

FINDING THE CIRCLE IN THE SQUARE:
A NEOPLATONIC INTERPRETATION OF KAZIMIR MALEVICH'S *BLACK SQUARE*

by

Matthew Madison Rowe

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts in Art History and Visual Culture
at
Lindenwood University

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ABSTRACT

Title: Finding the Circle in the Square: A Neoplatonic Interpretation of Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square*

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This thesis explores the influence of Silver Age philosophers Vladimir Soloviev, Sergei Bulgakov, and Pavel Florensky on Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square*. Malevich was among the first to apply Silver Age philosophy to abstract art, fully rejecting all objective representation in art. The thesis argues that Malevich's Suprematism was the result of the fundamental antimony of the Russian religious worldview, which understands reality as both immanent and transcendent. This understanding of reality was not unique to Russia but was the result of historic influences, including the Neoplatonic and religious-humanist philosophy that was prevalent in Russian intellectual culture during this period. By recognizing this difference, the thesis aims to provide a better understanding of the cultural forces that helped to shape the avant-garde and Malevich's Suprematism. It also presents humanism and Neoplatonism as an intellectual middle ground to better understand some of the cultural differences between Russia and the West. Finally, the thesis compares the *Black Square* with the geometric symbolism of the circle and square as understood through the Christian architectural tradition and the Vitruvian figures of the Renaissance. It shows that applying Vitruvian symbolism to the *Black Square* clarifies its role as an icon and does not undermine Malevich's interpretation of the work. The research provides a new perspective on Malevich's *Black Square* and its place in the context of Russian intellectual culture and history.

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Introduction

This research will consider the philosophical influences that shaped Kazimir Malevich's painting the *Black Square*. The beginning of the twentieth century in Russia was characterized by political, social, and economic instability. The revolution of 1905 was considered a failure by many and the country remained in a transitional state until the revolution of 1917. This period was characterized by the search for a true Russian identity amidst the tumult. Out of this, Kazimir Malevich emerged as one of the most influential artists of this time. He helped to develop the Russian avant-garde and participated in many of the most significant exhibitions of modern art in Russia. During the first fifteen years of his life as an artist (1900-1915), he experimented with all of the major styles of European modernism, including Impressionism, Cubism, and Futurism. In 1915, he exhibited his new form of art called Suprematism. Suprematism was among the first non-objective art forms in the world and was the first to combine non-objective art with the mystical-religious philosophy of the Russian Silver Age (c. 1880-1920). While Suprematism was not immediately accepted by the mainstream in Russian art, it was greatly influential among the younger generation and the artists of the avant-garde. The popularity of Suprematism led to Malevich being appointed to a variety of teaching and research positions in state sponsored art institutions in Russia. By the mid-nineteen twenties, the death of Lenin, purge of Bolshevism, and the rise of Stalin all contributed to a political environment that was no longer favorable to an art style that had come to be associated with Western bourgeoisie culture. Malevich and many of the Silver Age philosophers that had helped shape his worldview faced interrogations by state officials and time in prison under the new regime.

Discussing Malevich within the context of Silver Age philosophy is important for a variety of reasons. First, it helps to explain the more confusing aspects of Malevich's art and philosophy. Second, it presents Russian modernism as culturally distinct and not simply derived from Western influences. Finally, comparing Malevich and Silver Age philosophy invites an investigation of the Neoplatonic and humanist influences on Malevich's worldview and visual vocabulary. This serves a dual function of presenting a cultural common ground between Russia and the West and also helps to illuminate the symbolism of the *Black Square*. This research will demonstrate the significance of this approach through an examination of the Vitruvian symbolism of the *Black Square*.

Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* (fig. 1) is one of the most important works of modern art. This painting became the symbol of Suprematism and served as a visual manifesto for the art movement. At first glance, it appears as a simple composition. The painting is roughly thirty-one inches square, and does not exert the grandeur of scale common in abstract expressionist art. The strength of the *Black Square* lies in its ability to communicate in subtleties. Despite having relatively few visual elements, the content of the work is vast. Its minimal composition projects a sense of stillness and constrained energy. After being observed for a few moments, the work comes to life as the eye begins to perceive its quiet details. What is immediately visible is a black square full of craquelure surrounded by a white border. The eye of the viewer is first drawn to the center of the composition—to the square and its craquelure. After a moment, one becomes aware of indistinct and obscured forms lurking in the square, suggesting that there is something, or possibly everything existing in the square. Slowly, the subtle hints of color in the cracks can be recognized, reinforcing the idea that something exists within the black space. One of the most significant subtleties of this work is that it is not a perfect square, and not an attempt at one. The

bottom-right corner is skewed slightly up and to the right. This variation gives the form a sense of individuality. Also, because it is only slightly askew, one's eye returns to this corner repeatedly in order to verify its placement. This adds a slight movement to the work and draws the eye around the border line between the black and white space. Initially appearing as a simple line, the border is actually a subtly undulating push and pull between black and white; it is not a rigidly defined barrier between the two spaces, but rather a dynamic tension, like the dividing line between two bodies of water. Continuing outward, the white border is not simply a uniform space, but is composed of different shades of white. Applied with an Impressionistic texture, the white paint expresses movement and pulsing energy. While the black square recedes into an abyssal nothingness, the white border is active and energetically pulsing out towards the viewer. The greyish-white that predominates this area is significant because this shade results from white being painted over black. In a rejection of illusionism, the work does not merely suggest that the black space is behind the white, but rather, the white was actually painted over the black—the black space is the foundation of this painting.

The *Black Square* is not a painting of anything, rather it is a black square—it is a square of black paint on canvas. This is the realism of the *Black Square*; it does not suggest illusionistic space, but shares in the actual space of life. In this way, it has more in common with sculpture and architecture than most paintings. Also significant, is that there is no weight or gravity in the work. The square is not suspended in space, but exists in a space unencumbered by gravity. Most paintings imitate the physics of material reality and present an illusory space in which objects are pulled towards the bottom. Additionally, traditional compositional devices are used in most paintings to give a sense of movement throughout a work and to direct the viewer's eye to the most important aspects of the composition. The *Black Square* does not have these elements.

There is no sense of gravity, nor movement in naturalistic space. The movement Malevich achieves in this work is that of expanding and contracting towards and away from the viewer. In creating a physical form that abides by its own physics and compositional devices, Malevich rejected hundreds of years of academic mimesis in a single shape.

The craquelure is a central feature of this painting. It is generally assumed that this cracking was unintentional and the result of Malevich being overexcited by the idea and painting it too quickly. However, the painting is far too well-thought-out and subtly detailed to have been executed in a blur of excitement and enthusiasm.¹ Additionally, Malevich was too well trained in the formal techniques of painting to have not known that this paint would crack. In many of his compositions, there is craquelure in only the black paint, and in others the black paint is stable. Above all, Malevich was a materialist and centrally concerned with physical substance of paint. If one accepts that the cracks were intentional, then it adds another layer to not only the symbolism of the work, but the skill of the artist; if the craquelure was unintentional, then it was most certainly a happy accident. The cracks in the black paint add to the symbolism of the work by outlining the forms painted underneath the black; they enhance the sense of unformed existence residing within the square. It also allows not only white, but subtle hints of other colors to become visible, adding to the idea that something exists in the square. Finally, it suggests that the active white space arises out of undefined black nothingness. The cracks in the work help to reveal the process of becoming. It is the hatching of metaphysical reality into physical space. It is the active transition of infinite space and eternal nothingness manifesting as sensible reality. The craquelure is the process of becoming.

¹ Irina Vakar and Friedemann Malsch, *Kazimir Malevich. The Black Square. the Story of a Masterpiece*, (Köln: Walther König (Verlag), 2018), 25.

Importantly, more space in the *Black Square* is dedicated to black than white; roughly, three quarters of the canvas is black. This gives the viewer a sense of falling into the black square, or that the black square is expanding to encompass everything. It also evidences a prioritization of the metaphysical over the physical. That which was unseen and unformed was more important in Malevich's worldview than that which was formed and manifest. This imbalance leads to a sense of dynamic tension between the two areas of the painting. The work is not balanced, rather there is a push and pull between the black and white, with each alternately expanding and contracting. There is a sense that the white space has been pushed to the edges of the work; it exists in the periphery, whereas the black square is the central and dominant form. This is an expression of Malevich's own worldview, in which the frenetic activity of manifest reality plays out on the surface of true-metaphysical existence.

After painting the *Black Square* in 1915, Malevich spent the rest of his life elaborating and exploring its meaning. The work has been variously interpreted by scholars and critics since its creation. Some have chosen to explore the influence of other modern art movements and scientific innovations arising from the West. Another group of scholars has focused on the more distinctly Russian influences on the work. This includes Russian Symbolism, Silver Age philosophy, and the Russo-Byzantine tradition of icon painting. This research will favor this latter approach and explore the influence of the Silver Age philosophers Vladimir Soloviev, Sergei Bulgakov, and Pavel Florensky on the intellectual climate in early twentieth-century Russia and the art that it generated. Some of the most significant commonalities between these authors and Malevich are antimony, the synthesis of intuition and rationality, and an understanding of the transcendent nature of the Christian icon.

While there are few direct connections between these authors and Malevich, their influence was widespread, especially among the radical intelligentsia and Symbolist artists. Comparing these authors with Malevich reveals that his process was not one of invention, but application—he was among the first to apply Silver Age philosophy to abstract art. The Symbolists had begun this process in the preceding generation, and had drawn from Russo-Byzantine icon painting and Church decoration in rejecting Western mimesis in art. Malevich extended this discourse by fully rejecting all objective representation in art, believing that non-objectivity was necessary for true artistic creation. Rather than presenting Suprematist non-objectivity as an extension of Western modernism and abstraction, this research will present it as arising from the fundamental antimony of the Russian religious worldview—this being the belief that reality is both immanent and transcendent. For Malevich and the philosophers of the Silver Age, it was known that reason and the intellect were unable to conceive of the transcendent nature of reality. This meant that intuition, or the subconscious, was necessary to apprehend those aspects of reality that existed beyond reason.

This research will show that this dual understanding of reality as both manifest and transcendent was not unique to Russia, but was the result of historic influences. Specifically, Russian intellectual culture at this time was Neoplatonist and religious-humanist. This resulted from the historic influence of Byzantium coupled with a Russo-Byzantine revival that began in the first half of the nineteenth century. This coincided with an interest in humanist philosophy based on the dignity of man and fueled by scholars translating writings from ancient Greece and the Italian Renaissance into vernacular Russian. During this period, Russia had the same fundamental philosophy as that of the Italian Renaissance. Making this connection is significant because it does not divide Russian culture into Eastern and Western, but considers the shared

history between Russia and the West. Of particular importance to this research is the acknowledgement that pre-Soviet Russian intellectual and artistic culture was based on a different set of philosophical principles than the rationalist precepts of the West; approaching Russian art and history from a Western rationalist perspective will inevitably lead to confusion and misunderstanding. For a Westerner to understand this history, one must accept, or at the very least acknowledge, that there is a different set of values at work. Recognizing this difference shows that many of the seemingly contradictory and confusing aspects of Malevich's philosophy were actually widespread at the time, and were based on Neoplatonic duality. Recognizing Neoplatonism as fundamental to Russian culture, and its connections to the European Renaissance, provides Western readers with the opportunity to better understand the cultural forces that helped to shape the avant-garde and Malevich's Suprematism.

Having established the historic link to Neoplatonism and the Italian Renaissance, this research will conclude by comparing the *Black Square* with the geometric symbolism of the circle and square as understood through the Christian architectural tradition and the Vitruvian figures of the Renaissance. Although Vitruvian figures were not icons and do not have the same metaphysical implications, their visual simplicity provides a unique opportunity to discuss the meaning of the circle and square. This research will show that applying Vitruvian symbolism to the *Black Square* does not undermine Malevich's interpretation of the work; rather, it clarifies its role as a material presentation of metaphysical reality. Additionally, addressing the Neoplatonic roots of Russian culture serves to aid in understanding the differences between Russia and the West. For the purposes of this research, the terms Platonism and Neoplatonism are used interchangeably.

Literature Review

Presently, there are two main currents in art historical scholarship on Kazimir Malevich and Suprematism. The first focuses on Western influences and is characterized by the book, *Celebrating Suprematism: New Approaches to the Art of Kazimir Malevich*, which was edited by Christina Lodder.² The second approach emphasizes influences that were distinctly Russian; this approach is characterized by the book *Modernism and the Spiritual in Russian Art: New Perspectives*, edited by Louise Hardiman and Nicola Kozicharov.³ Included is an essay by Maria Taroutina, whose book *The Icon and the Square* greatly influenced this research. These two approaches mirror the historic division in Russia between Westernizers and Slavophiles, which will be discussed in greater detail in the next section. It is important to keep in mind that Russian culture was composed of both Eastern and Western influences, and that post-Petrine Russia developed under the influence of the West. It is because of its cultural diversity that the approaches of Lodder and Taroutina are both valid. Lodder associates more with those aspects of Russia that were Western, and discusses Russia, Malevich, and Suprematism through a Western lens, focusing on its Western influences. Lodder, and those sharing her Western approach, present their research in the same way. They make it comprehensible to a Western audience by highlighting familiar Western concepts—the flaw in this approach is that it offers no challenge to the Western perspective and presents Russian art as the result of Western influences. While useful, this approach is incomplete and must be amended to allow for a full understanding of Russian art.

² Charlotte Douglas, “Defining Suprematism: The Year of Discovery,” in *Celebrating Suprematism: New Approaches to the Art of Kazimir Malevich*, ed. Christina Lodder (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 29–43.

³ Louise Hardiman and Nicola Kozicharov, “Introduction: Modernism and the Spiritual in Russian Art,” in *Modernism and the Spiritual in Russian Art: New Perspectives* (Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2017), 36.

Taroutina's research takes nearly the opposite approach. While acknowledging the West, she focuses on specifically Russian influences on Malevich and Suprematism. She focuses in Symbolism, Silver Age philosophy (c. 1880-1920), the Russo-Byzantine revival, and icon painting. Her approach does not present Russia as Western and helps to educate Western readers about the unique aspects of Russian culture. She does not see abstract art as having developed in Russia due to the influence of Western modernism; rather, it was a distinct expression based on its own historic and cultural precedents.⁴ Certainly, Impressionism, Cubism, and Futurism had an influence on the Russian avant-garde. However, icon painting, the Orthodox church, and religious humanism were also central influences. In fact, it is not possible to fully understand the Russian avant-garde from a purely Western context. The primary antimony of reality as both immanent and transcendent is not compatible with mainstream Western rationality.

Taroutina's book, *The Icon and the Square*, discusses Malevich and Suprematism from a Russian perspective and presents artists like Wassily Kandinsky and Malevich as part of distinctly Russian movement in art that began with Symbolist artists like Mikhail Vrubel.⁵ More than merely responding to Western modernism, it was the expressive potential of the icon and its associated philosophy that was the most significant factor in inspiring the Russian avant-garde. Central figures in this discussion were Vladimir Soloviev, Nikkolai Punin, Pavel Florensky, and the authors that contributed to the *Vekhi* publication in 1909 (Mikhail Gershenzon, Nikolai Berdyayev, Sergei Bulgakov, Alexander Izgoyev, Bogdan Kistyakovski, Pyotr Struve, and Semen Frank). All of these individuals exerted a significant influence on Russian intellectual and artistic culture in the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. They were

⁴ Maria Taroutina, *The Icon and the Square Russian Modernism and the Russo-Byzantine Revival* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019), 14-24.

