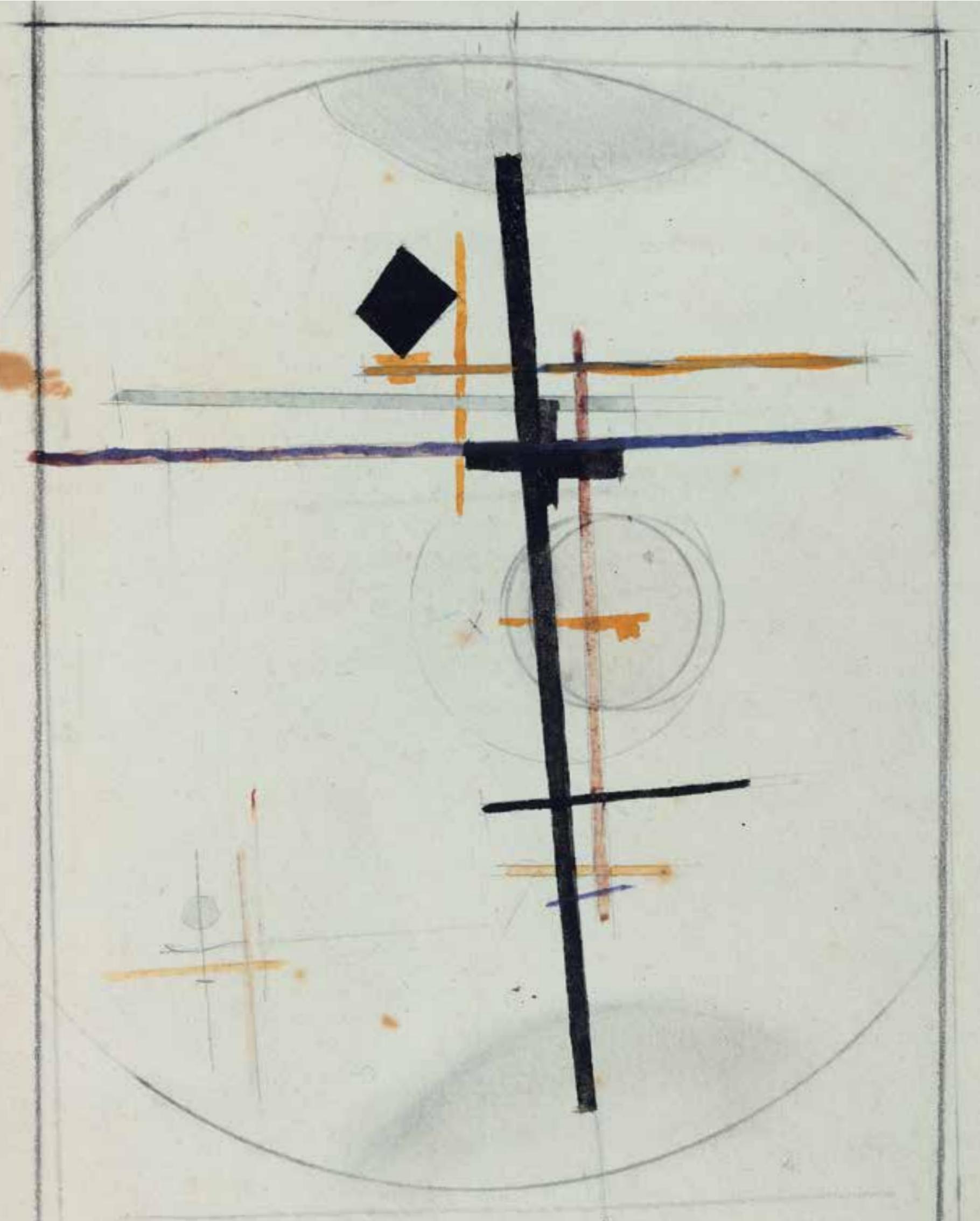


LAZAR **KHIDEKEL** & **SUPREMATISM**



# LAZAR KHIDEKEL & SUPREMATISM



Edited by Regina Khidekel

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# INTRODUCTION



## Regina Khidekel



**T**HIS volume offers a comprehensive overview of the rich legacy of the artist, architect, designer, and theoretician Lazar Khidekel (1904–1986), with special attention to the enduring importance of Suprematism in his artistic and architectural oeuvre. Khidekel classified himself as an artist and architect, subsequently adding the moniker “fantasist.” The latter was in reference to one of the central features of his art and architecture: his “vision of Suprematist structures floating in space,”<sup>1</sup> which emerged in the 1920s while he was a member of the Vitebsk Suprematist group Affirmers of the New Art (UNOVIS), first taking the form of space stations for earthlings in works created in 1920–21 and later inspiring projects for futuristic cities conceived in the mid-1920s.

Khidekel was initially trained and nurtured as an artist by the best painters of the time. His first teacher, Marc Chagall, counted him among the most talented painters in his studio. On encountering his former student during a 1973 visit to Russia, Chagall immediately recognized Khidekel and expressed astonishment that one of his best students had become an architect rather than a painter.<sup>2</sup> With Chagall’s encouragement, the fifteen-year-old Khidekel—who attended art school for less than a year—exhibited work alongside the luminaries of modern art, including Chagall himself, Vasiliï Kandinsky, and Kazimir Malevich. Khidekel went on to become, in the words of his friend and fellow UNOVIS member Ilya Chashnik, the only truly “revolutionary Suprematist.”<sup>3</sup> Although a few other members of UNOVIS organically absorbed the Suprematist system, most never managed to cross the threshold of abstraction, as did Khidekel. According to his completed UNOVIS questionnaire, Khidekel studied with Malevich himself—the only student taking Malevich’s course on Dynamics.<sup>4</sup>

Khidekel’s gifts as an architect were recognized early on, beginning with his widely acclaimed workers’ club project of 1926 (figs. 28, 33), which has come down in history as the world’s first Suprematist architectural design. In fact, starting with his work with El Lissitzky on the transition from planar to three-dimensional Suprematism, Khidekel became not just the first but indeed the only Suprematist architect. In his view, avant-garde architecture was derived from that modern pictorial system. For Khidekel, Suprematism was a living organism able to develop many branches, including architecture and design, to ultimately and infinitely change the visual image of the world. He believed that the initial artistic vision and form of an architectural structure determined its function, a belief that governed

left: The Affirmers of the New Art (UNOVIS) Creative Committee, September 1921. From right to left, standing, are Kazimir Malevich, Lazar Khidekel, and Ilya Chashnik.

both his own work as well as his teaching of generations of architects.

The study and publication of Khidekel's Suprematist legacy followed several decades of Stalinist prohibition, coinciding with the gradual rediscovery of the Russian avant-garde and its creators during the Khrushchev thaw. This process, which began in the late 1960s, was the result of the efforts of a group of Soviet and international scholars, two of whom were especially important: Larissa Zhadova and Selim Khan-Magomedov. Both scholars, who were particularly interested in Suprematism, had multiple meetings with Khidekel, examined and obtained firsthand information on his works, and completed the first post-World War II publications devoted to Khidekel's Suprematist oeuvre. Drawing on unique archival documents, including materials related to UNOVIS, the State Institute of Artistic Culture (GINKhUK), and Khidekel's art and architectural training, Zhadova and Khan-Magomedov each sought to define Khidekel's place in the UNOVIS artistic circle as well as his status as the first Suprematist architect.

