University of Alberta

The Anthropology of Yonder: Russian Orthodox Icons, Suprematism, and Russian Soul

by

Fiona Robertson

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Anthropology

©Fiona Robertson
Fall 2011
Edmonton, Alberta

Permission is hereby granted to the University of Alberta Libraries to reproduce single copies of this thesis and to lend or sell such copies for private, scholarly or scientific research purposes only. Where the thesis is converted to, or otherwise made available in digital form, the University of Alberta will advise potential users of the thesis of these terms.

The author reserves all other publication and other rights in association with the copyright in the thesis and, except as herein before provided, neither the thesis nor any substantial portion thereof may be printed or otherwise reproduced in any material form whatsoever without the author's prior written permission.

ABSTRACT

This study examines similarities between Russian Orthodox icons and Suprematist paintings, using an anthropological lens. Though their appearances and purposes differ, the two art traditions share multiple points of culturally important comparison. I took an anthropological approach in order to consider these similarities from a unique angle, gaining cultural insight that theology or art theory alone do not provide. Through this method, I was able to expose convergences in the technical forms of these art traditions that align with concepts of Russian Soul, an integral aspect of Russian national character. These convergences include depth and incongruence, which are expressed visually as *faktura* and mixed perspective. Furthermore, by studying the artist as a cultural specialist, the crucial role that the artist plays in Russian society emerged. This study shows that anthropology can provide a culturally revealing analysis of art objects in a way that traditional approaches to art do not.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to extend my gratitude to my supervisor, Marko Zivkovic, for his support and for guiding my thesis and me to the places we needed to go.

Thank you to the Department of Anthropology administrative staff for always having the answers and for being a warm presence at the end of the hall.

Thank you to my family, for providing an atmosphere in which learning and knowledge is highly valued and I am always encouraged.

Thank you to Jodie Asselin for her optimism, advice, and much needed distractions.

Thank you especially to Alicia Hibbert, whose constant patience, unwavering confidence, and invaluable input made this success possible.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
Research Questions	2
Background	4
CHAPTER ONE	12
The Foundation of Iconography	13
Icons: Form and Function	19
Orthodoxy in Russia	24
The Decline of Russian Iconography	31
CHAPTER TWO	32
Introduction to the Avant-garde	33
The Avant-garde in Russia	39
Kazimir Malevich and Suprematism	42
The Decline of the Avant-garde	47
CHAPTER THREE	51
Introduction to an Anthropological Theory	51
Russian Soul – *Russkaya Dusha*	60
Axes of Coherence	68
Art as Magic	74

CONCLUSION 88

Inferences and Contributions 88

Future Research 92

Summary 94

BIBLIOGRAPHY 96

FIGURES 101

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: *Christ the Saviour (Pantokrator)* 101

Figure 2: *Virgin*, Theophanes 102

Figure 3: *Archangel Michael*, Andrei Rublev 103

Figure 4: *St. Macarius of Unsha and Yellow Waters* 104

Figure 5: *The Holy Prophet Elijah in the Desert* 105

Figure 6: *The Entry into Jerusalem* 106

Figure 7: *Old Testament Trinity*, Andrei Rublev 107

Figure 8: *Old Testament Trinity*, Detail, Andrei Rublev 108

Figure 9: *Christ Pantocrator* 109

Figure 10: *Kazan Mother of God* 110

Figure 11: *Transfiguration*, Theophanes 111

Figure 12: *Barge Haulers on the Volga*, Ilya Repin 112

Figure 13: *Portrait of L.N. Tolstoy*, Ivan Kramskoy 112

Figure 14: *Portrait of Tolstoy*, Ilya Repin 113

Figure 15: *Videnie otroku Varfolomeiu*, Mikhail Nesterov 114

Figure 16: *Pliaska Tamar*, Mikhail Vrubel 115

Figure 17: *Tamara i Demon*, Mikhail Vrubel 116

Figure 18: *Demon (sidiashchii)*, Mikhail Vrubel 117

Figure 19: *Corner Counter-Relief, 1914-15*. Vladimir Tatlin. 118

Figure 20: *Corner Counter-Relief, 1915*. Vladimir Tatlin. 118

Figure 21: *Study for Fresco Painting*, Kazimir Malevich 119

Figure 22: *Study for Fresco Painting (Prayer?)*, Kazimir Malevich 119

Figure 23: *Chiropodist (at the Bathouse)*, Kazimir Malevich 120

Figure 24: *Floor Polishers*, Kazimir Malevich 121

Figure 25: *Taking in the Rye*, Kazimir Malevich 122

Figure 26: *The Woodcutter*, Kazimir Malevich 123

Figure 27: *Perfected Portrait of I. V. Kliun*, Kazimir Malevich 124

Figure 28: *An Englishman in Moscow*, Kazimir Malevich 125

Figure 29: *Black Square*, Kazimir Malevich 126

Figure 30: *Plane in Rotation, called Black Circle*, Kazimir Malevich 127

Figure 31: *Black Cross*, Kazimir Malevich 128

Figure 32: *Suprematist Painting: Eight Red Rectangles*,
Kazimir Malevich 129

Figure 33: *Suprematism (Supremus No. 50)*, Kazimir Malevich 130

Figure 34: *Suprematist Painting*, Kazimir Malevich 131

Figure 35: *Painterly Realism: Boy with Knapsack – Color Masses in the Fourth Dimension*, Kazimir Malevich 132

Figure 36: *Suprematist Composition: Airplane Flying*, Kazimir Malevich 133

Figure 37: *Suprematist Composition: White on White*, Kazimir Malevich 134

Figure 38: *Girls in the Field*, Kazimir Malevich 135

Figure 39: *Woman with a Rake*, Kazimir Malevich 136

INTRODUCTION

Art, as a distinct discipline of study, is a phenomenon specific to a Western tradition of thought. The direct equivalent does not exist universally across cultures. Anthropology should be able to find ways to talk about art that does not rely on Western preconceptions, namely image theory or art criticism. Better we find a way to approach art as a system of aesthetically rendered objects embedded within a society. Anthropology allows for an indifference toward aesthetics, a field that Western culture normally reveres; it can de-mystify art in the hopes of gaining meaningful insight. Although I will rely on elements of image theory and art criticism, I do so in the hope that it will provide a level of comfort from which we can then step away. The goal of this paper is to compare Russian Orthodox icons and Russian Avant-garde art, specifically Suprematism developed by Kazimir Malevich, using an anthropological approach. Initially, I felt a sort of kinship between these two art forms but could not find a means for further exploration or discussion; because the traditional spheres of discourse that these two forms occupy are so separate, studying them alone could only offer superficial connections at best. By approaching these art forms anthropologically – as opposed to through theology, religious studies, art theory, art history, ethnography, or discourses on national character – I hope to find a more analytical way to understand the similarities between them and how these similarities reveal larger concepts embedded in Russian culture.

While outwardly appearing to have nothing in common, icons and Suprematism both attempt to depict unknowns by trying to overcome the limitations of a two dimensional picture surface. This is a fundamental commonality between icons and Suprematism and the starting point for this paper. How can we talk about this unknown? Throughout the course of this discussion, I will interchange many different terms for the unknown of these two art forms: Transcendence, 4th dimension, union with God, state of Grace, painterly truth, Absolute Truth, and zero form. The term that I will rely upon most often is Yonder. Stephen Luecking (2010) extracts this somewhat antiquated term from phrases like ‘over yonder’ or ‘wild blue yonder’; it indicates a space beyond an unspecified expanse (88). According to Luecking (2010), “the yonder is the space of Malevich’s suprematism, what he called ‘the white free abyss’. As a noun, it expresses a space of indeterminate distance; as a preposition it expresses the indefinite position of objects therein” (88). Throughout this paper, I will show how Yonder is represented in icons and the Avant-garde as a space of unfathomable depth and indeterminate perspectives.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This paper will include an introduction to discourse on the Russian Soul, *russkaya dusha*, so that we may go forward in investigating its affinities with icons and Suprematist paintings. I will rely on *dusha* as a single construct that contributes to Russian cultural identity; I do not mean to imply that the Russian Soul is a foundation for Russian culture or identity. I will not attempt an

exhaustive mapping of Russian Soul onto these art forms, the concept being extensive and inclusive. Instead I will focus on two facets of *dusha*: depth and incongruence. Russian Soul could likely be studied in other forms of Avant-garde art, but this paper will focus mainly on Malevich's Suprematism. I have limited this discussion to icons and the Avant-garde but would not rule out the possibility of applying similar methods to other forms of Russian art, or even to other societies.

In this thesis I will address the following questions:

- What are the characteristics of the interactions between the art object and the viewer?
- Can we detect expressions of Russian Soul in icons and the Avant-garde? If Russian Soul is expressed can comparisons be drawn between the two art forms that will help us to better understand Russian culture?
- Finally, how do painters, in both traditions, access Yonder?

The specific contribution of this thesis is a review of the literature in these relevant areas and an application of anthropological theories about art to these discourses. I do not intend to make a contribution to art history or criticism, or to ethnographies of Russia. I will use Russian Soul to help explain the similarities between icons and the Avant-garde. I will rely on the theories of Gregory Bateson (2006) and Alfred Gell (1992; 1998) to contribute to the anthropology of art. I will mainly focus on discourses central to these areas – theology for icons, art theory for Suprematism and the Avant-garde, and ethnography and nationalism

for Russian Soul – to find the intersections in their relationships. These intersections align with constructs of national identity in Russia, articulated through discourse *on dusha,* and are expressed as Yonder in icons and Suprematist paintings.

BACKGROUND

Flatland

To have a discussion centred on Yonder, I will provide an exercise that will prepare the mind to leap from 3rd to 4th dimension. For this I will rely on *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* by Edwin Abbott, originally published in 1884. Around the turn of the 20th century, dimensional geometry captured much attention in relation to 4th dimension. Stephen Luecking (2010) asserts that many Avant-garde artists in Russia, including Malevich, were fascinated with discourses on 4th dimension, and that it contributed a great deal to their philosophies. One dimension produced a line, two dimensions produced a plane, three dimensions produced a solid, but what did four dimensions produce? Edwin Abbott published Flatland as an analogy to explore this idea. Flatland is a protest to the idea that reality as we see it is absolutely true and complete. We see length, breadth, and height, but how can we be sure that we are able to see all that exists? Abbott's contemporary, Charles H. Hinton (1912), also explored these concepts and I will include him in this exercise as well.

Abbott wrote Flatland as an autobiography of a gentleman named A. Square who lives in a world of two dimensions that he refers to as Flatland. A. Square describes Flatland in the following way:

> Imagine a vast sheet of paper on which straight Lines, Triangles, Squares, Pentagons, Hexagons, and other figures, instead of remaining fixed in their places, move freely about, on or in the surface, but without the power of rising above or sinking below it... and you will then have a pretty correct notion of my country and countrymen. [Abbott 2010:69)

In Flatland there are no solids, no 3rd dimension, and no height. As an example, place a coin on a table top: when you look at it from above it appears as a circle on a flat plane; when you move your gaze level with the table top, the coin appears as a line in your vision (Abbott 2010:69). From the perspective of A. Square and the beings in Flatland, all shapes appear as straight lines and straight lines appear as points. To enable the reader to imagine forward, beyond 3rd dimension, Abbott first creates a world that looks backward. Flatland is a visualization of this backward step. The book achieves the suggestion made by Hinton (1912) to "trace out the steps of reasoning by which a being confined to movement in a two-dimensional world could arrive at a conception of our turning and rotation, and then apply an analogous process to the consideration of the higher movements". [62]

The first event of note in the experience of A. Square is his dream of Lineland in which he envisions a stark, dull existence where no one has any knowledge of Flatland. He describes Lineland as "small Straight Lines... interspersed with other Beings... all moving to and fro in one and the same Straight Line..." (Abbott 2010:115). A. Square meets the King of Lineland who

explains their universe in which space is length and they see each other as only points. A. Square tries, in vain, to explain the nature of Flatland to the King by moving left and right. The King ascribes the disappearances – by way of sideways motion – of A. Square as 'magic' because he cannot explain it with his knowledge of natural laws.

A. Square is then himself visited by a Being that appears out of nowhere from another world – Spaceland. The Being is a Sphere and endeavours to introduce the idea of a third dimension to A. Square, just as he had attempted to do with Line King. First, Sphere tries to prove his point using geometrical progression:

> We begin with a single Point, which of course- being itself a Point- has only *one* terminal Point. One Point produces a Line with *two* terminal Points. One Line produces a square with *four* terminal Points... The one Square produces... a cube with eight terminal Points. [Abbott 2010:135)

A. Square acknowledges the soundness of the argument, that 8 should in fact follow in the progression, but cannot comprehend the notion of height. Sphere attempts another example to convince him:

> The side of anything is always... one Dimension behind the thing. Consequently, as there is no Dimension behind a Point, a Point has 0 sides; a Line... has 2 sides (for the Points of a Line may be called by courtesy, its sides); a Square has 4 sides; 0, 2, 4; what Progression do you call that? [Abbott 2010:135)

A. Square identifies this as arithmetic progression and that the next number is necessarily 6 – a cube is bounded by 6 sides – but he is still unable to understand a third dimension. Only when Sphere takes him to Spaceland is he able to understand. As a result, when he is returned to Flatland, all appears dull and shadowy, similar to the way Lineland appeared to him. Hinton (1912) supports

this notion, stating that "it is obvious that the existence of a plane being must be very limited" (8).

A. Square is finally able to understand the leap from two dimensions to three dimensions as a solid built of many squares parallel to one another until the structure is as high as it is long and broad. The Cube – with its 6 plane sides and 8 terminal points – is formed by a square moving parallel to itself in space. In his newfound enthusiasm for the gospel of the 3rd dimension, A. Square begs the Sphere to tell him about the 4th dimension, and the 5th and the 6th, and so on.

> As you yourself, superior to all Flatland forms, combine many Circles in One, so doubtless there is One above you who combines many Spheres in One Supreme Existence, surpassing even the solids of Spaceland. And even as we, who are now in Space, look down on Flatland and see the insides of all things, so of a certainty there is yet above us some higher, purer region, whither thou dost surely propose to lead me... [Abbott 2010:145]

Sphere is indignant that A. Square would suggest such a thing, a similar reaction to Line King's. Hinton (1912) stated, "as a line is the determination of a plane, and a plane of a solid, so solid space itself is the determination of a higher space" (37). This is the argument taken up by A. Square: that in one dimension a moving point produces a line with two terminal points, in two dimensions a moving line produces a square with four terminal points, in three dimensions a moving square produces a cube with eight terminal points, so in the fourth dimension, would not a moving cube produce an object with 16 terminal points (Abbott 2010:147)? Sphere confesses he does not have the answers to his pupil's question; A. Square infers that multiple dimensions must exist.

A. Square is also shown Pointland where a Point is the entirety of his own universe; Point is unable to comprehend anything outside of his own self. Point and Line King represent ignorance and close-mindedness in regard to other possible dimensions, both of which A. Square and Sphere exhibit at some point. Flatland is an exercise in keeping the mind open to previously unimagined possibilities; A. Square attempts to preach the 3rd dimension in Flatland and is jailed for his sedition. When he is first presented with the notion of height, as an inhabitant of a world that only allowed for length and breadth, A. Square has great difficulty imagining Space. Abbott's Flatland helps to open the mind, with relative simplicity, to the idea that there is more to reality than what we can see.

Icons

Orthodox icons are a particular type of religious art. Their roots can be traced back to pre-Christian art traditions. Icons evolved into a highly regimented and systematic art form, specific to Eastern Christianity and used in Orthodox religious practice. Icons are categorized by type, form, and regional style, all of which conform to prototypical formulas upheld by the Eastern Churches. The rigid adherence to prescribed forms is intended to maintain a likeness to the historical person depicted in the icon and also to create a sense of Transcendence. Icons are not art in the strictest sense since their purpose is not aesthetic; they are intended as tools for use in ritual by Orthodox Christians. Although they are appreciated for their beauty – indeed, it is a crucial aspect of their nature – icons are meant to be a vehicle for accessing the Divine. After the conversion of Russia to Orthodoxy, the icon was fully integrated into Russian culture as its signature

artistic expression. Russian icon painters introduced new elements to the existing typologies, which enhanced the quality of execution while also serving to adapt the art form to Russian culture. In Russian culture to this day, icons are held in a place of pride that represents the long and harrowing history of the country.

Avant-garde

The Avant-garde art movement in Russia was the product of a society undergoing immense cultural, social, and economic change. Emerging during the early 20th century, the Avant-garde was a reaction to and reflection of the rapid pace of change sweeping over Europe. New technologies – such as automobiles, airplanes, photography, and x-rays – had emerged or advanced incredibly quickly during this time. Such advances exposed the general public to modern science as they never had been before; science opened up realms of possibility and modes of thought that had previously been inconceivable. At the time, modern art in Russia was still relatively young while innovative artists like Cezanne, Matisse, and Picasso were forging new paths in painting. The combination of a newly formed modern art sensibility, exposure to Europe's greatest artistic talents, and technology that rapidly altered the scope of philosophy culminated in a new direction for artists in Russia. The Avant-garde enabled artists to capture the chaos of their ever-changing environment. These artists expressed their ideas through varying levels of abstraction ranging from figurative to Malevich's Suprematism, which does not rely on an object of any known type. At the heart of the Russian Avant-garde movement lays the desire to make sense of the

surrounding world, which had become altogether unfamiliar. Kazimir Malevich took his art one step further, and made an attempt to understand the world beyond.

Cultural Redundancies

Gregory Bateson (2006) and Alfred Gell (1992; 1998) both provide the methodology for anthropological analyses of art. Using different vocabularies, both assert that art objects from any given society can contain clues that point to larger societal characteristics. Bateson (2006) calls these points 'redundancies' while Gell (1998) uses 'axes of coherence', the term I will rely on more often; both of these terms indicate the unconscious ways that art objects reflect the societies in which they are produced. Art objects can be understood as microcosms of the larger macrocosm of culture. I will use Bateson's (2006) treatment of a Balinese painting to further articulate these ideas in Chapter 3. Both Gell (1998) and Bateson (2006) turn away from content toward form to find these clues. I will use these principles to point out places in icons and the Avant-garde where *dusha* emerges as a reflection of Russian society.

Agency

Gell (1998) further provides a means for thinking about the agency of art objects. He asserts that since anthropology is dedicated to understanding social relationships, we must approach art objects in the same way (Gell 1998:4). As such, he offers a way of seeing art objects as persons who enact social agency in exchanges with other, human, persons. I will use Gell's (1998) method to assess the types of agency and personhood being exercised by icons and Avant-garde

paintings in the hopes that it will illuminate another area of convergence between the two forms.

Inspiration

Bateson (2006) can also offer interesting insight into the concept of artistic inspiration, which I explain in detail in Chapter 3. Generally, artists create objects that the rest of society – the non-artists – find confusing. The creation of art is mysterious and requires special skill or talent that many people simply do not have. What is this ability? Bateson (2006) suggests that the key to this talent may be the unconscious mind. I will explore his ideas further in the hopes that we might find some insight into the ability of artists to confound us with their skill, the same talent employed by icon painters and the artists of the Avant-garde.

CHAPTER ONE

My goal in this chapter is to show how Yonder is accessed in Russian Orthodox Iconography. In the context of Orthodoxy, this concept is also referred to as Transcendence, Union with God, or a state of Grace. All of these indicate existence outside of time and space where a person is no longer associated with their physical body and all the worldly concerns associated with it. In the Orthodox Yonder, there is union in dichotomy; all things are connected as part of a whole. In this chapter, I will use the terms Transcendence and Yonder to refer to this place or state. I will place icons in context by describing their nature, their history, and their importance in Orthodox Christian culture. By providing this context for understanding icons and how they exhibit Yonder, I will be able to delve more deeply into their similarities with the Avant-garde in Chapter 2 and into a broader discussion of the Russian Soul in Chapter 3.

In order to explore Transcendence in icons I will begin by briefly examining them in the context of sacred imagery and early Christianity. To understand the nuanced nature of icons it is necessary to understand their foundations and their place within Christianity as a whole, including its history. I will also outline some functional and technical aspects of icons to explain their uses within Orthodox practice and their character as art objects. After addressing the specific place of icons in Russia, I will introduce some key historical figures. I will address the decline of icons that resulted in a period of negligence. The resurgence of icons, contemporaneous with the emergence of the Avant-garde,

will be addressed in Chapter 2. Icons played a significant role in the historical narrative of Russia for centuries, and acted as a connective strand between varied groups across a vast land. I assert that since they are so dominant in Russian culture, and Transcendence is such an important feature of icons, that Transcendence, or Yonder, is an integral component of Russian culture.

THE FOUNDATION OF ICONOGRAPHY

Sacred Imagery

Image use in ritual was a familiar custom for the peoples of the ancient world; statuary and bas-relief held roots in major religious cults across the Roman world of the early Christians (Cavarnos 1977; Ouspensky and Lossky 1982[1952]; Quenot 1991). At the time that Jesus lived, Roman portraiture flourished, paintings of Emperors were venerated as an incarnation of the man, and Egyptians had been portraying stylized versions of their dead for centuries. For the most part, powerful images packed with meaning were an integral aspect of daily life in this period. The exceptions were Jews. In this environment of evocative visuals, the Jewish spiritual law expressly forbade imagery, the only exception being those fashioned according to divine dictates (Quenot 1991). This law served to restrict the human potential for constructing inaccurate truths. Orthodox icons are required to follow similarly stringent rules in order to depict Truth.

Icons

Ouspensky[1] (1992[1978]) asserts that an icon is not an image of divine nature but an image of a divine person incarnate. In Orthodoxy, the distinction between the divine nature of Christ and the human nature of Jesus is equivocal. As he was divine and man simultaneously, Jesus Christ exists on earth as well as in Yonder, embodying the union of dichotomy. The achievement of this mystery can only be expressed visually. The canons dictate that the content of an icon should preserve this divide without wholly separating the two aspects (Ouspensky 1992[1978]).

In his definitive treatise on icons, *Iconostasis*, Pavel Florensky[2] (1996) addresses the depiction of the seen and unseen aspects of Christ's nature. He suggests that the distinct duality within the whole is a primary function of icons, just as in the perception of Christ. Florensky uses a magnet as a metaphor to articulate this dogma, an item that is equal parts physical structure and invisible force. It is a piece of steel, a tangible and known material, but it is also a force-field. To properly convey the image of a magnet, both aspects of its dual nature must be represented, using elements of realism and abstraction. Without finding a way to depict the force-field of the magnet, it is simply a piece of steel. Without finding a way to depict the divine nature of Christ, an icon is simply a picture of a man and not worthy of veneration or contemplation (Florensky 1996).

An icon must represent the spiritual world as an invisible reality that we are unable to comprehend with our human senses. Florensky (1996) asserts that

[1] Leonid Ouspensky was an influential iconographer and writer.
[2] Florensky was an Orthodox priest and philosopher, as well as a prolific mathematician and physicist.

the Orthodox faith does not require rationalization beyond the mystery God has provided and that we already have all of the senses necessary to comprehend as much as we need to. The perfect world of Yonder is ‘otherworldliness’ achieved through the reduction of personal artistic styles in favour of regimented styles (Taylor 1979). The emphasis is placed on the inherent differences between the image and the subject. Canons that pertain to icons are safeguards put in place by the Church and justified by Tradition to maintain the ‘otherworldly’ nature of icons; the confines of Tradition protect icons from corruption. These iconic safeguards also guarantee continuity and unity beyond national or regional variations (Quenot 1991). Without the regimented structure provided for icon painting, this connection could be lost and icons would be relegated to the realm of aesthetics.