⁵ Taroutina, *The Icon and the Square Russian Modernism and the Russo-Byzantine Revival*, 20-25.

responsible to popularizing the philosophy of the icon and challenged both the dominance of Western positivism and the blind faith of Orthodoxy. They presented a third way for Russian culture that combined faith and science, East and West, and the immanent and transcendent. It is clear from Malevich's own writings that he was familiar with these authors.⁶ An additional benefit of Taroutina's approach is that it provides a challenge to mainstream Western rationality and an opportunity to consider Russian history and culture independently from its Western influences.

As was mentioned above, the book *Celebrating Suprematism: New Approaches to the Art of Kazimir Malevich* focuses on how the West influenced the Russian avant-garde. This book was based on a group of papers that were presented at the conference 'Celebrating 100 Years of Suprematism' in 2015. This conference was organized by the Malevich Society, the Harriman Institute (Columbia University), the Lazar Khidekel Society, the Society of Historians of Eastern European, Eurasian and Russian Art and Architecture (SHERA), and the organization Russian Art and Culture.⁷ The contributing scholars were among the most renowned in the field of Russian art history and included Christina Lodder, Irina Vakar, Charlotte Douglas, and Alexander Bouras. Their essays cover a wide variety of topics ranging from new formal discoveries in Malevich's works, to the influence of the fourth dimension.

Linda Dalrymple Henderson's essay points to popular concepts in West such as the fourth dimension and ether physics as important influences on Malevich. Importantly, she notes that P.D. Ouspensky was responsible for transmitting the fourth dimensional theories of Claude Bragdon and Charles Howard Hinton to the Russian avant-garde. Given that Malevich included subtitles in some of his work mentioning the fourth dimension, there is little reason to doubt this

⁶ Taroutina, 15-59, 169.

⁷ Douglas, "Defining Suprematism: The Year of Discovery," 29-43.

influence. Overall, the essay considers how many innovations in European science and philosophy were transmitted to Russia. Henderson sees the fourth dimension and ether physics as the inspiration for Malevich's attempts to give form to the formless, rather than the influence of the icon.⁸ Henderson's essay was closely related to an earlier book she wrote called *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art*. Here, she makes the same statement that the fourth dimension was an active concern of the Russian avant-garde. However, in this book she also briefly mentions that Russian symbolism and its associated poetry and philosophy had created a receptive climate for concepts of the fourth dimension.⁹ This interpretation suggests that without the influence of the fourth dimension from the West, Russian artists' own ideas of transcendence and the metaphysical nature of the icon would not have led to abstract or non-objective art, and in doing so minimizes Russia's contributions to its own art.

Alexander Bouras' essay considers how the rejection of positivism and the cultivation of an irrational-intuitive approach influenced Malevich. Again, symbolism is noted as the origin for the rejection of positivism, but it is then discussed within a context of Western thinkers; specifically, Ernst Mach and Richard Avenarius. Their approach was called Empirical Criticism, and is noted as an influential example of anti-positivism. Bouras, like Henderson, attributes a non-positivistic ideology to Western influences rather than Russian ones; Bouras discusses the Russian author Petr Klimentevich Engelmeier as conduit for Mach's ideas. Most striking is Bouras' comparison of Malevich's principle of economy with Mach and Avenarius without any mention of the Russian economist, theologian, philosopher, and contributor to the Vekhi, Sergei

⁸ Linda Dalrymple Henderson, "Malevich, the Fourth Dimension, and the Ether of Space One Hundred Years Later," in *Celebrating Suprematism: New Approaches to the Art of Kazimir Malevich*, ed. Christina Lodder (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 44-80.

⁹ The philosophy associated with the Russian Symbolists was Silver Age philosophy. Henderson does not delve any deeper into these influences. Linda Dalrymple Henderson, *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), 372-73.

Bulgakov.¹⁰ This is not meant to imply that Bouras, Henderson, or any of the contributors to *Celebrating Suprematism* are wrong in any way. All of the points they make are correct; the fourth dimension, ether physics, and the balance between intellect and intuition are all definitive and well-established aspects of the Russian intellectual environment of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Rather, the authors of *Celebrating Suprematism* over-emphasize the Western contribution while almost ignoring Russian contributions to its own art.

Vladimir Soloviev, who many consider the most important figure in Russian philosophy of this period, is only mentioned three times in *Celebrating Suprematism* and only in the footnotes.¹¹ Pavel Florensky, whose ideas and influence on Malevich are discussed in detail in Taroutina's book, is only mentioned in a single footnote; one that is shared with Soloviev.¹² The influence of the Vekhi and its authors are mentioned in a single sentence by Bouras to support his idea that Mach and Avenarius' Empirical Criticism had influenced the avant-garde's criticism of positivism.¹³ Empirical Criticism did have an influence on the avant-garde; however, the philosophy of Soloviev and his followers was centrally concerned with the synthesis of science, philosophy, and theology. The general Russian cultural outlook at the time was historically predisposed to dual interpretation of life as both immanent and transcendent. It was the Westernizers and the post-Petrine Western tradition that had espoused positivism in Russia. Essentially, Bouras' essay uses the West to explain how Russia transcended Western narrowmindedness.

¹⁰ Alexander Bouras, "The Path of Empirical Criticism in Russia or 'The Milky Way of Inventors,'" in *Celebrating Suprematism: New Approaches to the Art of Kazimir Malevich*, ed. Christina Lodder (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 81-104.

¹¹ Douglas, *Celebrating Suprematism*, 92 and 115.

¹² Douglas, *Celebrating Suprematism*, 115.

¹³ Bouras, "The Path of Empirical Criticism in Russia or 'The Milky Way of Inventors,'" 97.

The omission of Russian sources from the discussion of Malevich is not new. Bouras' entire discussion of the influence of Mach on Malevich is derived from a similar essay written by Charlotte Douglas in 2009. Also, Charlotte Douglas' 1976 book, *Swans of Other Worlds*, only mentions Soloviev once.¹⁴ It appears that the main current in art historical scholarship on Malevich and the Russian avant-garde has been to ascribe it to the West. The countertrend is expressed most definitively in Maria Taroutina's book *The Icon and Square*. Unfortunately, neither current of scholarship has discussed the overlaps between the fourth dimension, Symbolism, ether physics, Empirical Criticism, and Russian Silver Age philosophy. This combined approach would provide a much fuller picture of Russian intellectual culture at the time. While a fruitful direction for future research, this combined approach falls outside of the scope of the current thesis. Rather, this research will find a common ground between Russia and the West by exploring their shared history and cultural influences.

While Taroutina's approach provides a fuller picture of the Russian philosophical influences on the Russian avant-garde, her book does not make the connection to the historic influences of Neoplatonism and humanism on Russian Philosophy; her book only mentions humanism twice and Plato once. However, scholars of Russian Silver Age philosophy have consistently described it as Neoplatonic and humanist.

The book *A History of Russian Philosophy 1830-1930* edited by G. M. Hamburg and Randall A. Poole, contains a selection of essays investigating the religious humanism of the Russian Silver Age and its relationship to the Humanism of the Italian Renaissance.¹⁵ It is their

¹⁴ Charlotte Douglas, *Swans of Other Worlds: Kazimir Malevich and the Origins of Abstraction in Russia*, (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1976), 30.

¹⁵ G. M. Hamburg and Randall A. Poole, "The Humanist Tradition in Russian Philosophy," in *A History of Russian Philosophy 1830-1930 Faith, Reason, and the Defense of Human Dignity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1-23.

contention that the central concern of Russian Philosophy during this period was human dignity, and that their understanding of human dignity was based on Renaissance humanism.

While this book does not make a direct connection to Neoplatonism, Janusz Dobieszewski's essay describes Neoplatonism as the central theme of Russian Silver Age philosophy.¹⁶ Making this final connection between humanism and Neoplatonism with Russian Silver Age philosophy allows for a novel interpretation of Russian avant-garde art in general, and Malevich in particular. This approach also allows for a recognition of the shared cultural roots between Russia and the West. Rather than presenting them as oppositional, Neoplatonism shows that there is much common ground between the two.

Having established a historic connection between Russia, the Renaissance, and Neoplatonism, this research will specifically consider Malevich's *Black Square* within the symbolic tradition of Christian architecture and Vitruvius. Rather than provide a completely new meaning, Vitruvius, Neoplatonism, and humanism all serve to reinforce and clarify the iconic interpretation of this work. Irina Sakhno and Taroutina have previously noted the connection between the *Black Square* and the holy Mandylion, and Sakhno has stated that Malevich knew of the symbolic associations of the circle and square.¹⁷ Despite these comments, previous scholarship has not made a direct connection between the Vitruvian symbolism of the circle and square with the *Black Square*. Making this connection is the conclusion to this research and shows that the Black Square was not an anomaly, nor even a great departure in art; rather, it is a part of both the Russo-Byzantine and Vitruvian traditions in art. While not a rejection of the approach of Lodder and the authors of *Celebrating Suprematism*, this research does not find that

¹⁶ Janusz Dobieszewski, "Neoplatonic Tendencies in Russian Philosophy," *Studies in East European Thought* 62, no. 1 (2010): 3–10.

¹⁷ Irina Sakhno, "Kazimir Malevich's Negative Theology and Mystical Suprematism," *Religions* 12, no. 542 (2021): 7.

the most significant contributions to Russian Modernism were from contemporary Western Culture; rather, it finds the most important influences in Neoplatonism, humanism, and the philosophers of the Silver Age.

Russia and the West: Philosophical Differences

In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, there were several fundamental differences between the general positivist worldview of the West and that of the Russian Silver Age philosophers and avant-garde artists. In the most general sense, Western positivism was defined by reason, while Russian philosophers and the avant-garde were led by intuition. Also, these Russian artists and authors rejected the concept of the isolated individual, believing that one could never be fully detached from one's social group. The impossibility of complete individuality led Russian thinking towards a plurality of meanings, rather than single answers. These Russian philosophers and artists believed there could be both rational and intuitive meaning.¹⁸ In the broadest terms, these differences result from the pervading philosophy of each culture. Western intellectual culture was based on Aristotelianism, whereas Russian intellectual culture was based on Neoplatonism.¹⁹ The influence of Aristotle is so deeply ingrained in the West, that many Westerners know his precepts without having to be taught them. Aristotelianism has invisibly shaped much of Western intellectual culture and has led to goals that are immanent, finite, and real. Plato's unseen influence was much the same in Russia, which led to many intellectuals seeking answers that were transcendent, ideal, and eternal.²⁰

¹⁸ Marian Broda and E. M. Swiderski, "Russia and the West: The Root of the Problem of Mutual Understanding," *Studies in East European Thought* 54, no. 1/2 (2002): 7.

¹⁹ The West is also described as solar or Apollonian and Russia as lunar or Dionysian; Broda and Swiderski, "Russia and the West: The Root of the Problem of Mutual Understanding," 7.

²⁰ Broda and Swiderski, 9.

An important distinction between the Russian Neoplatonic tradition and the Western Aristotelian system is the nature of the relationship between the Absolute (or Divine) and the world. The Western approach is considered substantialist. Here the Absolute serves as the foundation or source of the universe, but is not ever-present; this position is historically associated with the Ionians, Democritus, Aristotle, and Descartes. The Russian approach is energistic and conceives of the Absolute as a bond between all things; this approach is associated with Eastern philosophy, Heraclitus, Plato, Christian Mysticism, Hegel, and Schelling.²¹

One of the most important aspects of the energistic tradition is its use of mystical intuition to experience the Absolute. This is often derided in the West, which sees intuition and reason as opposed to one another.²² However, Neoplatonism seeks a balance between mysticism and rationalism; it is mystical-rational. It is an enlightened faith, rather than a blind one.²³ In the West, it was the mid-nineteenth century back-to-Kant movement that distanced its philosophy from the Neoplatonic mystical-rational tradition. During this period, the philosophy of Hegel was considered outdated and potentially dangerous.²⁴ However, Hegel and Schelling were the formative context for Russian Philosophy. Over time, Russian philosophy not only developed and extended this foundation, but it began to search through history to determine the origins of these philosophies; of particular interest were Pseudo-Dionysius, the Gnostics, and Nicholas of Cusa. Neo-Kantianism was not a contributing factor in Russian Philosophy.²⁵ When the Enlightenment arrived in Russia, it was not received by a culture with a withering sense of spirituality, as was the case in the West. Russia had a more robust spiritual tradition that did not

²¹ Dobieszewski, "Neoplatonic Tendencies in Russian Philosophy," 5-6.

²² Dobieszewski, 6.

²³ Dobieszewski, 7.

²⁴ Dobieszewski, 7.

²⁵ Dobieszewski, 8.

fold under the triumphalism of scientific reason. Despite Peter the Great's advocacy, Russia maintained a freer relationship with scientific reason. This allowed for a blending of faith and reason.²⁶

Russia's Neoplatonism was not simply derived from Plotinus and Hegel. Instead, Neoplatonism was the basic framework for perceiving reality—one consisting of both physical and metaphysical elements in a dynamic state of constant tension. The core of Orthodox and secular Russian intellectual thought was founded on the Neoplatonic tradition begun by Plotinus, continued by Pseudo-Dionysius, Eastern Byzantine theology, Eriugena, Eckhart, Boehme, Spinoza, Hegel, and Schelling. Overall, this approach was holistic and integrative, treating the world as a metaphysical whole. Individual, empirical events exist within and because of the metaphysical whole. The whole supersedes its parts—individual things are only transient manifestations of the whole.²⁷

In keeping with the fundamentally Platonic nature of Russian thought, Russian Philosophy was dialectical, and not based on the insights of the isolated individual. This dialectical thinking aimed at a truth that arises from the tension between opposites. Truth was not a concretized fact, but a becoming. There was not a separation between what was manifest and what was apprehended through the intellect or intuition. The material and metaphysical were not separate, so material reality became spiritualized. Reality as a whole was in dynamic flux and never settled. Nothing was finite; immanence and transcendence interpenetrated and suggested one another. Overall, the concern with the unity of the Absolute in both Russian Philosophy and historic Neoplatonism tended toward pantheism, seeing God in everything.²⁸

²⁶ Bruce V. Foltz, "The Resurrection of Nature: Environmental Metaphysics in Sergei Bulgakov's Philosophy of Economy," *Philosophy & Theology* 18, no. 1 (January 2006), 4.

²⁷ Broda and Swiderski, 9.

²⁸ Broda and Swiderski, 10.

The difference between the intellectual traditions of Russia and the West can also be seen as the difference between understanding and reason. Reason is relative, earthly, and finite. Understanding seeks the absolute, divine, and infinite. This is epitomized in the philosophy of Vladimir Soloviev (1853-1900), who sought integral knowledge of reality by combining philosophy, science, and theology. He believed this combined approach could lead to an authentic experience of the Absolute—an understanding of the “oneness of the whole and the wholeness of the one.”²⁹

It is important to note that while the West formulated its cultural identity without significant input from Russia, the post-Petrine Russian identity was developed under the influence of Western culture. These opposing influences split Russian culture into the Westernizers, who overly embraced and celebrated Western culture, and the Slavophiles, who rejected the West as vain and narrowly rationalistic.³⁰ Petr Chaadaev (1794-1856) was partly responsible for inciting this schism between Slavophiles and Westernizers in the first half of the nineteenth century when he claimed that Russia had not contributed anything significant to world culture while lauding the accomplishments of the West.³¹

The Slavophile philosophy was based on the idea of integral personhood. This views people as part of the integrated whole, be it society, the world, or creation. The Westernizers had the idea of autonomous personhood. Which saw the individual as free, independent, and self-contained.³² By the mid-nineteenth century, the radical intelligentsia consisted mostly of religious-humanist Slavophiles, while the mainstream intelligentsia was positivist

²⁹ Broda and Swiderski, 16.

³⁰ Broda and Swiderski, 22.

³¹ Hamburg and Poole, “The Humanist Tradition in Russian Philosophy,” 10.

³² Hamburg and Poole, 11-12.