Zhadova argued that "Khidekel was Malevich's principal assistant in his architectural experiments of 1924–25,"<sup>5</sup> an assertion that today is fully corroborated by documents from GINKhUK and the State Institute of Art History (GIII) archives—many appearing in print for the first time in Irina Karasik's contribution to the present volume.<sup>6</sup> For Khan-Magomedov, meeting Khidekel was one of the highlights of his scholarly career. By Khan-Magomedov's own account, in the course of working on his landmark volume *Pioneers of Soviet Architecture: The Search for New Solutions in the 1920s and 1930s*, for which he explored more than 150 institutional and private archives, it was a shock, after being introduced to El Lissitzky's Prouns, to realize Khidekel's works' relevance to "the breakthrough of suprematism to architecture."<sup>7</sup>

Searching for the transitional elements between planar Suprematism and its implementation in the architectural arsenal of the 1920s, Khan-Magomedov found the vital missing links in the Khidekel archive. Khidekel's axonometric views based on Suprematist compositions inspired a series of cosmic dwellings (1920–22) that were developed into works related to the Aero-Club (1923, fig. 23). The latter, in Khan-Magomedov's words, "was practically the first true architectural composition based on suprematism."<sup>8</sup> These were followed by Khidekel's projects from his days as a student at the Petrograd Institute of Civil Engineers (PIGI): the above-mentioned workers' club, which was immediately published both at home and abroad and was soon followed by his next groundbreaking student project, a collective dwelling (1927, fig. 34), as well as collaboratively realized designs with his professors Alexander Nikolsky and Grigorii Simonov. Khan-Magomedov's findings in Khidekel's personal archive prompted him to introduce two new sections into his book: "Suprematist Constructivism" and "Experimental Urban Planning Designs." The first section is devoted to planar Suprematism's evolution into actual architecture, which Khan-Magomedov was able to chart through his examination of Khidekel's work; the second section reflects Khidekel's radical yet environmentally conscious urban development visions for the future.

Khan-Magomedov notes that, unlike Malevich's paintings of 1915–18, Khidekel's works, along with those of several other students who passed through Lissitzky's class on projection drawing, "consisted not of colored geometric figures freely floating in the white space but of extended rectangles joined in a rigid cross-like composition."<sup>9</sup> Khidekel regarded these

graphic compositions as his contribution to the structural transformation of Suprematism. Looking at Khidekel's Vitebsk works, Khan-Magomedov observed the characteristic features that led to Suprematism's development by artists of the next generation, most notably the "shifting to volume and space."<sup>10</sup> Khan-Magomedov also noted in Khidekel's work the presence of extremely minimal compositions and "more complex structures where a cross and a square intricately interacted: for instance, a square split by a cross," as well as motifs such as the yellow cross and echoes of Malevich's white-on-white series—iconic images that determined Khidekel's subsequent development of Suprematism.<sup>11</sup>

Given Khidekel's unique talents and status as an art school graduate and representative of UNOVIS, "while he was still a first-year student [at PIGI]," Khan-Magomedov writes, "professors consulted with him and he lectured other students on Suprematist principles of architectural composition."<sup>12</sup> Describing this chain of influence—Malevich–Lissitzky–Khidekel–Nikolsky—enabled Khan-Magomedov to define Khidekel's role and influence on his professors as well as his architectural collaborations with Nikolsky and Simonov in the mid-1920s. Their jointly realized works significantly contributed to the emergence of a distinctive type of Suprematist Constructivism that characterized the work of the Leningrad avant-garde and "helped to consolidate the process of Soviet architects' creative experimentation."<sup>13</sup>

In the section of his volume entitled "Experimental Urban Planning Designs," Khan-Magomedov explores the different categories of Khidekel's futuristic cities, including the Aero-City, Garden City, City above Water, Floating City, and Flying City (the latter of which, for Khan-Magomedov, manifested the "the idea of mechanically raising an entire city above the earth"). These elevated complexes were so far ahead of their time that some of Khan-Magomedov's colleagues could not believe they were envisioned and produced by their fellow countryman in the 1920s: "If he got the idea of the city on stilts prior to Yona Friedman and the idea of the floating city . . . prior to the Japanese Metabolists, he was a genius," said one of them. "Why not?" wondered Khan-Magomedov. "Isn't it time for us to stop looking for geniuses out there only? But our domestic 'genius,' unlike the foreign ones, never insisted on his brilliance and was warily waiting for his 'formalistic' works . . . to be brought into the scientific and creative domain via my book."<sup>14</sup>

Today, with the rise of the Internet as a platform for independent thinkers, we can learn a great deal about the historical relevance of Khidekel's visionary projects. "Long before Friedman's Architecture Mobile, Constant's New Babylon, and Isozaki's Clusters in the Air," writes one source, "Khidekel imagined a world of horizontal skyscrapers that through their Suprematist weightless dynamism seemed to float ad infinitum across the surface of the earth." The article continues: "Like a Nietzschean visionary clearly ahead of his time, Khidekel not only announced the advent of the suspended cities that would later become the *tour de force* of the avant-garde in the sixties but he, like Malevich in art, reached a level of abstraction that goes beyond a specific historical period, developing on its way a regenerating form of architectural avant-garde that always looks to the future and that even today—eighty years later—remains revolutionary." The authors distinguish between revolutionary architecture and "architecture of the revolution," or Constructivism, which "responds to the iconoclastic demands of the moment and creates a profusion of icons that portray a specific historical period,"

inevitably becoming obsolete. On the contrary, Suprematist “revolutionary architecture always looks towards the future, remaining refreshingly contemporary.”<sup>15</sup> For another critic, “Khidekel’s visions still manage to look futuristic, arguably more so than most of the Metabolists or Situationist projects that today feel retro-futurist, inextricably tied to the past. Khidekel’s work remains endlessly floating towards the future.”<sup>16</sup>

Khidekel’s legacy would never have been resurrected without the pioneering work of Khan-Magomedov, whose scholarly integrity and absence of any vested political or commercial interests made him unique. He did what he deeply believed. This is what makes especially meaningful his inclusion of ten of Khidekel’s designs in his 2005 book *Sto shedevrov sovetskogo arkhitekturnogo avangarda (One Hundred Masterpieces of Soviet Avant-Garde Architecture)*.<sup>17</sup> It is important to note that publications about Khidekel, including a monographic study by Khan-Magomedov, were solely focused on Khidekel’s early experimental works of the 1920s. Like many scholars in the 1970s, Khan-Magomedov was interested only in experimental works, firmly refusing to consider anything created later than 1932, which was widely considered the endpoint of the Soviet avant-garde.<sup>18</sup>

This focus on Khidekel’s avant-garde output was hurtful for the artist, who lived and worked well into the 1980s, heedless of changing political and critical tides. Khan-Magomedov thought that the reason Khidekel asked him to include student drawings in the style of classical architecture, in addition to his Suprematist works, was that, as a professor of architecture, Khidekel would be reluctant to be represented merely as an avant-gardist. In fact, another scholar, Iurii Iaralov, an admirer of Khidekel’s works who also became a family friend, wrote an important and lengthy article on Khidekel that included works from different periods and styles.<sup>19</sup>

In my later correspondence with Khan-Magomedov during the preparation of his Khidekel monograph, I tried to explain that Khidekel was genuinely proud of all that he accomplished, including his post-avant-garde architectural designs—which likewise were based on Suprematist compositions. Khan-Magomedov had included in his monograph a few of Khidekel’s 1923 sketches of classical monuments from his student days at PIGI, and he had assumed that Khidekel’s later works were post-Suprematist. Khidekel, however, wished to be recognized for the entirety of his oeuvre, including his talents as a skilled draftsman. Even today, abstract artists are often seen as lacking the ability to draw. As an apprentice of the artist Mstislav Dobuzhinsky, Khidekel brilliantly mastered drawing and watercolor, which first came to the attention of his professors and classmates at PIGI, and which would both help build his reputation and lend credibility to his avant-garde experiments.

Prompted by the growing interest in his works in the early 1970s and the requests of Russian and foreign scholars and publishers, Khidekel started to systematically photograph his archive and to establish a clear chronology for his practice, grouping his works according to themes and periods. He identified the subjects of his abstractions and created a special file for his Suprematist works—pieces that he regarded as his unique contribution to the plastic development of painterly Suprematism.<sup>20</sup> He began to dream about a show of his work, and, indeed, among his 1970s manuscripts are some bearing the title “Toward My Exhibition” that still serve as a guide for presentations that he was unable to realize during his lifetime.

