“Monuments of the Future”: Designs by El Lissitzky

The Russian artist El Lissitzky (1890-1941) was one of the great avant-garde figures of the early twentieth century. The Getty Research Institute holds a remarkable array of materials on Lissitzky, including book and periodical designs, his complete correspondence to his wife, Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, photographs of his exhibition designs, his two personal address books, and additional manuscripts related to his life and work.

The exhibition “Monuments of the Future”: Designs by El Lissitzky, which was on display at the Getty Research Institute from November 21, 1998 through February 21, 1999, explored Lissitzky’s career as a typographer, book designer, and architect. This Web site takes its inspiration from the design of the exhibition and shows most of the materials that were on display, grouped according to their original sections. In addition, the Web site links to related holdings on Lissitzky and Russian modernism in the Getty Research Library and in other museums and archives.

Lissitzky's career was deeply marked by the social and political upheavals of the early twentieth century. He consistently sought to create bold and powerful artwork that would further the causes in which he believed.
As a young artist, Lissitzky aided the movement to revive Russian Jewish culture, studying the architecture and ornaments of old synagogues and illustrating Yiddish books. His lifelong engagement with abstract art began in early 1920, soon after he met the artist Kazimir Malevich. Upon settling in Berlin in 1921, Lissitzky was inspired by the utopian dream of internationalism to embark on a quest for a pictorial vocabulary that would be universal. In his later years, Lissitzky spoke of a self-imposed social mission, which required that he align his artistic aims with the goals of the Soviet state.

Lissitzky’s art displays his ongoing absorption not only in higher causes but also with particular visual images and artistic mediums. For example, the image of the disembodied hand first appears in Lissitzky’s work as the hand of God in a book illustration of 1919; it returns as the hand of the artist in the Constructor (Self-Portrait) of 1924, in his advertisements for Pelikan Ink, and in later Stalinist designs. Letters—Hebrew, Cyrillic, or Latin—feature prominently in his book designs, lithographic portfolios, and Soviet exhibition spaces, serving both as architectural elements and as visual symbols. The book as a dynamic object is a theme that Lissitzky sounds repeatedly. “In contrast to the old monumental art,” he notes, “[the book] itself goes to the people, and does not stand like a cathedral in one place waiting for someone to approach.”

Lissitzky regarded the book as a “unity of acoustics and optics” that requires the viewer’s active involvement, and, more than any other medium, he found in the book his “monument of the future.”

**Futurist Beginnings**

In this section of the Web site, a book design showing Lissitzky’s youthful experimentation with Russian futurism is placed in the context of the visual and poetic work of his contemporaries. When Lissitzky returned to Russia in 1914 from Germany, where he had been studying architectural engineering, he discovered a vital futurist
movement in which visual artists and writers drew inspiration from the dynamism and fractured forms of Italian futurism and French cubism.

His earliest book design, for a collection of poems entitled *Solntse na izlete* (Spent Sun, #1), was published in 1916 by Tsentrifuga (Centrifuge), a group of futurist poets that also published books illustrated by Natalia Goncharova. By aligning himself with Tsentrifuga and with an existing avant-garde style, Lissitzky found himself at the forefront of new artistic and poetic developments.

**Yiddish Book Design**

Following the February Revolution of 1917, Lissitzky moved from Moscow to Kiev, where he participated actively in a movement to create a modern secular Jewish culture in Russia. The new Provisional Government abolished laws that had barred Russian Jews from citizenship and repealed a decree that prohibited the printing of Hebrew letters. Between 1917 and 1919, at a time when publishing books in Yiddish was suddenly possible, Lissitzky devoted himself to illustrating Yiddish books.

His first designs appeared in *Sihas hulin: Eyne fun di geshikhten* (An Everyday Conversation: A Story, #7-8), published in 1917. The ornament-drawings in this book incorporate Hebrew letters into a curvilinear art nouveau design. In his illustrations from 1919 for the Passover song, *Had gadya* (One Goat, #5-6), where text is short and image has a more prominent role, Lissitzky integrated letters with images through a system of color coding that matched the color of the characters in the story with the word referring to them. He would return to this novel typographic device in later designs. In his setting of the final verse of the Passover song, Lissitzky depicts the mighty hand of God slaying the angel of death, who wears the czar’s crown. This representation links the redemption of the Jews with the victory of the Bolsheviks.