The difference between worshipping an icon and the person it represents is subtle (Taylor 1979). Icon painting should never be interpreted as failed attempts at realism because material reality is not the painter’s goal (Cavarnos 1977). The goal is to portray Transcendence. This style of ‘otherworldliness’ is achieved using various techniques: reduction or augmentation of specific features or figures, two dimensional treatment of three-dimensional space, expression of depth without the use of light and shadows, internal dynamics within the composition, and unnatural colours.

The prototypes of icons – the Virgin, the saints, or Christ – are often depicted as transcendent beings that exist outside of time and space. Historical narrative has a very limited place in iconography (Ouspensky 1992[1978]).

Russian icons use narrative scenes as borders to illustrate the crucial points in the lives of saints prior to their illumination. The concept of illumination in Orthodox theology denotes understanding and union with God, the state of Transcendence. Christ is the perfect manifestation of union with God, made that way at his conception (Ouspensky 1992[1978]). The only way for others to achieve this union is to achieve likeness to God. Orthodoxy asserts that we are all capable of this union, as we were made in God's own image.[3] This does not mean that God looks like us in some physical form, but refers to our potential to be like God (Ouspensky 1992[1978]). Man may become holy by attaining a likeness to God through the acquisition of His virtues: faith, humility, love, meekness, and freedom from passion (Cavarnos 1977). Humans have the capability to be virtuous like God and icons depict deified humans who have achieved this likeness to God (Quenot 1991). The transcendent state represented in icons is a reference to their transfiguration through illumination to Transcendence.

Icons and the Early Christians

While Christ was depicted by symbols throughout the first and second centuries CE, by the third century, Christians of Alexandria had adopted the local Egyptian convention of interring important figures in their community with encaustic panel portraits. This was a painting technique involving pigment mixed with molten wax (Quenot 1991). Some of the earliest surviving icons are painted in the encaustic technique, including the sixth century Sinai icon of Christ (see Figure 1). This depiction of Christ incorporates features that dominated icon

[3] "So God created man in his own image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" Gen 1:27.

painting during that century: the longhaired, bearded man with a long, slender nose, high cheekbones, and large eyes. These features, with slight regional and aesthetic variations, remained dominant in iconography into the modern era and continue to mould Christians' image of Jesus throughout the world. According to Orthodox Tradition, these are the specific features of the *Acheiropoietos*, the icon 'made without hands'.

Church Tradition asserts that in the first century King Abgar of Edessa sent an emissary to Jesus requesting that he come to heal him of his leprosy (Ouspensky 1992[1978]). Christ was not able to go to Edessa but wiped his face with a piece of linen and gave it to the envoy, along with a letter to the king. Upon receiving these items, Abgar was miraculously healed (Ouspensky 1992[1978]; Ouspensky and Lossky 1982[1952]; Quenot 1991). Under the successors of Abgar, the kingdom of Edessa became the first Christian state in the world (Ouspensky 1992[1978]). The piece of linen is the original icon 'made without hands', imprinted with the features of Jesus. It is the antecedent for all icon painting, the basis for rigid adherence to icon tradition, and ensures the connection of icons to the historical Jesus (Ouspensky and Lossky 1982[1952]). It is also roughly contemporaneous with the emergence of the specific features of Jesus portrayed in the Sinai icon, among others.

For Christians, the New Testament is the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel in the Old Testament; all of the events in Judaic history were preparation for the life and teachings of Jesus. Christ is the embodiment of promise, the vessel for all mankind's salvation. In the Orthodox faith, the nature of Christ is two-fold:

human and familiar (man) as well as divine and unknowable (God). In the New Testament, God became flesh and was represented visually in the form of Christ as before Christ there was only the word of God (Ouspensky 1992[1978]). The coming of Christ provided an image of God. According to Orthodox theology, this catalyst changed the rules; since God provided humanity with a visible form, the old Commandment prohibiting images was void. Michel Quenot (1991) provides the following explanation of this doctrine by summarizing the words of St. John of Damascus, St. Theodore the Studite, and Patriarch Nicephorus:

> By His Incarnation, Christ put an end to the Mosaic Law and the proscription of images. The Old Testament gives way to the New Testament, which reveals to us a true knowledge of God and liberates us from our former inevitable idolatry. The simple world of the Old Covenant is succeeded by the reality of the New Covenant: the Incarnation, the vision of divinity and humanity in the Person of Jesus. [39]

According to Ouspensky (1992[1978]) the original aim of Christianity was to preach the word and the image together. This is the combination of Scripture and Tradition. It is a reflection of the dual nature of Christ, two equal halves that are distinct but by their nature indissoluble (Ouspensky and Lossky 1982[1952]). The icon is the representation of the word in images according to Tradition. "This teaching shows that the image is necessarily inherent in the very essence of Christianity, from its inception, since Christianity is the revelation by God-Man not only of the Word of God, but also of the Image of God" (Ouspensky and Lossky 1982[1952]:25). The image used is a means of reaching communion with God and achieving Transcendence. It is a tool for worship and reflection as much as the written word in the Scriptures. Quenot (1991) refers to icons as "theology in imagery" (12), and describes this art as a visual language with vocabulary and

syntax. As the Bible is meant to be read, so should the icons of the Orthodox Church.

The *acheiropoietos* legend allows the Church to trace the human features of Christ back to the living Jesus, a necessary attribute of iconography. Although the encaustic painting technique first used by Egyptian Christians was later replaced with egg tempera painting, the countenance of Christ that emerged after the fifth century remains relevant in Orthodox Christianity today.

ICONS: FORM AND FUNCTION

The Functions of Icons

In *Orthodox Iconography*, Constantine Cavarnos[4] (1977) defines the functions of icons using the following criteria: beautification, instruction, remembrance, elevation of thought, inspiration, transformation, and veneration. The first refers to beautification of the Church, which is the House of God. In Orthodoxy, beauty is commensurate with Truth. The beauty of the Church and the icons should be transcendent and holy. The second function is the instruction of the faithful. Icons are intended as visual stories, which can have a greater emotional impact than words alone. Illiteracy has been an obstacle since the beginning of the faith and Church history is packed with references to the difficulty in articulating esoteric ideas to an illiterate population. Cavarnos lists remembrance as the third function; the mundane nature of everyday life can cause one to lose sight of the spiritual and images can serve as striking reminders of the

[4] Cavarnos is a professor trained in philosophy at Harvard University, and the author of several books about Byzantine art.

sacrifices the saints and martyrs made. Pavel Florensky (1996) also addresses the purpose of the icon as a tool for remembrance and refers to the Seventh Ecumenical Council[5] that outlined the icon as just such a tool. The type of 'remembering' that Florensky describes is more than the simple recollection of past events. This act relates to the ontological connection between the icon and its prototype. The believer remembers the prototype as the icon does.

The fourth function of the icon is the elevation of thought and feeling (Cavarnos 1977). Icons often depict people in a higher state of spiritual consciousness, whose lives were characterized by superior deeds in spite of their personal obstacles. The contemplation of their lives can assist the faithful in achieving Transcendence. This ties into to the fifth function, which is to inspire imitation. Icons supply the visible height to which one may aspire. The sixth function is transformation and sanctification; a person may become akin to that which they habitually contemplate. "The icon fulfills our vision of a universe of beauty by being representative of transcendent reality. Meditation finds an excellent aid in the icon, which keeps our mind on the image and helps us concentrate on the symbolized reality" (Quenot 1991:148). The seventh function Cavarnos (1977) assigns to the icon is its practical purpose in liturgy as a means of worship and veneration. The icon is a tangible access route to God. The mysteries of the faith may be invisible and unknowable but the icon can be contemplated, touched, and even kissed. Christianity is full of esoteric philosophies and lofty aspirations. Icons bring the act of worship into the physical

[5] Also referred to as The Second Council of Nicaea, which reinstated the position of the icon in 787 after the first Iconoclasm (Ouspensky 1992[1978]).

realm and, to an extent, embody the unknowable. “Thus, icons are intermediaries between the represented persons and the praying faithful, causing them to commune in grace” (Ouspensky 1992[1978]:140).

Technical Components of Icons

Distortion

In icon painting, the distortion of features is an effort to emphasize the spiritual transfiguration of the subject and also to reduce the sensuality of the human form. Cavarnos (1977) points out that the head is often enlarged in order to clarify the facial expression. The eyes of a saint are oversized to demonstrate their potential to see spiritual reality, or as an indication that the subject is already transformed and able to see the true nature of God. In some examples eyes appear glazed over and inattentive which is indicative of the subject’s ignorance of the mundane world in favour of Transcendence (see Figure 2) (Ouspensky 1992[1978]). Meanwhile the mouth is reduced to a mere line beneath an often-elongated nose (see Figure 3). Quenot (1991) suggests that the inherently sensual nature of the human mouth requires icon painters to render it geometrically and free of naturalism. In the spiritually transfigured person, the mouth is unnecessary because they are in a union with God where speech is superfluous. In the Orthodox faith, human senses become obsolete when one is able to access the Divine. The flesh becomes obedient to the Spirit. The facial features of such individuals are depicted with a degree of similarity, regardless of subject matter or region of origin.

Proportion

Proportion, space, and depth have specific treatments in icon painting. Proportion is often distorted to express the importance of one subject over another or how they interrelate (see Figures 4 and 5). Landscapes and buildings are diminished in relation to subjects (Cavarnos 1977). Icons are neither completely two-dimensional nor three-dimensional. Since an icon is a source of Divine Light, the absence of darkness and shadow, elements within the composition are flattened and layered to suggest depth (see Figure 6) (Quenot 1991). This technique allows for the illusion of three-dimensionality without the need for realism (Ouspensky and Lossky 1982[1952]).

Mixed Perspective

When three-dimensional space is conveyed in an icon, the perspective is distorted to the point of confusion. This is often construed as a primitive inability to depict perspective properly, an attitude that does not account for the intention of the painter and the purpose of the composition. The 'otherworldliness', or non-reality, of the icon is portrayed using a mixture of perspectives (Alpatov 1982). Inverse perspective is commonly utilized but rarely on its own. The inversion technique is often employed at strategic points in the composition, to draw attention to its most important aspects. This type of perspective is a tool for engagement; the point of departure is outside of the panel, so that the composition expands to include the viewer (Ouspensky and Lossky 1982[1952]). The icon invites the viewer to engage with it and be part of its ever expanding, immense reality. Andrei Rublev's *Old Testament Trinity* is an exemplary composition in

this respect (see Figures 7 and 8). Along with this icon's flawless combination of mathematics, artistry, and piety, the composition's inverse perspective balances the three figures equally while directing the content toward the viewer (Voloshinov 1999). Quenot (1991) compares this technique in icon painting to God coming forth to seek humanity.

The Applications of Colour

Colour is an essential facet of iconography and is used to great effect. Icon colour is highly regimented across space and through time (Taylor 1979). Regional and historical variations resulted in differences in saturation and tone, but the basic colour framework remained intact. This simple framework is ingrained in believers well-versed in Orthodoxy and easily taught to novices. In the language of iconography, colour symbolism is the easiest way to understand the spiritual matter of the painting (See Taylor 1979 for a complete discussion of colour in iconography). White represents purity, faith, eternity, grace, and happiness. Blue refers to the Heavens, contemplation, and infinity. Dark Blue is specifically reserved for the mystery of divine life and is used only in certain instances such as the Pantocrator's vestments or the robe of the Virgin. Red is used for the blood of martyrs and strength, or to signify love and the presence of the Holy Spirit. Black is ambiguous, as it represents denial, non-existence, chaos, and death but it can also represent the void, transition, and the promise of Creation (Quenot 1991; Taylor 1979).

Gold holds a special place within the colour lexicon of iconography. Gold portrays pure light and symbolizes the presence of divinity (Quenot 1991). Gold is

Transcendence, or Yonder. Florensky (1996) explains that while paint merely reflects light, gold holds light. A considerable section of *Iconostasis* (Florensky 1996) is dedicated to a discussion on *assyst*, the term used for the application of gold leaf in icon painting. This metallic substance is applied in bands of varying widths to relevant areas of the composition (see Figure 9). Painters use *assyst* to depict rays or as an outline (Trubetskoi 1973). Florensky insists that *assyst* is never used in a materialistic way. Metallic items within the composition, such as a chalice, are never treated with gold leaf but are painted to resemble gold. The intention is not to meld the gold seamlessly into the painting, but to make it stand apart. The point of *assyst* is its structural difference from the paint, its lack of reconciliation with the other materials. *Assyst* is the negation of darkness and is used in the compositional instances where there is only Divine Light; it corresponds directly to the manifest energy of God (see Figure 10). Gold leaf is placed where there is a direct relationship with the power of God: the garments or throne of Christ, the Gospel, or the Virgin's veil (Florensky 1996). The placement of gold suggests the presence of spiritual understanding or a distinction between the natural world and the divine. As a result, icons that focus on the humanity of Jesus should not utilize gold leaf (Trubetskoi 1973).

ORTHODOXY IN RUSSIA

Kievan Rus, the ancient principality roughly corresponding to modern Ukraine and parts of Russia, was the first Slavic principality to adopt Christianity in the tenth century. The conversion of Kievan Rus is a legend comprised of equal

parts history and hearsay with elements of theatricality and humour (Milner-Gulland and Dejevsky 1998). Prince Vladimir of Kiev received emissaries from the major religious centres of the ancient world to learn their ways with the intention of uniting the Rus peoples in faith: Islam was dismissed as joyless and the Muslim restrictions on alcohol were considered inappropriate for the Rus, while the loss of Jerusalem was considered to be a sign of God's abandonment of the Jews. Kievan culture required a certain attention to aesthetics that the German churches lacked (Milner-Gulland and Dejevsky 1998), and the great Hagia Sophia, built in Constantinople in 360, was taken as a symbol of the beauty and truth in Orthodoxy (Quenot 1991). In 988 Prince Vladimir supposedly converted the Kievan Rus to Orthodoxy in a mass baptism in the Dnieper River. The establishment of the Russian branch of the Orthodox Church was as dramatic as its new landscape. The conversion to Orthodoxy marks the introduction of an organized understanding of Transcendence to the Rus peoples.

The Mongol Occupation and Russia's Golden Age

The position of the Church in Russian society was tested with the Mongol invasions. In a period of subjugation unparalleled in the Russian consciousness, the Golden Horde destroyed Kievan Rus in the first half of the 13th century and occupied the principalities of Russia until the end of the 14th century. The princes were permitted to retain their titles as figureheads but the populace was subjected to oppressive economic tribute and social devastation.

During the height of the invasions in the 14th century, the Metropolitan of the Church was forced to flee Novgorod, which had been supplanting Kiev as the

centre of Russian city life since the 12th century. The Metropolitan established the new permanent headquarters for the Church in Moscow, establishing the supremacy of the bourgeoning Muscovite society over the other principalities (Milner-Gull and Dejevsky 1998). The liberation of Russia, beginning in 1380 with the defeat of a Mongol army by Prince Dmitrii Donskoi at the battle of Kulikovo, was roughly contemporaneous with the fall of Constantinople. This fateful course of history left Russia in a position to offer sanctuary to the Eastern Orthodox Church and consequently, shortly after the expulsion of the Golden Horde, Moscow became the new centre for Eastern Orthodoxy (Taylor 1979).

The Mongol era is a period of darkness in Russia's history but also a source of pride for Russian culture. The survival of the people during this period demonstrated their strength (Voloshinov 1999) and the time period following the Mongol occupation was Russia's Golden Age, an unmatched flourishing of culture. Two figures emerged from this period that would leave a lasting impression on Russian culture. Both continue to represent the highest Orthodox ideals to this day: St. Sergius and Andrei Rublev.

St. Sergius of Radonezh

St. Sergius of Radonezh is one of the most highly revered figures in the Russian Orthodox Church. Sergius is an emblem of the russification of the Orthodox Church, whose brand of unwavering ascetic piety became a touchstone for the new Russian society (Trubetskoi 1973). Daniel Rancour-Laferriere (1995) describes St. Sergius as the quintessential Russian Christian, who "wore uncouth garb, practiced heavy manual labour, would go for days without food, and

adamantly refused to be elevated in the ecclesiastical hierarchy" and whose "holy ideal was poverty" (20). Imitation of Christ through humility is the ideal virtue in Russian Orthodoxy and is best exemplified by St. Sergius. He is the perfect example of achieving enlightenment through suffering, a concept still articulated in Russia today (Pesmen 2000).

St. Andrei Rublev

The recognizable Russian style of icon painting was not established until several centuries after the influx of Orthodox Christianity. Two figures stand out in the formation of a purely Russian-style icon with a distinct palette: Theophanes the Greek and Andrei Rublev. Theophanes is considered integral to the Russian Tradition as a mentor to Rublev. Prior to Theophanes' sojourn in Novgorod at the end of the 14th century, Russian icons were crude and simplistic but employed expressive colours (Alpatov 1982). Early Russian icons are dominated by cinnabars with pure colours juxtaposed in contrast.

Theophanes the Greek marks the beginning of the Golden Age of Russian iconography, which flourished during the 15th and 16th centuries. The expressive colours, characteristic of earlier icons, were combined with a higher level of execution, intensity, and austerity and an incorporation of secular and folkloric elements (see Figure 11). A master of saturated tints, Theophanes introduced Russian Christians to cherry reds, dark blues, greens, and browns in a complementary yet balanced rhythm (Alpatov 1982). According to Alpatov (1982), as a student of Theophanes, Andrei Rublev would achieve a purity not found in Byzantine colours. Rublev is glorified in the Russian Orthodox Church

and holds a special place in history as the father of the Russian icon. His palette is intense and predominantly blue with violets and emerald greens (see Figures 7 and 8). It leaves no trace of the gloominess of earlier colour ranges but maintains an asceticism missing from later icon schools.

St. Andrei Rublev is the innovative father of Russian iconography, and also a follower of St. Sergius (Quenot 1991). His painting was inventive and exposed the unexplored possibilities within the existing structures and canons of icon painting. The works of his mentor, Theophanes, represent a spiritual complexity that was absent in Russian icons prior to his arrival. His icons hold weight and appear corporeal. Theophanes' icons stand in contrast to those executed by his greatest pupil, Rublev, whose figures appear so luminous and lightly drawn that they could float up off the board (Alpatov 1982).

Rublev inherited Theophanes' philosophical depth and conviction and combined it with his own painterly skills for composition, form, and colour. The *Old Testament Trinity* still stands today as a theologically sound Orthodox answer to questions about the nature of God (see Figure 7). Florensky (1996) asserts that the very existence of Rublev's *Trinity* is evidence of the existence of God. He states that:

> there exists the icon of the Holy Trinity by St. Andrei Rublev; therefore, God exists... In the iconpainting images we ourselves – wholly selves – see the illumined countenances of the saints and, in them, behold both the revealed image of God and God Himself. [Florensky 1996:68]

Rublev focused on the spiritual unity and undivided nature of the Trinity rather than depicting tenuous suggestions as to the mysterious identities of the three figures (Alpatov 1982). In his article, *The Old Testament Trinity of Andrey*

Rublyov: Geometry and Philosophy, Alexander Voloshinov (1999) employs principles of geometry to prove the multi-layered perfection of the icon. According to Voloshinov (1999), Russian and Byzantine icons show a keen awareness of mathematics in their proportions and composition, which produce visually pleasing effects. The *Trinity* exhibits Rublev's intuitive understanding of these complex principles in order to establish equality between the three figures while maintaining their distinction. Florensky (1996) addressed the significance of Rublev among painters; although Rublev deviated from canonical norms, the Divine Truth remained undeniable and it is the experience of Truth that allowed for inspired artistic innovation. At the Council of Moscow in 1555, the *Trinity* was declared the 'perfect example' of iconic art (Quenot 1991). The vision of Rublev is an example of *iconic revelation*, wherein a new type or style of icon is invented but accepted as Truthful beyond doubt because of its perceived spiritual potency. In Chapter 3, I will address how Rublev gained access to this spiritual potency, an ability which was perceived as inherently Russian.

In order to paint the truth of illumination in the faces of saints and martyrs, the iconographer must live a life of asceticism. The icon painter is different from secular painters; he is considered an intermediary and has little room for personal style (Taylor 1979). The painters believed that a monastic life leads to the truest depiction. Revelatory images are created through participation in the transfigured world and subjugation to the will of God (Ouspensky and Lossky 1982[1952]). Each icon begins with the canonic type and then progresses according to an iconographer's interpretation and, to an extent, invention. Nuance is the key.

Andrei Rublev spent hours studying and contemplating icons. His innovative modes of expression were credited to his spiritual force (Alpatov 1982). Every icon within a canonical type has similar building blocks, but it is the subtle differences between icons that distinguish those made with particular skill and supposed spiritual awareness. More spiritually valuable icons are considered the result of an individual painter's devotion as much as talent. Quenot (1991) asserts that they represent Transcendence in communion with God. For an icon to deliver the deepest religious impression the visual theologian must achieve the deepest faith.

The heights of icon painting in the 14th and 15th centuries were a crowning achievement following the Mongol occupation. A period marked by russification, the advancements made during this time defined the nature of Russian culture. The Golden Age was a time period when Russian culture came into its own; all that it expressed had always been there, but had become enhanced. Expressions of Transcendence, or Yonder, in icons became distinctly Russian. The superior artistic execution of Andrei Rublev demonstrated the heights that Russian culture could reach through Orthodoxy. Despite variations spanning as many as forty different schools and an expansive landscape, Russian iconography maintained and intensified its distinctly Russian qualities until the 16th century (Quenot 1991).

THE DECLINE OF RUSSIAN ICONOGRAPHY

Signifying a break in the tradition, at some point in the 16th century some painters began signing their work (Taylor 1979). Iconographers had never previously signed pieces; since the painter was considered the mere vessel for spiritual expression, his identity was irrelevant. The result of this alteration was the perceived loss of connection to Transcendence, which I will expand on in Chapter 3. At the same time, a proliferation of narrative icons, less dynamic by their more indirect nature, also occurred. Alpatov (1982) addresses the increasing Church control over painters and endless dogmatic debates and suggests that this put an end to the pious fervour characteristic of Russian iconography.

The 17th century is considered the downward turning point for iconography in Russia. Realism began to invade icons. Peter the Great is generally considered the source for this corruption; his single-minded pursuit of Westernization in Russia placed emphasis on science and military expansion, and ignored religion as much as possible (Alpatov 1982; Cavarnos 1977). Western notions of aesthetics and art stood in stark contrast to the purpose of the icon and its position in Russian culture. With all eyes turned westward, the icons collected layers of soot and dirt and the sacred art of Russian Orthodoxy darkened. Iconography was largely misunderstood throughout the Romanov Dynasty until modern artists looked to them for inspiration toward the end of the 19th century. A new approach to art and life was required to resurrect the icon.

CHAPTER TWO

This chapter explores the expression of the 4th dimension, or Yonder, in the Russian Avant-garde. Suprematism, pioneered by Kazimir Malevich, most aptly captures the spirit of the 4th dimension within this style. Through highlighting expressions of Yonder, my goal is to expose the similarities between the Avant-garde and Orthodox icons, both of which overlap in their desire to express the inexpressible and capture a sense of otherworldliness. Since Suprematism is the most highly abstracted form of Avant-garde art, it is important to know its social context in order to fully understand its meaning and significance. I will place the Avant-garde in its historical and socio-political landscape to provide the proper context for understanding a vibrant and progressive movement in modern art that was an important moment in Russian culture.