Closely following his recommendations, inclusive exhibitions of his work were eventually organized. One exceptional example was *Surviving Suprematism: Lazar Khidekel*, which marked the hundredth anniversary of the artist’s birth. According to the curator, Alla Efimova, “The grouping of early and late works, the juxtapositions of sketches and finished architectural forms reveal a remarkable consistency in Khidekel’s vision during the span of his career. The exhibition demonstrates, surprisingly, how his official Soviet architectural commissions were haunted by the spirit of radical avant-garde experimentation.” The show, Efimova continues, will “uncover a unique case of perseverance and survival, a remarkable example of a twentieth-century artist who carries the kernel of radical avant-garde vision through the terror and drudgery of totalitarian cultural history without succumbing to it.”<sup>21</sup>

Khidekel lived long enough to see the postwar expansion of Suprematism on an international level. Although he was isolated by the Iron Curtain, the logic of further avant-garde development can be detected ahead of its time in Khidekel’s oeuvre. Even his early works were Minimalist *avant la lettre*. In a 1995 review of *Russian Jewish Artists in a Century of Change, 1890–1990*, an exhibition at the Jewish Museum, New York, the critic Hilton Kramer singled out Khidekel’s work: “One of the most interesting artists is an artist few of us nowadays have heard of: Lazar Khidekel, who was associated with Malevich’s Suprematist circle in the 1920s and later turned to architecture. *Suprematist Concentric Circles* (1921) looks amazingly like a sketch for very similar paintings that Kenneth Noland produced many years later.”<sup>22</sup>

Kramer was not aware that Khidekel’s remarkable concentric circles of 1921 (fig. 51, pls. 39, 40) represent thermal zones dispersing from the Earth’s core, as we now know from the artist’s own drawings and commentaries. The highly refined, diversely textured pastel palette of the concentric circles relates to Khidekel’s monochrome nebulae and cosmic structures, while anticipating, as Kramer rightly observed, the Minimalist and Color Field painting that emerged decades later, particularly in the hands of Noland (fig. 53).

Other examples of Khidekel’s forward-thinking aesthetic readily come to mind: his blue-painted figural monuments of 1942–44 (fig. 41) may be seen as heralding Yves Klein’s blue busts, while the organic forms of Khidekel’s raised futuristic cities of the mid-1920s (pl. 82), where right-angled corners unexpectedly round off and form part of an acutely modern aerodynamic configuration, reverberate in Zaha Hadid’s “Suprematist” forms. Creating his spatial-pictorial fantasies in the mid-1950s through 1960s, Khidekel predicted the spectacular enlargement in scale of contemporary painting. Khidekel once said that a person of the nineteenth century was a pedestrian who could grasp minutiae, but that in the quickened pace of the twentieth century, volumes are all that could be discerned from automobiles and planes and, as a reflection of visible space, the size of canvases would increase accordingly with time.

*Lazar Markovich Khidekel: The Rediscovered Suprematist*, a two-part exhibition at Zurich’s Haus Konstruktiv and Leuenhof in 2010 and 2012, featured a more expansive treatment of his career, both stylistically and thematically. It included his architectural and coloristic experiments, landscapes, and personal creative explorations of the 1950s and 1960s, including designs for fashion, shoes, and hairstyles. Most notably, Dorothea Strauss, the curator and then director of Haus Konstruktiv, used Khidekel’s art to reveal Suprematism’s relevance in the context of

“refreshingly diverse forms of a new Minimalism, indicative of a widespread renewal of interest in the themes of the classical avant-garde.”<sup>23</sup>

The initial solo exhibition at Haus Konstruktiv was designed to coincide with *Complete Concrete*, a survey of one hundred years of Constructivist, concrete, and conceptual art and its impact on the present. According to Strauss, the juxtaposition made clear “the extent to which Suprematist works remain topical, even today . . . many young and international contemporary artists refer to the traditional themes of the founding generation with new self-confidence and can be seen to handle this heritage in a respectful, yet playful manner.”<sup>24</sup> Significantly, the exhibition timeline identified *AERO: Articles and Designs* (Vitebsk, 1920, fig. 6), a journal produced by Khidekel in collaboration with Chashnik, as the first multifaceted manifesto in which an artist expresses philosophical views on art as an emerging conceptual framework, articulating a “new futuristic vision and pioneering views on [the] looming ecological impact of modern civilization.”<sup>25</sup> The *Complete Concrete* catalogue includes an excerpt from *AERO* in which Khidekel “at the tender age of sixteen . . . advocates an urbanism that develops in harmony with nature. *AERO* is thus in all likelihood the earliest document to advocate the notion of a ‘green city.’”<sup>26</sup>

The 2013 exhibition *Floating Worlds and Future Cities: The Genius of Lazar Khidekel, Suprematism, and the Russian Avant-Garde*, at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York, focused on Khidekel’s early Suprematist works and his role in Suprematism’s transition from painting to architecture, cosmic urbanization, and his radical but environmentally conscious and compassionate city planning of the future. For Jonathan Brent, the director of YIVO, Khidekel was a “genius, visionary and prophet who was propelled by the power of his imagination into a future space and time that overturned the ‘realistic’ conventions of his world. He was both an individual living in concrete reality and also a representative of that which did not yet exist.”<sup>27</sup>

Exhibitions such as these have elevated Khidekel’s international stature in the twenty years since his Suprematist works were first shown to the public in *The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915–1932* (1992), at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, followed by their display in *Europa, Europa*, the landmark 1994 exhibition at the Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Bonn, and the major 1995 Malevich retrospective at the Museum Ludwig, Cologne. Yet, perhaps even more important, his legacy has been recognized by a younger generation of artists as an infinite source of ideas and inspiration. Mikhail Karasik’s book *Ommazh Khidekeliu (Homage to Khidekel)* is one such artist’s tribute to Khidekel’s influence.<sup>28</sup>

There are many accounts of the visceral impact of Khidekel’s work when examined up close. One of the most passionate was penned by the critic J. Bowyer Bell, who encountered Khidekel’s *Yellow Cross*, the 1923 painting featured on the present book’s jacket, at a 1997 exhibition in New York. Bell recounts that he was walking from one gallery to the next, spending

too much time looking and no longer seeing anything. And a single peek down a corridor . . . was a work so compelling, so majestic that I was reeled in—or down—the corridor like a caught creature. There from fifty feet was a yellow cross that grew only more complex, more compelling the closer I came, obviously a constructivist

work, as good as any Malevich, but not Malevich, unknown and sensational . . . created . . . in [the] midst of chaos and revolution, amid the hopes and prospects of the time, a small masterpiece that unlike most dreams has not died. . . . To make a masterpiece in one age, amid the clatter of the times and the fashion of the moment, is accomplishment enough. For the work to truly be a masterpiece it must travel. And so to make a work that seventy years later, in another country, another time, which can still command, still hold the viewer not by name or fame or fashion, but on quality alone, is a truly marvelous achievement. What more can an artist desire than to stop the viewer in flight, haul the critic down the corridor, induce awe and admiration. Live again and still on a wall in an alien country in another time? The Khidekel—the painting—creates within the Fuller building a marker and monument—art in action. It is a painting that needs no brand recognition to critic’s accolade, no patron or shift in fashion. Khidekel will be remembered as long as there are those seeking an intensity of image, who can be moved across time and place by great painting. And would that the *Yellow Cross* end up where all can feel the zing across the years, end in a public space.<sup>29</sup>

Khidekel was at the core of a group of artists who managed to break through from one time to another, from inner, earthly space to outer, cosmic space, a space that continues to provide inexhaustible possibilities for discovering new worlds in art.