**Proun**
Lissitzky entered a period of abstract art inspired by revolutionary ideas when Marc Chagall invited him to teach graphic arts, printing, and architecture at the People’s Art School in Vitebsk in 1919. There Lissitzky met Kazimir Malevich and was impressed by his system of nonobjective art, Suprematism.

Lissitzky joined UNOVIS (Affirmers of the New Art), a collective of students and teachers that Malevich founded in order to promote Suprematism and bring it to the city’s streets and squares. By 1920, however, Lissitzky had invented his own form of abstract art, for which he coined the term **Proun** (Project for the Affirmation of the New). Lissitzky’s **Proun** compositions utilize shifting axes and multiple perspectives to convey the idea of rotation in space. “We brought the canvas into circles,” he declared in 1921, “and while we turn, we raise ourselves into the space.”

The section of the Web site on Vitebsk juxtaposes the black square of Malevich, seen in his pamphlet *Suprematizm. 34 risunka* (Suprematism. 34 Drawings, #14), with works by Lissitzky that were directly inspired by Suprematism and produced as part of his activity with UNOVIS. Lissitzky’s **Lenin Tribune (Proun no. 85)** (#12) incorporates a tribune, or speaker’s platform, that was originally designed by Ilya Chashnik, a fellow UNOVIS artist. The red cube supporting the platform symbolizes the “mark of the world revolution in the arts.” Following Lenin’s death in January 1924, Lissitzky montaged a photograph of Lenin onto a little podium and placed him on the platform under a screen bearing the word “Proletarii” (Proletarians).

Also in this section is *Suprematicheskii skaz pro dva kvadrata v shesti postroïkakh* (Suprematist Story of Two Squares in Six Constructions, #10), Lissitzky’s first children’s book to combine abstract **Proun** forms with a new approach to typography. An allegory of the recent revolution, the book tells the story of two squares, one red and the other black, who join forces to shatter chaos and establish a new order. Lissitzky instructed children to act out the story using paper, rods, and blocks.
In Berlin, Lissitzky continued to pursue his goals of an international pictorial language, designing covers for the American magazine *Broom* (#24), the books *Ravvi* (Rabbi, #21) and *Ptitsa bezymiannaia* (Nameless Bird, #20), and the exhibition catalogue *Erste Russische Ausstellung* (First Russian Exhibition, #23), in which he combined techniques of rotation in three-dimensional space with a new treatment of the letter (Cyrillic and Latin).

**Jewish Works from the Proun Period**

Jewish themes and symbols, which played such an important role in Lissitzky’s book designs between 1917 and 1919, sometimes returned in his abstract *Proun* designs. In these instances, Lissitzky treats the Hebrew letter as part of the typography and sometimes as a visual code. For instance, his cover for the book *4 Teyashim* (Four Billy Goats, #27), published in 1922, shows an arrangement of Hebrew letters as architectural elements in a dynamic design that mirrors his contemporary *Proun* typography.

In his illustration for Ehrenburg’s short story “Shifs-Karta” (Passenger Ticket, #32), Lissitzky positions the two Hebrew letters “pei nun,” signifying “here lies,” on a raised palm. Literally referring to Malevich’s passionate appeal: “Let the rejection of the old world of art be inscribed on the palms of your hands,” Lissitzky expresses here the death of the story’s protagonist as well as the end of an entire era. “Here lies” declares the end of the old Eastern European Jewish life, and of the pre-revolutionary, pre-Soviet world.

The meaning of the letters has a more directly autobiographical significance as well: when completing “Shifs-Karta,” Lissitzky had recently arrived in Germany and did not know whether he would return to Russia (the old world) or continue moving on his path from East to West. For the next three years, Lissitzky would remain in Germany and Switzerland, working with various collaborators. During this time he developed a close friendship with his future wife Sophie Küppers.
Theories of Modernism

The works in this section highlight Lissitzky’s participation in critical modernist debates and his introduction of *Proun* theory to European artists. As one of the few Russians of his generation who could speak German fluently, Lissitzky was in a position to advance his theories through lectures, articles, and designs for books and periodicals for German-speaking audiences.

Not long after he completed his *Sieg über die Sonne* (Victory Over the Sun) portfolio, Lissitzky was asked by the Dada artist Kurt Schwitters to work on a special issue of the Dada journal *Merz*. The April-July 1924 issue, which they coedited, was designed by Lissitzky and given the title *Nasci* (Nature, #35-36). The text, consisting of a foreword and captions for a series of paired images, calls upon artists to set aside the machine in favor of “natural” forms such as crystals and plants, and argues that art follow principles of organic growth, economy, and balance.