While many of his contemporaries could also be examined to explore this, none address it with as much frankness as Malevich. Although the language he employed varied, the sentiments did not; Malevich continually revisited the idea of the 4th dimension throughout his life and work, in both his art and his writing. Suprematism was the closest he came to fully expressing his vision. By studying several crucial paintings I will illustrate Malevich's journey into Yonder.

I will begin this chapter by examining the major contributing art movements that preceded the Avant-garde. Tracing these roots will solidify the cumulative aspects of the Avant-garde within the legacy of Russian modern art.

The contributions of the artists that came before them directly affected Avant-garde painters; the movement owes as much to its ancestry as it does to the inventive minds of the artists.

INTRODUCTION TO THE AVANT-GARDE

The Emergence of Modern Russian Art

The *Peredvizhniki*, or Wanderers, were the first important modern artists in Russia. They were social commentators and, as a result, their style of painting could not have been achieved in any other socio-political circumstances (Bowlt 1988). The *Peredvizhniki* were realists but the multi-dimensional layers of meaning within their paintings suggest a facet of symbolism. Dmitrii Sarabianov (1990b), in his contribution to an essay collection for an exhibition of 19th century Russian art, uses the apt term "Critical Realism" to categorize the *Peredvizhniki* (31). Although their execution was of the highest standard, the painters were not interested in pure aesthetics. As Russian nationalists, their intent was to make art accessible to the Russian Everyman. They believed that art had the potential to change life and their goal was to return art to the people (Gray 1986). The work of the *Peredvizhniki* is best exemplified in a piece by Ilya Repin, titled *Barge Haulers on the Volga* (see Figure 12). This painting displays in balanced proportion the physical oppression and lack of dignity inherent in manual labour, with the potential for fortitude and resistance embodied by the alert and upright figure of the youth. The subjects painted by *Peredvizhniki* were often recognizable cultural heroes, such as Andrei Rublev, St. Sergius of Radonezh, and

Tolstoy (see Figures 13, 14, and 15). On many levels, these artists reflected a growing national trend of discontent in Russia; the disparities between the lives of the elite and the rest of the nation were becoming increasingly apparent.

At the close of the 19th century a Symbolist movement developed in Russian art. This movement, in contrast to Realism, rejected literal interpretation and embraced the esoteric. Mikhail Vrubel was among these Symbolists and an example of the convergence of 19th century naturalism and modernism; his contributions to art served as the stimulus for many later artists (Spira 2008). As early as 1890, Vrubel began to demonstrate his fixation with dissociative patterns, a common element in iconography (see Figures 16 and 17). The painter exploited the flat nature of the picture surface; rather than rely on realist perspective he utilized expressive lines to create texture and layered flat surfaces to create depth (Spira 2008). John E. Bowlt[6] (1988) finds geometric tendencies in Vrubel's art, along with the bold colours, sparse composition, and peasant motifs characteristic of the later Avant-garde painters (see Figure 18). His experimentations in colour, texture, and line, and advancements with the latent potential of the flat surface made Vrubel the single most influential painter to precede the Avant-garde (Gray 1986; Spira 2008). His contributions paved the way for the modernist painters that followed him amidst a fresh wave of social consciousness.

A Foundation for the Avant-garde

After the abolishment of serfdom in 1861, Russia experienced a period of rapid social and political change that greatly affected the cultural climate and

[6] John E. Bowlt is a professor of Russian Language and Literature and has written extensively on Russian art and culture in the early 20th century.

eventually culminated in the Revolution in 1917. W.S. Simmons (1981) suggests that while serfdom was abolished, the peasantry remained beasts of burden. The peasant was the fundamental native of Russia that represented life connected to nature; they lived off the land and retained their traditional life-ways unchanged through time. Peasants had long been subjects of Russian painting that reflected social issues, culminating in the work of the *Peredvizhniki*. The intelligentsia saw the peasant as the primordial being whose close association to nature inherently connected them to Truth; their simplistic existence was the truest form of Russian-ness. Because they lived in closer communion with nature, peasants were also in closer communion with true reality, free of the false perceptions of modernity. They were the embodiment of the Russian Soul because they were defined by their toil and steadfast devotion to God. By the turn of the century the image of the peasant was rife with this cultural symbolism (Simmons 1981).

In the first decade of the twentieth century, a combination of influences converged into a new Russian school of art (Gray 1986). Some of these influences included Gauguin, Russian folk art, Picasso's cubism, and Italian Futurism. This new style would eventually be called the Avant-garde and reflected a wave of modernist philosophy engulfing Europe at the time. The term Avant-garde was rarely used throughout the relevant time period but was applied to the movement in retrospect. It included painting, sculpture, architecture, design, and textiles, along with literature, poetry, photography, and film-making. Within each art form a variety of types and styles emerged, all with divergent theories on the nature of life and how to best express it. Each subgroup took inspiration from the others.

Suprematism, the brainchild of Kazimir Malevich, was one of these subgroups. Technology had only recently remade and compressed the world, allowing unprecedented sharing of ideas. Modern science had proved unpredictable in its seemingly limitless possibilities; the advancements made were so startling that the future had become indeterminate. The Avant-garde represents a need to reconcile technology and science with society. The upheaval engulfing them led artists to seek out new means of expressing the world around them without relying on known reality. As such, they rejected realism and the artistic techniques used to express it, and shifted their focus to new forms of reality, including the 4th dimension.

Key Components of the Avant-garde

Objectlessness

Objectlessness was a common mode of expression for Avant-garde artists despite their divergent paths en-route (Avtonomova 2007). For the first time in art, there was no discernable subject, no recognizable figures, not even a misplaced eye to suggest something familiar. The abandonment of the object was a way for artists to interpret the new understanding of the universe with which they were confronted. Freedom from the object provided freedom from the constraints of representing known reality (Harte 2009). For Malevich (2003), art and the feelings it created were more pure than those created by religion. The modern world had been defined by science, not God, and Malevich believed that art would take the role of religion to remake society. The new religion would be painterly truth, which could only be achieved through “absolute creation”

expressed as objectlessness (Malevich 1988:123). He believed that "painters should abandon subject matter and objects if they wish to be pure painters" (Malevich 1988:130). Natalia Avtonomova (2007) explains that the canvas was a border between two worlds, real and imagined, and that Malevich and his contemporaries were creating prototypes of a new world. Objectlessness was their avenue to the eternal, their interpretation of the truth they saw in the universe (Bowlt 1991). By refusing to rely on perceptions of reality, Malevich was able to focus on accessing Yonder through his canvas. In the unpredictable atmosphere of the early twentieth century, objectlessness and abstraction were the methods used to depict a reality that society was still struggling to understand, but also the underlying truth beyond that reality.

Faktura

Many Avant-garde artists were interested in the idea of *faktura*. This concept denotes texture while emphasizing the process of construction. Maria Gough[7] (1999) asserts that *faktura* was a major concern for Russian artists in particular, and had been since long before the advent of modern painting. The recognition of the value of icons in the late 19th and early twentieth century likely affirmed the aesthetic legacy of *faktura* in Russian art; icons combined a number of materials – tempera, gesso, gold-leaf, and metal – on wood without attempting to merge them (Gough 1999). Western art was an act of homogenization while art native to Russia celebrated the consolidation of distinct materials with appreciation for the artistic process.

Despite inconsistencies in the application of the term throughout the

[7] Gough is the Joseph Pulitzer Jr. Professor of Modern Art at Harvard University.

Avant-garde period, *faktura* remained relevant. Initially, the concept was applied to the working of a surface but would later come to mean the working of materials (Gough 1999). The former places the agency on the artist, while the latter transfers it to the material and suggests that the artist should be subordinate to the natural constraints of the medium. Gough (1999) outlines the three overall principles of *faktura,* as described by Latvian painter and critic, Voldemars Matvejs, in 1912, as follows: "materiological differentiation (heterogeneity), discordancy, and determination" (42). Materiological differentiation refers to the use of various materials within a single art piece. Discordancy addresses the use of materials in contention with the subject, such as the membrane of an egg used to depict a saint. The third principle, determination, is the most relevant to Avant-garde applications and refers to the potential for the material to determine the outcome of an art piece. Vladimir Tatlin, the innovator of the Avant-garde subgroup known as Constructivism and a rival of Malevich, offers the most explicit example of this principle, in his *Corner Counter-Relief* sculpture series (Gough 1999). Tatlin made no attempt to merge his materials, instead working within the confines of their existing physicality. The mechanisms for their fabrication and suspension are highly visible within the aesthetic composition of the pieces; the open spaces throughout their structures are treated as another material with which the artist had to contend (see Figures 19 and 20). For Malevich, *faktura* signified the capability of materials on a surface to create depth rather than relying on the illusion of depth, an echoing of Vrubel's philosophy (Gough 1999). In the general Avant-garde context, *faktura* often denotes the

deliberate exposure of the artist’s process of construction as an integrated aspect of the composition as a whole.

THE AVANT-GARDE IN RUSSIA

The Socio-Political Climate of the Avant-garde

In Russia, art became a medium for the philosophical expression of what the future might hold. According to Bowlt (1988), the term Futurism signified all of the extreme factions within literature and art, from Neoprimitivism to Constructivism, and falls under the Avant-garde umbrella. Futurism was an outlet for aesthetic speculation but also aggressive rejection of the past. In 1915, Kazimir Malevich condemned both his predecessors and his contemporaries as incapable of understanding and appreciating modernity. “Their bodies fly in airplanes, but they cover art and life with the old robes of Neros and Titians. Hence they are unable to observe the new beauty of our modern life. Because they live by the beauty of past ages” (Malevich 1988:120).

The artists encompassed in this new school had varying concerns and belief systems. Old concepts of philosophy and spirituality felt too simplistic for the complexities of the modern era; the modern thinking man required new explanations (Kurbanovsky 2007). One example is Neoprimitivism, the integration of folk motifs and peasant subjects with modern aesthetic sensibilities, which was Mikhail Larionov’s alternative to the inundation of Western influences. I will address the aversion to Western culture in Russia further in Chapter 3. These artists lived in the new urban landscape, one that was dependent

on machines and automation for the first time (Bowlt 1988). They were captivated by energy, speed, light, movement, space, and all of their potential implications. Simmons (1981) suggests that the Avant-garde was perhaps more sensitive to the social atmosphere of the time than politics or government, and that the revolution reached artists before it reached the masses. Tim Harte[8] (2009) asserts that artists were barely able to keep up with the rapid pace of change in their environment and that the Avant-garde movement was a result of the need to capture the essence of a new modern life in constant flux. The Avant-garde was the realm of society that embraced modernity and as such emerged in opposition to established art traditions.

For the artistic community in particular, the first decade of the twentieth century was characterized by constantly shifting allegiances and attitudes. Divisions tended to align with either new trends imported from Europe or nationalist sentiments (Bowlt 1988). Larionov and Goncharova set themselves apart as Neoprimitivists and declared their estrangement from French influences (Gray 1986). This style quickly became dominant among younger generations of artists. Neoprimitivism was achieved through studies of children's drawings and folk arts, in particular a style of peasant woodcut called *lubok* (Bowlt 1988). Neoprimitivists modified folk motifs and forms to conform to their own aesthetic ideals (Hilton 1989).

At the same time that Neoprimitivism was sweeping the art community, Orthodox icons were experiencing a resurgence in popularity due to a revived appreciation of icons among the intelligentsia, as much for their spiritual value as

[8] Tim Harte is a professor of Russian language and literature at Bryn Mawr College.

their aesthetic (Kurbanovsky 2007). For several centuries, icons were ignored and left to accumulate dirt and soot in church corners. The darkening of Russia's icons was exacerbated by their construction, which included a layer of linseed oil varnish, called *olifa*, which contributed to their golden warmth but amassed filth (Quenot 1991). The wealthy Stroganov family began collecting icons early in the 19th century but another hundred years of technological advances was required for science to catch up with sentiments (Gray 1986). The beginning of the twentieth century introduced new cleaning techniques and the brilliant hues and sophisticated colour palettes of Russian icons were revealed for a new millennium. According to Gough (1999), the icon was considered by many to be superior to easel painting because of the numerous materials involved in their creation, including tempera, gesso, gold leaf, and sometimes metals and semi-precious stones. As opposed to oil paint alone, all of these different elements contributed to the complexity of the icon and made it more stimulating. Gough (1999) states that this sentiment revolves around the concept of *faktura*, an idea growing in importance among Russian painters.

When Henri Matisse came to Moscow in 1911, he recognized the artistry of icons immediately, although he called them 'primitive' and relegated them to the realm of 'people's art' (Hilton 1969-1970). Matisse appreciated the bold, pure palette of icons, the simplicity of their shapes and detail, and their departure from realism. The renowned French artist recognized in the Russian people a keen awareness of their own artistic legacy and an unconscious attachment to their ancient traditions (Hilton 1969-1970).

KAZIMIR MALEVICH AND SUPREMATISM

Kazimir Malevich, a student of the Kiev School of Art, had come to Moscow in 1905 (Gray 1986). His early work demonstrated strong parallels with icon painting, particularly in the warm, amber palette and the ethereal quality of the subjects (see Figures 21 and 22). Neoprimitivism was publicly launched at an exhibit featuring Larionov and Goncharova in 1909; Malevich was introduced to the pair in 1910 when he contributed to the first Jack of Diamonds exhibit (Gray 1986). This exhibition was the first significant gathering of Avant-garde artists in Russia, and had a profound effect on Malevich. He began his own foray into Neoprimitivism with his 1911 and 1912 pieces (see Figures 23, 24, 25, and 26). In 1913, Malevich provided the stage design for the futurist opera, *Victory over the Sun*. Larissa A. Zhadova[9] (1982) suggests that these designs were likely the impetus for Suprematism, a form of Futurism that would be his lasting contribution to art, and the origin of *Black Square*, which appeared in several forms in the backdrops for the production. Malevich developed his Suprematist theory at the same time that he was experimenting with Alogism, a combination of Picasso-style cubism and the transrational poetry that was popular in Russia at the time, which used non-sensical words and sound phrases (see Figures 27 and 28).

The *Black Square*

Black Square (see Figure 29) remains the definitive piece in Malevich's oeuvre. It represents the essentials of the artist's personal philosophy; painting

[9] Larissa A. Zhadova was a Soviet art historian.

reality on a canvas is simply skilful reproduction, not art. He stated that “the artist can be a creator only when the forms in his picture have nothing in common with nature” (Malevich 1988:122). *Black Square* stands in opposition to traditional art values and signifies the triumph over the illusion of realism. It represents the absence and presence of colour simultaneously; it is space without reliance on depth and the representation of all views without reliance on perspective (Zhadova 1982). Malevich’s *Black Square* is not a fearsome void depicting nothingness; it is the depiction of space as the subject. Zhadova (1982) describes this as “boundlessness and cosmic spaciousness” (55).

The precise year that Malevich painted *Black Square* is a point for debate in Avant-garde studies. The artist blatantly manipulated his own chronology to exert control over his legacy within his lifetime (Simmons 1981). The painting was exhibited for the first time in 1915, but may have been painted as early as 1913 (Drutt 2003; Gray 1986; Sarabianov 1990a; Simmons 1981; Zhadova 1982). The public introduction to *Black Square* in 1915, at the *0.10 Last Futurist Painting Exhibition*, was also the public debut for Suprematism. The exhibit was met with public outrage and confusion, the pieces deemed threatening and indecipherable (Zhadova 1982). Malevich placed *Black Square* apart from the other paintings in an upper corner, a deliberate reference to the corner traditionally reserved for icons in Russian homes. For critics and the viewing public, there could be no mistaking such a placement; it was blasphemous (Zhadova 1982).

Natalia Avtonomova (2007) addresses the placement of the piece in the

icon corner at the *0.10 Exhibition* and suggests that Malevich consciously played on religion. *Black Square* was meant to be a new icon for a new reality. Kurbanovsky (2007) takes this argument further in proposing that its transcendental reality precluded representational forms. *Black Square* was a mystic sign for both the human inability to comprehend God and the pre-eminence of profound contemplation above intellect. According to Simmons (1981), the piece was a means for Malevich to overcome the constraints of perspective and link man to the infinite. *Black Square* is the best example of Malevich's theory of 'zero form'; it is irreducible because it has reached the greatest possible reduction, the most basic form (Harte 2009). The subject of *Black Square* is the pure potential and existential reality, or Truth, which exists beyond the understanding of the senses (Groys 1992). The concepts embedded in *Black Square* would continue to inform Malevich's work throughout the course of his life (Petrova 2003).

While the exact chronology of Malevich's work remains vague, the advancements in the development of his oeuvre are clear. He painted a series that coalesced with *Black Square* into a set of primordial symbols akin to icons and cast himself in the role of icon painter, a role that will be further discussed in Chapter 3 (see Figures 30 and 31). Kurbanovsky (2007) posits an interesting theory regarding Malevich's intention behind these pieces, which is as follows:

> The mystic significance of this series is undeniable: the square, the traditional symbol of the Earth in medieval iconography, may be said to designate all things earthly, the circle to represent the skies or God or both, and the cross to signify the Church as the union of the earth and the heavens. [367-368]

By doing this series, Malevich diminished his own artistic innovation since icon painters were essentially considered mediators rather than creators, witnesses through which the images of God were made manifest (Kurbanovsky 2007).

Kurbanovsky (2007) also refers to Malevich's later inclusion of Orthodox style crosses in his Suprematist works as further evidence of the artist's explicit iconographic objective. The absolute truth of this particular theory is irrelevant, but points to the mystic significance of the *Black* series as a whole. Malevich undoubtedly intended them to be representatives of truth and meaning beyond anything he could attempt to depict using realism – Yonder. Regardless of the outcry surrounding its debut, Suprematism had arrived.

The *Suprematism* Series

Malevich's *Suprematism* series is an exploration of dynamism[10] and spatial tension through composition and construction. At this point, the artist shows no trace of any recognizable form (Harte 2009). With *Black Square*, he felt he had broken art, and therefore life, down to its most simplistic form so he followed it with building blocks (Zhadova 1982). Using the same geometric simplicity as with *Black Square*, Malevich expanded his theories with new and more complex shapes, new colours, and increased spatial expression. These are not pictures of the real world; they are hypothetical and conceptual images. Malevich was concentrating on sensation and his perception of nature. "His pictures can be described as images of the world's cosmic space" (Zhadova 1982:53). The series that followed *Black Square* and furthered the development of

---

[10] Dynamism, a central concept in the Russian Avant-garde, is a Russian term that is akin to 'speed' in English in that it represents both an action of movement and accelerated velocity in relation to a fixed point (Harte 2009).

Suprematism was an exercise in freeing the mind and opening up to new possibilities of space, movement, colour, and form outside of 3 dimensional reality (see Figures 32, 33, and 34).

The genius within Suprematism lies in its simplistic formula: an infinite variety of permutations involving the combinations of basic geometric forms. By layering, moving, and reconstituting masses in relation to one another, the formula of Suprematism proves inexhaustible (Zhadova 1982). Malevich supposed that by assigning the appropriate name to his piece, the audience would be able to intuit the movement of the colour masses, as in *Painterly Realism: Boy with Knapsack - Colour Masses in the Fourth Dimension* and *Suprematist Composition: Airplane Flying* (see Figures 35 and 36). By suggesting a boy with a knapsack, the larger black square and smaller red square seem somehow magnetically fused and if one square were adjusted in the slightest, the tension between them could be lost. The forms in *Airplane* are arranged in a way that conveys steady, uniform motion, but the velocity is impossible to know (Harte 2009). The airplane as a known object enables the viewer to grasp a freedom from gravity and earthly physical constraints. The *Suprematism* series as a whole must be considered in the context of charged combinations of shapes moving at unknowable speeds, exploding away from each other or imploding into each other. These paintings are a fluid dance of space, motion, tension, and colour in barely-constrained chaos similar in feeling to the atmosphere in Russian society at the time. Malevich's Suprematist paintings can give us clues about the worldview in which he existed, the undercurrents of the society surrounding him. I will

explore this idea further in Chapter 3.

The *White* Series

The last major phase of Malevich's Suprematist painting is his *White* stage (see Figure 37). This was the last frontier for Suprematism, its furthest extension and ultimate fulfilment (Harte 2009). *Suprematist Composition: White on White* is the counterpart to *Black Square* (Zhadova 1982). Malevich began at zero with the black square, in which he reduced all form to its basic element. He then progressed through the stages of colour to eventually arrive at the pure light of white. Kurbanovsky (2007) describes these paintings as Malevich's most radical series because his vision has transcended the material and leaves nothing visual to be seen; his paintings have essentially left known reality and exist in Yonder. *White on White* is also a form of *faktura*, in which the subject is the worked surface texture, expressed in monochromes as the manipulation of a single pigment (Gough 1999). According to Zhadova (1982), *White on White* is the "ultimate in Suprematist representation of the all-universe in all-time" (58). All-universe in all-time can be interpreted as existence beyond the knowable in Yonder.

THE DECLINE OF THE AVANT-GARDE

Following the October Revolution, the newly formed regime made several attempts to bureaucratize the arts. Despite the presence of Avant-garde artists in the newly organized State Institute for Artistic Culture, of which Malevich acted as head, the atmosphere of acceptance they enjoyed declined drastically following

Lenin's death in January of 1924 (Gray 1986). Konstantin Akinsha (2007) equates Lenin's death with the victory of the realistic image over non-figurative art in Russia, exacerbated by the cult of Lenin that was engineered by the Communist Party under Stalin. Depictions of alternative realities, explorations in Yonder, quickly gave way in a movement toward realism. In the new Soviet society, reality was the only truth. Akinsha (2007) also suggests that Malevich was sensitive to the importance of Lenin's passing, and ardently rejected the religious attitude toward the leader that was engulfing the country. The policy adjustments resulting from the change in leadership tended toward conservative censorship and Malevich and his colleagues began to fall out of favour with the regime (Avtonomova 2007). The emerging Stalinist culture made artistic self-determination more difficult; a sense of obligation to the new culture engendered a feeling of responsibility toward the masses and the state, which had no need for the frivolity of artistic freedom (Dobrenko 2005). Art lacking in sufficient socio-political content often was deemed 'formalist' and unsuitable for Soviet society. Within a year, Avant-garde art had fallen from the heights of representing revolutionary culture to open hostility (Bowlt 1988). Kazimir Malevich spent the last years of his life as an outcast in the Stalinist regime, focusing on his artistic legacy until his death in May of 1935 (Zhadova 1982).

Boris Groys[11] (1996) suggests that by attempting to control their political reality through artistic means, the artists of the Avant-garde left behind the realm of pure aesthetics. Instead they mired themselves in politics, an arena where they

[11] Groys is a philosopher and art critic, as well as a writer who specializes in Soviet art and literature, and the Avant-garde.

did not have the advantage or the means for success. The Avant-garde ideology of life construction required a certain amount of power within society in order to execute an aesthetic re-ordering; this need for power proved to be their social downfall (Kurbanovsky 2007). By the early 1930's, the state was exerting greater control over the content and direction of art. The foundations for Avant-garde explorations were no longer experimental, the environment of innovation had stagnated (Harte 2009).

Malevich's own great hopes for the Revolution were not actualized. The result of this realization was his loss of conviction in abstraction and eventual return to figurative work (Drutt 2003). His late-period portraiture retains elements of Suprematism, but is also reminiscent of his earlier Neoprimitivist peasant paintings and maintains a continued reliance on undefined cosmic space (see Figures 38 and 39) (Zhadova 1982). Groys (1996) describes how Soviet politics appropriated the philosophy and artistic projects of the Avant-garde for legitimacy, leaving artists bereft of any tools for negotiating their own advancement:

> The avant-garde artist laid claim to the vacant place of the total creator, but in fact this place had been filled by political authority. Stalin became the only artist, the Malevich, so to speak, of the Stalin period, liquidating the avant-garde as a competitor in accordance with the logic of the struggle- a logic which was not foreign to avant-garde artists either, who willingly resorted to administrative intrigues. [209]

Socialist Realism emerged to replace the Avant-garde as the art of the people; its official endorsement in the Central Committee decree in April of 1932 acted as the nail in the Avant-garde coffin (Groys 1992). The goal of bringing the art out of the museum to the people was a motivating factor in the Avant-garde, a

goal that was inherent in the very existence of Socialist Realism. Painting in Russia could no longer access and explore Yonder since the Soviet regime would not tolerate deviation from known reality.