It is greatly hoped that the present volume will go a long way toward promoting a full appreciation of this major figure of the Russian avant-garde, and will, in turn, be followed by many other studies exploring Khidekel’s contribution and legacy. Space limitations permit the reproduction of some two hundred illustrations, which, while a considerable number, nonetheless constitute only a small fraction of Khidekel’s vast body of work. The same is true of the selection of Khidekel’s writings, which are presented throughout in the form of excerpts.

## Notes

- 1 Lazar Khidekel, manuscript, ca. 1972, Lazar Khidekel Family Archive.
- 2 See Regina Khidekel, "Shagal: Rannye gody," *Novoe russkoe slovo* (New York), November 1995.
- 3 Ilya Chashnik, letter to Lazar Khidekel, March 27, 1922, Lazar Khidekel Family Archive.
- 4 Questionnaire, State Archive of Vitebsk (GAVO), f. 837, op. 1, d. 1, ll. 141–43.
- 5 Larissa A. Zhadova, "Suprematicheskii order," *Problemy istorii sovetskoi arkhitektury* (1983): 37.
- 6 See Irina Karasik's appendix, "Lazar Khidekel and His Role in the Development of Suprematism: Documents from the State Institute of Artistic Culture and the State Institute of Art History," in the present volume.
- 7 Selim O. Khan-Magomedov, *Lasar Khidekel, Makers of Avant-Garde* (Moscow: Russian Avant-Garde Foundation, 2011), 18. First published in Russian in 2008.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 63.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 38–39.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 40.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 41.
- 12 Selim O. Khan-Magomedov, "The Suprematist Architecture of Lazar Khidekel," in *Lasar Markovich Khidekel: Suprematism and Architecture*, exh. cat. (New York: Leonard Hutton Galleries, 1995).
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 Khan-Magomedov, *Lasar Khidekel*, 24.
- 15 WAI Architecture Think Tank, "Discovering Khidekel," *Architect News*, July 18, 2012, <http://architect.com/news/article/53722256/discovering-khidekel>.
- 16 "Khidekel," *Kosmograd Newsfeed*, October 10, 2013, <http://newsfeed.kosmograd.com/kosmograd/2013/10/khidekel.html>.
- 17 Selim O. Khan-Magomedov, *Sto shedevrov sovetskogo arkhitekturnogo avangarda* (Moscow: Editorial URSS, 2005), 78–82, 243, 249–50, 285–86, 435.
- 18 In 1932 the Union of Artists and the Union of Architects were established, leading to the dissolution and ban of other artistic groupings in the Soviet Union.
- 19 Iurii Iaralov, "Stareishii zodchii," *Zodchestvo* (Moscow), no. 2 (1978): 138–46.
- 20 Many works from this file are reproduced in the present volume.
- 21 Alla Efimova, *Surviving Suprematism: Lazar Khidekel* (Berkeley: Judah L. Magnes Museum, 2005), 9–10.
- 22 Hilton Kramer, "Jewish Artists in Rubble of Tragic Russian Era," *New York Observer*, October 2, 1995.
- 23 Dorothea Strauss, press release for the exhibition *Lazar Markovich Khidekel: The Rediscovered Suprematist*, Haus Konstruktiv, Zurich, 2010–11, Lazar Khidekel Family Archive.
- 24 *Ibid.*
- 25 *Ibid.*
- 26 Museum Haus Konstruktiv, *Complete Concrete: Art since 1945*, exh. cat. (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2011), 342.
- 27 *Floating Worlds and Future Cities: The Genius of Lazar Khidekel, Suprematism, and the Russian Avant-Garde*, exh. cat. (New York: Lazar Khidekel Society, 2013).
- 28 See Mikhail Karasik, *Ommazh Khidekeliu: Litografskie etudy* (St. Petersburg: M. K. Publishers, 2012).
- 29 J. Bowyer Bell, "Lazar Khidekel at Leonard Hutton," *Review*, February 1, 1997, 35–36.



# “RESEARCH IN THE PLANE OF THE SUPREMATIST FIELD”: LAZAR KHIDEKEL’S SUPREMATISM

● **Tatiana Goriacheva**

**T**HE “Work Plan of the Suprematist Department” submitted to the State Institute of Artistic Culture (GINKhUK) in 1924 encompassed the full scope of activities of the circle of artists that formed around Kazimir Malevich in Vitebsk and continued in Leningrad. Among the document’s contents was a text entitled “Research in the Plane of the Suprematist Field.” The author of the piece was Lazar Khidekel, who not only belonged to the group but is now considered one of the most significant adherents of Suprematism. Indeed, it would be fair to count Khidekel among the most gifted students ever to emerge from the Malevich circle. Khidekel truly grasped Suprematism’s significance and potential, not merely emulating Malevich but furthering his teacher’s ideas and implementing them in his own oeuvre.

Khidekel’s decision to pursue a career in art was largely influenced by his upbringing—his father was a stonemason and a builder, while his mother was a seamstress for the theater. After completing elementary school and briefly attending middle school, he was admitted to the People’s Art School in Vitebsk, founded by Marc Chagall.<sup>1</sup>

In September 1918, Chagall was appointed Commissar of the Arts for Vitebsk, a position that entailed far-reaching authority, including the establishment of art schools and museums and the organization of art exhibitions, lectures, symposia, and other cultural undertakings. His first act as commissar was the founding of the People’s Art School (fig. 1), and the school accepted its first students in November of that year. From December 1918 through January 1919, Chagall was busy assembling a teaching staff for the school, which he accomplished in several ways. He published an announcement in the newspaper *Iskusstvo kommuny*, inviting members of the public to join the school’s faculty and student body. Chagall also personally invited a number of noted artists to serve as instructors, among them his own teacher, Mstislav Dobuzhinsky. Various Petrograd artists soon signed on to teach at the newly formed institution, including Ivan Puni, who organized the poster workshop, and Ksenia Boguslavskaja, who taught applied art. Nadezhda Liubavina was hired to teach the introductory courses, while Ivan Tilberg directed the sculpture studio.<sup>2</sup> Chagall himself led the painting studio. By January 1919, the People’s Art School already had 120 students.

Dobuzhinsky taught drawing as well as served as the school’s director, although he ended up staying in Vitebsk for only a brief period (barely three months). Following his departure, the directorship was

left: Members of Affirmers of the New Art (UNOVIS), June 5, 1920. Khidekel is front row, center.



FIG. 1

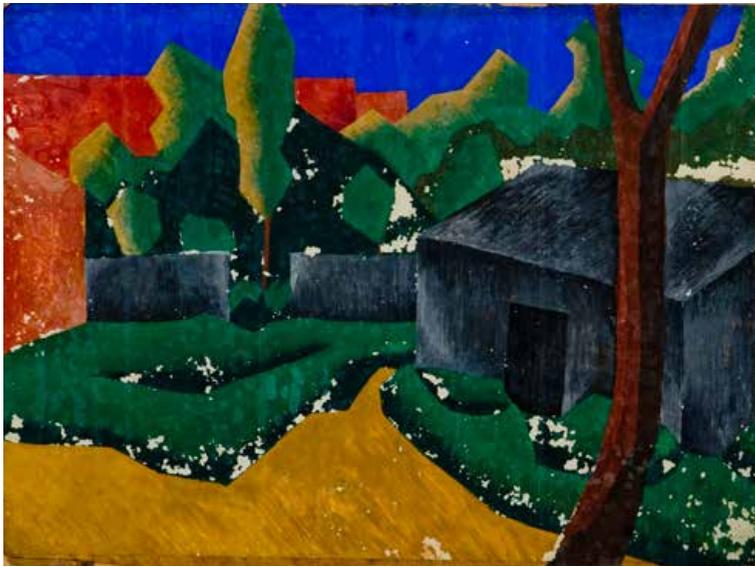


FIG. 2

FIG. 1 People's Art School, Vitebsk, ca. 1920

FIG. 2 *Backyard in Vitebsk*, 1919  
Gouache on board  
7 × 9½ in. (17.8 × 24.2 cm)

FIG. 3 *Vitebsk Street*, 1920  
Dry brush on board  
8⅞ × 5⅞ in. (21.8 × 15.1 cm)

FIG. 4 *Vitebsk Rooftops*, 1920  
Dry brush on board  
8⅞ × 5⅞ in. (21.8 × 15.1 cm)

occupied by Alexander Romm, who also taught drawing and art history. Romm served as director from February through April 1919, at which point Chagall himself took over the directorship.