Westernizers.³³ Dostoyevsky was one of the most significant influences on the humanism of Russia's radicals, especially Vladimir Soloviev and the authors of the *Vekhi*, which was a collection of essays critiquing the irreligious mainstream intelligentsia.³⁴

Boris Chicherin and Vladimir Soloviev were two of the most prominent nineteenth-century philosophers in the struggle against positivism. They did this on the foundation of human dignity, which was also the foundation for Soloviev's idea of Godmanhood (*bogochelovechestvo*), or divine humanity. Soloviev himself compared his humanism to that of the Renaissance.³⁵ The overlaps between this period in Russian history and the Italian Renaissance are abundant. Their essential Neoplatonism and religious humanism created a unique intellectual environment from which some of the most significant works of art and literature were created. The Russian Silver Age philosophers conceived of a unique yet historically rooted Neoplatonic unity while living in the chaos of social upheaval, revolution, and industrialization. Their ideas were closely related to the Symbolist movement in art and poetry and exerted a significant influence on the avant-garde. Indeed, the Russian Silver Age philosophy can also be considered Symbolist philosophy.

Historic Context

Russian modernism overlapped with the Silver Age of Philosophy, lasting from the 1880s to the 1930s. This coincided with a period of great social and political turmoil. The old ways were being challenged in every sector of Russian society; artists challenging classical methods of artistic representation was a part of much larger trend. Political turmoil provided artists with more opportunities to challenge tradition. The following is a brief history of significant events

³³ Hamburg and Poole, 13-14.

³⁴ Hamburg and Poole, 15-16.

³⁵ Hamburg and Poole, 16-17.

that impacted the development of Russian society—it was within this historic framework that the avant-garde developed their new art, and, it was this period of political upheaval that gave rise to non-objective art.³⁶

In 1881, Russian Terrorists assassinated Tsar Alexander II. This led to 25 years of political stagnation and conservatism. During this time, Russia's Golden Age of literature ended with the silencing of Tolstoy and deaths of Dostoyevsky and Turgenev.³⁷ Nicholas II ascended to the throne in 1894. This was not a period of optimism, despite its rapid industrialization. Mining and oil production increased dramatically, but low-class wages and working conditions were dismal. The middle class rapidly expanded during this period and Russia began to look like Western Europe. Literacy and access to education became widespread and many Russians studied abroad. Despite all this growth, the period leading up to the end of the century was characterized by pessimism and apocalyptic doom.³⁸ A failed revolt in 1905 led to the Tsar's cavalry killing peaceful protesters, mostly women and children. Nicholas II was able to retain power for a time, but after a few months was replaced by a semi-constitutional monarchy and parliament. Despite this, the political climate remained divided and volatile. However, it was stable enough for Russia to continue to industrialize.³⁹ By 1914, important social and economic changes were taking place and a class of independent farmers was established. However, the old nobility still guarded their privileges and the clergy blocked all attempts at religious reform. While still in the process of restructuring and rebuilding their military, Russia entered World War I. This briefly united its rival factions, but its instability soon resurfaced.⁴⁰

³⁶ Denis G. Ioffe and Frederick H. White, "An Introduction to the Russian Avant-Garde and Radical Modernism," in *Russian Avant-Garde and Radical Modernism an Introductory Reader*, ed. Denis G. Ioffe and Frederick H. White (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2012), 15.

³⁷ Ioffe and White, "An Introduction to the Russian Avant-Garde and Radical Modernism," 14.

³⁸ Ioffe and White, 14-15.

³⁹ Ioffe and White, 15.

⁴⁰ Ioffe and White, 16.

In November of 1917, a Bolshevik faction led by Lenin seized control of the government. The Bolsheviks realized the fundamental goal of modernism by destroying the old economic, political, and social systems. Russian avant-garde artists played an important role in advocating for such a radical change. Unfortunately, the Bolshevik's control was tenuous and they were unable to maintain their initial idealism.⁴¹ The death of Lenin in 1924 led to four years of political conflict that ended when Stalin assumed power in 1928. Stalin promoted his own central authority rather than Lenin's collective leadership. He did not tolerate any opposition and, after consolidating most of the government and industry, he eliminated any remaining Bolsheviks in the Great Purge of 1936-38.⁴² Stalin established Socialist Realism as the state art in 1932. Modernism was associated with the West and was labeled as decadent bourgeois art. Social Realism was characterized as a pure Communist-Russian art. Many avant-garde artists attempted to conform to this new restriction, but it soon became clear that the era of the Russian avant-garde had ended.⁴³

Russian Modern Art

There were five distinct movements in Russian modern art which mirrored developments in the West. However, the radical nature of modern art was enhanced by Russian political turmoil and revolutionary zeal.⁴⁴ Symbolism, which lasted from the 1880s through the beginning of the twentieth-century, was the earliest modern art movement in Russia and exerted a strong influence on its subsequent genres. The core aspiration of Symbolism was the discovery of hidden spiritual realities. They believed in a hidden reality more real than the physical world that could not be experienced with the senses. As these artists moved away from the visible world in

⁴¹ Ioffe and White, 16.

⁴² Ioffe and White, 17.

⁴³ Ioffe and White, 17.

⁴⁴ Ioffe and White, 10.

their spiritual explorations, they also moved away from mimetic representations of the world in their art. From the Symbolists arose alogical and irrational art—works that were intended to challenge the laws of conventional rationality. Alogism was also at the core of the deconstructive enterprise of the Futurists, Cubo-Futurists, and Dadaists.⁴⁵ Additionally, Symbolism was an expression of the alienation and isolation characteristic of the modern world—this sense of feeling alone in a crowd was something that permeated modern art.⁴⁶

For the Symbolists, the modern world was cramped, stifling, and unbearable. They grew weary of the conventionality of the world. They rejected mainstream forms of society, morality, and perception. They grew skeptical of the external world. Symbolism was the first manifestation of modernism that challenged modernity. It was an archaic avant-garde defined by pre-history rather than progress. It was a response to the predominate Western positivistic naturalism that blindly accepted the premises of mainstream reality. Paralleling the expedition of Heinrich Schliemann to Asia Minor in search of Troy, the Symbolists undertook mental journeys to reveal the sources of divine wisdom in ancient Greek art and culture. They did not limit themselves to the rationalized-Neoclassical perspective of ancient Greek culture, but they found parallels between Dionysian mysteries and Hindu, Egyptian, and Biblical mythologies. They sought the original wellspring of ancient wisdom.⁴⁷ They based their new-personal belief systems on the sacred texts of the past and believed that Greece provided a synthesis of many ancient sources. The Symbolists believed that one could intellectually apprehend a higher spiritual reality by understanding the patterns beneath the surface of reality. They did not engage

⁴⁵ There were no Russian Dadaists; the Cubo-Futurists can be seen as the Russian equivalent to the Dadaists.

⁴⁶ Ioffe and White, 12.

⁴⁷ Daniel Gerould, "The Symbolist Legacy," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 31, no. 1 (2009): 80–82.

in mimetic representations of the contemporary world. For many, abstraction became the appropriate means to portray spiritual reality. Significantly, the Symbolists introduced to the modern era the link between the exterior macrocosm and the interior microcosm; through this connection, the individual could enact social change through the transformation of one's own consciousness.⁴⁸

The Symbolist movement in Russia was closely related to Silver Age poetry and philosophy. Its most prominent contributors were Aleksandr Blok, Andrei Bely, Aleksandr Scriabin, Nikolai Berdiaev, Pavel Florensky, Sergei Bulgakov, Dimitri Merezhkovsky, and Simeon Frank. Vladimir Soloviev was one of the most significant members of this movement and a dominant cultural force in fin de siècle Russia. His book *Spiritual Foundations of Life* (*Dukhovnye osnovy zhizni*) was published in the early 1880s and had a profound influence on Florensky and Bulgakov. The Silver Age opened the door for the exploration of theological ideas outside of Orthodoxy and fostered an intellectual environment that rejected the material aspects of life in favor of the spiritual. Aesthetically, these philosophers saw the old Russian icon as having the same significance as the masterpieces of the Italian Renaissance.⁴⁹

The second modern art movement in Russia was Cubo-Futurism, which also included writers and visual artists. In regards to the Russian avant-garde, the terms 'Futurism' and 'Cubo-Futurism' can be used interchangeably. Cubo-Futurism was a blending of Cubism with International Futurism. The Russian Futurists were often at odds with Italian Futurism, especially in the Italian's support of fascism. What the two groups shared was an enthusiasm for technology, machines, industrial manufacturing, speed, and dynamism. Their ideals were similar to those of the Dadaists. Their central goal was to undermine conventional logic and rationality.

⁴⁸ Gerould, "The Symbolist Legacy," 80–82.

⁴⁹ Hardiman and Kozicharow, "Introduction: Modernism and the Spiritual in Russian Art," 23.

In terms of art, their goal was to change the way society related to art and what objects could be considered art. This core tenet is a significant aspect of Cubo-Futurism because it was carried on in subsequent Russian modernist movements. The Jack (Knave) of Diamonds and the Hylaea group were central to this movement. Some of its main figures were Alexander Archipenko, the brothers Burliuk, Aleksandra Ekster, Natalia Goncharova, Ivan Klyun, Mikhail Larionov, Lyubov Popova, and Olga Rozanova. They jointly published a manifesto in 1912 called “A Slap in the Face of Public Taste.” These Futurists incorporated radical social and political change into their artistic activities.⁵⁰

Primitivism (or Neoprimitivism) and Rayonism were also important art movements in Russia. Both were associated with Natalia Goncharova and Mikhail Larionov. They represent the first steps towards constructing new creative values after the deconstruction of the Futurists. Primitivism sought to excise all traces of Western individualism in art, and to embrace Russian culture; specifically, to accept the Eastern aspects of Russian Culture as valid forms of art. This included Russian icon painting and folk art.⁵¹ Rayonism was concerned with the difference between sense perception and scientific perception. It took the optical phenomenon of reflecting light rays and developed one of the first fully abstract styles of art. Rayonism was composed of the imaginary intersection of reflected light rays, represented through colored lines.⁵²

Suprematism was established by Kazimir Malevich in 1914-15. It was arguably the first movement in art whose formal language was completely removed from representations of the physical world—it was an objectless-geometric abstraction; it was non-objective painting. Malevich also explored the concepts of economy and energy in his work. Showing the influence

⁵⁰ Ioffe and White, 13.

⁵¹ Ioffe and White, 14.

⁵² Ioffe and White, 15.

of Cubo-Futurism, Malevich sought to replace the traditions of naturalistic art with an artistic language based on simple geometric forms; one consisting of crosses, circles, and squares.⁵³ Suprematism is generally associated with Malevich, but its visual vocabulary was adopted by many of his peers.⁵⁴

Constructivism was the extension of the Suprematist visual vocabulary into physical space and time. It was an attempt to fully incorporate the new art of the modern era into the daily lives of modern people. To this end, it sought to eliminate the concept of art as something distinct from everyday items and experiences. The term Constructivist was first used in 1921. The concept of constructing art was meant to associate it with utilitarian form and mechanized mass production. This was seen as a way to rectify art in terms of modernity. These artists admired mass production and machine products; they endeavored to become engineers of art.⁵⁵ Art was meant to provide a blueprint for a utopic future society. It had a significant influence on the Bauhaus and De Stijl movements. Its members included Naum Gabo, El Lissitzky, Ivan Leonidov, Konstantin Melnikov, Antoine Pevsner, Lyubov Popova, Aleksandr Rodchenko, Vladimir Shukhov, Varvara Stepanova, Vladimir Tatlin, and Alexander Vesnin.⁵⁶

Soviet Socialist Realism began in the 1920s, and it was the final recasting of artist as laborer. The artist became both a product and producer of culture. Although it was superficially similar to nineteenth-century Realism, it was, in fact, a completely new expression of compositional and formal values expressing an unprecedented social, cultural, and political

⁵³ Ioffe and White, 16.

⁵⁴ Ioffe and White, 16.

⁵⁵ Ioffe and White, 13.

⁵⁶ Ioffe and White, 16.

environment. Socialist Realism was the final manifestation of the initial goal of the Futurists to integrate art into life. It also marked the end of avant-garde art in Russia.⁵⁷

Malevich Biography

Kazimir Malevich was born in the south of Ukraine in 1879. He described his childhood as devoid of art. It either was not there, or he did not notice art-as-such until he was much older. His earliest self-described passion was for observing nature and staring into space. The most influential aspect of his childhood was the strength of his impressions of nature—he described these impressions as photographic negatives stored in his brain. He recalled having icons in his house and his father taking him to see the machines at the sugar-beet factory where he worked, but Malevich plainly stated that neither the icon nor the machine provided him with any creative inspiration as a youth. Nature was his most significant source of inspiration—he was not moved by the creations of man.⁵⁸

Malevich was not a particularly creative child and did not take to art quickly. It was not until he finally saw a painting in a shop-window in Kiev around the age of ten that he realized nature could be depicted using a pencil or paint. In the artist's own words, he “was an incredible blockhead.”⁵⁹ He was fifteen when his mother purchased him his first set of paints. He initially wanted to reproduce nature as he saw it, but his early attempts all resulted in blobs. Despite his inability to depict reality, he noted that “I got satisfaction from doing actual painting. I experienced a very pleasant feeling from the paint and brush.”⁶⁰ This connection with the feeling

⁵⁷ Boris Groys, “The Birth of Socialist Realism from the Spirit of the Russian Avant-Garde,” in *Russian Avant-Garde and Radical Modernism: An Introductory Reader*, ed. Denis G. Ioffe and Frederick H. White (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2012), 250–75.

⁵⁸ Kazimir Severinovich Malevich, *Essays on Art, 1928-1933: Vol. II*, ed. Troels Andersen, trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin (Kopenhagen: Borgen, 1971), 149-152.

⁵⁹ Kazimir Severinovich Malevich, *Essays on Art, 1928-1933: Vol. II*, 152.

⁶⁰ Malevich, 151.

of painting rather than its ability to imitate nature would become the foundation of his approach to art.

Malevich often characterized himself as someone who had no academic training and was unconstrained by the aesthetics of academic institutions.⁶¹ Although his art and creative philosophy were definitively unique, he was not untrained. After failing the entrance exam to the Moscow school of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture three times, he attended Theodor Rerberg's School of Painting for several years before 1909. There, Malevich learned professional techniques and art history. At the time, this school was actually the most serious art school in all of Russia and possibly all of Eastern Europe—the painting technique taught at Russian schools was often on par with European schools.⁶² Malevich also briefly attended workshops at the school of the plein-air painter Mikola (Nikolas) Murasko. Although Malevich attempted to describe himself as untrained, he always expressed the utmost respect for professional painters and the techniques of many Old Master painters, especially Rembrandt.⁶³ This rigorous technical training supported a greater confidence in Russian painters of the era and facilitated their transition into abstraction. The Russian avant-garde was proud of their artistic achievements both technically and conceptually. It could be said that without this mastery of craftsmanship, these artists would not have arrived at abstraction.⁶⁴

Having become fluent in the basic techniques of painting, Malevich was compelled to explore all different styles of expression. In the first fifteen years of his life as an artist, Malevich experimented with all the major French styles of art after Impressionism. Both his early and

⁶¹ Nakov and de la Guardia, "Devices, Style and Realisation: Professionalism in Malewicz's Painting Technique," 186.

⁶² Nakov and de la Guardia, 187-89.

⁶³ Nakov and de la Guardia, 189-90.