CHAPTER THREE

INTRODUCTION TO AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL THEORY

In this section I will turn to Alfred Gell's *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* to supply a framework for addressing the similarities between icons and Suprematism. I will explain his theory of art as a social relationship between people and art objects through exchanges of agency. Gell establishes the difference between primary and secondary agency and I will outline how these apply to Russian art. I will also provide an overview of Gell's discussions of prototypes and how they fit into the matrix of social exchange in art. I will relate Gell's concepts to Yonder, icons, and Malevich throughout this section. In addition, I will turn to David Freedburg's (1989) *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* to support Gell's assertions, exploring icons and Suprematism through an anthropological theory of art.

Art and Social Personhood

Gell begins *Art and Agency* by establishing that in order to approach art anthropologically we need to address art as more than simply that which is given value by the Western art world (critics, dealers, collectors). An anthropological understanding of 'art' should transcend this culturally constrained construct. To achieve this, Gell suggests that the social processes surrounding art objects must not be overlooked and that we can understand 'art' by considering its social context. In this approach, the aesthetic properties may become secondary to the

social implications of the object. But if aesthetics aren't the point, then what is the point? Gell asserts that the point of art objects is not merely symbolism but agency. The purpose of art objects is not coded meaning but social action. Gell (1998) asserts,

> the aim of anthropological theory is to make sense of behaviour in the context of social relations... the objective of the anthropological theory of art is to account for the production and circulation of art objects as a function of this relational context. [11]

Social Relations

Anthropology is often concerned with things that are treated as, or act as, more than just things. Art is intended to interact with the world, not just reflect it symbolically. Art is an avenue for action or exchange – it is not just representational or reflective, it is a presence. The specific nature of the art object is difficult to describe in theory because a social context is required. Gell explains that an art object does not have inherent value independent of the relational context in which it occurs.

> Nothing is decidable in advance about the nature of this object, because the theory is premised on the idea that the nature of the art object is a function of the social-relational matrix in which it is embedded. [Gell 1998:7]

Art falls into a category of objects that behave in un-object-like ways. This is because people respond to art objects differently because they behave as more than objects. Art objects have personhood in the sense that they exert social agency. Art objects engage in an exchange-based relationship with human beings. This type of relationship is uncharacteristic of standard human-object relations but similar to human-human relations.

Social Agency

The immediate ‘other’ in a social relationship does not have to be a human being. Gell establishes this by addressing *things* as social agents. In this context, Gell (1998) describes agency as,

> … attributable to those persons… who/which are seen as initiating causal sequences of a particular type, that is, events caused by acts of mind or will or intention, rather than the mere concatenation of physical events. An agent is one who ‘causes events to happen’ in their vicinity. [16]

This is social personhood and it is exerted by art objects all the time. This is the heart of Gell’s anthropological theory of art: that art objects interact with humans as social persons. Art objects can only be agents in social relations with humans; their agency is dependent on their social interaction with humans. Without their interaction, they are relegated back to the category of things. Freedburg (1989) also asserts this premise in *The Power of Images* in relation to religious imagery,

> People do not garland, wash, or crown images just out of habit; they do so because all such acts are symptoms of a relationship between the image and respondent that is clearly predicated on the attribution of powers which transcend the purely material aspect of the object. [91]

Although he is specifically referring to religious imagery (Christian in particular), this statement applies to art objects in general. It is the response to art that makes it more than just the physical sum of its parts. Freedburg (1989) also establishes the familiarity of the social relations humans have with images, and asserts that this behaviour is common to all societies, not just those perceived as ‘primitive’. He states that, “it is not just pagans or exotic tribes that do such things to images or expect such thing from them or, indeed treat them as if they were alive” (Freedburg 1989:91).

Gell provides an insightful comparison to demonstrate the everyday social interactions people have with objects, in order to explain his theory fully. He uses the example of his own relationship with his car to express his meaning. Cars are not inherently social agents, but can exert agency when people bring them into a social exchange.

> My Toyota is reliable and considerate; it only breaks down in relatively minor ways at times when it 'knows' that no great inconvenience will result. If, God forbid, my Toyota were to break down in the middle of the night, far from home, I should consider this an act of gross treachery for which I would hold the car personally and morally culpable, not myself or the garage mechanics who service it. Rationally, I know that such sentiments are somewhat bizarre, but I also know that 99 per cent of car owners attribute personality to their cars in much the same way I do, and that such imaginings contribute to a satisfactory *modus Vivendi* in a world of mechanical devices. [Gell 1998:18-19]

Gell refers to this as 'vehicular animism,'' a commonplace type of animism that occurs throughout the world and across multiple cultures. His description of his Toyota as an example of an object with assigned personhood serves to demonstrate how people attribute such agency to objects unconsciously. This is also his intention when describing art objects as exerting agency.

To be clear, when Gell refers to 'intention', he does not mean to suggest an intended outcome. Social interactions will rarely conform to a particular agents' expected outcome, if one is expected at all. The use of the word intention should not be taken to preclude some exertion of will or sentience on the part of the object. The 'intention' under discussion only extends to the intentions people assign to objects, as in the case with Gell's Toyota and the negative intentions he attributes to it in the event of its grossly treacherous breakdown.

Agents and Patients

Here I will briefly explain the recipients of agency. The counterpart of the agent in a response or exchange is the patient – that upon which the agent's agency is exerted. Gell (1998) states that "the patient is the object which is causally affected by the agent's action" (22). Patients should not be understood to be inherently passive since they can be resistant. Gell suggests that art objects are a particularly resistant form of patient, as they are difficult to make, to understand, or to categorize.

In the most basic understanding of agent-patient relations when considering art, the artist is the agent and the work is the patient. The artist exerts his agency over the canvas, the subject, the medium. Recipients are the intended audience of an art object, and are in a social relationship with that object. The type of action indicated by the term 'agency' is varied; it can refer to a feeling, a thought, a physical movement, or any other kind of reaction one may have to an art object. Denial and refusal are common reactions to art objects, especially modern abstract art. Malevich is a perfect example since his quintessential work, *Black Square*, is difficult to interpret without understanding the philosophy behind it. Some will look at it and be irritated that it is only a black square, and what meaning could it possibly have, what skill could it possibly require to create? But that irritation is still a reaction to it, and a result of the agency exerted by it.

The agent-patient relationship is immediately complicated in the context of Russian art since the patient – the art piece – always exerts some agency over the artist; the subject, medium, or prototype will act as determining forces over

the artist in the creative process. In the case of icons, the painter may have very little agency, if any at all. A similar approach could be extended to Malevich since he was painting the truth, according to his own philosophy. This is where primary and secondary agency enters the equation. Primary agents are wilful, sentient beings and secondary agents are conduits through which primary agents distribute their agency. In the context of this paper, the secondary agent is often the artist himself through which the intentions of a primary agent are exacted. Artists usually fall into the primary agent category but this is not the case for icons, or arguably for Suprematism. For icons, God is always the primary agent, and the artist is the secondary agent at best (if not merely a recipient). In Chapter 1, I addressed the decline of icon painting in the 16th century, as indicated by the painters signing the icons. This was a re-assignment of agency; the act of signing the icons represents an exertion of primary agency over the art piece. As a result, God is no longer the primary agent, which renders the painting useless within the icon schema. For Suprematism, painterly truth is the primary agent, revealed through Malevich's secondary agency. While there is definitely more agency exerted by Malevich in this formula than an icon painter, the agency is still secondary. I will explore these ideas further in the following section where I will outline Gell's approach to prototypes.

Prototypes

Gell includes prototypes in a framework along with the artist, the recipient, and the index, an "'object'... related to a social agent in a distinctive, 'art-like' way" (Gell, 1998:13). Gell (1998) refers to the index as a material thing

that permits a particular cognitive operation or causal inference (13). He describes this as abduction in a very technically complex discussion, in which he uses the example of smoke as an index from which we abduct the presence of fire. We know that smoke can in fact exist without fire, and do not require some rationale or scientific proof to resolve the absolute truth of the matter. In the same way, a smile suggests a friendly constitution but can be hiding all manner of deception or malcontent (Gell 1998:13). This does not stop us from perceiving a smile as a representation of a friendly attitude – this is abduction, a kind of guessing. I will continue this discussion at a later point in this chapter, when I address Bateson. For our current purposes, the index will stand for the art object, and abduction stands for the knowledge we can infer about other things from the index.

In Gell's theory, these four terms – prototype, artist, recipient, and index – interact in an interchangeable matrix of social exchange. Each can directly interact with the other three in a variety of agent-patient formulas. Gell (1998) explains prototypes as follows:

> iconic representation is based on the actual resemblance in form between the depictions and the entities they depict or are believed to depict. A picture of an existing thing resembles that thing in enough respects to be recognized as a depiction or model of it. A depiction of an imaginary thing (a god, for instance) resembles the picture that believers in that god have in their minds as to the god's appearance, which they have derived from other images of the same god, which this image resembles. [25]

The basic nature of the prototype in this matrix is that it causes the representation to exist. The prototype exerts its agency over the artist and the depiction. Prototypes may exist in a variety of social relationships with the index: the index can have agency over the prototype, which we see in examples of

sorcery, where harm done to the index causes harm to the prototype; more common is the prototype exerting agency over the index, where the prototype causes the appearance of the index. This is the outwardly relevant relationship expressed in icons; the agency of Jesus, Mary, or a saint, causes the icon to have the appearance it has, and to be created by the painter. According to Gell (1998), "where the prototype of an index is an entity (such as a king, magician, divine being, etc.) endowed with the ability to intend its own appearance, then the prototype may be partly or wholly a primary agent..." (37). Icons are an overt example of the prototype-as-agent causal relationship. Suprematism is not as overt but it can still be categorized the same way.

Gell (1998) also outlines what he calls the "idol formula" (40), which is another formula relevant to icons in which the prototype exerts agency over the recipient. In this case, God, Jesus Christ, the Virgin, or a saint exert their agency over the viewer (in this case, the faithful). The reverse to this is where the viewer exerts agency over the prototype, which applies to icons as well. The faithful has access to the prototype through the icon representing them. When an Orthodox Christian venerates an icon, they are venerating the prototype, not the object before them. The icon creates an avenue for access to the prototype, a window through which the actual being can be perceived. The agency exertion of the prototype and the recipient occurs simultaneously in icons, creating a social exchange between the prototype and the viewer. This relationship is not as straightforward in the case of Suprematism; while the viewer may have access to Yonder through the painting, it is not as much an exchange as with icons. There is

no overt agency being exerted by Yonder on the viewer. The relationship in the case of Suprematism is limited to a one-way, visual exchange rather than a direct social exchange with a (supposed) being.

The artist in the agent position with the prototype in the patient position is the causal relationship of imaginary arts, images the artist has created from their own mind. It would be easy to relegate Malevich and Suprematism into this category but this would be an inaccurate analysis of the causal exchange involved. The primary agency in Suprematism is painterly truth, revealed to Malevich. Painterly truth can be understood as Yonder, an existential reality beyond human perception. As an artist, Malevich never claimed to have invented Suprematism. His vocabulary points to having found Suprematism. It was revealed, it was discovered, it was even sought, but it was not created. The Truth Malevich assigned to Suprematism existed before him and he believed it would remain after him. This is a slight variation of the prototype-icon relationship but the formula is the same.

The key difference between icons and Suprematism is the type of agency exerted by the artists. In icon painting, agency is exerted by the artist to the detriment of the accuracy of the prototype's portrayal. The result is a degrading of the quality of production. There are exceptions: Rublev, whose agency, when exerted, showed a more intuitive understanding of the prototype than had previously been rendered. But the question then becomes, did Rublev understand the prototype better than other painters, or did the prototype reveal itself more fully to him? What makes him so special? Perhaps there is never agency on the

part of the icon painter, and it is always a case of more complete revelation. In contrast, the Suprematist artist maintains at least a secondary agency in the equation. But the agency of the prototype is indisputable; regardless of the artists' type of agency, both icon painters and Malevich are patients in the formula, responding to the primary agency exerted by the prototype. The icon and the Suprematist painting are windows of exchange through which Yonder reveals itself and interacts socially with the recipients. The nature of this exchange will be further explored elsewhere in this paper.

RUSSIAN SOUL – *RUSSKAYA DUSHA*

In this section I will introduce and illustrate the concept of *russkaya dusha*, which translates into Russian Soul. I will begin by briefly explaining the concept and highlighting the discourse surrounding it, focusing on several relevant contributors. I will further expand the definition of *dusha* and explain its relevance to the present discussion.

Russian Soul is a concept that gained popularity across Europe in the 19th century but it has endured in Russia in various guises since the conversion to Christianity, as previously discussed in Chapter 1. The concept is somewhat fluid and can be difficult to define. While we cannot assume that every individual in Russia relates to the concept personally, it is a generally accepted discourse among Russians, and many individuals would claim to exhibit some manifestations of it. Russian Soul is characterized by suffering, fortitude, perseverance, depth of feeling and emotion, depth of perception and

understanding, expansiveness, inexpressibility, immeasurability, communal feelings, and generous hospitality. It often stands in contrast to Western thought, attitude, reason, and logic. This is the source of its popularity during the 19th century among Russians – while Western Europe seemed to flounder amidst the negative repercussions of industrialism and imperialism, Russia represented the alternative. In modern conceptions, *dusha* is a subconscious vitality that can be fostered or maimed, uplifted or stifled, and understood or hidden, all simultaneously. Its enduring quality can be directly connected to its fluidity and adaptability.

Roberts C. Williams[12] (1970) adroitly distils the concept of Russian Soul in 19th century discourse in, *The Russian Soul: A Study in European Thought and Non-European Nationalism*. Williams exposes the Western European contribution to Russian Soul; the concept became crystallized only after it permeated popular discourse in Western Europe and then filtered back to Russia through literary channels. Russian Soul was juxtaposed with the rational, material Western European man. Russia and its soul represented a return to a simpler, more innocent nature, where people were free to be spiritual and philosophical, undamaged by a lengthy past. Western Europe was often characterized as a great, soulless machine. Nineteenth century comparisons between Western Europe and Russia inevitably break down to a relatable civilized versus primitive division; Russia was not as backward as naked tribesman of the colonies, but was not considered as advanced technologically and culturally as Western Europe. It was a

[12] Williams was a dean and professor of history at Davidson College, specializing in Russian History.

safe kind of primitivism. Russian Soul discourse offered a satisfying alternative to disenfranchised Europeans left bereft in the wake of the First World War and the belief that the West was on the decline.

According to Williams, the other major contribution to the 19th century discourse on Russian Soul is literature. The back and forth interplay between the literatures of Western Europe and Russia eventually solidified in the works of Dostoevsky, the writer considered to be the quintessential Russian Soul. Williams describes, in great detail, this process, which essentially began with Gogol's publication of *Dead Souls* and a critic's misinterpretation of the title's meaning. The period of 1880-1930 was marked by a flourishing of Russian literature which was digested by Western Europe and then reflected back. The concept of Russian Soul maintains an embedded element of superiority over the West. The contribution of Russian literature in the 19th century helped to maintain these feelings. *Russkaya dusha* came to represent all that was not Western and therefore was lively, creative, and elemental. While the modern concept of *dusha* is somewhat removed from the 19th century exchange of ideas, which can today seem stale and trite, it is still relevant as the point in history when Russia and the world began talking about Russian Soul.

Liah Greenfeld[13] (1992) includes the concept of Russian Soul in her treatise on the formation of Russian nationalism and national consciousness. She agrees with Williams (1970) that Russian literature greatly contributed to the foundation of the concept of Russian Soul. She goes on to demonstrate how Russian Soul was an elemental aspect of the Russian national consciousness by

[13] Greenfeld is an authority on nationalism and a professor at Boston University.

the 19th century. She attributes this consciousness to the reigns of Peter I and Catherine II, their westward focus, and the resulting fallouts in society after their deaths. Peter's focus on the West as a model for civilization served to highlight the differences between Russia and the West; serfdom and the oppressive conditions in which most Russians lived did not measure up by comparison (Greenfeld 1992:231). The reality of Russia did not meet the Western European standard. According to Greenfeld (1992), this resulted in *ressentiment*, the existential envy of the West (250). To avoid the shame of this failure, a new model was required, one that did not force Russia to uphold standards it could not meet. This required "a Transvaluation of Western values, the creation of a new, this time in every sense imaginary model, and with it a new hope for Russia, a new image of Russia, a soothing, comforting image, able to serve as a basis for individual self-esteem" (Greenfeld 1992:253). Through this transvaluation, the Russian Soul emerged. The Western model was made irrelevant; Russia was the true model, whose standards were superior to those of the West. The West appeared to be ideal but this was deception; the West was materialistic while the real ideal was Russia because it was spiritually real (Greenfeld 1992:255). During the 18th century, what Russia lacked and envied of the West was "the thinking individual – the common man endowed with reason" (Greenfeld 1992:255). Reason was the foundation for modern morality in the Western construct; in Russia, this was countered by the Soul. Reason was fashionable but Soul endured forever. Liberty and equality received the same treatment as well. Western liberty and equality were not considered real because they constrained Soul. Real freedom was spiritual in

nature and rendered all these rational concepts obsolete (Greenfeld 1992:257). Russia remained uncivilized by Western standards but held onto their primordial roots. Russian Soul was a combination of all the virtues that opposed those Western virtues that Russia lacked. This indefinable construct offered a reprieve from the continual self-abasement of their failure and due to its enigmatic character it allowed for re-interpretation and accommodation. Superiority over the West could be achieved because the Russian people had tapped into their natural existential aptitude. Greenfeld (1992) sums up the attitude that required Russian Soul in order to succeed:

> There was no need to catch up to the West; it was this pitiful opponent who had some catching up to do; Russia was the opposite of the West and so much the better for that. Russia contained the salvation of the world within herself; she preserved and held high the torch of humanity, and the West was to watch her in amazement. [267]

Since the 19th century was the point of emergence of the term *russkaya dusha*, it would be difficult to trace its history before that time. Daniel Rancour-Laferriere[14] (1995) explores Russian Soul from a psychological standpoint in his book, *The Slave Soul of Russia*. It may seem counterintuitive to investigate a cultural tendency from the necessarily individualist perspective of psychology but Rancour-Laferriere makes some interesting points and recognizes that culture exists as an expression of a collective of individuals. The assertions he makes that are relevant to my discussion centre on the relationship between Orthodoxy and Russian Soul. Orthodoxy is the connective and foundational fabric of a unified Russian history since the conversion. Rancour-Laferriere asserts that moral

[14] Rancour-Laferriere was an Emeritus Professor of Russian at University of California, Davis, and taught in Social Sciences and Humanities.

masochism, the slave soul, is a cultural tendency among Russians. Without using his psychological terminology, I would further argue that this concept is an integral element of the Russian national consciousness and it corresponds in many ways to Russian Orthodoxy. Attitudes toward suffering in Russia are widely known and expressed; submission to and illumination through suffering is a temporal constant in Russia. This is intimately connected to Orthodoxy:

> the "law of descent" is the essence of "Russian soul", and the lowly, humiliated, but enlightening Christ is the perfect model for this Russian tendency. It is as if the words "imitation of Christ" were inscribed on the forehead of the Russian nation. It is as if Russians were *born* Christian... [Rancour-Laferriere 1995:3]

The history of the Russian Orthodox Church is replete with examples of illumination through suffering. No societal figure is more revered than the holy ascetic who, by rejecting all worldly pleasure and shutting himself off from the world, represents the ultimate expression of Christianity. St. Sergei of Radonezh ruined his body with manual labour and fasting, refused elevation within the ranks of the Church, and continually maintained the ideal of holy poverty in imitation of Christ. "In suffering, a Russian is by definition imitating Christ" (Rancour-Laferriere 1995:27). Rancour-Laferriere's "moral masochism" is essentially the practice of suffering in Russia. Dale Pesmen[15] substantiates the connection between Orthodoxy and *dusha*; according to her investigation, an inherent aspect of being Russian was the Orthodox faith. "Although both nationalist and everyday uses of *dusha* at first seem unrelated to Orthodoxy, there are substantial links" (Pesmen 2000:17). Suffering, a key component of both Orthodoxy and the concept of *dusha*, is a central theme in the work of Dale Pesmen.

[15] Pesmen is an anthropologist and visual artist.

As described by Dale Pesmen in *Russia and Soul: An Exploration* (2000), for Russians suffering unites people, opens the soul, and revives the soul. There is a thin line between suffering that opens the soul and suffering that kills it. Suffering can purify and revitalize but it can also maim. To suffer is to live through something with caring and feeling. Suffering is juxtaposed with everyday life – *byt* – which is mundane and monotonous and unrelenting. *Byt* can slowly beat down one's soul until it can hardly be found at all. But without *byt*, how would we know soul exists? Without suffering, how would we know what it is not to suffer? An essential aspect of *dusha* that Pesmen continually circles around is duality; *dusha* often contains pairs. Within this discussion is embedded the notion of dual selves. One part is outward, living in the world, and going about daily life; the other is hidden, truer, more perceptive, and generally considered healthy. Along with suffering, this concept also ties into Orthodoxy, where the faithful must be true to the "other" world since it is not transient like this world. Suffering reveals this falseness and enduring suffering is taken as proof that this world is not real. Orthodoxy also places emphasis on the irrational mind over the rational mind, or the unconscious over the conscious, since the rational human mind is considered incapable of a true understanding of God. Everyday life, *byt*, is external, material, and happens on the surface. Feelings are emphasized as more important than rationality. This material self is understood to be constricting and destructive. The soul is internal, good, desirable, and "other." Pesmen (2000) suggests that "distant otherworldliness was related to and often synonymous with *dusha*, the inner world" (60). Suffering is central to both Russian Orthodoxy and,

according to Pesmen, post-Soviet concepts of *dusha*. Suffering is believed to exist so that humans can understand each other's pain and live with empathy. In this understanding, suffering cannot exist without duality; the only way we know happiness and communion with others is because we have suffered and endured. Within the concept of *dusha*, regardless of the name given to it, kernels of identity exist in a continuum that spans the past and present of Russian culture.

Greenfeld (1992) and Williams (1970) both assert that the Russian national identity formed in the 19th century is bound to the concept of Russian Soul. Standing in contrast to the West and all of its perceived downfalls, the Russian Soul was supposed to lead the way to a utopian 20th century. In connecting *russkaya dusha* to suffering, Rancour-Laferriere (1995) underscores the concept's connections to Orthodoxy. Multiple aspects of *russkaya dusha* overlap with key tenets of the Orthodox faith: redemption through suffering, truth through suffering, accepting the unknowable, the false nature of material reality, the incredible expanse of the human spirit. In Pesmen's (2000) explorations of post-Soviet Russia, *dusha* appears to be a great concern for her informants; their worry for the state of their Russian Souls in their new society is the subject of the majority of Pesmen's (2000) 300 pages. All of these writers demonstrate the importance of *russkaya dusha*, Russian Soul. It came to a head during the 19th century when the term was first defined as such, but since many aspects of Russian Soul correspond so closely with the Orthodox faith, we can assume that aspects of *dusha* were born long before. Anthony D. Smith (1994) writes about myths of national identity throughout time and addresses the need for connective

tissues to create it. In discussing the important role of national intelligentsias in nation foundation, he cites another necessity for the process; during the formative process, nations "required antecedent cultural ties and sentiments in a given population if they were, and are, to strike a deep popular chord and forge durable nations" (Smith 1994:100). The antecedent cultural tie relevant to my discussion is *russkaya dusha*, Russian Soul. It is parallel to Russian Orthodox tenets and maintained its relevance throughout the upheavals of the distant and recent past, the 20th century in particular, and remains relevant to Russians in Dale Pesmen's (2000) post-Soviet world and beyond. In the next section I will use Bateson's approach to culturally analyzing painting to show parallels between *dusha*, icons, and Suprematist paintings.