In March of that year, the Visual Arts Section of the Commissariat of Enlightenment (IZO Narkompros) sent Nina Kogan to teach at the school, and the following month, Vera Ermolaeva, who went on to become deputy director—or “comrade director,” as listed in the school records. That summer, the faculty underwent further changes: Boguslavskaja, Liubavina, Puni, and Tilberg left; the introductory course was now taught by Yehuda Pen and the sculpture class by David Iakerson.<sup>3</sup>

The teenage Khidekel enrolled in Dobuzhinsky's class, where he learned the basics of academic drawing. Although brief, this experience was nevertheless important for Khidekel's artistic development. As a master of graphic art, Dobuzhinsky added a layer of interest and sophistication to introductory drawing lessons. Khidekel's study with Dobuzhinsky not only solidified the foundations of his artistic training, but also instilled in the young artist a genuine appreciation and understanding of art.

The next step in Khidekel's artistic training came in Chagall's studio, where the young artist, as he later described, not only began “seriously painting in oils,”<sup>4</sup> but also had his first encounter with modern art practices. As Khidekel recounted, “We were provided a model—a sitting girl with a kerchief on her shoulders. We were allowed to paint in quite a limited color range: gray and blue.”<sup>5</sup> Another student from the Chagall studio, Valentin Antoshchenko-Olenev, provided a similar account of his experiences: “I sat before the unfurled canvas admiring the beautiful, young model, but how was I to paint her? With blue and red or yellow?”<sup>6</sup> Even from these brief recollections, it is possible to reconstruct Chagall's pedagogical method, based on avant-garde practices: he taught his students to create form and space through the application of color rather than through chiaroscuro and the “correct” sequence of atmospheric colors and perspectival planes.

Khidekel's absorption of Chagall's teaching is evident in *Backyard in Vitebsk* (1919, fig. 2). Created when Khidekel was fifteen years old, this early landscape deploys a Cubist handling of form, painterly generalization, daring use of local color, and cropping as a compositional device: in short, a combination of techniques that reveal the artist's early ability to grasp artistic innovation.

Khidekel's earliest artistic successes did not go unnoticed. In June 1919, he was included in the school's *First Summary Exhibition*. The exhibition jury—led by Chagall himself—awarded prizes to the best student exhibitors; the young Khidekel was among them. The award-winning works were placed in a school museum that opened shortly thereafter, as the result of Chagall's efforts.<sup>7</sup> In early November, Chagall organized the *First State Exhibition of Paintings by Local and Moscow Artists*. Khidekel was represented in this Vitebsk show alongside other highly regarded students—as well as in the presence of masters such as Robert Falk, Vasilii Kandinsky, Petr Konchalovsky, Aristarkh Lentulov, Ivan Kliun, Mikhail Le Dantu, and Malevich.

In the summer of 1919, another notable figure joined the People's Art School faculty: El Lissitzky. Upon Chagall's personal invitation, Lissitzky came to Vitebsk to direct the school's graphics and architecture studio. Shortly thereafter, an unsigned notice (likely submitted by Lissitzky himself) appeared in the Vitebsk newspaper *Izvestiia*, announcing the



FIG. 3



FIG. 4

opening of the new workshop, its goals, and the forthcoming course on architecture: “Participants in the architectural workshop will have the opportunity to become acquainted with the basic methods of architecture, and to learn about the graphic and plastic expression of its plastic concepts (through work on models).”<sup>8</sup>

A month later, Lissitzky’s article “Novaia kul’tura,” a manifesto devoted to the new methods of artistic pedagogy, appeared in the weekly periodical *Shkola i revoliutsiia* (*School and Revolution*).” Lissitzky urged:

It is now time to arrive at a completely new method of art education. It should be based in the studio, where the master and his apprentices work in close and dogged collaboration in the service of a single goal—absolute freedom, unconstrained by anything except the creative aspiration to arrive at a form for one’s self-imposed goals. . . . This process is facilitated by familiarity with the basic architectural principles. Tectonics—the art of discovery in order, expediency, and the rhythm of chaos—serves as the foundation of all the arts, which in school already serves to develop our versatility and broaden our perception.<sup>9</sup>

For Khidekel, who on the one hand had dreamed of becoming a builder from an early age and on the other was strongly attracted to innovative artistic approaches, the program outlined by Lissitzky was nothing short of ideal. It is also important to note that Lissitzky’s loud, declarative style—highly unusual for the provincial city of Vitebsk—heightened the suggestive influence of his theses, intensifying their appeal for the young art student. Khidekel began to make regular visits to Lissitzky’s studio. While Khidekel may have continued to spend time in Chagall’s studio—the school permitted students to work in different studios simultaneously—it is quite clear that his gravitational center now shifted toward Lissitzky’s architectural workshop. At the same time, it is important to note that Lissitzky did not expose his students solely to avant-garde concepts; while he was demonstrating an adherence to avant-garde ideas around this time,<sup>10</sup> he had not yet developed his own distinctive aesthetic program. Although by that point he had already been introduced to Malevich’s Suprematism (in Moscow), the shift in Lissitzky’s artistic orientation prompted by his exposure to that pivotal movement would happen somewhat later.

A certified architect, Lissitzky taught his students the basic tools of the profession: technical draftsmanship and the creation of architectural sketches and models. Two landscapes from 1920, *Vitebsk Street* (fig. 3) and *Vitebsk Rooftops* (fig. 4), survive from Khidekel’s early period. While possibly created as studies in the Lissitzky workshop, the works are infused with a much looser and livelier character than that associated with student architectural sketches. They seem to prioritize artistic expression over the creation of architectural form, while also suggesting the compositional strategies of Dobuzhinsky’s cityscapes through their saturation and their use of a vertical format, presentation of buildings from multiple perspectives, and deployment of a view from above, “outside the window.” The works are hardly derivative—with their free, sweeping brushstrokes, they in no way mimic the refined, painstaking quality of Dobuzhinsky’s *World of Art*-inspired draftsmanship. At the tender age of sixteen, Khidekel was already demonstrating both a fully confident hand and an independent approach.

It is also instructive to situate these studies within the context of contemporaneous developments in Khidekel's creative evolution. By early 1920, Khidekel had already joined the ranks of Malevich followers and begun to work in the Suprematist mode. Around this time, Lissitzky introduced a new creative phase connected to the creation of his Suprematist-based Prouns, which inevitably reverberated in his teaching. However, judging from Khidekel's works, one may assume that Lissitzky continued to instruct his students on the fundamentals of architecture, including assigning them the creation of architectural sketches.

On Lissitzky's invitation, Malevich arrived at Vitebsk in November 1919. His arrival had major repercussions, both for Lissitzky's artistic orientation and for that of the People's Art School. Suprematism now comprised the main artistic direction of the institution. Within the span of several months, Malevich's innovative art, combined with his charismatic personality and unique gifts as a proselytizer, enabled him to organize a unified Suprematist collective from among the school's faculty and student body: UNOVIS.

Formed in the spring of 1920, UNOVIS—the Russian acronym for Affirmers of the New Art—launched radical reform of the school's pedagogy and social-cultural life. Even though art studios embodying different movements and styles (most notably that of Yehuda Pen<sup>11</sup>) continued to exist at the institution, the members of UNOVIS now occupied the key positions. Khidekel became one of the most active members of the collective.