⁶⁴ Nakov and de la Guardia, 190.

mature works show the same primal energy, single-minded focus, and obsession with process of painting. When he finished a day's work as a draftsman, he would rush home to paint or sketch.⁶⁵ His work became experimental in the beginning of 1910, and led to a style he called Februaryism [*Fevralizm*], which was defined by its alogism and transrationality.⁶⁶ This lasted from 1914-15. In these paintings, Malevich attempted to destroy the traditional boundaries of art—he was deconstructing the old-traditional methods of artistic creation and posing a challenge to mainstream logic.⁶⁷ Here, he expressed time and space in ways that the French Cubists had yet to explore. The goal was to transcend the limits of common sense and undermine those conditions that define the relationships between material phenomena. Alogism was driven by intuition—Malevich sought to master his intuition and employ it as a method of creation. In this way, he could consciously access information in his subconscious. This style tended towards absurdity—there were no limits in the quest to undermine the logic of everyday life and normative reality. Transrationality was not madness, but rather superrational—a higher order of consciousness. These works manifested new relationships with the environment. They still had basic directional orientation, but their plastic structures existed suspended in universal space—gravity did not apply as an organizing principle. The most successful of these works are *Cow and Violin*, *Englishman in Moscow*, and *Portrait of Ivan Kliun* (fig. 2-4).⁶⁸

In 1913, the first All-Russian Congress of Futurists was held. Here, work began on the first Futurist opera *Victory over the Sun*, “Kruchenykh wrote the libretto, Matiushin the music, and Malevich sketched the costume and set design...it was a collective effort that combined

⁶⁵ Evgenii Kovtun and John E. Bowl, “Kazimir Malevich: His Creative Path,” in *The Russian Avant-Garde and Radical Modernism: An Introductory Reader*, ed. Denis G. Ioffe and Frederick H. White (Boston, MA: Academic studies, 2012), 206.

⁶⁶ Charlotte Douglas, “Defining Suprematism: The Year of Discovery,” 29.

⁶⁷ Shatskikh, *Black Square: Malevich and the Origin of Suprematism*, 272-73.

⁶⁸ Kovtun and Bowl, “Kazimir Malevich: His Creative Path,” 206-7.

words, music, and the artist's image of space."⁶⁹ It was performed on the December 5th, 1913, in St. Petersburg's Luna Park. It provoked outrage in most of the audience, while a small group of supporters cheered and applauded.⁷⁰

Malevich's designs for the opera proved to be crucial to his development of Suprematism. Mostly they were Cubist and non-objective designs; the main drama of the performance unfolded before a backdrop that was a black and white square divided diagonally. It was not until 1915, with the second staging of the opera, that Malevich recognized that his drawing of a black square for a backdrop could have significance as a painting. It was in designing this opera that he took his first step towards Suprematism.⁷¹

1915 was a pivotal year for Malevich. By mid-year, he had completed around thirty non-objective canvases and titled his new form of art Suprematism. He secluded himself in his studio and did not allow anyone to see what he was working on until the fall of 1915. One of the most significant events in modern art history was the *Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings 0.10 (Zero Ten)*, which opened on 17 December at Nadezhda Dobychina's Art Bureau on the Field of Mars in Petrograd. It was there that Malevich first exhibited his *Black Square* in the icon corner, alongside thirty-eight of his first Suprematist paintings (fig. 5). The other artists in the exhibition refused to list his works as Suprematist, but he had already prepared a brochure and had hung up a sign reading, "Suprematism of Painting, K. Malevich."⁷² Malevich explained that in Suprematism, they would reduce all natural forms to nothing, to zero, then they would step

⁶⁹ Kovtun and Bowl, 208.

⁷⁰ Kovtun and Bowl, 208.

⁷¹ Kovtun and Bowl, 208-9.

⁷² Kovtun and Bowl, 209.

beyond that. They all intended to go beyond zero. Ivan Kliun and Mikhail Menkov were the first to adopt Suprematism.⁷³

Velimir Khlebnikov (1885-1922), the poet and mathematician, became fascinated with Malevich's Suprematist work and was especially interested in its mathematical interpretation. He found the unity of the microcosm and macrocosm written in the mathematical proportions of Malevich's Suprematist compositions. They represented the conjunction of human and cosmic space. The fundamental principles of the entire universe could be perceived in these works. Each painting was its own little universe defined by a particular numerical expression. Khlebnikov's mathematical calculations of Malevich's Suprematist canvases were discussed in his 1919 draft *The Head of the Universe, Time in Space*.⁷⁴

Malevich made a huge impact on the art scene both in Russia and internationally. Soon after Suprematism was unveiled, his writings on art were published in the newspaper *Iskusstvo kommuny* [Art of the Commune] and in the journal *Izobrazitelnoe iskusstvo* [Visual Art].⁷⁵ In 1919, he took a teaching job at an art school in Vitebsk where he established a collective of artists known as Unovis, who came to play a major role in the future of Russian and Soviet art.⁷⁶ He eventually reached the point where he stopped painting and dedicated himself to writing about his theories and sensations. He believed that the purest form of a painting had no objects, only painterly masses—manifestations of substance. The painting was organized like a body; it was a unified structure composed of many separate elements. The ability to create a unified whole was an expression of man's genius. Painting was its own justification of form.⁷⁷

⁷³ Kovtun and Bowlt, 209.

⁷⁴ Kovtun and Bowlt, 211.

⁷⁵ Kovtun and Bowlt, 213.

⁷⁶ Kovtun and Bowlt, 213.

⁷⁷ Kovtun and Bowlt, 214-15.

Unfortunately, Stalin's political agenda was not favorable to the ideology of the avant-garde, and Malevich lost support for his endeavors in 1925. His ability to exhibit his works was limited, and he slowly faded from public consciousness. He had his final exhibition in 1932 and passed away in 1935.⁷⁸ Soviet censorship nearly removed Malevich from history in the 1930s. It was not until the 1980s that Malevich became a part of modern art history and his contributions began to be recognized globally.⁷⁹

For Kazimir Malevich, the *Black Square* was much more than just a painting. It became the emblem of Unovis and the followers of Suprematism (fig. 6). The *Black Square* was used as a decoration at public events, and a seal for official documents. Members of Unovis stitched it onto their clothing as a badge. The *Black Square* even came to decorate buildings and trolley cars. In Malevich's later years, after returning to traditional naturalism in painting, he continued to sign his paintings with a black square. His funeral featured the *Black Square* prominently on his "coffin, the automobile, the train wagon that brought the body to Moscow, and the ornamented cube placed on the artists grave in Nemchinovka" (fig. 7-11).⁸⁰ Malevich specifically stated in his will that he was to be placed in a cruciform coffin with a black square painted at his head and a red circle at his feet.⁸¹ Malevich designed his own funeral to be a spectacle of Suprematism.⁸² It is easy to understate the significance of the *Black Square* and Suprematism. El Lissitzky perhaps expressed its importance best in his 1920 essay "Suprematism in World Reconstruction," writing:

...amid the thunderous roar of a world in collision we, ON THE LAST STAGE OF THE PATH TO SUPREMATISM BLASTED ASIDE THE OLD WORK OF ART LIKE A

⁷⁸ Kovtun and Bowlt, 216-22.

⁷⁹ Aleksandra Semenovna Shatskikh, *Black Square: Malevich and the Origin of Suprematism*, trans. Martin Schwartz (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), ix-x.

⁸⁰ Vakar and Malsch, *Kazimir Malevich. The Black Square. the Story of a Masterpiece*, 41.

⁸¹ Taroutina, *The Icon and the Square Russian Modernism and the Russo-Byzantine Revival*, 172.

⁸² This arrangement is of primary importance to the conclusion of this research as it is a flattened representation of a Vitruvian figure.

BEING OF FLESH AND BLOOD AND TURNED IT INTO A WORLD FLOATING IN SPACE. WE CARRIED BOTH PICTURE AND VIEWER OUT BEYOND THE CONFINES OF THIS SPHERE AND IN ORDER TO COMPREHEND IT FULLY THE VIEWER MUST CIRCLE LIKE A PLANET ROUND THE PICTURE WHICH REMAINS IMMOBILE IN THE CENTRE... AFTER THE OLD TESTAMENT THERE CAME THE NEW—AFTER THE NEW THE COMMUNIST—AND AFTER THE COMMUNIST THERE FOLLOWS FINALLY THE TESTAMENT OF SUPREMATISM.⁸³

The *Black Square*, Suprematism, and Silver Age Philosophy

Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* was one of the most significant paintings of the twentieth century. It signaled the end of the old art and the beginning of the new in the same way that the work of Giotto signaled the transition from a canonical-medieval style to Renaissance mimesis. *The Black Square* marked the end of representation in painting and initiated a new visual language for the modern world. Despite its simplicity, Malevich spent the rest of his life explaining its meaning. *The Black Square* provided a theoretical foundation for a new abstract movement in art, spawned a variety of philosophical treatises, influenced architecture, and shaped a new visual environment through its influence on decorative and applied arts—specifically porcelain and textiles. Malevich was not the first to arrive at abstract art, but he was the first to present abstract art as an emblem with an accompanying manifesto. *The Black Square* was a philosophical text expressing the ineffable nature of the universe and rendering knowable the unknowable through Suprematist minimalism.⁸⁴ However, the philosophy of the *Black Square* was not exclusively Malevich's invention. His ideas were greatly influenced by Symbolism and Silver Age philosophy.

The Silver Age of Russian philosophy has gone largely unnoticed due to its suppression by the Soviet government in Russia. It was based on German idealism, Neoplatonism, and

⁸³ El Lissitzky, "Suprematism in World Reconstruction, 1920," in *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism 1902-1934*, trans. John E. Bowlt (New York: The Viking Press, 1976), 155-58.

⁸⁴ Aleksandra Semenovna Shatskikh, *Black Square: Malevich and the Origin of Suprematism*, ix-x.

Eastern Christian mystical traditions.⁸⁵ Russia's mysticism was rooted in both its pagan history and its Byzantine and Orthodox spiritual traditions. Vladimir Soloviev was the central figure in Silver Age philosophy and the spiritual renaissance of the early twentieth century. He introduced the main themes of religious humanism and Neoplatonism to his and subsequent generations. In a way, all ensuing philosophy in Russia was a response to Soloviev. He inherited the Slavophile school of thought and paved the way for the next generation of authors, including Pavel Florensky, and Sergei Bulgakov.⁸⁶ Soloviev in particular was critical in setting the intellectual foundation for artists of the avant-garde.

Malevich's new era in art was defined by the conceptualization of the true nature of reality. For Malevich, painting was a way to access the fundamental structure of the universe and the nature of being. In moments of ecstatic inspiration, the artist became aware of the sensation of the life of the universe. His explorations into the fundamental qualities of the universe led to the artist's gradual understanding of the unity of space and time.⁸⁷ Soloviev expressed this unity as Sophia—he believed that all matter was spiritual and that there was a divine wisdom (Sophia) in the structure and organization of the world. He also believed that Russia was uniquely tasked to unite Western rationalism and Eastern spirituality. One aspect in which Soloviev's ideas were related to those of the mid-nineteenth-century Slavophiles was that he rejected the European tendency to over specialize and divide knowledge into ever more specific sub-disciplines. He believed that all religions and the subdivisions of intellectual thought should be combined into a single dynamic whole—what he described as an *integral life*.⁸⁸ Soloviev and his followers were

⁸⁵ Foltz, "The Resurrection of Nature: Environmental Metaphysics in Sergei Bulgakov's Philosophy of Economy," 2.

⁸⁶ Taroutina, 52-58

⁸⁷ Shatskikh, *Black Square: Malevich and the Origin of Suprematism*, 273.

⁸⁸ Taroutina, 51

central figures in the struggle against the separation, fragmentation, and atomization of social forms and intellectual activities. They were a counterbalance, attempting to present novel approaches to unity and harmony between the different aspects of society, religion, and thought. Malevich too sought a unity between art and the different aspects of society, industry, and culture. This movement towards unity was essentially Neoplatonic, and its humanism was based on the idea of the integral man—humans do not exist in isolation and any truly human endeavor reflects the essential communal characteristics of each individual’s life. The one in the many (community) and the many in the one (the state).

Sergei Bulgakov’s was also centrally concerned with the fundamental structure of the universe; while based on the ideas of Soloviev, his inspiration came from the study of economics. For him, economics was not limited to human interactions within family or social groups. It considered the relationships between all levels of man and the universe—economics was a way to understand the completeness, continuity, and endlessness of both human life and the universal superstructure.⁸⁹ This is explained in his book, *The Philosophy of Economy: The World as Household*. His ideas were based on the Greek root *ecos*, meaning household life. The Russian term, *koziaistvo*, while referring to economics and economic activity, also described household life. The Russian term shared in the same meaning as the Greek *ecos*. For Bulgakov, the individual was not the subject of economy, but rather, humanity was the subject of economy. The basic unit was not the individual but the social group or household.⁹⁰

This collective, universal humanity is none other than what has been called since antiquity the world soul, and whose lineage Bulgakov traces from Plato, Plotinos, and the ancient Stoics through Sts. Dionysios, Gregory of Nyssa, and Maximos in the Greek

⁸⁹ Nadezhda Gonotskaya and Galina Kirilenko, “Between Philosophical Theory and Religious Dogma: Philosophical Views of Father Sergius Bulgakov,” *Toronto Journal of Theology* 37, no. 2 (Fall 2021): 212-13.

⁹⁰ Foltz, 5-10.

East—and Scotus Erigena in the Latin West—to Böhme, von Baader, Schelling, and Soloviev in modern times.⁹¹

For Bulgakov, art was the epitome and perfection of economy. The goal of household life was art. Art was the uncovering of beauty through the act of human creativity. Here, discovery and creation were two aspects of a single process.⁹²

Similarly, Malevich believed that there were two different aspects of creation. The first was a product of the conscious mind and physical reality; it was practical, concrete, and dealt with identifiable-visual phenomena. The second was a product of the subconscious and was intuitive.⁹³ He did not associate it with any practical or utilitarian function; rather, it dealt with abstract or transcendental phenomena. Malevich believed science and religion dealt with the concrete, while art dealt with the abstract. For him, painting unified the conscious and subconscious minds. Soloviev saw this same duality between unconscious intuition and conscious reason in all of human activities. While elevating intuition over reason, he also sought a unity between the two. Soloviev believed that truth existed beyond physical experience, for knowledge of the material world was not truth. Soloviev was also concerned with the association of the good and the beautiful. He therefore ascribed salvific notions to art and its ability to create a utopic future world. Soloviev believed that "...art could reveal the fundamental spiritual essence that permeates all material reality and in so doing help mankind to achieve a truly enlightened modernity through the fusion of religion and philosophy, rationality and faith, and the secular and the sacred."⁹⁴ Malevich too believed that art could unite all these separate disciplines and lead to a utopic future.

⁹¹ Foltz, 10.

⁹² Foltz, 12.

⁹³ Malevich believed the subconscious and superconscious refer to the same intuitive understanding.

