

Without a Trace

In 1927 the Russian artist Kazimir Malevich took about seventy of his paintings and drawings to Germany, where they were displayed in a retrospective as part of that year's *Great Berlin Art Exhibition*. Malevich chose works from across his career, from his earliest impressionist canvases to the abstract pictures for which he had become renowned. One of his largest and best known early paintings, *Peasant Funeral* 1910 was included in the Berlin show. When Malevich returned to St Petersburg he left all his works in Berlin in the care of a supporter called Hugo Häring. (Abstraction in all its forms, and even paintings executed in a vaguely modernist, European style, were falling from official favour in the Soviet Union, and Malevich clearly thought it wise to leave his current work, together with his early more figurative pieces, elsewhere.) Malevich never returned to Germany, dying in Russia in 1935.

In the 1950s a number of pieces by Malevich were discovered in Häring's possession but about twenty-one of the works exhibited in 1927 were missing, including *Peasant Funeral*. Known today only through two black and white photographs, the fate of this colourful painting of early Russian modernism remains uncertain. Paradoxically, it may have been its sheer size rather than its subject matter or style that made it particularly vulnerable to neglect and loss.

Malevich was born in Kiev, the son of ethnic Poles, in 1879. He grew up in the villages of the Ukraine, and was very familiar with peasant styles of decoration. He studied drawing in Kiev and, after the death of his father, moved to Moscow in 1904 to further his career. Here he quickly experimented with modern painting styles imported from Europe: impressionism and fauvism from France, futurism from Italy. In 1910 Malevich joined the avant-garde *Knave of Diamonds* group, and became influenced by the theories of fellow member Wassily Kandinsky. Like Kandinsky, Malevich began to explore whether certain combinations of colour and form could, without referring to elements in the 'real' world, create an emotional response in the viewer.

While exploring avant-garde styles, Malevich became intensely preoccupied with the theme of peasant life, perhaps as emblematic of Russia. As he had grown up among the sugar-beet plantations of the Ukraine, rural subjects had a personal resonance. But his choice of subject matter also showed his desire to follow in the footsteps of the great European modernists: artists such as Gauguin had studied French peasants, believing their simple and rustic ways could somehow reveal some basic, more fundamental, truth about the human condition, and help rejuvenate stale traditions in art. In choosing to paint peasants in a quasi-'primitivist' style indebted to modern European artists in France and Germany in particular, Malevich aimed to create a bridge

between ‘real Russia’ and the world of contemporary art in a way that inevitably had political connotations in Russia in the early 1900s.

Malevich’s early sketches for *Peasant Funeral* in 1911 depict workers gathered around an open grave, suggesting an allusion to the French nineteenth-century realist painter Gustav Courbet and his famous masterpiece *Burial at Ornans* 1849–50 that showed ordinary townspeople assembled for a funeral. However, in the final painting Malevich shifted the focus of attention away from the grave and the pallbearers towards the procession of stocky peasant figures, with simplified features (the heads have been likened to medieval icons and frescos), bowed shoulders and huge hands. Completed in 1911, *Peasant Funeral* was over two metres wide and among the largest works Malevich painted (whether with oil paint onto canvas or gouache onto sheets of paper which were then mounted onto canvas remains uncertain). He showed it at an exhibition of the experimental *Donkey’s Tail* group in Moscow in March 1912, and then sent it to St Petersburg for the annual *Union of Youth* show in December. Fortunately, a review, published in 1913, reproduced the painting, giving us a reasonable photograph of it.

Another painting of this period offers us perhaps a sense of the bold colours Malevich may have used in the lost work. *Peasant Women in Church* 1911 was displayed alongside *Peasant Funeral* in the 1912 *Donkey’s Tail* exhibition and excited press comment. Although influenced by fellow avant-garde artists Natalia Goncharova and Mikhail Larionov at this point, Malevich’s use of colour appears to have been distinctive: one reviewer wrote about ‘irresistibly made reds and yellows’; another declared simply, ‘we are conquered by Malevich’s colouring’.