AXES OF COHERENCE

In an anthropological approach to art, we need to focus our attention on form rather than content. Art objects can reveal cultural tendencies when we go beyond the story depicted in the painting by attending to form. Gell (1998) suggests that "artworks are parts of culture which recapitulate the whole" (159). We will look to the technical components – style, materials, composition, skill – that can point to embedded cultural clues. "The code whereby perceived objects or persons (or supernaturals) are transformed into wood or paint is a source of information about the artist and his culture" (Bateson 2006: 79). The way an artist creates an art object, the processes involved in the creation, and the choices he makes in the arrangement are packed with meaning. "'Meaning' may be regarded

as an appropriate synonym of pattern, redundancy, information and 'restraint' within a certain paradigm" (Bateson 2006: 79). The redundancies Bateson is referring to are contained within any given culture; due to these redundancies we can infer knowledge from other things, without knowing it to be true in an absolute sense. Gell also relies on such 'redundancies' but refers to them as "axes of coherence" (Gell 1998:165). He uses the term style and defines its basic characteristic as a sharing of attributes. "Anthropologists think of 'style' as the attributes of artwork which associate those artworks with other cultural parameters, such as religious belief, kinship values, political competition, etc." (Gell 1998:159). Gell (1998) suggests a hologram as an example since it has "the curious property that any part of a holographic image contains an attenuated version of the information contained in the hologram as a totality" (166). An anthropological approach to an art piece should look for those parts of the piece that contain attenuated versions of larger cultural expressions.

Axes of coherence are not overtly recognized; for the recipient, this type of 'knowing' hardly even occurs on a conscious level. Earlier in this chapter I introduced Gell's (1998) concept of abduction, whereby we make causal inferences according to perceived relations between things. Abduction ties into Bateson's (2006) concept of redundancies: these patterns provide us with a sort of relational short-hand for unconsciously perceiving causation. An example is that a tree above ground can indicate roots underground without having to look for direct proof (Bateson 2006:79). We do not need to dig up the roots, or find some means of proving the point. We rarely consider how we know something; we

usually only consider what we know (Bateson 2006: 82). The ‘knowing’ that occurs on the level of axes of coherence is happening in a part of the mind that is not governed by reason; in this way we can assign it to the so-called unconscious level. The success of an artist, in an anthropological context, lies in their unconscious ability to build an art piece out of these coherences.

Bateson (2006) is able to study a Balinese painting and extract cultural redundancies from it. He demonstrates how the painting represents Balinese social organization, sex, and death all the while asserting an important cultural attitude – that serenity and turbulence are mutually dependent and cannot exist in seclusion. Bateson sees this attitude in each of the levels of representation and as such can assume that it is the relationships between all of the ideas depicted, simultaneously, that are important (2006:90). Focusing on only one aspect of the discourse of the piece would be a disservice to the work of the artist. The relationship between serenity and turbulence is the redundancy, the axis of coherence, that the relationships within the painting represent, from which we can potentially extract information about Balinese society. Gell (1998) applies a similar treatment to Marquesan art. In this paper, I will point to depth and incongruence, elements of *dusha*, as axes of coherence in Russia. It infiltrates society on multiple levels. Depth and incongruence are expressed in icons and Suprematist paintings, although not always in the exact same formula. Elements of both art forms are visual manifestations of these cultural tendencies.

In order to articulate these elements I will turn back to Dale Pesmen (2000) for her treatment of depth, a key component of her characterizations of

dusha. Depth of feeling, depth of understanding, and depth of insight are common themes in discourse on *russkaya dusha*. The Russian Soul is understood to be unimaginably deep and encompassing. Pesmen's informants' understandings of depth correspond to technical elements in icons and Suprematist painting. Pesmen (2000) summarizes it as follows:

> ...deep things are deep thanks to surfaces. Much of the meaning of expanses and worlds depends on thresholds or horizons that define and cover them. Dusha, like a veil, conceals, shields, distances, while seducing one. [216]

Depth corresponds to a surface, specifically to a distance from it, an expanse beyond it. The painted surface of icons and Suprematist paintings acts as this surface. What lies beyond the painted surface, which is two dimensional, is an expanse of unknown qualities. These qualities are unknown because they cannot be known, they are understood as inconceivable, expansive, encompassing, and existing in a space and time that cannot be conceived of by human consciousness – Yonder. Pesmen (2000) describes the depth of *dusha* as expansive, vast, centred, hidden, internal, and unfathomable. These multiple variations of depth are expressed in icons as multiple perspectives, which I addressed in Chapter 1. Icons employ a mixture of perspectives as opposed to the singular perspective of a landscape painting, for example. The vanishing points of these multiple perspectives will lead the recipient's eye in various directions, and may even lead toward the recipient themselves. The point of this technique is to allude to the all-encompassing space occurring in Yonder, and to express it to the viewer on an unconscious level.

The treatment of depth in Suprematist paintings is different than in icons, but serves the same purpose. While icons depict the many variations of depth that are occurring in *dusha* and in Yonder, Suprematist paintings display none. There is no perspective in Suprematist paintings. This is not to say there is no depth; the technique employed, as it is in icons, of layering flattened surfaces creates the illusion of three dimensions on a two dimensional plane. But in terms of distance from the surface, Malevich opted for a new approach: in abstaining from depicting specific perspectives, he is allowing for all perspectives. Malevich used white space to portray cosmic expanse (Zhadova 1982). White is the absence of shadow and presence of light. There is no way to understand the vastness of space beneath Malevich’s surface because there is no way to consciously understand the depth of Yonder. Malevich re-worked an unconsciously understood redundancy within Russian culture – the depiction of unknown depth using multiple perspectives – and carried it one step further.

There is another redundancy to be found within icons and Suprematist paintings, which also extends to other types of Avant-garde art. I have previously discussed *faktura*, the purposeful exposure of the material elements of a painting or sculpture for the purpose of dissonance. This technique was used by icon painters to highlight certain elements of an icon as more holy. It was later employed by Avant-garde artists to incorporate the material aspects of their medium into their creation. Bateson (2006) addresses this approach, and refers to

Jackson Pollock and wood carvers:

> A special ‘effect’ is achieved, not by the mere representationalism, but by the perceiver’s partial awareness that a physical system *other* than that of draftsman has contributed to determine his perception. [89]

Faktura reminds the recipient of the skill of the artist. The two dimensional surface can be appreciated as an achievement of communion between the artist and the mediums. The recipient is made aware of the Avant-garde painting as creating three dimensions on a two dimensional space; the recipient is made aware of the nails and wire and space incorporated into Tatlin’s Constructivist sculptures. The recipient is also made aware of the gold *assyst* layered on the icon, and that it is a wood board coated in gesso, egg, and pigment that can provide access to the Divine. Within the concept of *faktura* lies the appreciation for the difficulty of achieving it. *Faktura* is akin to accepting incongruities. Pesmen (2000) claims that the sense of what *dusha* is relies heavily on incongruities, ambiguities, dualities, and oppositional pairs. In the segment that addresses the *bania*, communal baths, she references Victor Turner’s *liminal spaces*:

> Bania is caught in the same opposition between pure and impure, cultured and primitive, as other things I describe. A partial but too simple explanation is that opposites coexist at liminal times and places (Turner, 1969), when people are undergoing transformation, developing, temporarily stripped of status. [Pesmen 2000: 112]

Dualities are common in discourse on *russkaya dusha*; simultaneously occurring contradictions are also common to Orthodox theology. In a way, these sentiments apply to the surface of icons and Suprematist paintings. These too could be

categorized as liminal. They are spaces of boundary, where the recipient passes from the material world into the world beyond. Space is depicted in non-rational ways, depth is confounded, flattened, heightened, and the materials do not quite fit properly. This is where *faktura* comes into play. The incongruity and dissonance of the materials expresses the liminal qualities of the painted surface. The recipient can unconsciously acknowledge the special nature of the space the painting occupies.

ART AS MAGIC

In this section, I will explore the concept of art as magic. For the purpose of this paper, I use the term 'magic' to denote causation, or perceived causation, not related to logic or known scientific parameters. By its nature it is unquestioned, assumed, and sometimes even unconscious. This section will explore some interchangeable aspects of art, magic, and religion. Within this formula there is the specialist, the figure whose special abilities enable them to access the existential realm beyond material reality. Through these specialists, recipients may confer with Yonder which would otherwise be denied to them. In *Out of this World: Otherworldly Journeys from Gilgamesh to Alberta Einstein*, Ioan Couliano[16] (1991) refers to shamanism as a "system of ecstatic and therapeutic methods whose purpose is to obtain contact with the parallel universe of the spirits" (38). I will address Malevich and icon painters, Andrei Rublev specifically, as shamanic specialists in their role as secondary agents.

[16] Couliano was a professor of History of Religions and History of Christianity at the University of Chicago.

The overlap between magic and religion has been discussed in the anthropological context countless times (Frazer 1976[1922]; Malinowski 1954[1948]; Durkheim 1965[1958]). The line separating an icon painter acting as a conduit for the Divine and a shaman in a ritualistic trance is somewhat arbitrary; anthropologically there is little difference. They serve the same purpose which is to allow believers special access to an existential realm that they are unable to access on their own. If taken one step further to include Malevich as a specialist accessing Yonder, then the distinction is purely the line between sacred and secular, an often arbitrary division. Malevich himself toyed with this distinction, to his advantage. As an artist, he was perceived to have specialized access to the existential realm as well; instead of spirituality opening this access, his presumed innate artistic ability and training opened the way. But what are icon painters or animistic shamans if not highly trained specialists with innate abilities that mark them as appropriate for their tasks? These three examples, the shaman, the icon painter, and the modern artist, are all particular kinds of secondary agents in their respective context; their role in society affords them special access to the existential as conduits, a role that is recognised by the rest of society. Artistic inspiration is the magic of Malevich. Artistic inspiration combined with asceticism is the magic of icon painters.

In the case of art, magic is the leap between what an artist can create and what we, the viewers, can understand in the creative process. As an artist himself,

Alfred Gell (1998) captures this division:

> …part of my experience as a recipient of Vermeer's *Lacemaker* is the contemplation of the possibility that I, not Vermeer, could have produced this painting- not in this world, I hasten to add, but in some other 'possible world' in which I would be a much better painter than I actually am. At the same time, I am acutely aware of the counterfactuality of this apparently feasible world: even though I know (generically) how to mix paint, and I can draw after my fashion, I also know that I could not even produce a decent copy of *The Lacemaker*… Gazing at the picture, my jaw drops, in admiration- and defeat. This defeat is, however, profitable to me also, to the extent that in mentally retracing Vermeer's origination of his picture, the technical and imaginative performance which culminated in the finished work, I do manage, exercising such powers as I possess, to attain a certain point, before I break off in bewilderment and can follow Vermeer no longer through the maze of his artistic agency. Up to a point, I can be Vermeer, I can identify with his artistic procedure and see his picture, vicariously, as a product of my bodily engagement with the world and with the materials artists manipulate. But once the point of incommensurability is reached, the point at which it is no longer possible to identify Vermeer's agency with my own, then I am left suspended between two worlds; the world in which I ordinarily live, in which objects have rational explanations and knowable origins, and the world adumbrated in the picture, which defeats explanation. [69]

This 'point of incommensurability' is magic. This is artistic inspiration and innovation. In religious terms, this is Divine intervention. The moment Gell is describing, which he as a non-specialist cannot overcome, is the moment where the artist/magician/shaman is understood to have access to Yonder.

Gell (1992) initially explored this idea in relation to canoe prow-boards from the Trobriand Islands, which he calls "weapons in psychological warfare" (44). The intention of these prow-boards is to cause their overseas Kula exchange partners to abandon their good sense and bargain poorly; the boards would dazzle and demoralize their trade partners (Gell 1992: 44). The Trobrianders' trade

partners were meant to believe the efficacy of the prow-boards reflected the magic power within it. Any generosity on the trade partner's part was attributed to this magic. The trade partners should be impressed by "the magical prowess on the part of the owner of the canoe" and assume "that he has access to the services of a carver whose artistic prowess is... the result of his access to superior carving magic" (Gell 1992:46). The trade partners abduct the magical might of the canoe owner, via the carver, from the index, the prow-board.

Gell (1992) refers to the nature of this abduction as enchantment and categorizes it as magical.

> The difficulty I have in mentally encompassing their coming-into-being as objects in the world accessible to me by a technical process which, since it transcends my understanding, I am forced to construe as magical. [Gell 1992:49]

How many of us have been awe struck by an art piece at some point? The abilities of the Trobriand carver are the same as the art specialist in our Western understanding: we cannot completely explain their process of bringing these objects into being. Their agency creates something that is "achieved both by human agency but at the same time by an agency which transcends the normal sense of self-possession of the spectator" (Gell 1992:49). The specialist – Trobriand carvers, Jan Vermeer, icon painters, or Malevich – can manipulate everyday materials – wood, or canvas, or pigment – in ways that spectators cannot understand and transform them into other things. These "occult transubstantiations of artists' materials into other things" (Gell 1992:51) may be one criterion for what constitutes 'good art' in human perception. The ability to better access the forces that enable one to produce these effects – whether they are

magic, creativity, or Divine intervention – are what separates these specialists and places them in a specific role in society. The purpose of this role is to access levels of conception that the rest of society cannot reach.

The Specialists

I have previously addressed the agency of the icon painter as a secondary agent acting according to the will of the primary agent, the prototype. The prototype exerts its agency on the recipients through the painter and the icon he creates. The agency exchange goes back and forth; the recipients can also exert agency on the prototype, using the icon as a conductive window to the existential plane. The icon painter maintains a level of agency since it is his skill which affects the efficacy of the icon, and therefore the exchange between the prototype and the recipient. I also previously discussed the quality of an icon in relation to the level of perceived spirituality of the painter. In Russian Orthodoxy, the ascetic devotion of the icon painter is directly proportionate to the spiritual effectiveness of the icon. Asceticism is the icon painter's shamanic trance; the mind and body are altered, and given in sacrifice, to such a degree that the mind of the painter is believed to access a higher level of understanding.

Andrei Rublev is the model of asceticism among Russian icon painters, who painted the perfect example of a Russian icon. The *Trinity* remains the perfect Russian icon because Rublev managed to visually capture crucial expressions of Russian Orthodox culture. His use of mixed perspective and understanding of the three-fold nature of the Holy Trinity are exemplary. After the oppression of the Mongol Invasions, Rublev represented glory through suffering,

sacrifice, and fortitude. The *Trinity* is a visual expression of the depth of soul which is such an important characteristic in Russian culture and *dusha*. While in discourse on *dusha* depth is expressed verbally, The *Trinity* provides a visual representation of the notion of unknowable and inconceivable depth. The three-fold nature of the Trinity Rublev painted, which maintains the mystery and unity of the three figures, represents a comfort with dichotomy that is characteristically Russian. From an internal perspective, the Russian Soul is not encumbered by reason as it does not require rational divisions. In Orthodoxy, the Holy Trinity is one united and three separated at all times. This Mystery is not troublesome as it might be for Western-based philosophies.

Consecration rituals are essential to icons in Orthodoxy because they ensure the efficacy of an image. Freedburg (1989) distinguishes that "images work *because* they are consecrated, but at the same time they work *before* they are consecrated" (98). Consecration serves to activate the potentiality of an image but oftentimes the image is active prior to the ritual. Icons go through a naming ceremony after they are completed. They are sanctified by a specialized priest who declares them to be authentic. Only after this naming ceremony is an icon officially an icon within the Church. However, while the icon must be named to be officially accepted, it must have latent power within it otherwise any painting could be named as an icon. The combination of the specialised work of icon painters, accordance with iconic cannons, and consecration by a specialized priest activates and authenticates an icon. But, since icons have latent authenticity, the act of consecration could be interpreted as the consecration of the artist rather than

the icon itself. The ritual is acknowledging the icon painter's access to the prototype. If the exchange of agency between the primary and secondary agents results in an icon that enables exchange between the prototype and the recipient, it is deemed authentic.

As a secular secondary agent, Malevich required a different sort of authentication. In the 20th century, acceptance by the art world is the act of consecration required for an artist working within the boundaries of contemporary 'high art'. In this world, consecration is conferred upon individual art pieces, since the artist has already been accepted by the other specialists. Malevich's ability to reach a 'point of incommensurability' was already acknowledged. Therein lay the controversy of *Black Square*: it represents an instance where not everyone agreed on its efficacy, regardless of Malevich's status as an acknowledged 'shamanic' specialist operating within the boundaries of the contemporary art sphere. *Black Square*, while widely acknowledged as a feat of modern art in retrospect, was not immediately accepted by the art world. In its first exhibition, many specialists operating within that world could not even agree on its designation as 'art'.

Malevich as a shaman differs in some ways from icon painters as shamans. Malevich did not have a 'trance state' unless you refer to his creative process. Some artists do consider their creative process to be a transformative state of mind. It is unlikely that Malevich starved himself, ingested hallucinogens, or mortified his flesh in order to achieve an alternate state of mind. He did, however,

claim to achieve a special state of mind through unique qualities:

> Therefore, not everybody can be an artist but only those lucky ones who possess the extraordinary sensitivity of the nervous system which arouses a feeling of emotion, and, where the centre of the subconscious has proved to be a good receptor, such people are powerful and can work miracles; transform objects and ideas into artistic images, into a higher spiritual-artistic reality. [Malevich 1976:298]

He often framed his art and philosophy in religious terms. As a non-religious specialist, he connects to magic in religious terms. He considered the mystery of artistic creation as akin to religious mystery. Religion has the potential to transform the human spirit, which can in turn transform the human body. Malevich considered art to be capable of similar transformation; art transforms stone into beauty. The transformations he is referring to are not metaphors, but actual, physical transformations; the magic of being capable of transforming matter into some other form.

Malevich (1976) addressed the specialised role of the artist within society in his writing. His description follows:

> Art, from the point of view of the citizen, is 'the highest creative beginning', the result of inspiration which the artist possesses because he stands above the ordinary citizen who is occupied with practical, useful things, acting with his consciousness, and consequently the artist acts not with consciousness but through something else, let us say the subconscious, and therefore he solves something which is inaccessible to the conscious, it is that centre, which can show man existence in another form and relationship, and that consciousness, relying on clear logical registration of calculations which in the end prove to be fiction but not reality, and inasmuch as the centre of the subconscious carries within itself a part of consciousness, it possesses a fictional meaning. Art appears only under the condition of an influence of the centre on the remaining organism, and man who has fallen under its influence begins to create higher works of a higher order below consciousness, and becomes an extraordinary citizen and artist with great advantages over other citizens in general, he is genius, he possesses talent, this is the title society gives him. [298]

The word ‘magic’ does not occur within this passage, though it could be inserted in various places. He affords the artist a specialised place in society, although he does so with the elevated ego of an artist that believes he has an integral role to play in the world he inhabits. Malevich was acutely aware of his own ability to access a higher realm of consciousness than the average citizen, and then to offer the citizen access to that realm through his paintings. He refers to the specialized skills and elevated mind of the artist. Malevich calls the “centre of the subconscious” of the artist a “good receptor”. He distinguishes between receiving and creating. He also states that such people are “powerful and can work miracles” and “transform objects”. This sounds very much like an icon painter receiving Divine inspiration and a magician transforming matter into something more than what it was before.

The type of specialization described by Malevich corresponds to that of icon painters. This specialization looks and feels like magic, in that it cannot be easily explained using logic or reason. Both receive their vision from outside of themselves; both act as secondary agents to the primary agency of some force beyond themselves. Malevich calls it genius; Orthodoxy calls it God. Both act as shamanic specialists with access to an existential reality that is not open to the ordinary person. This connection to the existential is then affirmed through an act of consecration, however controversial, by other specialists within their respective worldviews. I will now shift to Bateson (2006) to illuminate how a painter-specialist might achieve access to the existential, or Yonder.

Wisdom, Yonder, and the Unconscious

Gregory Bateson (2006) explores art as a means of accessing wisdom by providing a portal to the unconscious. For Bateson (2006), wisdom is the perception of – or partially conscious knowledge about – Yonder. To explain his assertion, I will unpack his description of the unconscious. ‘Knowing’ something does not necessarily mean that one has a conscious knowledge of it; many kinds of information are inaccessible to our conscious minds (Bateson 2006:81). An example Bateson (2010) uses is migratory birds, whose knowledge occurs at an unconscious level and is a kind of adaptation: “a migratory bird perhaps does not know the way to its destination... but the bird may contain the complementary instructions necessary to cause it to fly right” (81). The level of the mind that Bateson (2010) is concerned with is where habit is formed. This occurs at the unconscious level, which he calls Primary Process, wherein the more one knows something, the less aware of knowing it they become (Bateson 2006:81). This happens because consciousness is only a part of brain function and “for obvious mechanical reasons, must always be limited to a rather small fraction of mental process” (Bateson 2006:82). Economy of the conscious is necessary for the brain to function. With so much happening on the conscious level alone, the brain could not accommodate all of the unconscious becoming conscious as this would require an inconceivable increase in the circuitry of the brain. Habit formation is necessary for economizing thoughts since “no organism can afford to be conscious of matters with which it could deal at unconscious levels” (Bateson 2006:85). Bateson (2006) describes it as a process of “sinking knowledge down to

less conscious and more archaic levels" (84-5). Our unconscious contains the knowledge that we know so well that we do not need to think about it consciously.

Consciousness is partial and selective because it must be. It is a small sample of the reality of its whole, an integrated network of circuits, and therefore cannot lead us to the truth of that whole (Bateson 2006:86). According to Bateson (2006) "life depends upon interlocking *circuits* of contingency, while consciousness can see only such short arcs of such circuits as human purpose may direct" (87). If we try to reconfigure samples into a true representation of the network, the outcome would be a distorted, Picasso-esque portrait of the truth.

Art exercises the unconscious; to create it is to practice and better understand unconscious communication, leading to wisdom and the understanding of Yonder. Bateson (2006) claims that the unconscious is not coded like language, as conscious thought is, which makes it more difficult to understand. When access to the unconscious is achieved, the translation into words is generally poor. We can achieve a better translation through dreams, art, poetry, religion, and even intoxication (Bateson 2006:83). The messages communicated in art, such as those representing *dusha* in both icons and Suprematist paintings, are not the kind that can be verbalized, which is our only means of expressing conscious messages.