⁹⁴ Taroutina, 51

Soloviev held that icons were specifically valuable due to their dual existence, penetrating both into the divine and material world. Icons were simultaneously physical and spiritual, and therefore reflected nature of divine creation—they shared the same structure as the body of Christ, they were symbols of the divine nature of creation. They could therefore inspire viewers to the divine:

By simultaneously participating in the physical and the spiritual, and the concrete and the symbolic realms, icons bore direct witness to a deified creation—and by extension eternal truth—and could thus function as vehicles of universal salvation, helping humanity to attain theosis, the ultimate unification with the divine energies of the Creator.⁹⁵

The dual physical and spiritual nature of the icon was of fundamental importance to Malevich's art and was the foundation of the symbolism of the *Black Square*. This painting synthesized the transcendent and the material; providing a physical presentation of metaphysical reality in the form of pure painterly realism. Both Malevich and Soloviev saw the synthesis of the transcendental and material as the highest form of art; however, Soloviev took it a step further, believing that a combination of transcendent and material existence was also the highest goal for humanity. He described this as Godmanhood, or union with God resulting from the willful self-realization of one's own divinity. Here, one realizes this divine likeness by working for the positive divine transformation in everything, creating a unity of all things.⁹⁶ All of mankind shares in the dual nature of Christ. The ultimate goal of existence being a union with God (theosis). For Soloviev the philosophical understanding of the universe as a unified whole with many individual manifestations was equated with the revelation of Christ as a unified whole consisting of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Similar to Hegel and Schelling, Soloviev believed the Absolute or Divine principle was God. He defined God both positively and negatively—as

⁹⁵ Taroutina, 51-52

⁹⁶ Hamburg and Poole, 16-17.

both absolutely united and separate from all particular things. God, or the Absolute, was both everything and nothing. Soloviev defined the *One* as the Father and the *All* as Sophia.⁹⁷

Bulgakov continued to explore the relationship between material reality and spiritual reality. He combined many diverse influences including Greek philosophy, Gnosticism, the Kabbala, Patristics, and medieval philosophy. He also freely drew from European rationalists, irrationalists, pragmatists, and positivists, and was fascinated by Soloviev's sophiology.⁹⁸ More than most of his contemporaries, Bulgakov was axiomatic and expressed himself within the boundaries of Christian dogma. Antinomy was used to show that the rational mind was ill equipped to conceive of God, infinity, or nothingness. The religious mind was used to guide the reader away from the limitations of the rational mind.⁹⁹ Bulgakov believed that the rational mind could not navigate the contradictory nature of antinomy; it was better suited to the essentially irrational religious consciousness.

Antinomy is difficult to understand if one is not familiar with transcendent thought.¹⁰⁰ The primary antinomy of religious or mystical thought lies in the fact that reality is understood as both transcendent and immanent. This logical contradiction does not undermine the transcendent, but rather proves that there are mysteries beyond reason's ability to comprehend. This contradiction is experienced everyday—the nature of reality is itself contradictory—therefore reason is clearly insufficient to explain all of existence. God is not impossible, but only rationally impossible and logically contradictory. Obviously, rationality is not the core principle of existence. It is within the religious consciousness that the fundamental mystery of life can be

⁹⁷ Brandon Gallaher, "Antinomism, Trinity and the Challenge of Solov'ëvan Pantheism in the Theology of Sergij Bulgakov," *Studies in East European Thought* 64, no. 3/4 (November 2012), 211.

⁹⁸ Gonotskaya and Kirilenko, "Between Philosophical Theory and Religious Dogma: Philosophical Views of Father Sergius Bulgakov," 210–11.

⁹⁹ Gonotskaya and Kirilenko, 212.

¹⁰⁰ Gallaher, "Antinomism, Trinity and the Challenge of Solov'ëvan Pantheism in the Theology of Sergij Bulgakov," 207–8.

perceived—the contradictory nature of God as both transcendent and immanent, both all and one, both unified and heterogenous.¹⁰¹

This same antimony or logical contradiction can be found in Malevich’s understanding of realism. Realism for Malevich is simultaneously transcendent and immanent. Despite his art moving away from depictions of visible reality, he continued to describe his style as ‘Cubo-Futurist Realism’ and ‘Transrational Realism.’¹⁰² Even his manifesto of Suprematism had the subtitle, *The New Painterly Realism*.¹⁰³ Malevich’s naturalism was an expression of the metaphysical structure of the universe, what Soloviev described as Sophia. What he rejected was the presentation of visible nature or physical reality as inherently true. For Malevich, truth could only be found in the metaphysical. This is why he rejected art that recreated material reality. He believed that for most of human history, art was created with the purpose of imitating objects from nature in order to maintain traditional standards of common sense through naturalistic representation. He believed Cubism destroyed objects and their “essence, meaning, and purpose.”¹⁰⁴ However, despite the fact that modern art purposely distorted the object towards the boundaries of existence, “it did not go outside the bounds of zero.”¹⁰⁵ For Malevich, everything before zero still contained form and was not true realism or true creation. The *Black Square* was the zero of form because it reduced all objective form to zero. It was the first painting to fully reject material reality. It was also the first true work of art because it was an expression of metaphysical reality—the true nature of the universe. Placed at the end of form, Suprematism was the beginning of the new, “The artist can be a creator only when the forms in his picture have

¹⁰¹ Gallaher, 211.

¹⁰² Kovtun and Bowlt, 210.

¹⁰³ Kazimir Malevich, “From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Painterly Realism, 1915,” in *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism 1902-1934*, trans. John E. Bowlt (New York: The Viking Press, 1976), 116.

¹⁰⁴ Malevich, “From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Painterly Realism, 1915,” 132.

¹⁰⁵ Malevich, “From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Painterly Realism, 1915,” 133.

nothing in common with [physical] nature.”¹⁰⁶ True art creation did not copy physical nature because physical nature was an illusion. A person’s thoughts only relate to the conscious mind and are thus based on the illusion of physical reality.¹⁰⁷ Malevich believed that it was through the intuitive subconscious mind that one begins to apprehend true-metaphysical reality.¹⁰⁸ This is related to Bulgakov’s idea that only the irrational religious mind can understand the fundamental antimony of existence. Both believed that the conscious or rational mind was incapable of perceiving the true nature of existence.

Pavel Florensky also shared Malevich and Bulgakov’s mistrust of visible reality and the conscious mind. Florensky rated icons as the highest form of art because he believed that what one sees with one’s eyes was not true reality. That it was a false realism based on an individual perspective. He saw the triumph of naturalism as the success of a fraudulent expression. He did not believe that illusionism could convey actual truth. Icons used inverse perspective and polycentrism in a presentation of transcendental realism. The icon was a symbol. It was not concerned with the duplication of reality or attractive visual aesthetics. Iconic representations were the materialization of God’s words—the transcendent made immanent. In the icon, one could perceive eternity. It was the transcendent quality of the icon that made it significant.¹⁰⁹ He believed the greatest works of iconic art were:

The mosaics of San Vitale, Hagia Sophia, Kariye Camii, and the St. Sophia Cathedral in Kiev; the frescoes in the Church of Christ the Savior on the Neredita and those of Theophanes the Greek (1340–1410) and Dionysius (1440–1502); and finally the icons of the Virgin of Vladimir and Andrei Rublev’s Old Testament Trinity.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ Malevich, “From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Painterly Realism, 1915,” 122.

¹⁰⁷ Malevich, “From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Painterly Realism, 1915,” 133-34.

¹⁰⁸ Kazimir Malevich, *The Non-Objective World*, (Chicago: P. Theobald, 1959), 18-21.

¹⁰⁹ Taroutina, 52-55.

¹¹⁰ Taroutina, 58.

Soloviev, Florensky, Bulgakov, and Malevich all rejected the supremacy of reason and embraced the irrational-mysterious aspects of religious thinking. Florensky believed that it was human egoism that led people to believe that reason could comprehend God—no rational proof could subordinate God. In accepting God, one also accepted the reality of an irrational universe that contained supersensible, metaphysical, and incomprehensible aspects. Bulgakov also rejected the Aristotelian concept of God as the Prime Mover. God existed beyond the causal chain and did not abide by the laws of physics or mechanics. God was that which was acted upon, that which acted, and the laws by which actions were limited. God was also not any of these things.¹¹¹

Both Florensky and Bulgakov rejected the idea that faith and reason, and theology and philosophy were mutually exclusive. For Florensky, truth was based on both intuition and reason. Bulgakov believed that every philosophy was based on a forgotten underlying myth—philosophical inquiry was the immanent-human striving towards the Absolute.¹¹² For them, Christian philosophy was the third way, the harmony between rationalism and mysticism. There was not an opposition between faith and reason. The opposite of faith is faithless, and the opposite of reason is irrational. Faith does not imply an immature mentality; faith can be informed and not blind.¹¹³ Bulgakov recognized the distinction between logical contradiction and antimony. Antimony results from the recognition of the inadequacy of rational thought to conceive of certain subjects or tasks. A logical contradiction occurs when there is a violation of

¹¹¹ Christoph Schneider, “Faith and Reason in Russian Religious Thought: Sergei Bulgakov, Pavel Florensky and the Contemporary Debate about Onto-Theology and Fideism,” *Analogia* (2529-0967) 8 (January 2020), 134.

¹¹² Schneider, “Faith and Reason in Russian Religious Thought: Sergei Bulgakov, Pavel Florensky and the Contemporary Debate about Onto-Theology and Fideism,” 136-38.

¹¹³ Schneider, 141.

the laws of logic. Antimony generates an acknowledgement of the limits of reason in the face of the task of knowing the infinite or transcendent.¹¹⁴

Recognizing the limits of reason, Malevich believed that there was neither truth nor meaning in the objective world. If feelings arose from physical encounters, they were only reflections of pure feeling diluted by the physical medium. The true value of any work of art did not reside in the conscious concepts it attempted to convey, but in its ability to express feeling.¹¹⁵ Suprematism cast aside those ideas, concepts, and images that determined objective ideals in life and art in exchange for the experience of pure feeling:

The ascent to the heights of non-objective art is arduous and painful...but nevertheless rewarding. The familiar recedes ever further and further into the background...the contours of the objective world fade more and more and so it goes, step by step, until finally the world—‘everything we loved and by which we have lived’—becomes lost to sight. Even I was gripped by a kind of timidity bordering on fear when it came to leaving ‘the world of will and idea’, in which I had lived and worked and in the reality of which I had believed. But a blissful sense of liberating non-objectivity drew me forth into the ‘desert’, where nothing is real except feeling...and so feeling became the substance of my life...I realized that the ‘thing’ and the concept’ were substituted for feeling and understood the falsity of the world of will and idea.¹¹⁶

Malevich believed that art had been purer in the distant past, and over time became cluttered by the accumulation of objects. The abundance of things in art concealed the feeling which originally gave rise to it—concealed its true value. Suprematism asked viewers to give up visible reality in exchange for pure non-objective feeling.¹¹⁷ Its rejection of representations of the physical world sought to unmask art and reach a pure experience of reality. Non-objective reality was immutable, while everything in the physical world was mutable and nothing could be considered eternal.¹¹⁸ Conscious thought was in constant flux, and the Absolute could be “given

¹¹⁴ Schneider, 135.

¹¹⁵ Malevich, *The Non-Objective World*, 67.

¹¹⁶ Malevich, *The Non-Objective World*, 68.

¹¹⁷ Malevich, *The Non-Objective World*, 74.

¹¹⁸ Malevich, *The Non-Objective World*, 84.

tangible form through the expression of the pure feeling of the subconscious.”¹¹⁹ In life, the non-objective feeling was clothed in objective imagery, “The Suprematist does not observe and does not touch—he feels.”¹²⁰ In accepting this change of paradigm, Malevich was released from the bonds of academism, the dominance of visible reality in art, and mainstream rationality:

I say to all: Abandon love, abandon aestheticism, abandon the baggage of wisdom, for in the new culture, your wisdom is ridiculous and insignificant. I have untied the knots of wisdom and liberated the consciousness of color! Hurry up and shed the hardened skin of centuries, so that you can catch up with us more easily. I have overcome the impossible and made guild with no breath. You are caught in the nets of the horizon, like fish! We, Suprematists, throw open the way to you. Hurry! For tomorrow you will not recognize us.¹²¹

For Malevich, the *Black Square* was the corporeal embodiment of the creative principle of the universe, of Sophia. It was a sign of man’s existence as a part of the dynamic universe—a part of the universal harmony between the material and transcendent. The *Black Square* both revealed and concealed the existence of the infinite in nothingness—that the zero was equivalent to everything (Zero=All).¹²² It was through his sub-conscious intuition, and not his reason, that he was able to express the ineffable nature of the universe. Using a vocabulary of circles, squares, and crosses, he made visible the concepts of emptiness and nothingness. Suprematism was a way to depict the Absolute, and on a more tangible level, to create the new world and a new consciousness.¹²³ While his application of these thoughts was novel, his ideas were indebted to the intellectual culture that surrounded the Russian avant-garde. While it is difficult to find direct connections between Malevich and Soloviev, Florensky, and Bulgakov, it is clear that they

¹¹⁹ Malevich, *The Non-Objective World*, 88.

¹²⁰ Malevich, *The Non-Objective World*, 94.

¹²¹ Malevich, “From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Painterly Realism, 1915,” 135.

¹²² Shatskikh, 274

¹²³ Sakhno, “Kazimir Malevich’s Negative Theology and Mystical Suprematism,” 1.

were all grappling with the same ideas about the nature of the universe, humankind, and rational thought.

One of the most significant parallels between Soloviev, Florensky, Bulgakov, and Malevich is their reverence for the symbolic and revelatory capacity of art and, more specifically, the icon.¹²⁴ Both icons and the *Black Square* were formal constructions based on historically determined symbolic systems, and physical presentations of metaphysical reality.¹²⁵ It was not just in discussing his art that Malevich revealed his mystical tendencies; he deliberately cultivated the persona of a mystic-visionary, and intentionally employed biblical language and symbolism to add significance and impact to his writing. He also invented somewhat miraculous creation stories for the *Black Square*. All this was done to enhance its mystical significance. He drew on the mysticism surrounding icons to present the *Black Square* as the result of divine inspiration and specifically drew on the Byzantine legend of the Mandyliion.¹²⁶

Malevich's practice was apophatic because he sought to know the unknowable and to visualize the invisible. This was due to the influence of Soloviev and his followers. He rejected classical canons and moved beyond traditional concepts of time and space; he used sacred geometry and symbolism to give form to emptiness and nothingness. He believed that God was both the meaning of the universe and an unknowable nothingness. Meaning is finite, while God is infinite; God is therefore beyond meaning. The goal of negative theology was to remove the particular from religious thinking, while the goal of Suprematism was to remove the object from

¹²⁴ Taroutina, 169.

¹²⁵ Oleg Tarasov, "Spirituality and the Semiotics of Russian Culture: From the Icon to Avant-Garde Art," in *Modernism and the Spiritual in Russian Art: New Perspectives*, eds. Louise Hardiman and Nicola Kozicharow (Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2017), 122.

¹²⁶ Taroutina, 169.

art. The nature of God was zero; God was no-thing.¹²⁷ The face of God could be recognized in empty space. Through the annulment of objective reality, Suprematism brought the viewer closer to recognizing the transcendental spiritual Absolute. Reality was actually nothing; it was an eternal, ambivalent nothingness. The primary forms of Suprematism were the circle, square, and the cross; these represent the being of non-being, “The Black Square is the zero-matrix reflecting the foundations of the Universe and the spiritual Absolute; the liberated Nothingness symbolizing the apophatic non-being of God.”¹²⁸ Rather than presenting God in the image of man, the *Black Square* presents the essential nothingness of God’s perfection.

Malevich understood the symbolism present in Russian icon painting; he knew the cultural meanings that defined the cube, rectangle, or square as the earth, and the circle or sphere as the heavens. It is also clear that he understood that a mandorla represented the duality of the earthly/profane and the heavenly/sacred, and the transfiguration of Christ.¹²⁹ For Malevich, the *Black Square* was a transcendental symbol of God and a negation of objective reality.¹³⁰ It was the limit between being and non-being, rational and irrational, material and Absolute. The square represented the process of negating reality in negative theology.¹³¹ Malevich learned from icons that an image could serve both a material and spiritual function. Although his representation differed from traditional icons, it followed the same pursuit, which was the transition from a human to a divine reality. Malevich understood the capacity of an image to interface with metaphysical reality. In this way, his Suprematist art became a vector, or point of departure, for transcendental thought. In expressing pure form, he suggests the pure formlessness of the divine

¹²⁷ Sakhno, 3-5.

¹²⁸ Sakhno, 7.

¹²⁹ Sakhno, 10-11.

¹³⁰ Sakhno, 8.