Lissitzky’s typographic design for the front and back covers of *Nasci* captures these ideas visually through a spare layout, ample use of open space, and a harmonious arrangement of text on the vertical and horizontal axes of a grid. Following *Nasci*, Lissitzky embarked on a new collaboration, this time working with Hans Arp on *Kunstismen* (The isms of Art, #37-38), a historical survey of modern art.

Victory over the Sun

Lithographs from Lissitzky’s *Victory over the Sun* portfolio of 1923 (#40-49) illustrate his use of *Proun* visual devices to design costumes and machinery for the stage. While working in Vitebsk in 1920, Lissitzky saw a performance of the Russian futurist opera *Victory over the Sun*, which was first produced in 1913 with a libretto by Aleksei Kruchenykh and sets and costumes designed by Malevich.
In recasting the opera as an “electromechanical” show for figurines, Lissitzky used Malevich’s--that is, UNOVIS’s--signature black and red squares but transformed Malevich’s Suprematist shapes into *Proun* figures constructed of transparent prisms and metallic rods, bending and receding in space.

To Kruchenykh’s plot--the New Man tears down the sun, symbol of old-world rationality; the Gravediggers bury the victims; the Announcer heralds victory; and the Sportsmen sing the song of the future--Lissitzky introduced the role of the Designer of the Spectacle, who controls the light, the sound, and the movement of the figurines. His experimentation with electromechanical devices, radical for its time, was influenced by the mechanical shows of abstract figurines performed at the Weimar Bauhaus in the summer of 1923.

**Marketing Pelikan Ink**

Lissitzky became seriously ill with tuberculosis in 1923 and went to Switzerland for treatment. During his convalescence, he supplemented his income by designing typographic and photographic advertisements for Pelikan, an office supply company based in Hanover. Kurt Schwitters, who was living in Hanover and working for Pelikan, probably introduced Lissitzky to the firm.

Several of Lissitzky’s advertising designs are displayed in this section, including a photograph of his wood-panel advertising relief for Pelikan typewriter ribbons (#58), which he intended “for a shop window, for vitrines in train stations, and, above all, wherever there is traffic.” The transfer of new typographic techniques and *Proun* spatial ideas to advertising can be seen in the kinetic effect of the circular mirror in the shopwindow relief, the diagonal position of the large capital P in Pelikan, and the interplay of optical effects and tactile materials (stained wood, veneer, lacquer).

The image of the artist’s hand with Pelikan drawing ink and compass in an advertisement of 1925 (#51) had its source in *The Constructor* (#50), a remarkable
photomontage and photogram that Lissitzky created in December 1924. In this piece, Lissitzky gazes out at the viewer, the palm of his hand is superimposed over an all-seeing right eye, and his fingers hold a compass. Lissitzky represents himself here as the “artist-constructeur,” an artist whose hand has discarded the paintbrush for the compass, the blank sheet for the sheet of graph paper. *The Constructor* reveals Lissitzky’s indebtedness to the Constructivist concept of the artist as engineer of the world.

**Architecture and the Demonstration Space**

In 1925, after the Swiss government denied his request to renew his visa, Lissitzky returned to Moscow and plunged into the design of architectural projects. Most significant was his invention, with the Swiss architect Emil Roth, of a skyscraper for Moscow that he called the *Wolkenbügel* (Cloud-Iron, #65-67). The *Wolkenbügel* contradicted America’s vertical building style, because the building expanded horizontally in the air to save space on the ground.

Lissitzky published an article about his skyscraper project in 1926 in the only issue of the Moscow-based architectural review *ASNOVA* (The Association of New Architects, #68). He wrote articles for both *ASNOVA* and the German art journal *Das Kunstblatt* in which he proposed a new “rational architecture” for East and West that would involve modern architects and “rationalized labor” joining forces with science and high technology.

Included in this section of the Web site are some of Lissitzky’s other architectural concepts and documents from his teaching at the art school VKhUTEA (State Higher Artistic and Technical Workshops). The section also shows photographs of the two “demonstration spaces” that Lissitzky created in Germany: *Room for Constructivist Art* (Dresden, 1926, #69-71) and *Abstract Cabinet* (Hanover, 1927-1928, #72). Lissitzky designed these spaces to encourage the participation of visitors, who could slide...
panels to reveal or hide pictures, alter lighting, and pop up various documents in a rotating case.