For reasons that are not entirely clear Malevich moved quickly and dramatically away from a style based on European fauvism and cubism in the years before the First World War. After ‘alogism’ – works presenting conflicts of logic – he went on to turn away from rationality altogether in 1913 with a series of canvases with block-colour geometric shapes. He wrote: ‘we rejected reason so that another kind of reason could grow in us, which ... can be called beyond-reason’. The repudiation of European styles by Malevich and his contemporaries in favour of geometric forms – famously a black square on a white ground, and a white square on a white ground – became explicit in 1915 when they staged the *Last Futurist Exhibition 0.10* in St Petersburg. It was at this 1915 show that Malevich first named this style suprematism. However, his interest in the life of ordinary peasants did not wane: in 1915–16 he worked with other suprematist artists in a peasant or artisan co-operative.

A uniquely Russian avant-garde movement, Malevich’s suprematism was heralded as a triumph by his contemporaries and, immediately after the Russian Revolution of 1917, by the communist state. In 1919 he enjoyed his first retrospective in Moscow. Titled K.S. Malevich: *His Way from Impressionism to Suprematism*, it presented Malevich’s work as the latest stage in the development of European modernism. *Peasant Funeral* was among the 150 works chosen for this exhibition, placing it firmly within this evolution.

In 1923 Malevich was appointed director at the new Institute of Artistic Culture in St Petersburg, founded to lead research into the new styles of Soviet art. There he had further retrospective exhibitions and published key texts about his philosophy, including *The World as Non-Objectivity*. The Soviet state was then promoting social realist art – art showing politically approved subjects (notably industrial workers and peasants) executed in a realist and carefully executed style – but the communist party quietly tolerated Malevich.

As the 1920s progressed, European interest in Malevich's ideas grew and, prompted by an invitation from an artists' society in Germany, the Institute of Artistic Culture decided to organise an exhibition of their members' work in Berlin. However, avant-garde or experimental art was falling from favour in Russia. In 1926 a party newspaper branded the Institute a place rife with 'counterrevolutionary sermonising and artistic debauchery'. The state refused to fund the German exhibition, and Malevich was obliged to plan and fund his trip himself. Malevich left Russia on 8 March 1927 with a selection of his theoretical notes and diagrams and about seventy of his works, including *Peasant Funeral*. He journeyed first to Warsaw, where he gave lectures to Polish artists on the Institute's research and exhibited a selection of his works. He also visited the progressive Bauhaus arts school in Dessau, where the professors arranged for the German publication of his writings.

Before his trip Malevich had been in touch with the Berlin-based architect Hugo Häring, best known today for his writings on organic architecture and as a figure in architectural debates about functionalism. Keen to support this important Russian artist, Häring (who had a Russian-born wife) introduced Malevich to the German art world and, as a member of the organising committee for the annual *Great Berlin Art Exhibition*, was able to obtain exhibiting space for him in that year's show. The exhibition opened on 7 May 1927, with the artist displaying approximately seventy works in a room specially reserved for him. Alongside *Peasant Funeral* Malevich exhibited paintings ranging across his career, from his earliest impressionist works to his geometric suprematist pieces.

Malevich was thrilled with the positive reaction he received in Germany, writing to his Institute colleague Lev Yudin on 7 May 1927:

As far as the level of interest at the demonstration of our works is concerned, I couldn't have asked for more ... the Germans gave me an out-of-this-world welcome ... How I wish you could see everything here, the consideration I am shown, and all of this in a foreign country. I do not think that any other artist has ever been accorded such hospitality.

Unfortunately, news reports of Malevich's activities in Germany only worsened his position in government circles in Russia. Ordered to return to St Petersburg, he left Germany on 5 June 1927. Concerned for the safety of his paintings, and with the Berlin exhibition not set to close for another three months, Malevich left them behind in the care of Häring and gave special instructions that they were not to be sent to

Russia but to wait for his return. After the closure of the show, the works were crated and stored by a Berlin-based art transport firm. Malevich also entrusted a bundle of his theoretical writings to his host in Berlin, a man who had been attached to the German embassy in St Petersburg, with the written instruction that, ‘in case of my death or permanent imprisonment’, the package should be unpacked in twenty-five years and the texts translated and published.