¹³¹ Sakhno, 7.

nothing. The undiluted reality of his painting sparked metaphysical contemplation. In being absolutely finite, it became transcendent—the infinite Absolute. It was the boundary between mathematical form and infinite-undifferentiated formlessness.¹³²

The tradition of negative theology is believed to have begun with Dionysius the Areopagite (1st century CE), who thought that God was unknowable and incomprehensible. This was expanded upon by Gregory Palmas (1296-1359) who believed that divinity was limitless and incomprehensible. Only in complete ignorance could one comprehend the unknowable nature of God. Negative theology was a way to indirectly understand God.¹³³ In the same tradition, Nicolas of Cusa (1401-1464) thought God was the infinite absolute maximum that surpassed all understanding. Thinking of God was similar to contemplating nothingness.¹³⁴ Malevich's approach was comparable to Pseudo-Dionysius' idea of *dissimilar likeness*, in which unrelated symbols could be placeholders for God, who was unknowable and impossible to signify. In the art of Malevich, the square, circle, and cross became Neoplatonic apophatic symbols of the Modern era.¹³⁵

Russian Philosophy, Neoplatonism, and Religious Humanism

One of the key aspects of Russian Neoplatonism was its religious humanism. Russian religious humanism valued the internal reality of the soul above the physical form of man. This was consistent with their rejection of rationalism, positivism, and materialism. One's inner experience was more important than empirical evidence. They even went so far as to reject the laws of nature. Spiritual truth was always superior.¹³⁶ Soloviev's Godmanhood was based on the

¹³² Tarasov, "Spirituality and the Semiotics of Russian Culture: From the Icon to Avant-Garde Art," 124-25.

¹³³ Sakhno, 1.

¹³⁴ Sakhno, 3.

¹³⁵ Sakhno, 11.

¹³⁶ Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, "Religious Humanism in the Russian Silver Age," in *A History of Russian Philosophy 1830-1930 Faith, Reason, and the Defense of Human Dignity*, ed. G. M. Hamburg and Randall A. Poole (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 238.

divine source of mankind and its spiritual potential. It was related to the idea that man was created in the image of God; since all humans were created in God's image, they could all aspire to Godmanhood. This was his basis for human dignity. Every person was part of the divine and should be treated accordingly. Soloviev himself commented on his indebtedness to the humanism of the Italian Renaissance.¹³⁷

The Italian Renaissance was Neoplatonic, humanist, and religious. The basic credo of Renaissance humanism could be the quote from Genesis 1:26, "And God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.'"¹³⁸ Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) believed that it was one's individual responsibility to realize one's own likeness to God through self-realization and moral striving. Some scholars regard Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's book *De hominis dignitate* (1486), as the manifesto of the Italian Renaissance. Here, Mirandola expressed that human dignity was founded on man's perfectibility—the ability to create in one's self, through discipline and will-power, the image of divine perfection. Both Mirandola and Ficino believed that faith and reason could be allied and not opposed.¹³⁹

Human dignity in self-determination and perfectibility, and the compatibility of faith and reason were central themes in both the European Renaissance and nineteenth-century Russian philosophical humanism. In fact, both of these periods were rooted in the same history. The Renaissance's humanism found much of its inspiration in the Christian humanism of the fourth-century Greek patristic tradition. After the fall of Constantinople in 1453, many from this Greek tradition emigrated to Italy. They brought with them the literature of the Byzantine East and

¹³⁷ Hamburg and Poole, 16-17.

¹³⁸ Hamburg and Poole, 6-8.

¹³⁹ Hamburg and Poole, 6-8.

specifically works of the Greek church fathers. In this way, Byzantine theology helped to shape Italian humanism.¹⁴⁰

The story of how the humanist tradition traveled to Russia began with the Greek monk Maximos (Michael) Trivolis (c. 1470–1556). In Russia, he is known as Maksim the Greek, and is remembered for translating the Psalms to Slavonic and proposing liturgical reforms. He also studied with Mirandola and Ficino in Florence. He spread this philosophy in Muscovy until a Russian Church council accused him of heresy in 1525. After Maximos, there was very little dissemination of patristic and theological texts of the Eastern Orthodox tradition in Russian. This changed in the nineteenth century when theological academies began to translate these works into Russian for the first time, “in 1821, the St. Petersburg Theological Academy began to translate various writings of the fourth-century Cappadocian Fathers Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa.”¹⁴¹ This was the first time in Russian history that people without a specialized education could read about human dignity in their own language.¹⁴² In the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century, Dimitri Merezhkovskii translated many of the ancient Greek and Renaissance classics into Russian. He also wrote a historical novel about the life of Leonardo da Vinci titled *Rebirth of the Gods: Leonardo da Vinci* (published 1900–1901), which became a best seller.

The History of the Vitruvian Figure

Nineteenth-century Russia and Renaissance Italy shared not only Neoplatonism and religious humanism, but they also used the same system of geometric symbolism in their art and architecture; this system can be traced back to Plato. This is evidenced most clearly in church

¹⁴⁰ Hamburg and Poole, 8.

¹⁴¹ Hamburg and Poole, 9.

¹⁴² Hamburg and Poole, 8-9.

architecture. In the tenth century, Prince Vladimir of Kiev, having searched the world for a suitable religion for his kingdom of Rus, was overwhelmed by the beauty of the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. This became the example he chose for his kingdom. According to the Byzantine-Russian tradition, it is through beauty that the divine wisdom (Hagia Sophia) of the cosmos is experienced.¹⁴³ The term Hagia Sophia refers to, “the holy wisdom of God, the divine wisdom coursing throughout the cosmos.” In Cyrillic, Hagia Sophia came to refer to Russia’s great cathedrals, famous church icons, liturgies, and feast days. Hagia Sophia is one of the most definitive characteristics of Russian thought and spirituality, and is based on the Byzantine differentiation between *ousia* (divine essence), and *energeia* (immanent physical energy), which are present in all things.¹⁴⁴ Sophia is that aspect of the physical world that is rooted in the divine. The seed or spark of the divine in all matter. For Bulgakov, Sophia was Plato’s world of the forms.¹⁴⁵

In Christian architecture, the sphere and the cube symbolized heaven and earth. This was especially apparent in the domed churches of Byzantium.¹⁴⁶ The clearest example of which comes from the Cathedral of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. Its design pays particular attention to fitting spheres on cubes and circles in squares.¹⁴⁷ Aside from its square ground plan and the circle of the dome resting above the square of the crossing, an additional layer of circle-square symbolism exists along the surface of the interior of the church. The upper half consists of curved surfaces, vaults, semi-domes, and domes, while the lower half is composed of vertical walls, columns, and a horizontal floor. Additionally, everything above the springing line was

¹⁴³ Foltz, 4.

¹⁴⁴ Foltz, 3.

¹⁴⁵ Foltz, 13-14.

¹⁴⁶ Nigel Hiscock, *The Symbol at Your Door: Number and Geometry in Religious Architecture of the Greek and Latin Middle Ages* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 65.

¹⁴⁷ Hiscock, *The Symbol at Your Door: Number and Geometry in Religious Architecture of the Greek and Latin Middle Ages*, 67.

covered in mosaics, while everything below it was surfaced with marble slabs. Due to the incandescent lighting effect of the mosaics, the upper portion of the church was luminous. All of these details functioned both physically and symbolically to associate the dome with light, the sun, stars, and the divine; and the base with the earthly square. Its four-sidedness is emphasized through the repeated use of the number four (four arches, four columns, etc.).¹⁴⁸

This symbolism of the circle and square in The Hagia Sophia was derived from the geometric symbolism that Plato described in the *Timaeus*. The platonic model presented the universe as composed of four physical elements, fire, water, air, and earth. Each element was represented by one of the regular polyhedra. All of these polyhedra could be inscribed within a sphere. Fire, air, and water were seen as unstable and were therefore associated with polyhedra comprised of equilateral triangles. Earth was believed to be the only stable element and was symbolized by the cube. The universe itself was a sphere, and contained all the other forms.

Plato's cosmology considered the universe a living creature and believed man was a microcosm of it.¹⁴⁹ The analogy of man as a microcosm of the universe was one of the most important examples of universal proportion and harmony. It also showed that man was unique in having the ability to perceive incorporeal-intelligible reality through the mind, and corporeal reality through the senses. This arrangement situated man as a bridge between the incorporeal and corporeal, or human and divine.¹⁵⁰ It was Vitruvius (c. 80 BCE-15 BCE) who played the most important role in spreading the principle of man as a microcosm of universe and the attendant symbolism of the circle and square. Most importantly, he connected the proportions of the human body to the architecture of temples, the circle, and the square. The human body was

¹⁴⁸ Hiscock, 74-76.

¹⁴⁹ Hiscock, 129.

¹⁵⁰ Hiscock, 12.

understood as providing the harmony, or third term, connecting the circle and square.¹⁵¹ This is discussed in the first four paragraphs of Book Three of Vitruvius' *De architectura*:

The composition of a temple is based on symmetry, whose principles architects should take the greatest care to master. Symmetry derives from proportion, which is called analogia in Greek. Proportion is the mutual calibration of each element of the work and of the whole, from which the proportional system is achieved. No temple can have any compositional system without symmetry and proportion, unless, as it were, it has an exact system of correspondence to the likeness of a well-formed human being... Similarly, indeed, the elements of holy temples should have dimensions for each individual part that agree with the full magnitude of the work. So, too, for example, the center and midpoint of the human body is, naturally, the navel. For if a person is imagined lying back with outstretched arms and feet within a circle whose center is at the navel, the fingers and toes will trace the circumference of this circle as they move about. But to whatever extent a circular scheme may be present in the body, a square design may also be discerned there. For if we measure from the soles of the feet to the crown of the head, and this measurement is compared with that of the outstretched hands, one discovers that this breadth equals the height, just as in areas which have been squared off by use of the set square. And so, if Nature has composed the human body so that in its proportions the separate individual elements answer to the total form, then the ancients seem to have had reason to decide that bringing their creations to full completion likewise required a correspondence between the measure of individual elements and the appearance of the work as a whole. Therefore, when they were handing down proportional sequences for every type of work, they did so especially for the sacred dwellings of the gods, as the successes and failures of those works tend to remain forever.¹⁵²

To summarize, a well-formed human being could be inscribed within a circle and a square; symmetry, analogy, and proportion were involved in composing both the human form and the architecture of temples, and this proportional system was passed down from the ancients. The ideal human body was the standard of perfect proportionality. The circle and the square were not included merely as geometric standards, but were vital in providing the additional symbolism needed to convey the deeper meaning of the work—the unique position of man in the cosmos.

There is not much factual history known about Vitruvius. He was likely the architect of the Basilica in Fano, and it is also possible that he worked for Julius Caesar as the superintendent

¹⁵¹ Hiscock, 132.

¹⁵² Marcus Vitruvius Pollio, *Ten Books on Architecture*, trans. Ingrid Drake Rowland (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999), 47.

for war machines. His name is remembered to this day because of *De architectura*. The text of which was arranged in ten books written between 29 and 23 BCE, during the reign of Roman Emperor Augustus.¹⁵³ The book was not particularly popular in the Roman Empire and was not well known throughout the Middle Ages. Despite this, it survived into the Renaissance virtually unaltered. It was not until the beginning of the fifteenth century that it was recognized as important.¹⁵⁴ Surviving copies of Vitruvius' original text did not have illustrations, but some notes indicate that it originally had illustrations. This provided artists with an opportunity to illustrate the book according to their own interpretations, and not a historic precedent, which gave rise to a series of novel representations.¹⁵⁵

An important early depiction of the Vitruvian figure came about as the result of Saint Hildegard of Bingen (Bernersheim vor der Höhe, Bingen am Rhein, 1098–1179). The *Liber Divinorum Operum* is a text containing descriptions of ten of her mystical visions with accompanying illustrations. One of these depicts a male human figure inscribed within a sphere representing the universe (fig. 12). While not as simple and direct as many of the later illustrations, this work nonetheless depicts the relationship between man the microcosm and the universal macrocosm. Although the square directly surrounding the human figure is missing in this illustration, it could be implied by the rectangular border of the page, the page itself, or the form of man could be meant to imply the physical world. Regardless of its exact reading, it is an expression of the symbolic iconography of circle and square in early Christian art.¹⁵⁶

Taccola (1382-1453) was possibly the first person since antiquity to make a serious attempt at illustrating the Vitruvian Man (fig. 13). It is clear from the drawing that he was unable

¹⁵³ Plinio Innocenzi, "Homo ad Circulum," *The Innovators Behind Leonardo*, Springer, Cham (2018), 182.

¹⁵⁴ Innocenzi, "Homo ad Circulum," 182.

¹⁵⁵ Innocenzi, 183.

¹⁵⁶ Innocenzi, 204-5.

to find a solution for inscribing man in both the circle and square. The compass, plumb, and ruler were included to show how it was created. Despite the roughness of this sketch, it signaled the beginning of illustrations of the Vitruvian figure in the West.¹⁵⁷

Francesco di Giorgio's (1439-1502) Vitruvian man was based on careful and systematic study (fig. 14). He also studied the application of human proportions in architecture. He was specifically interested in the relationship between the human figure and the cruciform church (fig. 15-16). He believed the attractiveness of human proportions reflected the perfection of God. He not only applied human proportions to the ground plan of churches but also to their facades and detail elements such as columns (fig. 16-17). In the Vitruvian figure, the perfection of God's creation is reinforced by the perfection of circle and square.¹⁵⁸

Giacomo Andrea da Ferrara's (d. 1500) manuscript was similar to Taccola's in its roughness (fig. 18). It was part of a private manuscript and potentially the first illustrated version of Vitruvius's *De architectura*.¹⁵⁹ What is most significant about this piece is that Giacomo Andrea was a close friend of Leonardo and their solutions for inscribing the figure into both the circle and square are the same. It is likely Leonardo had seen this sketch and discussed it with Giacomo Andrea before starting his own. Due to the numerous iterations of human figures inscribed in the circle and the square created during the Renaissance, it is non-productive to focus on the question of who copied from whom. It is better to consider them as collectively working towards a solution to the Vitruvian enigma. These illustrations are not just studies in

¹⁵⁷ Innocenzi, 185.

¹⁵⁸ Innocenzi, 186-89.

¹⁵⁹ Roman originals are believed to have only had a few illustrations, while this contained 127 hand-drawn illustrations

human proportions and anatomy, but an expression of Renaissance humanism and Man's central position in the structure of the cosmos.¹⁶⁰

The first printed and illustrated version of *De Architectura* was created by Fra Giocondo (Giovanni Giocondo from Verona; 1433–1515) in 1511. This book contained two illustrations related to the Vitruvian Man (fig. 19). This version helped to spread Renaissance ideals and contributed to the rediscovery of classical knowledge.¹⁶¹

The first printed version of *De Architectura* in Italian was created in 1521 (Fra Giocondo's version was in Latin). This Italian version was illustrated by Cesare Ceasarino (1475–1543). It is clear from his illustrations that he understood the concept, but was unable to execute it with precision (fig. 20). The figure's hands and feet were awkwardly enlarged to make the figure fit into its geometric scaffolding.¹⁶²

Leonardo da Vinci's (1452-1519) *Vitruvian Man* (fig. 21) was the clearest representation of the Renaissance ideal of man. Within this humanist context, man was both the measure of all things and the center of creation.¹⁶³ When comparing Leonardo's *Vitruvian Man* with the previous iterations, it is clear that he was able to represent its geometry and proportions far more elegantly and beautifully than any of the aforementioned artists. Like the Ferrara illustration, the center point shifts between the circle and the square from the navel to the pubis, which allows the same figure to fit into both shapes in the same illustration—they share the same geometric solution. It is important to note that this was likely drawn around 1490, well before the print versions.¹⁶⁴ The various visual solutions executed in the aforementioned illustrations are

¹⁶⁰ Innocenzi, 189-91.