Skill and Talent

The practice of art makes the artist better at making it and also less aware of the process by which it is achieved – this is a type of habit formation and occurs on the unconscious level. Bateson (2006) specifies this as 'skill' and claims that it is only partially conscious, which is why we have difficulty putting

its sensations and qualities into words (83). He references Isadora Duncan, who claimed “if I could tell you what it meant, there would be no point to dancing it” (Bateson 2006:83). The message that she is communicating through dance is partly unconscious, therefore her means for expressing it must also be so. Bateson (2006) asserts that “the fact of skill indicates the presence of large unconscious components in the performance” (82). The demonstration of skill that makes up an art piece is not so much a message *from* an artist’s unconscious, but rather it is a message *about* an artist’s unconscious (Bateson 2006: 85). Wisdom, according to Bateson (2006) is a “sense or recognition of the fact of circuitry” (87). The artist is in some way in tune with the circuitry of the unconscious. Art functions to maintain this ‘wisdom’ and remind us of the greater connectivity of the unconscious. Consciousness, when aided by art, or dreams, or religion, can appreciate the systemic nature of the mind (Bateson 2006:86). If wisdom, or perception of Yonder, is achieved by accessing unconscious circuits through art, it is the skill or talent of the painter-specialist that allows for this access to occur. If we think of art as the portal to wisdom, skill or talent is the unconscious means by which the painter is able to enter that portal.

In her exploration of *dusha* in post-Soviet Russia, Dale Pesmen (2000) briefly addresses the issue of talent. Her informants characterize talent as the ability to access the hidden elements of one’s *dusha*, a degree of ability to express one’s *dusha*, and something that emerges from *dusha* as a pathway. In the third instance, the pathway should be arduous; suffering and pain is necessary to bring *dusha* to fruition. Talent is considered to be intuitive, internal, and God-given. It

cannot be learned, regardless of the amount or quality of someone's education. Pesmen (2000) summarizes that "*dusha* can be seen as giving life to talent" (76). These descriptions of the connections between talent and *dusha* reinforce the notion of the artist as a specialist. The talent of the artist is seen as something that cannot be duplicated or imitated. It is believed to come from a more unconscious place, deep in a person's soul.

Another of Pesmen's (2000) informants suggested that a person's art can tell you about their *dusha*; "art was expected to have soul and foster it, and it is with *dusha* that one perceives art and identifies it as good or bad" (77). This indicates that art is perceived on a less conscious level than other things and that art is considered to be good when it resonates with the unconscious. In other words, when a viewer has an emotional response to an art piece, it was painted with *dusha.* Art is considered good when it creates an exchange with one's *dusha*. This quality of art is perceived as directly related to the *dusha* of the artist; artists, along with poets and musicians, are people that can access levels of *dusha* that others cannot. They can access it and express it and in this way are seen as capable of facilitating exchanges with others' *dusha*. Pesmen (2000) explains that "writers, painters, and especially poets, musicians, and actors are described in terms of other worlds they interact with, represent, and help us enter" (78). Having special access to *dusha* affords a specialist position for artists in Russia, one that is widely accepted and generally recognized. This position is contingent on the condition of their *dusha*, which is understood to be somehow extraordinary.

> An artwork or performance may seem to open up a “world” with its own laws and terms. Those who create may seem to participate in such internal and external places, a relationship that, perhaps, anyone may have to something, but that not everyone is seen as being in a condition to have. [Pesmen 2000:79]

CONCLUSION

INFERENCES AND CONTRIBUTIONS

Icons and the Avant-garde are not unfamiliar bedfellows; the parallels between them have been explored previously (Gough 1999; Hilton 1969-1970). Andrew Spira (2009) offers a beautifully constructed exploration into the artistic alignments of the two art forms which maintains the boundaries of art theory. However, Spira (2009), like others writing along a similar vein, is not offering an understanding of the cultural forces that might be expressed in icons or the Avant-garde, maintaining a study of artistic content only. As such, there can certainly be no insight into how these two forms might overlap in their expressions of those cultural forces. My contribution to this discussion is to bring them together under the umbrella of anthropological inquiry and to find a new way to approach their connections. Alfred Gell (1992) calls for the need to apply the same "methodological atheism" (41) to our studies of art that anthropologists traditionally apply to the studies of religion, politics, or economics. Without this, we are merely critiquing style, and not making any sort of contributions to our understanding of a given social system via its art forms. By introducing discourse on *dusha* to the icon and Avant-garde equation, I was able to explore an underlying cultural thread within these artistic traditions and flush out some points at which they align.

This paper examines icons and the Avant-garde in two ways: first, in a context of art theory, which enabled us to more comfortably approach them in the

second way, anthropologically. Art theory assumes an underlying Truth exists within art objects. But the Truth of art was not the purpose of this paper; my purpose was to look at these art objects as properties of the society that produced them. The anthropological approach enables us to come out from under the spell of art, which captivates us partly due to the mysterious nature of its creation. Chapters 1 and 2 offered a view of these art forms, situated in time. Once the basic knowledge of these forms was established, I was able to extend beyond those familiar structures to approach them anthropologically.

By approaching art as an exchange of social agency, I was able to apply Gell's (1998) theories, which demonstrate the personhood of art objects and the special role they play as material objects with humans. With this lens, we can see that icons and the Avant-garde are exerting similar forms of agency in their social exchanges with recipients. Both forms fall into the same category of prototype-based art objects; the art represents something or someone that already exists. The existence of this prototype causes the art object to come into being. Icons and the Avant-garde act as access routes for social exchanges between the prototype and the recipient.

Furthering this approach, not only do icons and Avant-garde paintings exert agency, but they exert agency in similar ways. Primary agency is exerted by the prototype, while the artist exerts only secondary agency. Although the type of secondary agency enacted by icon painters differs from the type enacted by Malevich, the formulation is the same. They both depict the prototype in the way it intends to be depicted. The necessity of the primary agent is more pronounced

in the case of icons; the loss of the primary agent results in the loss of an icon's ritual relevance. However, this variation in agency does not diminish the fact that Malevich believed he was depicting a Truth in his Suprematist paintings, not simply the musings of his imagination.

Without Gell's (1998) anthropological approach to axes of coherence, it would be difficult to find a vocabulary to talk about the cultural alignments common to both art forms. I used the concept of *dusha* – the Russian Soul – to explore the axes of coherence in icons and the Avant-garde. With this approach we can turn the focus away from content, toward form. Axes of coherence are parts which summarize a whole; the form an art piece takes can tell us about the larger culture of which it is a part. In the same way that Bateson (2006) analyzed a Balinese painting, I was able to investigate underlying axes of coherence in icons and Avant-garde art. I focused on the concepts of depth and incongruence, both central to *dusha*.

The modes for depicting unknown, and unfathomable, depths in both icons and the Avant-garde are references to the depth of *dusha*. Although they depict it differently – icons rely on multiple perspectives while Suprematism removed all sense of perspective – they both have the same intent. They portray the unknown expanse beyond the picture surface. Both forms are visualizing the unknown-Yonder. As an analogy, I introduced Abbott's (2010) *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* to provide a means for conceptualizing the leap to a 4th dimension from a 3rd dimension. Abbot (2010) does this by telling the story of A. Square, a being in the 2nd dimension, who experienced a revelation of a 3rd

dimension. In a similar way, we can conceptualize how the artist is able to access Yonder.

The other axis of coherence I exposed is incongruence. Dichotomy, duality, opposites, and liminality are all represented in icons and the Avant-garde by *faktura*. Material dissonance is the visual expression of incongruence which serves to establish the picture surface as a liminal space, a boundary that simultaneously connects and divides the material world and Yonder. The difficulty of *faktura* is also embedded within discipline required to achieve it, a concept which ties in to the final area explored by this paper.

The artist is a specialist who plays a particular role in society that is mirrored by the shaman – both specialists appear to have access to Yonder. This access is achieved through skill – or talent or *dusha* – that non specialists cannot understand. When considering icon painters and Avant-garde artists in the specialist role, the division of sacred and secular do not apply. Gell (1992) explored the magic abducted by the trade partners of the Trobriand Islanders based on their canoe prow-boards; this abduction signifies the moment where non-specialists cannot understand the process by which the art object came into being.

Malevich (1976) referenced the unconscious as a potential source for this inspiration. Bateson (2006) provides us with a language to talk about the unconscious in the same capacity. The unconscious human mind is full of habitual knowledge which, by its nature, has become unconscious and therefore cannot be consciously analyzed. Art can translate unconscious knowledge but not in a way

that can be verbalized. The skill of the artist – the habitual knowledge of art creation – allows them moments of access to the unconscious. The unconscious can be substituted for many other expressions – artistic inspiration, Divine inspiration, Grace, higher understanding, higher realm of consciousness, level of conception, special state of mind – but all of these things point to the Yonder that is depicted in icons and Suprematist paintings. All of these constructs generally refer – with the exception of Divine inspiration – to the internal or intuitive, and all vaguely gesture back toward the unconscious.

My contributions to an anthropological approach to icons and Suprematist paintings are threefold. First, they are an exchange of both primary and secondary social agency in which the art objects exert a sort of agency on recipients. Second, icons and the Avant-garde, Suprematism in particular but not exclusively, share axes of coherence that express *dusha*, specifically the concepts of depth and incongruence, in a visual form. And third, the artists of both traditions are shaman-like specialists whose role in society is to open avenues of access into Yonder, which most of society cannot do. In following this line of thought through to the conclusions Bateson (2006) provided, I propose that Yonder could be considered akin to the unconscious.

FUTURE RESEARCH

In Chapter 1, I described the role of colour in icon painting, specifically focusing on the use of gold *assyst*. I gave some examples of the symbolism at work but was not able to fully address the role of colour as a language of

expression in icons. If this was explored further, areas of convergence might be found with the Avant-garde. The colour palettes employed by the Avant-garde painters are remarkably similar to those in icons. This could simply be the result of resurgence in the popularity of icons in the early 20th century, but could also indicate something larger at play. A more in depth analysis of colour in icons and the Avant-garde could reveal more coherence between the two forms.

The Avant-garde tradition is a network of painters, sculptors, poets, filmmakers, and writers who shared some ideologies and adamantly rejected others. Malevich and Suprematism are only one example, albeit a prolific one. Vladimir Tatlin and Constructivism would be an excellent example that would not be difficult to substitute into this particular discussion. Aside from Tatlin's *Corner Counter-Relief* series which exploits principles of *faktura*, he also created Constructivist paintings on wooden boards reminiscent of icon boards (Spira 2009). Other artists exhibit direct links to icon painting. Goncharova, in particular, actually painted Avant-garde icons, complete with figures from the Christian pantheon. Many Avant-garde paintings exhibit structural compositions that mimic icons. The parallels between icons and the Avant-garde are in no way limited to the areas under discussion in this paper and could be taken in a great many directions for further inquiry.

In my consideration of depth and incongruence as axes of coherence I focused my attention on only those two components of *dusha*. The Russian Soul contains much more than just these two elements and has the potential to offer other redundancies. An expanded study accommodating the ideas of suffering,

fortitude, or empathy might point to other commonalities between icons and the Avant-garde that reflect Russian national character.

SUMMARY

This paper is an approach to questions that art theory alone cannot answer. At first, Suprematist art may not feel in any way analogous to Russian Orthodox icons. Their subject matter could not be more different nor could their intended purposes. Icons are regimented portraits of saintly figures while Suprematism rejects any form of object in favour of geometric shapes. But, once the issue of subject is overcome, we can begin to see that they are not so different after all. In order to flush out the deeper convergences occurring between icons and Suprematist paintings a culturally inclusive perspective is required. To see the meeting places of the two forms, the subject matter must fall into the background so that we can focus on the technical aspects of the pieces that reveal their underlying, unconscious structures.

Dusha, an integral component of Russian identity, is expressed on unconscious levels in icons and Suprematist paintings. I have particularly focused on the concepts of depth and incongruence in these art objects, but these concepts exist on many other levels of Russian society. The specialists that create these works are able to manipulate their skill and tap into levels of unconscious to create accessible portrayals in a way that is not possible for most people. By leaving behind assessment of the subject matter of icons and the Avant-garde we eventually come full circle and find that underneath all the different layers of their

compositions, their subjects are actually the same. Yonder is the unknowable space on the other side of the picture surface; this space cannot be conceived or understood with the conscious mind so we must rely on the unconscious to express it and perceive it.

If there is any area within a supposed Russian national character that we might find parallels similar to those addressed in this paper, it could be found in discourses on connection to the land. Russians tend to claim an acute sense of connection to the land they inhabit. The vocabulary employed in these discourses has a familiarity with those I have used to discuss *dusha* – wide open space, endlessness, vastness beyond conception, unending expanse, and unknowable distance. Russians describe themselves as open, particularly in their search for meaning in life (Pesmen 2000). Many aspects of a perceived Russian national character appear interchangeable in terms of their expansive potential: space of landscape, depth of soul, size of heart, capacity for empathy, pursuit of meaning, and moral superiority over the West. Perceptions of landscape often align with concepts of *dusha*, expressing infinite depth and vast incongruence, and intersect within Russian national character. A verse written by Avant-garde poet Vladimir Mayakovsky might best articulate this Russian attitude: “space has no edges, time has no end” (Zhadova 1982:41). There is no spatial limitation on the mind, the heart, the land, or the soul in the Russian national character; the perceived capacity of their character is an infinite expanse.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abbott, Edwin

2010 Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions. Lila Marz Harper, ed. Peterborough, ON: Broadview Editions.

Akinsha, Konstantin

2007 Malevich and Lenin: Image, Ritual and the Cube. *In* Rethinking Malevich: Proceedings of a Conference in Celebration of the 125th Anniversary of Kazimir Malevich's Birth. Charlotte Douglas and Christina Lodder, eds. Pp. 139-158. London: Pindar Press.

Alpatov, Mihail

1982 The Icons of Russia. *In* The Icon. Pp. 237-304. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center

1990 Kazimir Malevich 1878-1935. Jeanne D'Andrea, ed. Los Angeles: Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center.

Avtonomova, Natalia

2007 Malevich and Kandinsky: The Abstract Path. *In* Rethinking Malevich: Proceedings of a Conference in Celebration of the 125th Anniversary of Kazimir Malevich's Birth. Charlotte Douglas and Christina Lodder, eds. Pp. 40-64. London: Pindar Press.

Bateson, Gregory

2006 Style, Grace, and Information in Primitive Art. *In* The Anthropology of Art: A Reader. Howard Morphy and Morgan Perkins, eds. Pp. 78-90. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.

Bowlt, John E.

1988 Introduction. *In* Russian Art of the Avant-Garde. John E. Bowlt, ed. Pp. xix-xl. New York: Thames and Hudson.

1991 Orthodoxy and the Avant-Garde: Sacred Images in the Work of Goncharova, Malevich, and their Contemporaries. *In* Christianity and the Arts in Russia. William C. Brumfield, and Milos M. Velimirovic, eds. Pp. 145-150. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Cavarnos, Constantine
1977 Orthodox Iconography. Belmont, MA: Institute for Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies.

Couliano, I. P.
1991 Out of this World: Otherworldly Journeys from Gilgamesh to Albert Einstein. Boston: Shambhala Publications.

Dobrenko, Evgeny
2005 Aesthetics of Alienation: Reassessment of Early Soviet Cultural Theories. Evanston, Il: Northwestern University press, 2005.

Drutt, Matthew
2003 Kazimir Malevich: Suprematism. *In* Kazimir Malevich: Suprematism. Matthew Drutt, ed. Pp. 16-31. New York: Guggenheim Museum.

Durkheim, Emile
1965[1958] The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life. *In* Reader in Comparative Religion: An Anthropological Approach. 2nd Edition. William A. Lessa and Evon Z. Vogt, eds. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers.

Florensky, Pavel
1996 Iconostasis. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press.

Frazer, James George
1976[1922] The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion. London: The Macmillan Press Ltd.

Freedburg, David
1989 The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Gell, Alfred
1992 The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology. *In* Anthropology, Art, and Aesthetics. Jeremy Coote and Anthony Shelton, eds. Pp. 40-63. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

1998 Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory. New York: Oxford University Press Inc., New York.

Gough, Maria
1999 Faktura: The Making of the Russian Avant-Garde. RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics 36(Autumn):32-59.

Gray, Camilla
1986[1962] The Russian Experiment in Art, 1863-1922. New York: Thames and Hudson.

Groys, Boris
1992 The Total Art of Stalinism. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.

1996 The Birth of Socialist Realism from the Spirit of the Avant-Garde. *In* Laboratory of Dreams: The Russian Avant-Garde and Cultural Experiment. John E. Bowlt and Olga Matich, eds. Pp. 193-218. Stanford CA: Stanford University Press.

Harte, Tim
2009 Fast Forward: the Aesthetics and Ideology of Speed in Russian Avant-Garde Culture, 1910-1930. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.

Hilton, Alison
1969-1970 Matisse in Moscow. Art Journal 29(2)166-173.

1989 The Peasant House and its Furnishings: Decorative Principles in Russian Folk Art. Russian/Soviet Theme Issue, Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts 11(2):10-29.

Hinton, Charles H.
1912 The Fourth Dimension. London: Allen.

Kurbanovsky, Alexei
2007 Malevich's Mystic Signs: From Iconoclasm to New Technology. *In* Sacred Stories: Religion and Spirituality in Modern Russia. Mark D. Steinberg and Heather J. Coleman, eds. Pp. 358-376. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Luecking, Stephen
2010 A Man and His Square: Kasimir Malevich and the Visualization of the Fourth Dimension. Journal of Mathematics and the Arts 4(2):87-100.

Malinowski, Bronislaw
1954[1948] Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays. New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc.

Malevich, Kazimir
1988 From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Painterly Realism, 1915. *In* Russian Art of the Avant-Garde. John E. Bowlt, ed. Pp. 116-135. New York: Thames and Hudson.

Malevich, Kazimir Severinovich
1976 The World as Non-Objectivity. Copenhagen: Borgen.

Malevich, Kasimir
2003 The Non-Objective World: The Manifesto of Suprematism. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications.

Milner-Gulland, Robin, and Nikolai Dejevsky
1998 Cultural Atlas of Russia and the Former Soviet Union. New York: Checkmark Books.

Ouspensky, Leonid
1992[1978] Theology of the Icon: Volume I. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press.

Ouspensky, Leonid, and Vladimir Lossky
1982[1952] The Meaning of Icons. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press.

Pesmen, Dale
2000 Russia and Soul: An Exploration. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Petrova, Yevgenia
2003 Malevich's Suprematism and Religion. *In* Kazimir Malevich: Suprematism. Matthew Drutt, ed. Pp 88-95. New York: Guggenheim Museum.

Quenot, Michel
1991 The Icon: Window on the Kingdom. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press.

Rancour-Laferriere, Daniel
1995 The Slave Soul of Russia: Moral Masochism and the Cult of Suffering. New York: New York University Press.

Sarabianov, Dmitrii

1990a Malevich and His Art, 1900-1930. *In* Kazimir Malevich 1878-1935. Jeanne D'Andrea, ed. Los Angeles: Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center.

1990b The Rise and Fall of the Wanderers. *In* The Wanderers: Masters of 19th Century Russian Painting: An Exhibition from the Soviet Union. Elizabeth Kridl Valkenier, ed. Pp. 25-47. Dallas, TX: Dallas Museum of Art.

Simmons, W. S.

1981 Kasimir Malevich's Black Square and the Genesis of Suprematism, 1907-1915. Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International.

Smith, Anthony D.

1994 The Problem of National Identity: Ancient, Medieval and Modern. Ethnic and Racial Studies 17(3):97-123.

Spira, Andrew

2008 The Avant-Garde Icon: Russian Avant-Garde Art and the Icon Painting Tradition. Burlington, VT: Lund Humphries.

Taylor, John

1979 Icon Painting. New York: Mayflower Books, Inc.

Trubetskoi, Eugene

1973 Icons: Theology in Color. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press.

Voloshinov, Alexander V.

1999 "The Old Testament Trinity" of Andrey Rublyov: Geometry and Philosophy. Leonardo 32(2):103-112.

Weitzmann, Kurt

1982 Introduction: The Origins and Significance of Icons. *In* The Icon. Pp. 3-10. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

Williams, Robert C.

1970 The Russian Soul: A Study in European Thought and Non-European Nationalism. Journal of the History of Ideas 31(4):573-588.

Zhadova, Larissa A.

1982 Malevich: Suprematism and Revolution in Russian Art 1910-1930. London: Thames and Hudson.

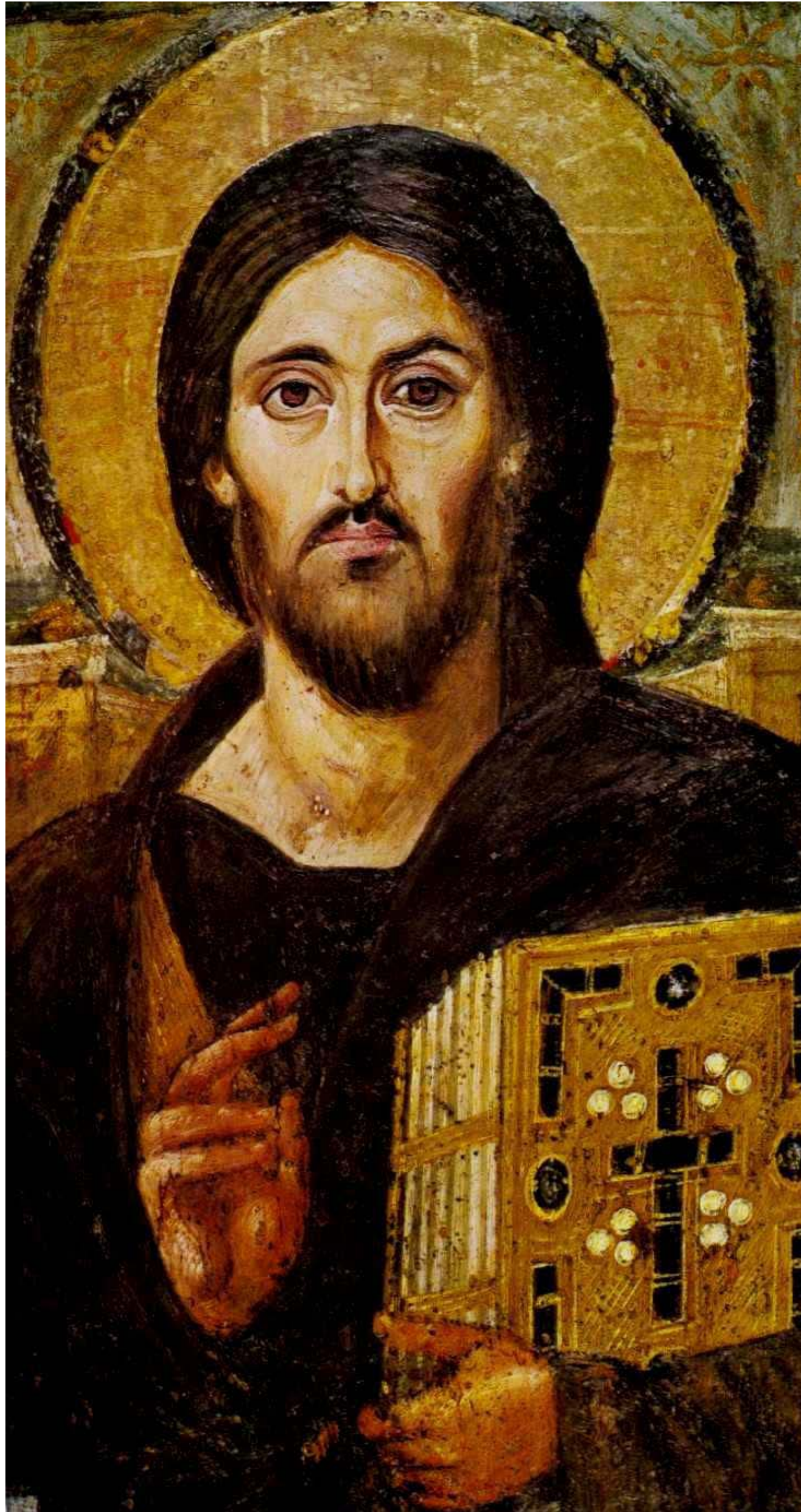

Figure 1: *Christ the Saviour (Pantokrator)*. 6th Century. Saint Catherine's Monastery, Mount Sinai. Electronic Image, Public Domain, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Spas_vsederzhitel_sinay.jpg, accessed August 2011.