Upon his return to St Petersburg Malevich faced two weeks of interrogation from party officials and, though he was released, his reputation never recovered. In the autumn of 1927 the Institute for Artistic Research was closed down, and Malevich found his work increasingly restricted. The authorities refused to let him travel and his hopes of going back to Germany and showing his works in western countries were crushed. During the next few years he returned to the peasant theme, attempting to reconcile his painting with the state’s demand for art that glorified the ordinary worker. Ultimately even this was unsuccessful. In 1932 a state monopoly was declared over all artistic production in Russia and socialist realism – idealised depictions of workers and the great men of socialism – became the only accepted style. Penniless, unable to work and forced to deny his past, Malevich was diagnosed with cancer in 1933. He never returned to Germany to see his works, and died in St Petersburg in 1935.

Peasant Funeral was thus last seen in public in the 1927 Berlin exhibition, and its fate thereafter remains unclear. The seventy works that Malevich brought with him to Berlin were stored by Häring and later other well-wishers, or loaned by them to various exhibitions to help promote his reputation outside of Russia, but without, it seems, anyone keeping effective records over the years.

After the Berlin exhibition ended, two works were sold – a landscape and a suprematist piece – and the remainder was kept in storage at Häring’s expense. At some point prior to 1930 Alexander Dorner, director of the Landesmuseum Hanover and famous supporter of modernism in Germany, asked to borrow a group of Malevich’s works, and Häring, acting on behalf of the beleaguered artist, agreed. A crate was shipped to Hanover and a selection of the suprematist works was unpacked for inclusion in the museum’s ‘Cabinet of Abstraction’. This was a gallery designed by the constructivist artist El Lissitzky especially for abstract art (it was destroyed by the Nazis in 1936). In 1930 Dorner lent three of the Malevich works he had borrowed from Häring to exhibitions of Russian art in Berlin and Vienna. *Peasant Funeral* – not a radical or avant-garde work by interwar standards – was not among the works loaned.

Another chance for the painting to surface in a public exhibition or official records came in 1935 when Alfred Barr, then director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, visited Dorner in Hanover to select works for an exhibition the following year called *Cubism and Abstract Art*. Barr borrowed a selection of Malevich’s suprematist works and five of his theoretical charts. On the cover of the exhibition catalogue he famously included a flow chart showing the development of modern art, with suprematism identified as an offshoot of cubism and a forerunner of abstract art.

Kazimir Malevich 1879–1935

Peasant Funeral 1911Oil on canvas
c.120 x 220 cm

The exhibition was a huge success and helped cement the importance of Malevich and suprematism on an international stage. However, again, *Peasant Funeral* was not among the works chosen, and documents relating to the loans to America and Barr's own records make no reference to it.

At the closure of *Cubism and Abstract Art* in New York it was felt too dangerous to send Malevich's works back to Hanover – both for the works themselves and for the German museum's staff. After Hitler's appointment as Chancellor in January 1933 the Nazi government had attempted to purge all modern art from Germany and the works risked being confiscated by the government. In Hanover Dorner removed all Malevich works from display and, around 1936, shipped a crate of works back to Häring in Berlin before fleeing to the USA.

Häring left Berlin in 1944, taking the works with him to his home town of Biberach in Southern Germany. He survived the war, and in spring 1951 a crate of works by Malevich was rediscovered, still with Häring in Biberach, by curators from Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum. However, *Peasant Funeral* was not among these. In fact, a comparison of the list of Malevich's works shown in the Berlin exhibition with lists of what was at this point in the possession of Häring and MoMA, together with those pieces known to have been sold, shows that about twenty-one pieces are still unaccounted for. Most of these are large, suggesting that they may have been packed separately, perhaps rolled up, in the Berlin storage depot. Unfortunately, the depot was destroyed during the Second World War. Whether lost in storage at an early date or during the war, it seems unlikely that *Peasant Funeral* will now be found, though nobody is entirely sure.

Text—

Jennifer Mundy