¹⁶¹ Innocenzi, 192.

¹⁶² Innocenzi, 193-96.

¹⁶³ Innocenzi, 181.

¹⁶⁴ Innocenzi, 199-200.

represented in figure twenty-two.¹⁶⁵ These purely symbolic depictions are valuable in understanding the geometric relationships that underly these illustrations. Without the human figure, these arrangements reveal the connection between Malevich's geometric language and the representational art of the Renaissance. This geometric symbolism is what carries the weight of the meaning behind these illustrations and elevates them above mere proportional studies into the realm of metaphysics. At the core of these investigations is the Renaissance idea of human dignity.

Although it is improbable that Leonardo Da Vinci had read Nicholas de Cusa's writing, the two shared many ideas in common.¹⁶⁶ Most importantly, the two believed the highest goal in human life was the union of the artist and philosopher. Creativity was a core component of human dignity. Nicholas de Cusa transferred the symbolic relationship of the circle and square into the humanist vision of man as uniquely situated in the cosmos. Cusa saw each individual as unique; this uniqueness was based on the human ability to express one's soul in creative activities. This was not limited to artistic creation, but included all intellectual creation. Intellectual activity was one of man's defining characteristics, and it was within the human intellect the circle and square intersected; that heaven and earth coincided.¹⁶⁷ Cusa used the circle and the square to explain the relationship between man and God. The image of the limited manifestation of God was the square. The image of limitless-transcendent manifestation of God was the circle. The essence of both the square and the circle was the same—they stood for different forms of the divine:¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁵ Innocenzi, 201.

¹⁶⁶ Martin Germ, "Leonardo's Vitruvian Man, Renaissance Humanism, and Nicholas of Cusa," *Umeni / Art* 55, no. 2 (April 2007), 102-4.

¹⁶⁷ Germ, "Leonardo's Vitruvian Man, Renaissance Humanism, and Nicholas of Cusa," 105.

¹⁶⁸ Germ, 105.

It is in Man that the finite and the infinite coincide, because Man is subject to all limitations of the world (therefore inscribed in a square), but the inexhaustible power of his creative spirit in motion (indicated through the circular motion of the human body forming the circle) simultaneously lifts him above those limitations.”¹⁶⁹

Leonardo’s *Vitruvian Man* was both a study of proportions and an illustration of the Renaissance understanding of human dignity. Essentially these mean the same thing, since man’s perfect proportions reinforce the divine aspect of humanity.¹⁷⁰

Luca Pacioli’s *Divina proportionae* was also an important text in expressing the symbolism behind the circle and square.¹⁷¹ Pacioli began with:

the proportions of man, because from the human body derive all measures and their denominations and in it is to be found all and every ratio and proportion by which God reveals the innermost secrets of nature... for in the human body they found the two main figures without which it is impossible to achieve anything, namely the perfect circle . . . and the square.¹⁷²

One of the definitive aspects of the Renaissance was the revival of the ancient Greek mathematical interpretation of the world and of God. This was bolstered by the Christian belief that Man was created in the image of God, and in this image existed the harmony of the universe. The Vitruvian figure became a symbol of the mathematical connection between the microcosm of Man and the macrocosm of the Universe.¹⁷³ For most of his life, the mathematical quandary of squaring the circle had preoccupied Leonardo. It is possible that he believed his *Vitruvian Man* had resolved this supposedly impossible task. By presenting the mathematical harmony between the circle and square, or body and soul, the *Vitruvian Man* became visual proof of the Christian duality of man, and therefore the dignity of man. By using the human figure to square the circle, the Vitruvian figure became an emblem of the Incarnation of Christ.¹⁷⁴

¹⁶⁹ Germ, 105.

¹⁷⁰ Germ, 105.

¹⁷¹ David Rosand, "Reading the Figure," *Notes in the History of Art* 31/32, no. 4/1 (2012): 38.

¹⁷² Rosand, "Reading the Figure," 38.

¹⁷³ Rosand, 38.

¹⁷⁴ David Rosand, "Reading the Figure." *Notes in the History of Art* 31/32, no. 4/1 (2012): 42.

The *Vitruvian Man* presented the mathematical harmony of the universe using the circle, square, and human form just as Malevich's Suprematism presented his understating of the structure of the universe through various arrangements of the circle, square, and cross. All these forms exist individually and coexist as part of a unitary whole. The seemingly infinite multiplicity of relationships available between these forms adds to the sense of universal harmony existing within a unitary whole by underlining the fact that a harmonic whole is simultaneously various and unique. Only through visual language could its simultaneity, variety, and unity be properly expressed; Leonardo believed that painting was the best way to express harmonic proportion.¹⁷⁵ Malevich continued to explore the harmonic relationships between these forms in Suprematism.

Finding the Circle in the Black Square

This discussion leads to the core question of this research, “does Malevich’s *Black Square* share in the tradition of geometric symbolism expressed in the *Vitruvian Man*?” Like an icon, the *Black Square* has both immanent and transcendent meaning. As an immanent manifestation, the *Black Square* is pure painterly realism—it *is* a black square, and not a painting of a black square. There is no illusionism or mimesis in this work. It is as close to true-divine creation that humans can achieve. As a symbol of transcendent reality or Sophia, it is the point where the divine is perceptible in the material—it is an immanent manifestation of eternity and infinite nothingness. This iconic interpretation has its roots in Christian Neoplatonism and Renaissance humanism. As was previously shown, the circle and the square have a very specific relationship and symbolic meaning in this historic context. There is no doubt that Malevich understood that the square represented man and that the circle represented the divine. He could

¹⁷⁵ Domenico Laurenza, “The Vitruvian Man by Leonardo: Image and Text,” *Quaderni d’italianistica* 27, no. 2 (September 2006), 46-48.

have been exposed to this symbolism through Russian religious humanism and the revival of Renaissance thought concerning the dignity of man. Even if this discourse had never exposed him to a Vitruvian figure, he could not have avoided the symbolism of the circle and square in both the church architecture and icon painting tradition that Russia inherited from Byzantium. If one accepts that Malevich knew Vitruvian symbolism, then how does this influence the meaning of the *Black Square*?

Malevich never plainly stated that the square of the *Black Square* represents the human microcosm. In presenting only a square, one could interpret the work as a pure materialist denial of the presence of the divine in the new modern world. While symbolically cogent, this reading does not accord with Malevich's beliefs. His understanding of the icon contradicts a purely materialist symbolism. The work makes an undeniable statement about divinity; he sees the nothingness of the Absolute in the *Black Square*, but how is a viewer meant to see divinity in a square—in the symbol of man? Again, this could be interpreted as an elevation of man to the status of the divine; if God was indeed dead, as Nietzsche had claimed, then man was the ultimate authority and author of reality—the circle contained within the square. Again, while symbolically cogent, this does not align with Malevich's own beliefs. Rather than taking for granted only what is shown, the circle could be present in the *Black Square*, but not visible; it could be derived from an intellectual engagement with the work. This conclusion is supported both conceptually and formally. Not only is there a circle behind the black square, but the *Black Square* is not a painting of black square at all, but a painting of a hollow white square on a black background.

A critical part of the symbolism of the *Black Square* was expressed by Nikolai Tarabukin (1889-1956), an art historian, contemporary of Florensky, and follower of Soloviev. Tarabukin

asserted that iconic space was not flat, but spherical.¹⁷⁶ Despite the fact that icons were painted on square or rectangular panels, they were meant to imply the sphere of the infinite metaphysical universe. This idea served as the conceptual ground upon which the *Black Square* was constructed—the canvas represented a limitless reality upon which was created pure painterly realism. The circle is the space behind the square. This interpretation is supported by a formal analysis of the way Malevich constructed the work.

Malevich painted the *Black Square* in the highly expressive painterly calligraphy of the Impressionists. His lively brushwork rigorously defines the borders of the square, making it actively separate. Additionally, he painted several layers of each color, and often the layers were of slightly different tones—adding a subtle luminosity to the forms.¹⁷⁷ The *Black Square* is commonly understood and perceived as a black square painted on a white ground. Because of the color of paper and blank canvas, most people assume that the color white is the background. This is not the case with the *Black Square*. In fact, the liberation of white from its role as a background was one of the goals of Suprematism.¹⁷⁸ Recent scientific analysis of the work has shown that the *Black Square* is actually formally complex and consists of many distinct layers. The very first layer of the work was a thin primer on which was painted a Cubo-Futurist composition. When this layer was dry and beginning to form craquelure, Malevich painted the central section white. This white square has the same borders as the final black square. Soon thereafter, he painted a black border around the white. He then placed a small white border around the margin of the white square and filled in the central square with a specially made velvety black paint. The final step in the creation of this painting was adding zinc white to the

¹⁷⁶ Taroutina, 57

¹⁷⁷ Nakov and de la Guardia, 205-209.

¹⁷⁸ Branislav Jakovljevic, “Unframe Malevich!: Ineffability and Sublimity in Suprematism,” *Art Journal* 63, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 21.

border of the painting.¹⁷⁹ The placement of the black behind the white is not just a formal property of the painting, but part of Malevich's understanding of the non-objective world:

The solar disc, like a screen, cannot be the screen for the manifestation of the incomprehensible...it is obvious that the development of Suprematism through colour has arrived at black and white in which one must see a full impersonality, imagelessness, non-objectivity, balance, indifference, the state situated outside time...black stands behind white...¹⁸⁰

The presentation of black behind white is the final piece necessary to complete the Vitruvian interpretation of the *Black Square*. If the black is behind the white, and the space of an icon is spherical, then there is a black sphere beyond the white border of the *Black Square* (fig. 22). The orientation of the work becomes something similar to the circle-square orientation used in Taccola and Caesariano's Vitruvian figures (fig. 23). Here, one is only able to perceive a square within the infinite space of the circle. This is same statement that Malevich is making. There is an infinite and undefined divine nothingness symbolized by a black sphere existing behind the white of this work and this world. The white is a representation of active and manifest reality; it represents the limitations of perception and immanent reality.¹⁸¹ The white border is the square of man and represents humanity's inability to perceive the Absolute. However, it does not inhibit man's ability to intellectually conceive of the infinite nothingness that lies beyond manifest creation. It is the viewer that completes the Vitruvian orientation of the *Black Square*—through intellectual engagement, man is able to perceive the sphere of the divine existing beyond the limitations of physical reality (fig. 24). Thus, the *Black Square* uses Vitruvian symbolism to present a window into eternity, and serves its role as an icon by presenting a physical manifestation of the transcendent.

¹⁷⁹ Vakar and Malsch, 62

¹⁸⁰ Kazimir Severinovich Malevich, *The World as Non-Objectivity: Unpublished Writings 1922-1925: Vol. III*, ed. Troels Andersen, trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin, (Kopenhagen: Borgen, 1976), 83.

¹⁸¹ Branislav Jakovljevic, "Unframe Malevich!: Ineffability and Sublimity in Suprematism," 23-24.

Malevich's understanding of the Vitruvian symbolism of the circle and square was perhaps most clearly expressed at his funeral. As was stated earlier, his will indicated that he was to be placed in a cruciform coffin with a black square at the top and a red circle at the bottom.¹⁸² Photographs from his funeral show that, while his coffin was not cruciform, the circle and square were present (fig. 7). The placement of the square near his head and the circle at his feet could be seen as elevating the mundane over the eternal. However, this arrangement could also be interpreted as expressing his rootedness in the divine—a divine foundation. He was created from the ineffable beauty of the Absolute, thus his feet are rooted in the red circle. The *Black Square* was a result of his intuition, intellect, and creativity—it was a product of his humanity. It was therefore associated with his head, and served as the lens through which he perceived the world. His human form, intended to be a cross, connected the circle and square. As has been mentioned previously in this research, the basic vocabulary of Suprematism was the circle, square, and cross. Malevich's funeral made clear that he associated the cross with the human form, and that, from the very beginning, Suprematism had employed Vitruvian geometric symbolism. Malevich's Suprematism expressed the integral nature of the universe and fundamental relationships between the mundane, human, and divine using a vocabulary of circles, squares, and crosses.

Conclusion

While the *Black Square* can be appreciated from a formal, social, or political perspective, this research has shown how philosophy can enhance one's appreciation of art. In pure philosophical discourse, ontology and epistemology can be obtuse and incomprehensible. Art can serve to ground philosophical discourse and provide tangible subject matter to aid in

¹⁸² Taroutina, *The Icon and the Square Russian Modernism and the Russo-Byzantine Revival*, 172.

comprehension. In the end, both philosophy and art benefit from one another. Philosophy can give a consistent voice to the intangible aspects of art, while art can give material substance to the metaphysical aspects of philosophy. In the case of Russian art, this combination is even more valuable because it allows one to appreciate some of the fundamental differences in the Russian cultural worldview. While understanding the social and political circumstances of the era is crucial, politics and sociology do not provide insight into the more fundamental questions about the nature of being; such as, the basic antimony of reality as both immanent and transcendent. Philosophy can lead to a more intimate understating of art by providing insight into the thought process that gives rise to the creative process. The most primary question being, what does the artist define as reality? Is reality in the mind or in nature? The answer to this question defines for the artist what is abstract and what is real. This fundamental philosophical inquiry can provide essential insights to any work of art.

Despite the depth of this research, there are several concepts that could be further elaborated. While addressing the symbolism of icons and Vitruvian figures, this research does not fully discuss the significant differences between Vitruvian illustrations and icons. In its discussion of the influence of Russian Silver Age authors on the avant-garde, it has continued a discourse initiated by the authors included in the book *Modernism and the Spiritual in Russian Art: New Perspectives*, especially Maria Taroutina. However, it does not fully address the history of the Russo-Byzantine revival and its influence on the re-evaluation of the icon in nineteenth century Russia. Additionally, this research does not address the fact that aside from hanging the *Black Square* in the icon corner of *Zero-Ten*, Malevich did not directly refer to it as an icon in his writings. While it is clear that he borrowed the dual nature of the icon in his characterization of the *Black Square*, it is unclear if *Black Square* should be considered an icon. A valuable direction

for further research would be addressing if the *Black Square* can be considered an icon, and if not, what precisely it is. Additional directions for further research would include direct comparisons of Soloviev and Malevich, and Florensky and Malevich. Also fruitful would be a comparison of Malevich and Bulgakov's philosophies of economy. In a similar vein, an interesting discussion could be had concerning Stoic Oikeiosis, Vitruvius, and Bulgakov's economy. Finally, as was mentioned at the beginning of this research, approaching the study of both Malevich and the Russian avant-garde from a standpoint that balances Western and Russian influences would provide the fullest understanding of the topic.

This research has provided a philosophical interpretation of Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* based on Neoplatonism, religious humanism, and Vitruvius. By doing so, this research has extended previous discussions of the influence of Silver Age philosophy and the Russo-Byzantine revival on Russian modern art to include its historic roots of Neoplatonism and humanism. In turn, this has revealed a shared cultural root between the West and Russia. Rather than presenting Russian innovations as the result of Western influences, it shows the intellectual traditions of Russia as unique. In exploring the history of Russian culture, it shows that Renaissance humanism and Neoplatonism can serve as a middle ground for understanding between Russia and the West. The goal of this research was not to present a new interpretation of the *Black Square*, but to show how Neoplatonism, religious humanism, and Vitruvian symbolism could provide a fuller understanding of not only the *Black Square*, but Russian culture as a whole.