**Printing Trades and Pressa Exhibitions**

In the following years, Lissitzky was commissioned by the Soviet government to design exhibition spaces. Appointed chief artist for the All-Union Printing Trades Exhibition held in Moscow in 1927, he designed the installation (#93-97), the catalog (guidebook) (#101), and the bulletin (#98).

In 1928 Lissitzky received the commission to serve as chief artist for the Soviet Pavilion at the International Press Exhibition in Cologne. Lissitzky directed the creation of a revolutionary exhibition design that brought together architecture, graphic design, photography, sound, and film in the service of one idea: informing an international audience about the significance of the press in Soviet society since the Revolution. His photomurals and his emphatic use of the letter in every size and thickness and type, running in various directions, transformed the Soviet Pavilion into an enormous illustrated book.

**Film and Photo**

In his graphic designs for books and exhibitions during the years 1927-1930, Lissitzky turned increasingly to film and photography. For the cover of the brochure *Architecture. VKhUTEMAS* (#108), which he produced in 1927, he brings back the photomontage of the hand with a compass from the *Constructor* of 1924. He rotates the image to create a symbolic gesture in which the vertical hand and the compass, opened at a forty-five degree angle, echo the typographic arrangement of the three title words.

On the covers for the album *Foto-Auge. OEil et Photo. Photo-Eye* (#104) and the catalog for the Japanese Cinema Exhibition of 1929 (#105), Lissitzky refers back to this visual motif. The title of the former, and the visual montage of a movie camera and a human
eye on the cover of the latter both convey the message that technology expands human vision and creativity.

**Designs for the Future**

This section highlights 1930, the year in which Sophie and El Lissitzky’s son, Jen, was born. Lissitzky created a birth announcement in the form of a photomontage, superimposing an image of the infant Jen over a factory chimney and whistle. By linking Jen’s future with his country’s industrial progress, Lissitzky offered a personal endorsement of the Soviet Union. Lissitzky’s commissioned designs for the International Hygiene Exhibition in Dresden (1930) and the Fur Trades Exhibition in Leipzig (1930, #122-126) deploy large lettering, photomurals, and startling juxtapositions of real objects with naturalistic and abstract forms to convey an optimism about Soviet developments in social welfare.

**USSR in Construction**

The final section presents two issues of the Soviet propaganda publication, *USSR in Construction*, for which Lissitzky worked as a designer during the last decade of his life when he was very ill. The journal was published in the Soviet Union in four languages and was meant to provide Western European audiences with information about Soviet industry, economy, and culture.

Lissitzky’s designs for *USSR in Construction*, which he compared to the planning of exhibitions, often consist of larger-than-life photographic spreads, such as the panoramic view of social hospices in the October 1936 issue (#129) and the poster-size portrait of Stalin in the December 1937 issue on the “Soviet Constitution” (#127). The spreads were intended to convey a mythologized image of Soviet reality, with each number devoted to a single theme. Lissitzky produced his last design for *USSR in Construction* in October 1940. In 1941, the year of his death, he signed a contract for the artistic-typographical design of the collected works of Lenin. He was also at work designing two posters promoting Soviet Russia’s war effort, one entitled “Davaite
pobolshe tankov” (Give Us More Tanks), and the other on the theme of Nazi tyranny. To the end of his life, Lissitzky continued to align his art with the social and political causes of his time, including the cause of Soviet Communism.

**Images Used on the Web site**

The letters, photographs, and documents, and many of the books displayed in this Web site are from two of the Getty Research Library’s archival collections: El Lissitzky Letters and Photographs, acquired in 1995 from Lissitzky’s son, Jen; and the Jan and Edith Tschichold Papers, which include letters and graphic designs sent to Tschichold by artists of the international avant-garde. Five of the photographs are from the J. Paul Getty Museum and are so noted. Books and periodicals are also drawn from the Getty Research Library’s extensive collection on Russian modernism, which includes a copy of nearly every important book Lissitzky designed.

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For more information on El Lissitzky and related holdings in the Getty Research Library at the Getty Research Institute, contact the Research Library’s Reference Desk at (310) 440-7390, or email: reference@getty.edu

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