The pedagogy of various faculty members of the People's Art School—Vera Ermolaeva, Nina Kogan, Lissitzky, and Malevich—was based on the program developed by Malevich, which traced his theories of artistic progression from Paul Cézanne to Suprematism. The program consisted of four sections corresponding to the four stages of instruction. The first stage was the introductory course, acquainting students with the general principles of the "abstract depiction of objects" and addressing artistic fundamentals—color, form, composition, volume. In the second stage, students turned to the study of Cubism. In the third, they learned the laws of Futurism as "the study of speed." Only the fourth stage, itself consisting of seven steps, focused on the social-aesthetic doctrine of Suprematism. The first step explored plastic volumes and their practical application. The next two steps revealed the essence of Suprematist painting, followed by the three-dimensional interpretation of Suprematism. A special section concerned the significance of the square ("The Square: Its Economical Development"). Finally, the last two steps addressed the potential for interpreting Malevich's teaching as a philosophical system.

Kogan taught the introductory course to the school's youngest students. Ermolaeva taught the classes on Cubism and Cubo-Futurism for older students. Malevich supervised all of the courses, and also taught the class on Suprematism.

Khidekel continued his studies in Lissitzky's architectural workshop, while simultaneously taking courses with Ermolaeva and Malevich. The *Second Summary Exhibition* was held in February 1920; seventeen students received prizes, among them Khidekel. His award was probably for works he had completed in Chagall's studio—a fitting epilogue to his brief yet productive period of study with the master.

In the spring of 1920, Khidekel, along with several of Chagall's other students, transferred to the UNOVIS studio. Membership in UNOVIS

involved not only the study of avant-garde art but also the dissemination of the group's ideas beyond its immediate circle. Students and teachers alike participated in conferences and art exhibitions, delivered lectures, staged plays, and issued small-circulation, self-published editions of their work.

In the fall of 1920, Khidekel was elected to the UNOVIS Creative Committee; he later went on to become its chair. In September, Khidekel, along with his fellow committee members—Ilya Chashnik, Kogan, Lissitzky, and Malevich—traveled to Smolensk for the UNOVIS regional conference. At the Vitebsk exhibition *Revolution and Art*, held the following month, Khidekel gave a speech on the new art of the day and delivered remarks on the exhibited works. Khidekel also belonged to the theatrical circle led by Ermolaeva, taking part in the production of the opera *Victory over the Sun*. Students assisted with the creation of costumes and stage décor based on Ermolaeva's sketches; one of the costumes was designed by Malevich himself.

In addition to practical activity, UNOVIS members were also expected to engage in theoretical work in varied forms. Students prepared essays, courses, and articles for both typewritten and lithographed publications. Khidekel wrote several essays on Suprematism for UNOVIS brochures and newspapers—among them "The New Realism: Our Present," "On the Struggle against Aesthetics," and "UNOVIS in the Workshops"—and in 1920, together with Chashnik, produced the typewritten journal *AERO: Articles and Designs*.

 In 1920–21, Khidekel simultaneously explored Cubism, Futurism, and Suprematism. Three surviving drawings from 1920—*Seamstress* (pl. 1), *Man with a Mandolin* (pl. 2), and a study of a seated model (fig. 5)<sup>12</sup>—provide insight into his Cubist and Futurist exercises. A student-like work, the drawing of the seated model demonstrates how Khidekel absorbed the basics of Cubist form in a diligent yet rather naive manner, breaking down the figure into geometrical volumes and attempting to transform the anatomy of the human body according to Cubist principles.

Yet before the young artist could fully overcome the encumbrances of nature, he first had to understand Cubism as, above all, a means of conceiving space. His seated-figure study reflects a superficial, mechanical "Cubistization" of its subject, suggesting the schematization of the human form deployed in Malevich's sketch for the Futurist Strongman costume for the Vitebsk production of *Victory over the Sun*. Khidekel's drawing may have also been inspired by Malevich's 1919 series of drawings entitled *Cubo-Futurism: Dynamic Sensory Experience of a Model*, likely created for his students and based on a 1913 motif.

Khidekel's *Man with a Mandolin* reveals a more sophisticated handling of Cubism. In it, the artist combines elements of the seated model—almost exactly replicating the man's pose—with a variation on the subject of Pablo Picasso's *Woman with a Mandolin* (1909; Museum of Modern Art, New York). Emphasizing Cubism's systematic quality, Malevich's pedagogy, focused on the canonical works of Picasso and Georges Braque, was founded on the study of Cubism as the basis for grasping the principles of "objectlessness." For Malevich, Cubism enabled an understanding of the techniques of building pure form, of the issues of texture (*faktura*) and material, movement and stasis. *Woman with a Mandolin* was evidently one of Malevich's favorite examples for teaching



FIG. 5

FIG. 5  
Study for *Victory over the Sun*, 1920  
Pencil on paper  
7 1/16 × 4 5/16 in. (17.9 × 11 cm)

his students about the geometrizing of form; in late 1920, the painting was copied by another of his students, Konstantin Rozhdestvensky. Yet Khidekel's *Man with a Mandolin* was not merely a reproduction of the Picasso painting, but a revisiting of his seated model by way of the previously mastered laws of Cubism.

Khidekel's *Seamstress* was executed within the context of the school's lessons on Futurism; students were to depict a mechanism in motion, either an inanimate object or a human figure.<sup>13</sup> The drawing was possibly inspired by a 1913 Malevich work of similar subject matter and title that may have been included in the artist's Moscow solo exhibition of March 1920.

Khidekel regarded Cubism and Futurism as necessary stages on the path toward the mastery of Suprematism. This was in stark contrast to many of his fellow students at the People's Art School, who regarded the boundary between Cubism and Suprematism as insurmountable and for whom Suprematism was merely an object of study, rather than a conceptual system worthy of deep understanding. Indeed, in the eyes of young artists such as Natalia Ivanova, the brothers Mark and Georgii Noskov, Klara Rozengolts, Dmitrii Sannikov, Lev Tsiperson, Lev Iudin, and Lazar Zuperman—all of whom remained at different stages of Cubism—the Suprematist system was inherently alien, a means of expression so extreme as to forestall the possibility of a traditional painterly artistic approach. By contrast, the members of UNOVIS regarded Suprematism as a vital creative method, adopting Suprematist principles and appreciating its artistic potential and possible applications. These artists included Chashnik, Ivan Chervinko, Khidekel, and Nikolai Suetin.

In 1918, Malevich identified the boundary between Suprematism and objectlessness as follows: "Suprematism . . . contains a definite basis, an inviolable axis. . . . Individuality desiring to work with Suprematism must yield to this foundational principle, developing its own unique character along the radius of this foundation."<sup>14</sup> As if in response to Malevich's entreaty, Khidekel's Suprematism has its own "radius of foundation," an unmistakably recognizable "handwriting." Although the surviving drawings are generally not dated, complicating efforts to place them in chronological order, it is fair to assume that the first works to appear gravitated toward a planar, linear-constructive approach that could be characterized as "Cubo-Suprematism."<sup>15</sup> This term was used by UNOVIS artists<sup>16</sup> to denote a middle ground between Suprematist geometrism and Cubist spatial density (the principle of "cohesion" among geometric planes), a stage on the path toward the apprehension of a dynamic spatial approach to form and the ability to develop plastic compositions.

Khidekel included a number of his Cubo-Suprematist drawings in the journal *AERO* (fig. 6), which he and Chashnik created in the fall of 1920. *AERO* was probably inspired by the typewritten publication *UNOVIS Almanac No. 1*, which Lissitzky and Malevich produced in 1920 along with a number of their students.<sup>17</sup> As Khidekel and Chashnik themselves had not participated in the *UNOVIS Almanac*, *AERO* could be understood in terms of their desire for self-expression; it also provided a vehicle for applying the polygraphic ideas developed by Lissitzky, who taught his students not only architecture but also printing-related topics such as typography and graphic design.