Figure 2: *Virgin*. Theophanes. 1405.
Weitzmann, Kurt. 1982. *The Icon*. Pp. 265. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

Figure 3: *Archangel Michael*. Andrei Rublev. 15th Century.
Weitzmann, Kurt. 1982. *The Icon*. Pp. 272. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

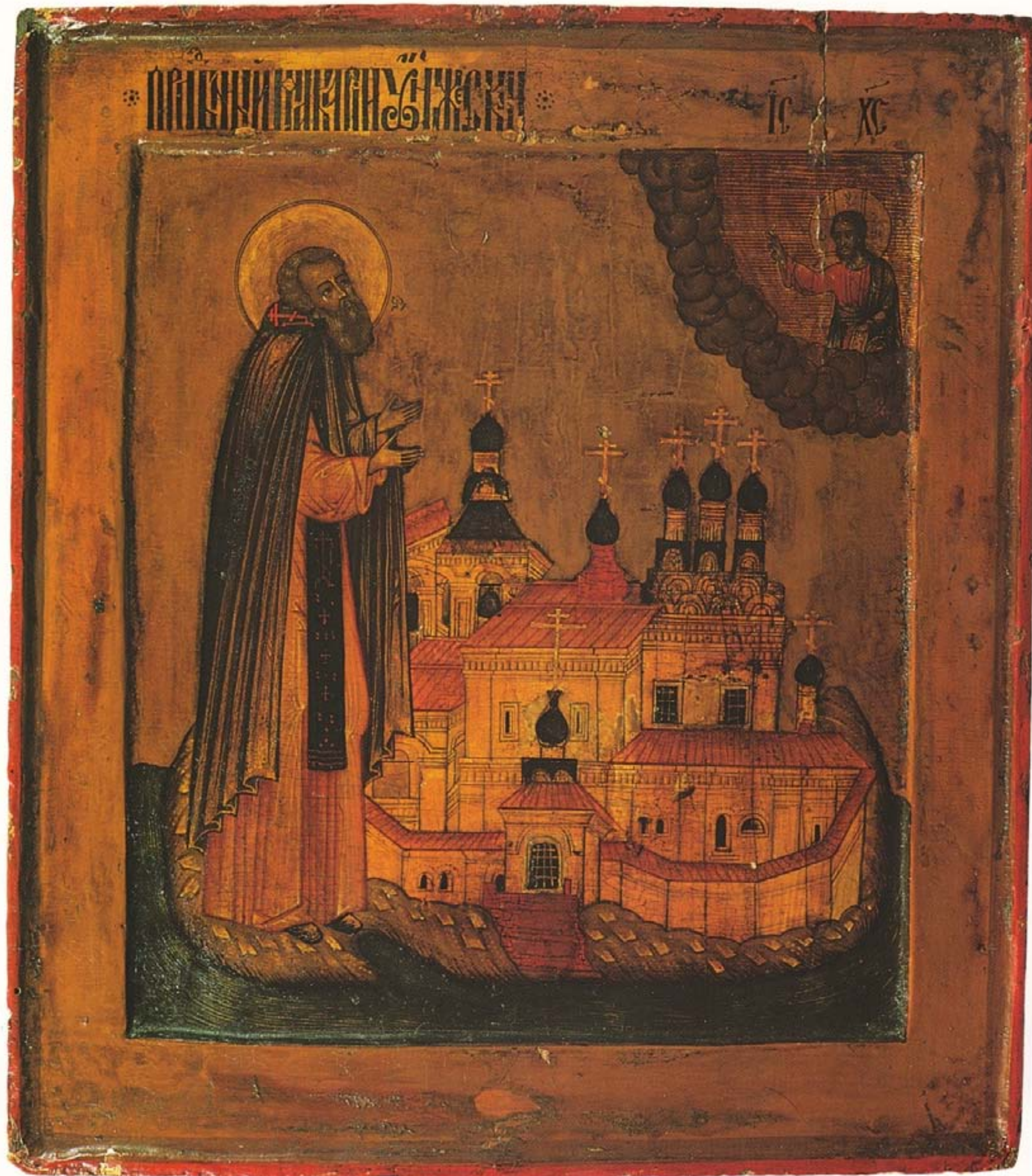

Figure 4: *St. Macarius of Unsha and Yellow Waters*. 17th Century.
Ouspensky and Lossky. 1982[1952]. *The Meaning of Icons*. Pp. 134. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press.

Figure 5: *The Holy Prophet Elijah in the Desert*. 15th Century.
Ouspensky and Lossky. 1982[1952]. *The Meaning of Icons*. Pp. 142. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press.

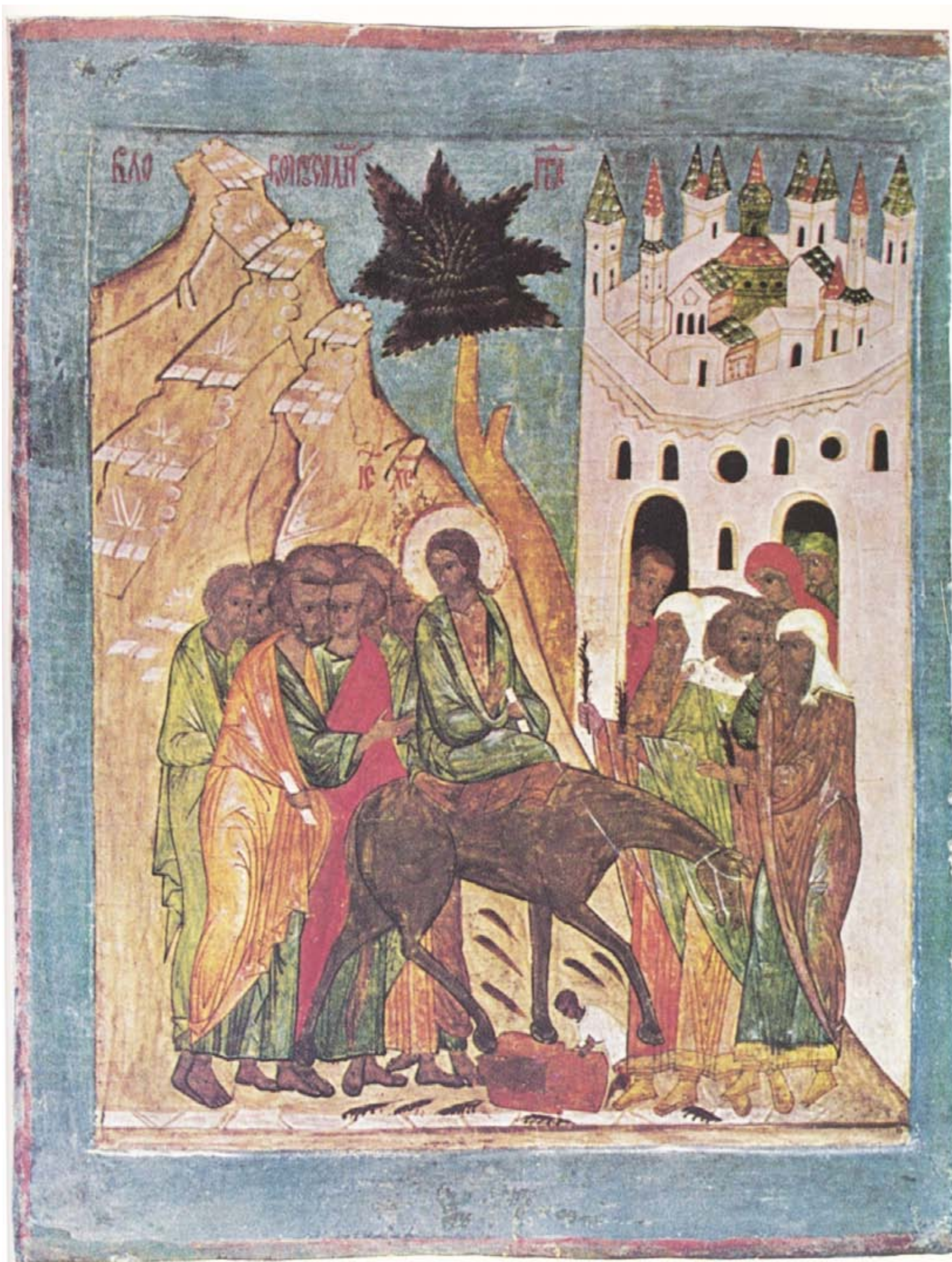

Figure 6: *The Entry into Jerusalem*. 16th Century.
Ouspensky and Lossky. 1982[1952]. *The Meaning of Icons*. Pp. 179. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press.

Figure 7: *Old Testament Trinity*. Andrei Rublev. 15th Century.
Weitzmann, Kurt. 1982. *The Icon*. Pp. 270. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

Figure 8: *Old Testament Trinity*, Detail. Andrei Rublev. 15th Century. Weitzmann, Kurt. 1982. *The Icon*. Pp. 271. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

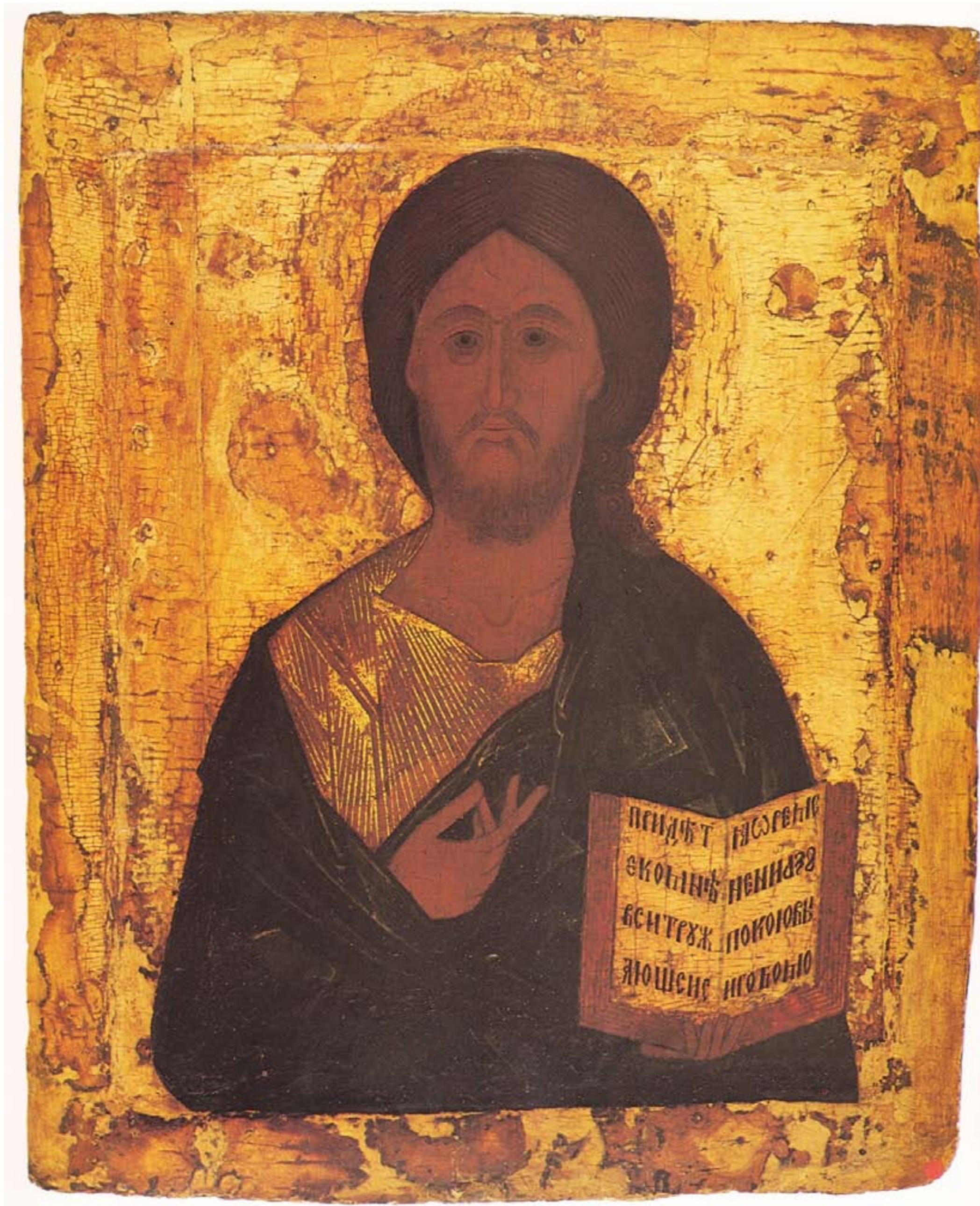

Figure 9: *Christ Pantocrator*. 16th Century.
Ouspensky and Lossky. 1982[1952]. *The Meaning of Icons*. Pp. 74. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press.

Figure 10: *The Kazan Mother of God*. 16th Century.
Ouspensky and Lossky. 1982[1952]. *The Meaning of Icons*. Pp. 87. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press.

Figure 11: *Transfiguration*. Theophanes. 15th Century.
Weitzmann, Kurt. 1982. *The Icon*. Pp. 267. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

Figure 12: *Barge Haulers on the Volga*. Ilya Repin. 1870-1873.
The Wanderers: Masters of 19th Century Russian Painting: An Exhibition from the Soviet Union. Elizabeth Kridl Valkenier, ed. Pp. 33. Dallas, TX: Dallas Museum of Art.

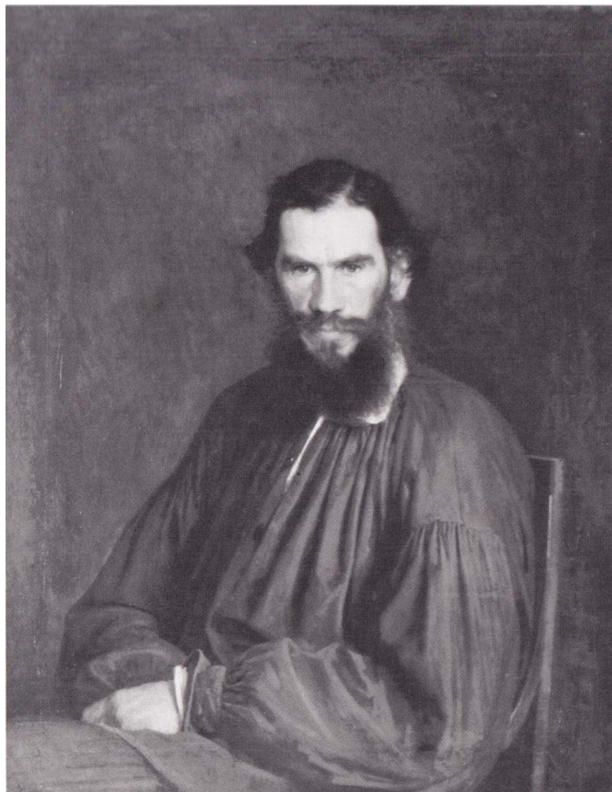

Figure 13: *Portrait of L.N. Tolstoy*. Ivan Kramskoy. 1873.
The Wanderers: Masters of 19th Century Russian Painting: An Exhibition from the Soviet Union. Elizabeth Kridl Valkenier, ed. Pp. 37. Dallas, TX: Dallas Museum of Art.

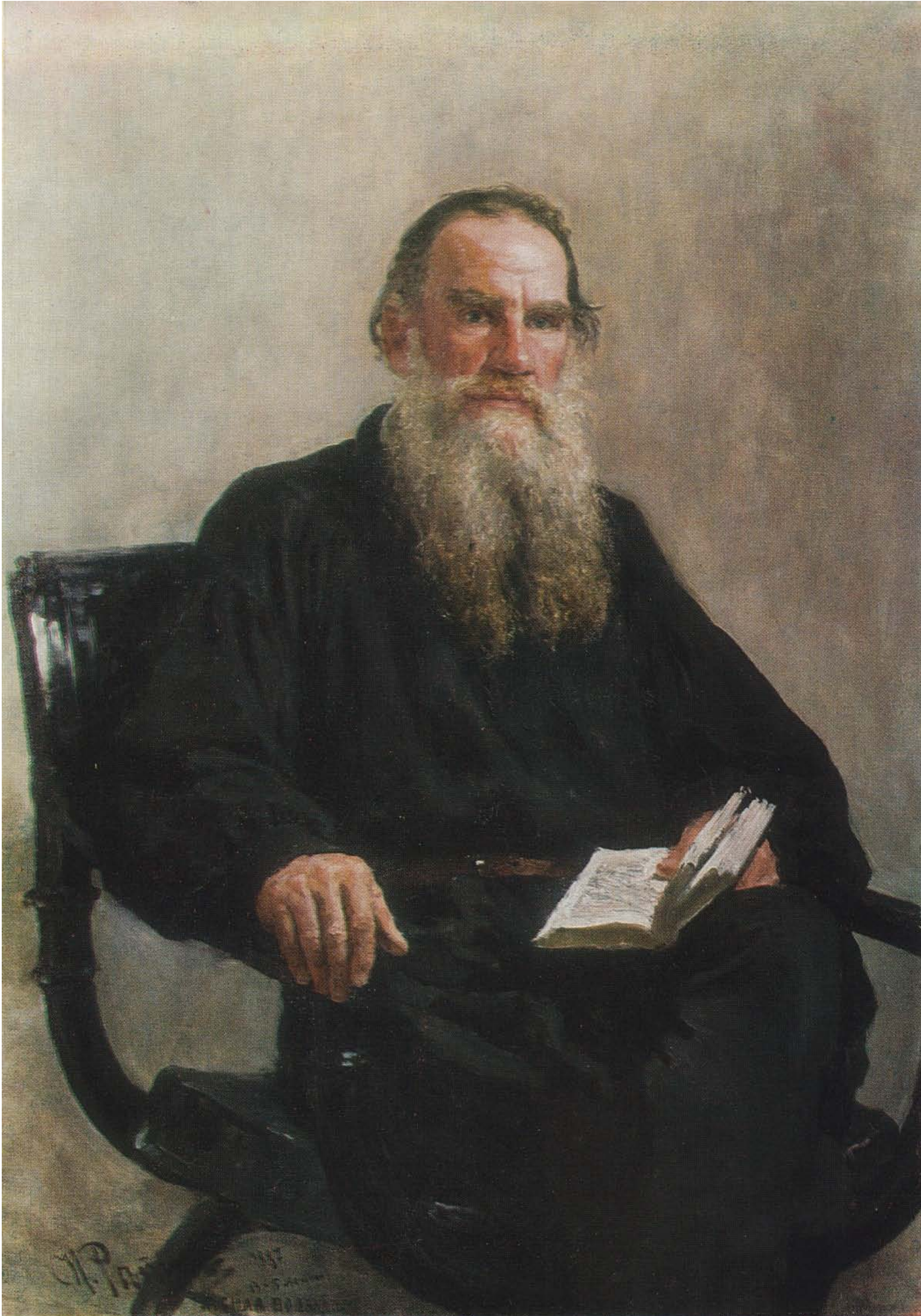

Figure 14: Portrait of Tolsoy. Ilya Repin. 1887.
Paramanov, A.V. 1975. *Peredvizhniki 1870-1970*. Pp. 63. Moskva: Izdatelstvo "Iskustvo".

Figure 15: *Videnie otroku Varfolomeiu*. Mikhail Nesterov. 1889-1890. Paramanov, A.V. 1975. *Peredvizhniki 1870-1970*. Pp. 73. Moskva: Izdatelstvo “Iskustvo”.

Figure 16: *Pliaska Tamar*. Mikhail Vrubel. 1890-1891.
Alenov, Mikhail. 2001. *Mikhail Vrubel*. Pp. 19. Moskva: Belyi Gorod.

Figure 17: *Tamara i Demon*. Mikhail Vrubel. 1890-1891
Alenov, Mikhail. 2001. *Mikhail Vrubel*. Pp. 19. Moskva: Belyi Gorod.

Figure 18: *Demon (sidiashchii)*. Mikhail Vrubel. 1890.
Alenov, Mikhail. 2001. *Mikhail Vrubel*. Pp. 54-55. Moskva: Belyi Gorod.

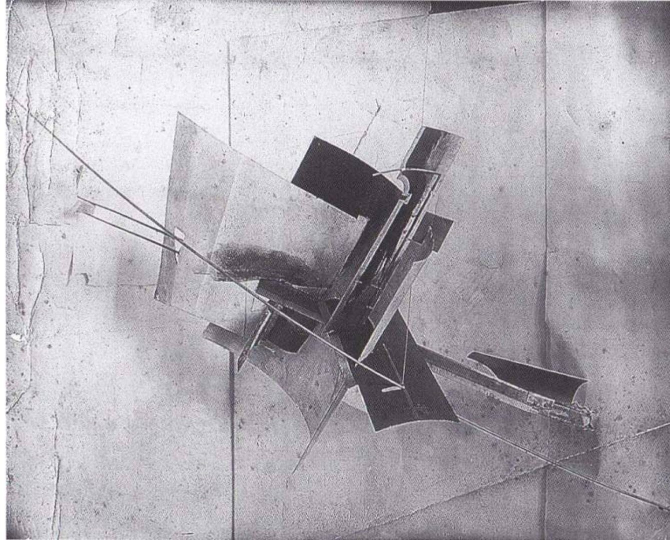

Figure 19: *Corner Counter-Relief*, *1914-15*. Vladimir Tatlin.
Lynton, Norbert. 2009. Tatlin's Tower: Monument to Revolution. Pp. 49. New Haven: Yale University Press.

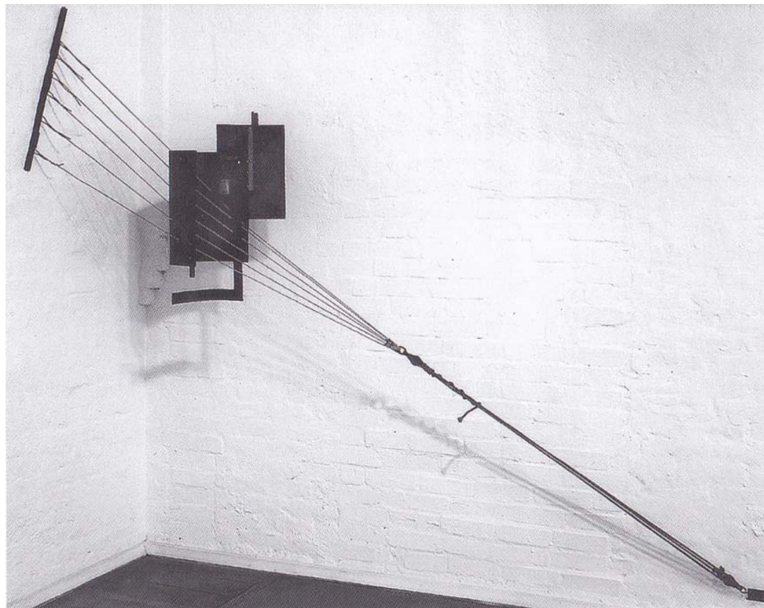

Figure 20: *Corner Counter-Relief, 1915*. Vladimir Tatlin.
Lynton, Norbert. 2009. Tatlin's Tower: Monument to Revolution. Pp. 50. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Figure 21: *Study for Fresco Painting*. Kazimir Malevich. 1907.
Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center. 1990. Kazimir Malevich 1878-1935. Jeanne D'Andrea, ed. Pp. 37. Los Angeles: Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center.