In addition to the philosophical rhetoric typical of the UNOVIS circle, Khidekel's article in *AERO*, "The Canvas Serves to Usher in Achievements," contained implicit references to the drawings featured in the journal:



FIG. 6

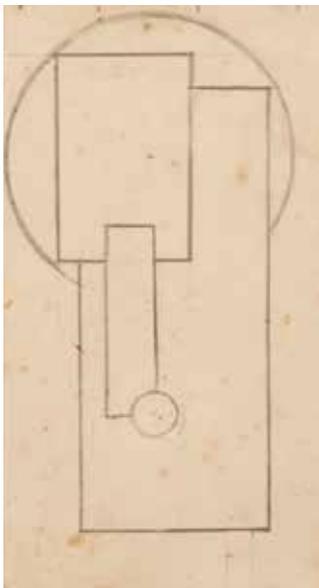


FIG. 7

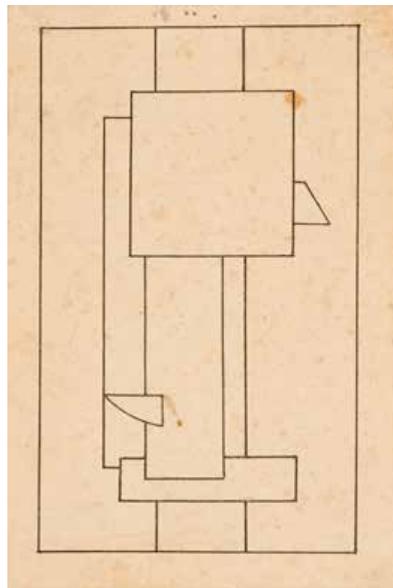


FIG. 8

In the course of its development, Cubism as a correct and logical path reinforced the feeling for pictorial construction, promoting as a consistent progression in its latest stages of development a feeling not only for the pictorial canvas, but also for the pictorial construction of life itself.

Those who have a feel for the construction of the pictorial organism should also experience the construction of life itself, since the construction of painting in the present and the future shall broadly master in its ultimate achievements the feeling of the powerful sensations of the figural-chaotic world.<sup>18</sup>

This article is important for its affirmation of the significance of Cubist composition. The term "construction" is a key element of the essay:

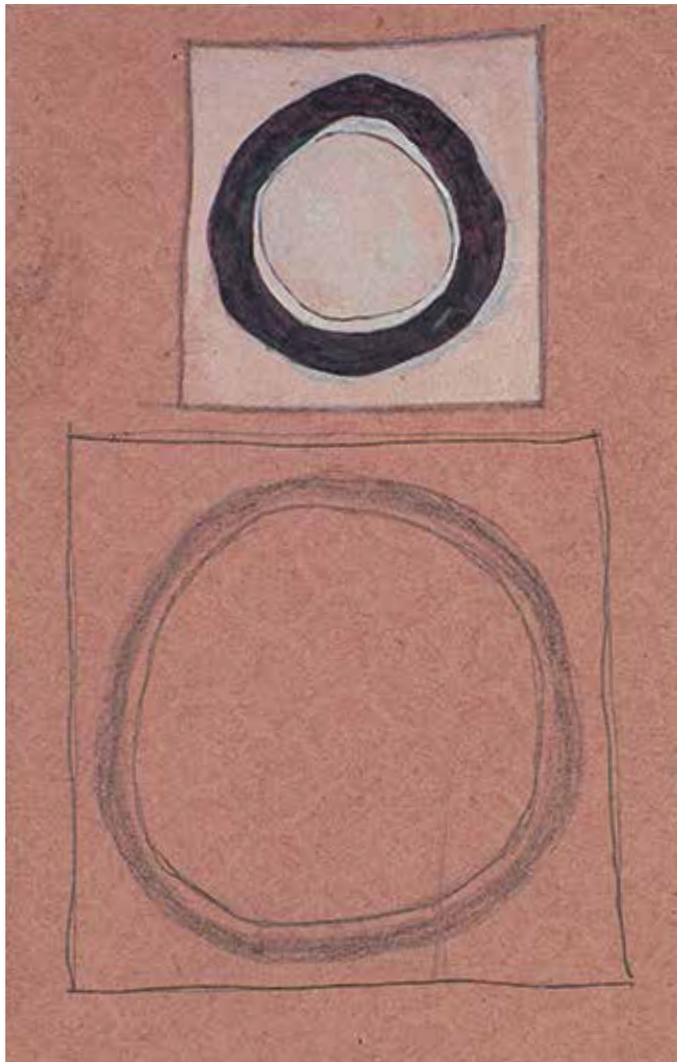
Construction should not only denote the machine, but also water and wind, living motion, in order to apprehend and explain the opposition and hidden forces of nonmechanical nature, which are forced to operate in a united collective summarizing the figural sensations of the vital dynamic. . . . The construction of future creativity leads to the convergence of all creative spheres of the new life, to the path of economy and a vital dynamic. This should master the whole spatial figural-chaotic world, leading to the unification of life-creating construction.<sup>19</sup>

It is remarkable that Khidekel does not mention Suprematism even once in the text. A possible reason for this apparent omission may be found in Lissitzky's teaching. Having arrived at the basis of the new artistic direction with his Prouns—which combined Suprematist flatness with the principles of the Constructivist development of form—Lissitzky was by this point orienting his students toward the revelation of Constructivist form rather than Suprematism.

Khidekel conceived the four drawings reproduced in *AERO*, in addition to others not featured in the publication (figs. 7, 8, pls. 5–9), as demonstrations of the universal principles of the assembly of construction. The marked diversity of the compositions—the use of different perspectives of geometric figures and varying details, alongside the frequent repetition of particular motifs—makes visible the concept of construction as a living, dynamic organism and imbues the drawings with the character of the theoretical designs promised by the journal's subtitle.

Design-oriented work was typical of the activities of Lissitzky's architectural studio, as well as those of UNOVIS as a whole. Objectless compositions were invested with the status of designs, helping advance the development of the principles of form-creation (*formoobrazovanie*) that were to comprise the foundation of the world-building of the future.<sup>20</sup> The title *AERO* reflected the cosmic vision of UNOVIS endeavors, underscoring the group's intentions to do no less than conquer outer space. Writing from Moscow to Vitebsk in late 1920, Lissitzky observed, "I am certain that the question of space and dynamic structural form is on everyone's lips."

However, this is where Malevich's and Lissitzky's interests diverged. At this time, Malevich was busy developing a general utopian doctrine focused on the world-building potential of Suprematism, while Lissitzky was attempting to express this notion through specific forms of architectural design. But architecture demanded concrete engineering and socially



**FIG. 9**

**FIG. 6**

Cover of *AERO: Articles and Designs*  
(*AERO: Stat'i i proekty*), 1920  
Lithograph  
9<sup>13</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 16<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> in. (25 × 42 cm)

**FIG. 7**

*Linear Suprematism*, 1920  
Pencil on paper  
6<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 3<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> in. (16.2 × 8.8 cm)

**FIG. 8**

*Linear Suprematism*, 1920  
India ink on paper  
5<sup>11</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 3<sup>13</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in. (14.4 × 9.7 cm)

**FIG. 9**

*Circles*, 1921  
Watercolor, india ink, and pencil on paper,  
6<sup>13</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 4<sup>7</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in. (17.4 × 11.2 cm)

oriented solutions, thus requiring a functional approach—something impossible for Malevich, for whom the goal of Suprematism above all else meant the creation of new artistic form, a conception that equally applied to his views on architecture. For its part, the Lissitzky studio was fully engaged in issues of built architecture, but restrained from taking the final step of renouncing its adherence to strict Suprematist ideals.<sup>21</sup>

In late 1920, following sharp disagreements with Malevich, Lissitzky left for Moscow. In the aftermath of Lissitzky's departure, the architectural studio was now under Malevich's general supervision and focused entirely on theoretical Suprematist-inspired design work. The studio was home to the most talented students in the school, two of whom—Khidekel and Chashnik—managed the day-to-day activities of the studio.<sup>22</sup>

UNOVIS's architectural projects were infused with a utilitarian mission, but, in accordance with Malevich's program, one that did not attain the level of functional resolution. This contradiction was identified by one of the critics from the opposing camp, Alexander Romm, in his review of the UNOVIS exhibition of May 1921: "The present exhibition features a multitude of projects for entire cities, aerially mobile stations, electric power stations for aerial contexts, and the like. . . . All these projects are presented rather monotonously, and the specific architectural concept of a given structural type, defining its utilitarian function—station, city, theater—is not revealed or articulated with the necessary cogency."<sup>23</sup> Romm clearly regarded adherence to the tenets of Suprematism as "monotony." As a practitioner of traditional art, he was unable to grasp the UNOVIS concept of form-creation. But in other respects, it is difficult to contest his assessment, since UNOVIS did not set any concrete engineering goals for its projects.