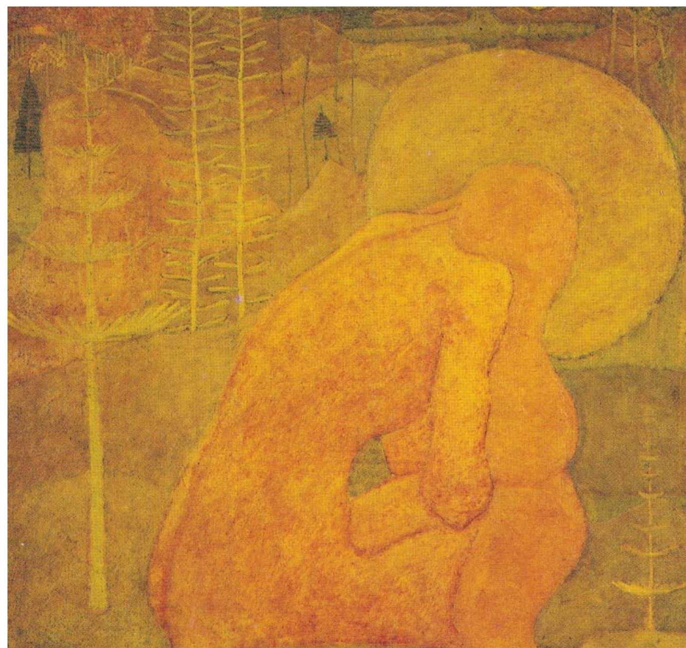

Figure 21: *Study for Fresco Painting (Prayer?)*. Kazimir Malevich. 1907.
Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center. 1990. Kazimir Malevich 1878-1935. Jeanne D'Andrea, ed. Pp. 37. Los Angeles: Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center.

Figure 23: *Chiropodist (at the Bathouse)*. Kazimir Malevich. 1911-1912.
Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center. 1990. Kazimir Malevich 1878-1935. Jeanne D'Andrea, ed. Pp. 47. Los Angeles: Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center.

Figure 24: *Floor Polishers*. Kazimir Malevich. 1911-1912.
Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center. 1990. Kazimir Malevich 1878-1935. Jeanne D'Andrea, ed. Pp. 48. Los Angeles: Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center.

Figure 25: *Taking in the Rye*. Kazimir Malevich. 1912.
Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center. 1990. Kazimir Malevich 1878-1935. Jeanne D'Andrea, ed. Pp. 50. Los Angeles: Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center.

Figure 26: *The Woodcutter*. Kazimir Malevich. 1912.
Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center. 1990. Kazimir Malevich 1878-1935. Jeanne D'Andrea, ed. Pp. 51. Los Angeles: Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center.

Figure 27: *Perfected Portrait of I. V. Kliun*. Kazimir Malevich. 1913.
Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center. 1990. Kazimir Malevich 1878-1935. Jeanne D'Andrea, ed. Pp. 58. Los Angeles: Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center.

Figure 28: *An Englishman in Moscow*. Kazimir Malevich. 1914.
Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center. 1990. Kazimir Malevich 1878-1935. Jeanne D'Andrea, ed. Pp. 66. Los Angeles: Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center.

Figure 29: *Black Square*. Kazimir Malevich. 1913-1915.
Drutt, Matthew. 2003. Kazimir Malevich: Suprematism. Pp. 119. New York: Guggenheim Museum.

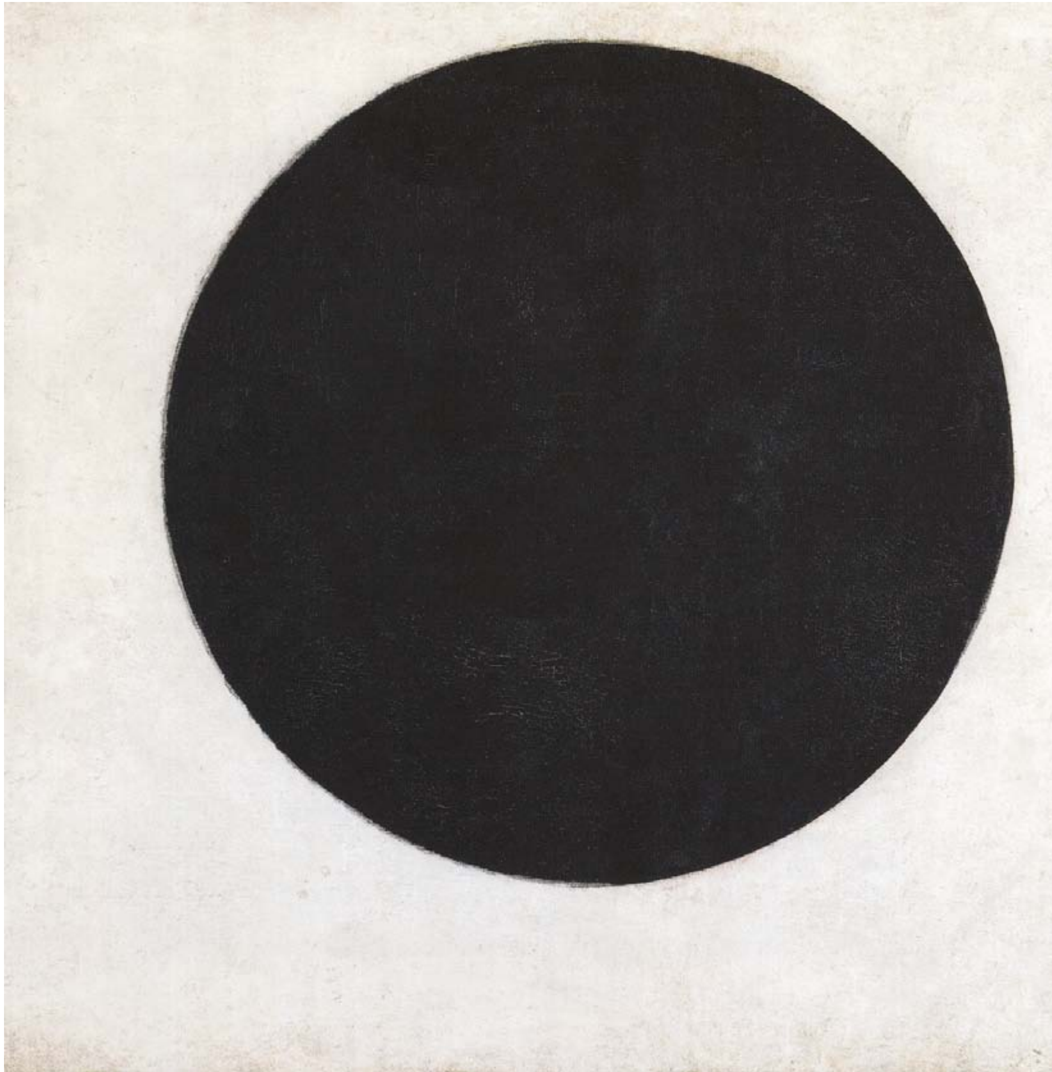

Figure 30: *Plane in Rotation, called Black Circle*. Kazimir Malevich. 1915. Drutt, Matthew. 2003. Kazimir Malevich: Suprematism. Pp. 120. New York: Guggenheim Museum.

Figure 31: *Black Cross*. Kazimir Malevich. 1915,
Drutt, Matthew. 2003. Kazimir Malevich: Suprematism. Pp. 121. New York: Guggenheim Museum.

Figure 32: *Suprematist Painting: Eight Red Rectangles*. Kazimir Malevich. 1915. Drutt, Matthew. 2003. Kazimir Malevich: Suprematism. Pp. 143. New York: Guggenheim Museum.

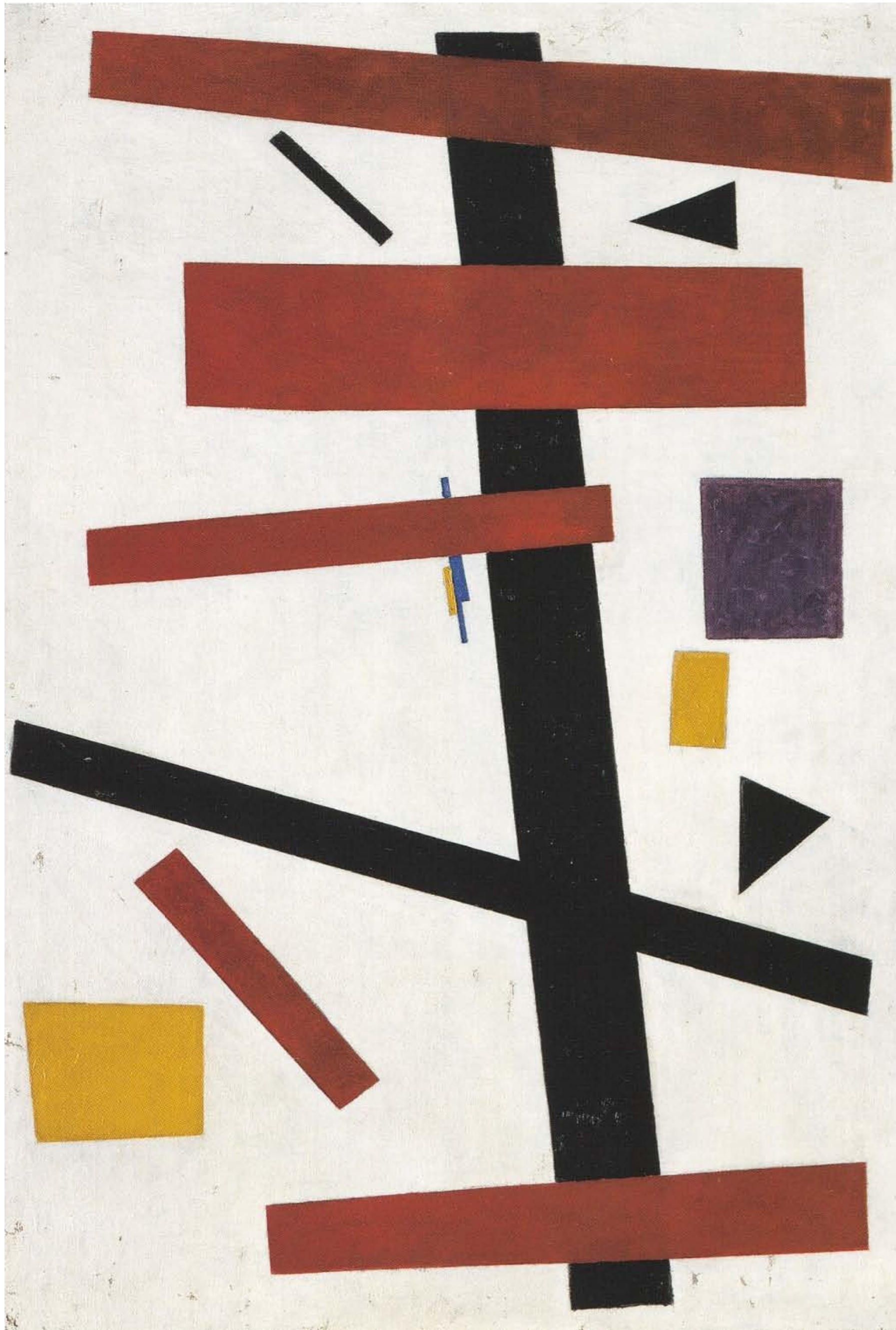

Figure 33: *Suprematism (Supremus No. 50)*. Kazimir Malevich. 1915.
Drutt, Matthew. 2003. Kazimir Malevich: Suprematism. Pp. 151. New York: Guggenheim Museum.

Figure 34: *Suprematist Painting*. Kazimir Malevich. 1916.
Drutt, Matthew. 2003. Kazimir Malevich: Suprematism. Pp. 177. New York: Guggenheim Museum.

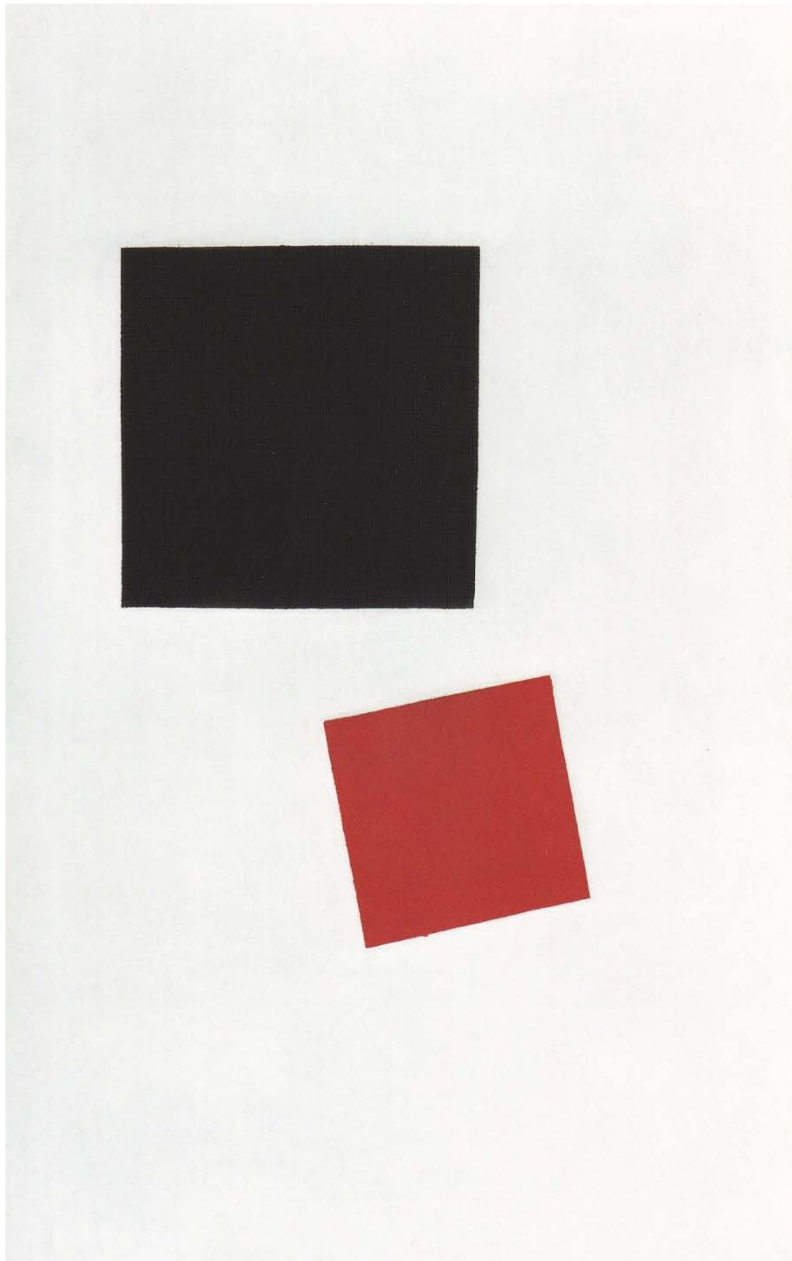

Figure 35: *Painterly Realism: Boy with Knapsack – Color Masses in the Fourth Dimension*. Kazimir Malevich. 1915.
Drutt, Matthew. 2003. Kazimir Malevich: Suprematism. Pp. 128. New York: Guggenheim Museum.

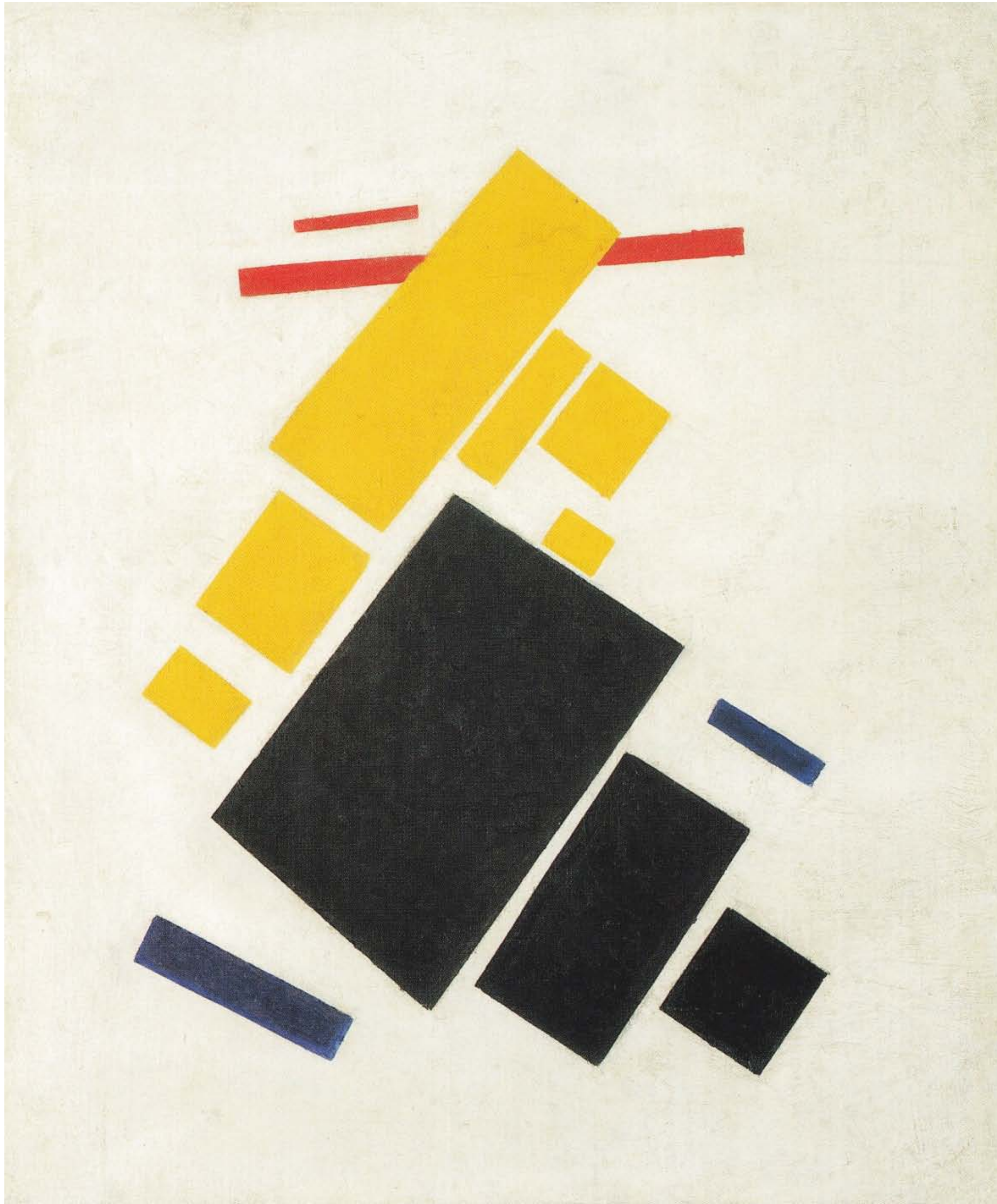

Figure 36: *Suprematist Composition: Airplane Flying*. Kazimir Malevich. 1915. Drutt, Matthew. 2003. Kazimir Malevich: Suprematism. Pp. 145. New York: Guggenheim Museum.

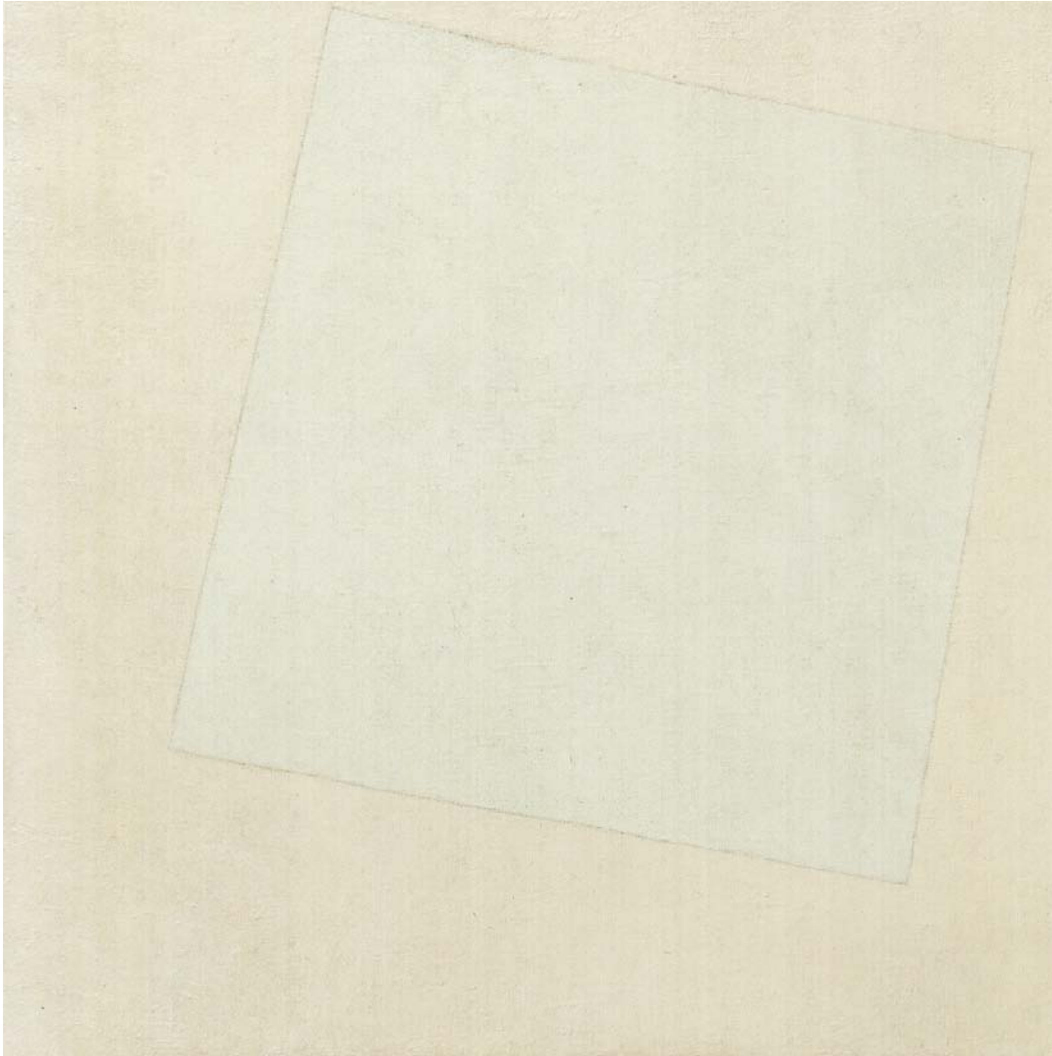

Figure 37: *Suprematist Composition: White on White*. Kazimir Malevich. 1918. Drutt, Matthew. 2003. Kazimir Malevich: Suprematism. Pp. 201. New York: Guggenheim Museum.

Figure 38: *Girls in the Field*. Kazimir Malevich. 1928.
Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center. 1990. Kazimir Malevich 1878-1935. Jeanne D'Andrea, ed. Pp. 99. Los Angeles: Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center.

Figure 39: *Woman with a Rake*. Kazimir Malevich. 1928-1932.
Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center. 1990. Kazimir Malevich 1878-1935. Jeanne D'Andrea, ed. Pp. 51. Los Angeles: Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center.