While many individuals were able to teach architecture, only one person could teach Suprematism: Malevich. Khidekel's years of close contact with the leader of the Russian avant-garde were most significant for the young artist, who became fully consumed with Suprematism. Much like Suetin and Chashnik, Khidekel doggedly sought out his own original variant of the style. The path to this goal was long and arduous, involving countless studies and investigations into formal possibilities based on deep understanding of the Suprematist system: weight, weightlessness, velocity, density, energy, tension, and gravity.

UNOVIS drawings reflect the emergence and crystallization of individual interpretations of Suprematism. In this regard, they reveal their creators' unique thought processes: the distinct explorations of Suprematist patterns, priorities, and difficulties encountered along the way. The repetitions in different renderings of the same motif embody the full complexity and multi-stage journey that artists had to undertake to arrive at their own unique versions of the style, revealing likenesses that could be interpreted both as responses to Malevich's initial assignment and as youthful steps on the path to understanding and mastering the Suprematist system.

Although the themes of Khidekel's Vitebsk-era drawings could be typologically differentiated from those of other students, they are bound up with fundamental Suprematist artistic principles, both artistic and philosophical. Thus, Malevich's view of Suprematism as a metaphor for cosmic space, and his insistence on Suprematist forms' equivalence to forms in nature, can be discerned in Khidekel's drawing cycle, with its extensive use of circles and concentric spheres. The cycle is directly

related to Malevich's lectures, especially these dedicated to matter and energy. As recorded in Iudin's journals and Khidekel's outlines, Malevich's theoretical lessons were enhanced with schematic drawings of the cross-sections of the Earth—its core and encircling "rings of thermal energy." These are evoked in Khidekel's drawings describing various states of ring-shaped energy encircling the Earth—its oscillations, thermal gradations, transformation into matter, the tension of centrifugal and centripetal forces (fig. 9, pls. 39, 40). The rings' irregular, washed-out outlines transform Khidekel's compositions into images of pulsating, living matter—a far cry from the geometrical precision typical of his graphic oeuvre.

In other drawings, the circle is freed from direct astronomical allusions, and included in the context of characteristic Suprematist geometric compositions. Despite that fact, the cosmic subtext of Suprematist philosophy is present in the series. By way of example, the 1921 ink drawing *Philosophy of the Circle: Mass, Density, and Movement* (fig. 10) is infused with the interplay between black and white, circle and square—serving to demonstrate that the compositional interaction of Suprematist forms is not just an arbitrary artistic act but a reflection of the general laws of the universe.

Like many other students of Suprematism, Khidekel was often inspired by Malevich's canonical works, likewise creating compositions of colorful geometric planes floating in white space (fig. 11, pls. 32–38). But even these early Khidekel works are diverse—reflecting the young artist's simultaneous experimentation in multiple directions. Some works, composed of elongated rectangles at times intersected by straight lines, explore variations on Suprematism's monolithic subject matter.<sup>24</sup> The colors deployed in these sketches are based on the "color" period of Malevich's Suprematism: to the basic palette of black, white, and red are added other hues—dark blue, light blue, gray, orange, and yellow.

Their combinations of disjointed, free-floating, differently scaled rectangles and planes adds another level of variation to these works, which already reveal the emergence of Khidekel's individual style, with its Constructivist, concise, and airy compositions. The artist minimized the number of geometric planes, while also reducing their scale in relation to the background and deploying the white field of the canvas as a legitimate compositional element. Forms hover in airless space, as if frozen in time; the compositions seem to record a moment of ideal rhythmic correlation. (According to Iudin's journal, Malevich himself assigned students to create compositions with floating figures; one entry reads: "Idea: suspension, restraint.")

Khidekel was apparently guided by the use of an analytical method and a striving for Constructivist sharpness. These compositions' spareness stems largely from their limited palette, with many dominated by a single color, often black or red. A number of Khidekel's compositions—primarily the explorations of the black square (fig. 12, pls. 11, 12)—are distinguished by the exclusive use of black. By diminishing or enlarging the scale of the square, moving it from one corner of the canvas to another, increasing its angle of incline, or positioning it along a strict central axis, Khidekel revealed the compositional potential of this most important Suprematist form.

Other drawings address the challenge of achieving balance between black and white. A matrix consisting either of intersecting and elongated rectangles (pl. 28) or two horizontal rectangles is inscribed into

the square format so that the composition appears to be divided into identical white and black lines. (Similar sketches recording the stages of the study of Suprematism and Malevich's assignments appear in Iudin's journals, with entries accompanied by cursory sketches.)

Some sketches repeat the color compositions, transforming them into black and white. The monochromatic palette eliminated the need for building color harmony, allowing Khidekel to fully concentrate on issues of pure form and composition: architectonics, symmetry, movement, stasis, the search for perfect balance.

Especially revealing in this respect are three drawings in which the same plastic motif—two differently scaled rectangles—are varied, depending on the specific goals of each sketch. The rectangle's meticulously calculated proportions—the long side of the small figure is equal to the short side of the large figure—remain constant; the only variant is their position on the sheet. Absolute symmetry and balance prevail in one of the drawings, a horizontal composition in which the rectangles are parallel on the long sides and precisely situated along the central axis of the sheet. The second drawing (pl. 14) is similarly composed, but the small rectangle is turned on a diagonal, creating the effect of movement. The third drawing (pl. 18) addresses the challenge of dynamic equilibrium, featuring a diagonal line that bisects the square evenly along the center and rectangles that are perpendicular to each other.

Such compositions were created as assignments from Malevich, as described in Iudin's journals:

Develop a Suprematist form in space using black.

1a) Construct a square.

2) Assemble two forms in magnetic equilibrium using black.

3) Assemble three, four, and more forms using black.

4) Construct a system of forms moving in the same direction using black. Construct two additional forms in motion in black and gray-black.

Movement on a diagonal.

5) Resolve the motion of the parallel lines of the canvas frame (suspension).

6) Resolve two or more lines of motion. . . . It's more instructive to create large-scale forms. The forms' positioning could be called "Suprematist" when motion is achieved. . . . Dynamic interactions are achieved in the first phases through the incline.

There are two aspects to a Suprematist composition:

1) The aspect of the framework: "What's the best way to see this composition?"

2) How this composition is actually assembled. . . . whether a composition is correctly positioned on the canvas, whether each element of the composition is correct independently.

No, because these parts are viewed independently of the whole, they take on a much different significance.<sup>25</sup>

Starting in 1921, Khidekel, along with other advanced students at the People's Art School, was invited to serve as a teaching assistant—clear evidence of Malevich's high regard for him. Iudin, who was never completely satisfied with his own work and closely followed others' progress, recorded the following in his journal:



FIG. 10

**FIG. 10**  
*Philosophy of the Circle: Mass, Density,  
and Movement, 1921*  
India ink on paper  
8¼ × 8¼ in. (21 × 21 cm)  
Private collection



## Lazar Khidekel and Suprematism

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