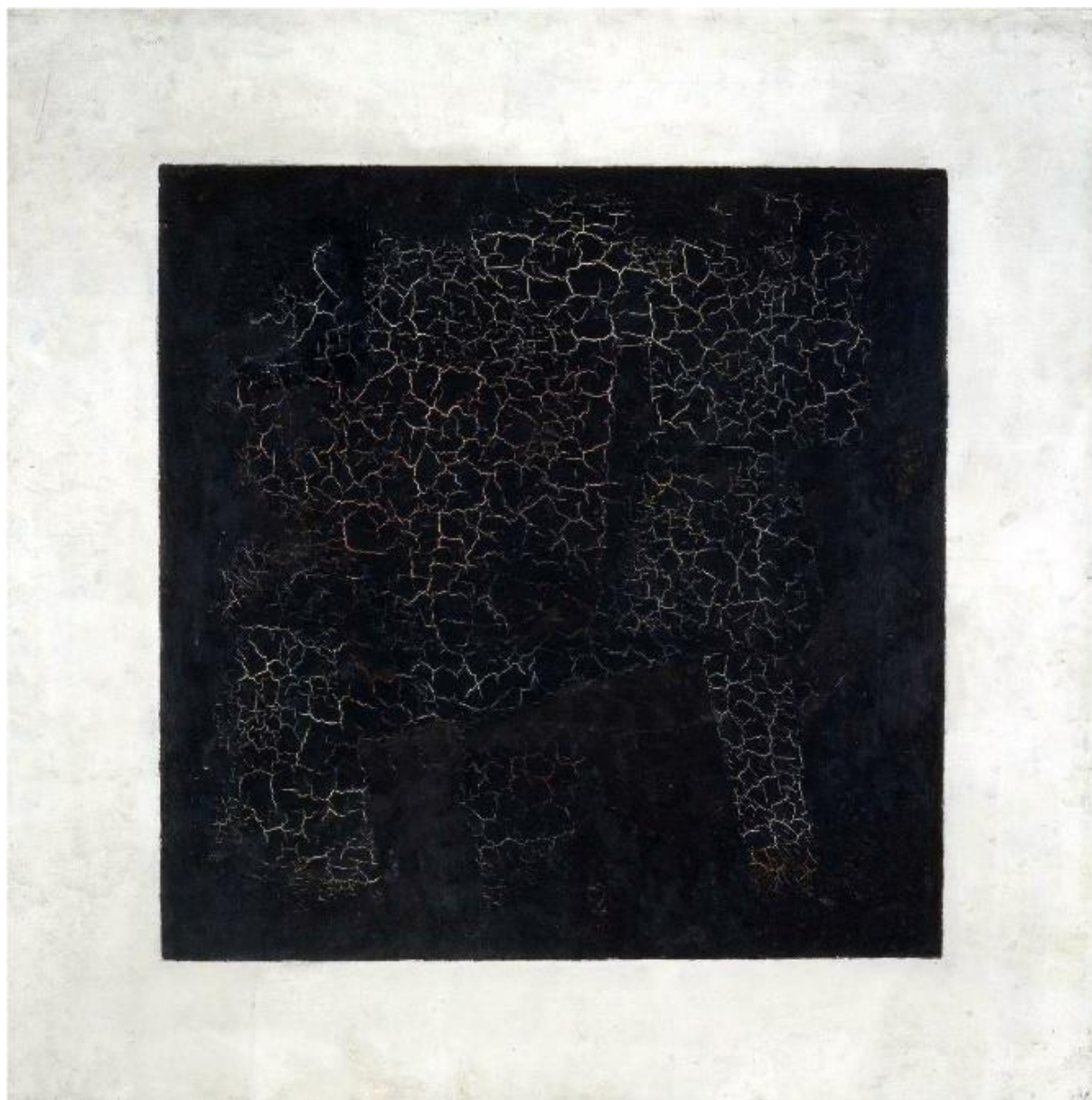
Illustrations

Figure 1. Kazimir Malevich. *Black Square*, 1915. Oil on canvas, 31 3/16 x 31 5/16 cm.
<https://jstor.org/stable/community.13698229>.



Figure 2.
Kazimir Malevich. *Cow and Violin (Bull and Violin)*, 1913. Oil on canvas, 48.8 x 25.8 cm. State Russian Museum. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.14499072>.

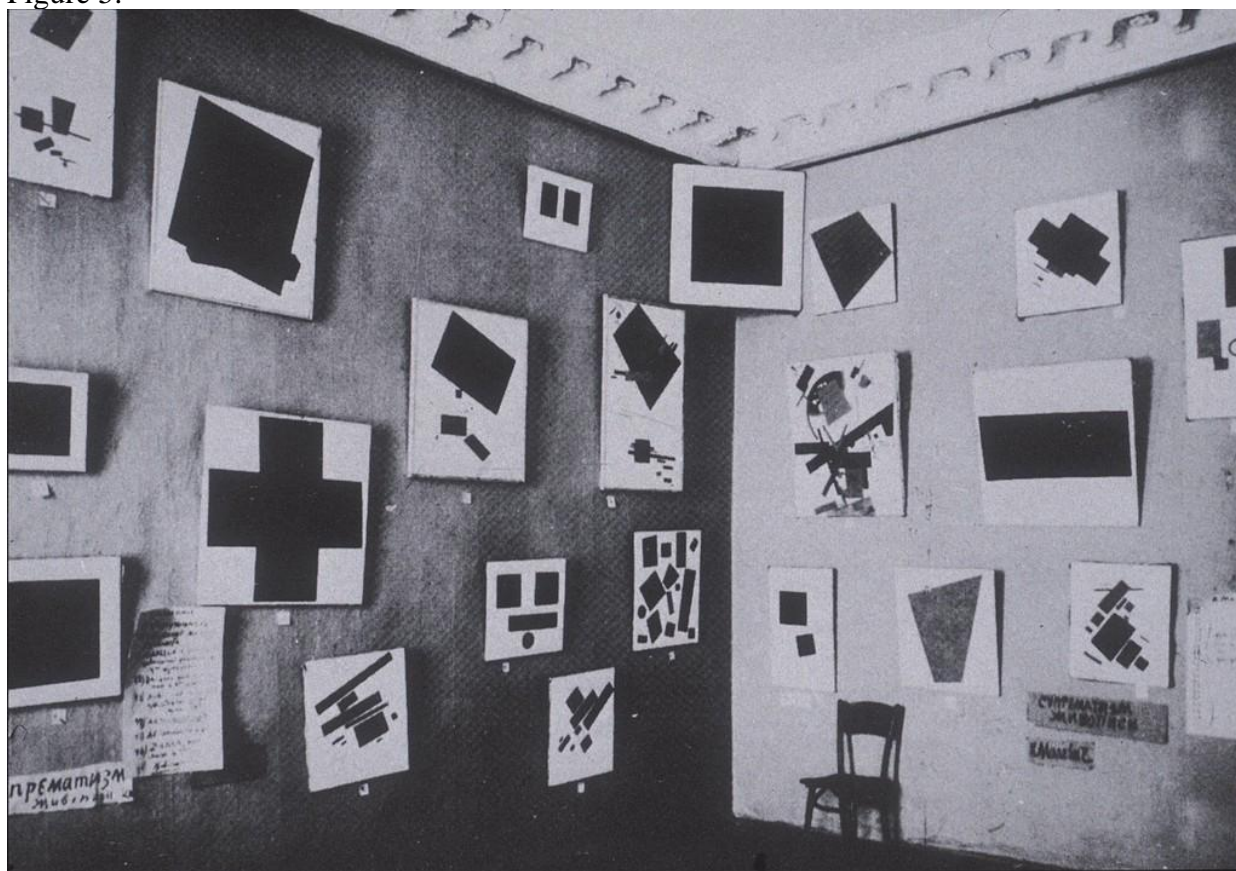


Figure 3.
Kazimir Malevich. *An Englishman in Moscow*, 1913-14. Oil on canvas, 88 x 57cm.
<https://jstor.org/stable/community.18117770>.



Figure 4. Kazimir Malevich. *Perfected Portrait of Ivan Kliun*. 1913. Oil on canvas. 111.5 x 70.5 cm. State Russian Museum

Figure 5.

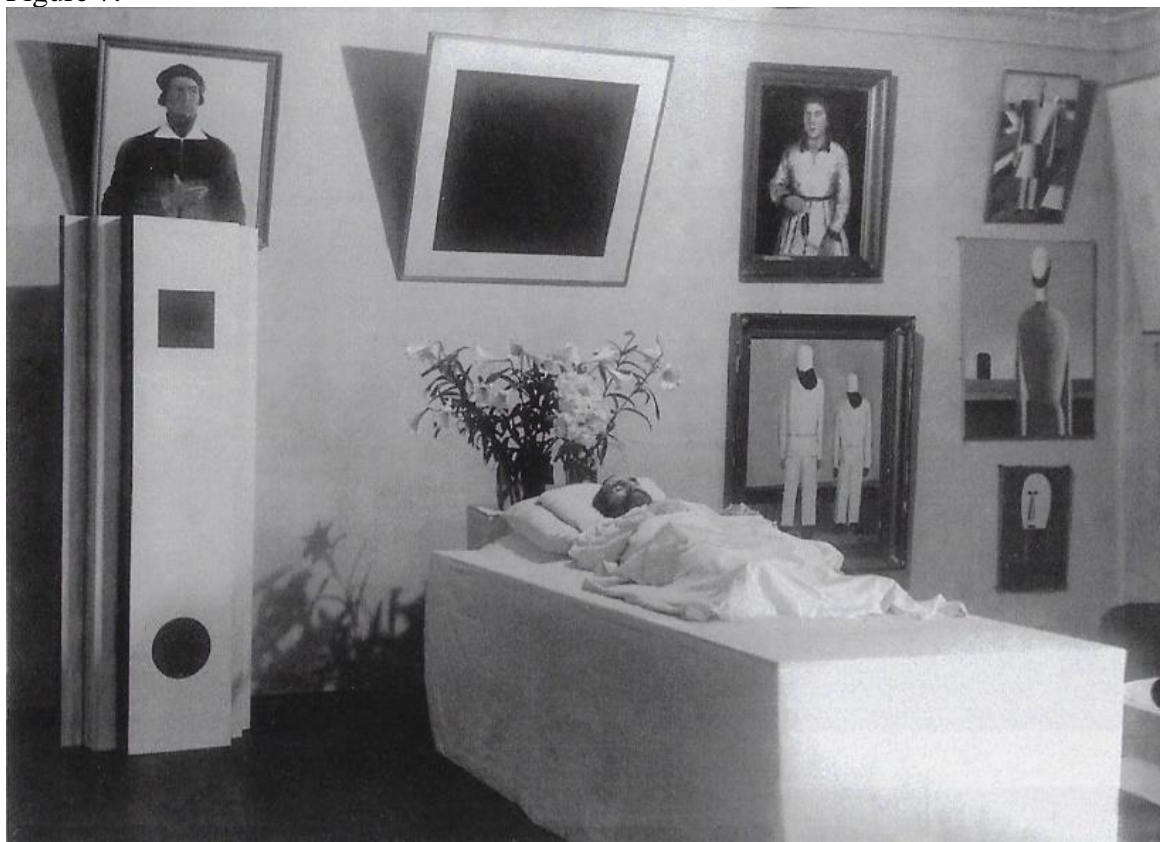


Kazimir Malevich. *Installation: Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings 0.10 St. Petersburg: Installation*. n.d. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.13734535>.



Figure 6.
Kazimir Malevich (center) and Members of Unovis, 1920.
<https://jstor.org/stable/community.13698771>.

Figure 7.

Malevich in his deathbed, 17 May 1935.¹⁸³

¹⁸³Kazimir Malevich and Irina Vakar. *Kazimir Malevich: Letters, Documents, Memoirs, Criticism*. Vol. 2 of 2 vols. (London: TATE Publishing, 2015), 498.

Figure 8.

Malevich's funeral procession, 18 May 1935.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸⁴ Malevich and Vakar. *Kazimir Malevich: Letters, Documents, Memoirs, Criticism*, 502.

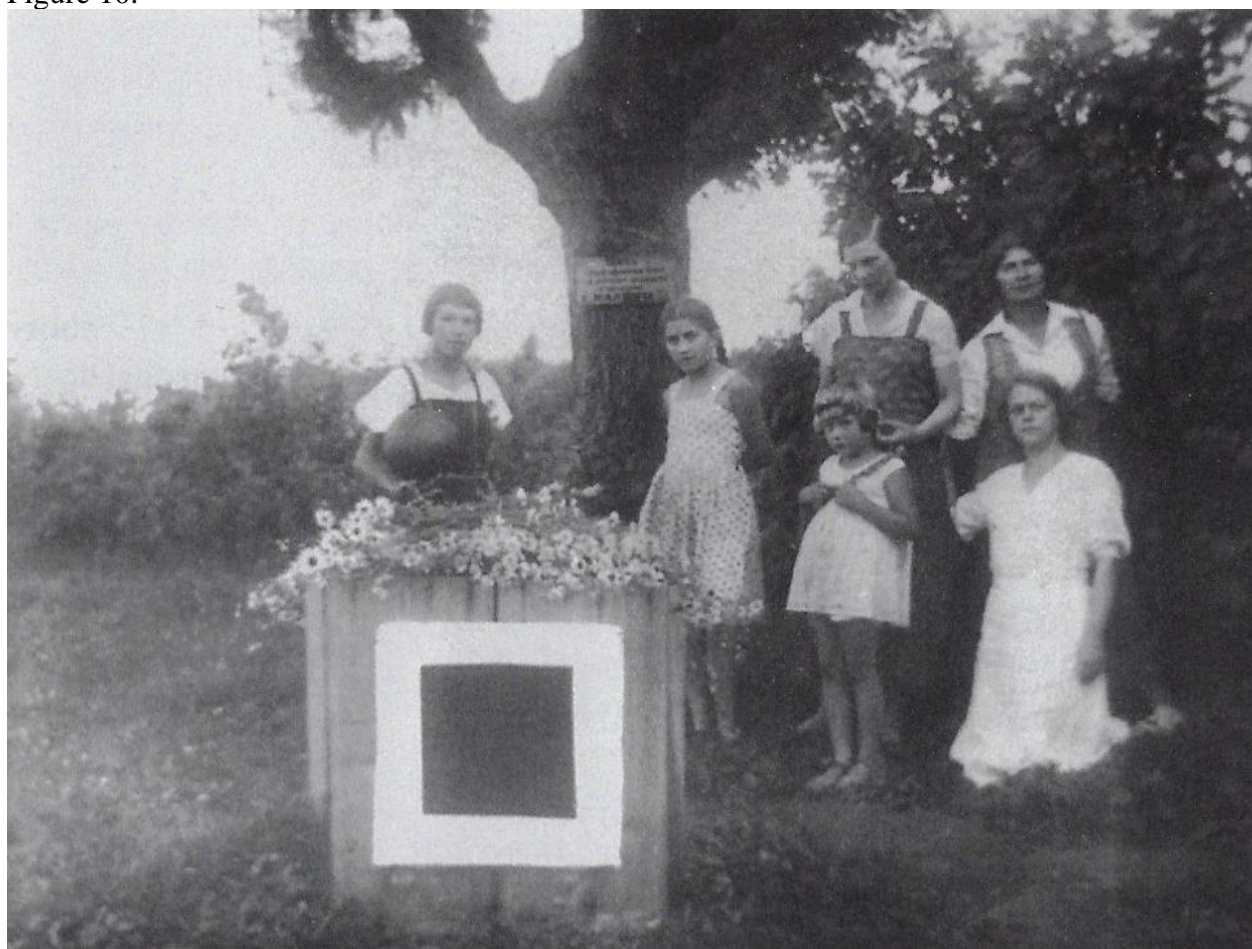
Figure 9.



Procession and Malevich's funeral car with a black square, 18 May 1935.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸⁵ Malevich and Vakar, 503.

Figure 10.

Malevich's grave in Nemchinovka, surrounded by family and friends, May 1935.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁶ Malevich and Vakar, 505.



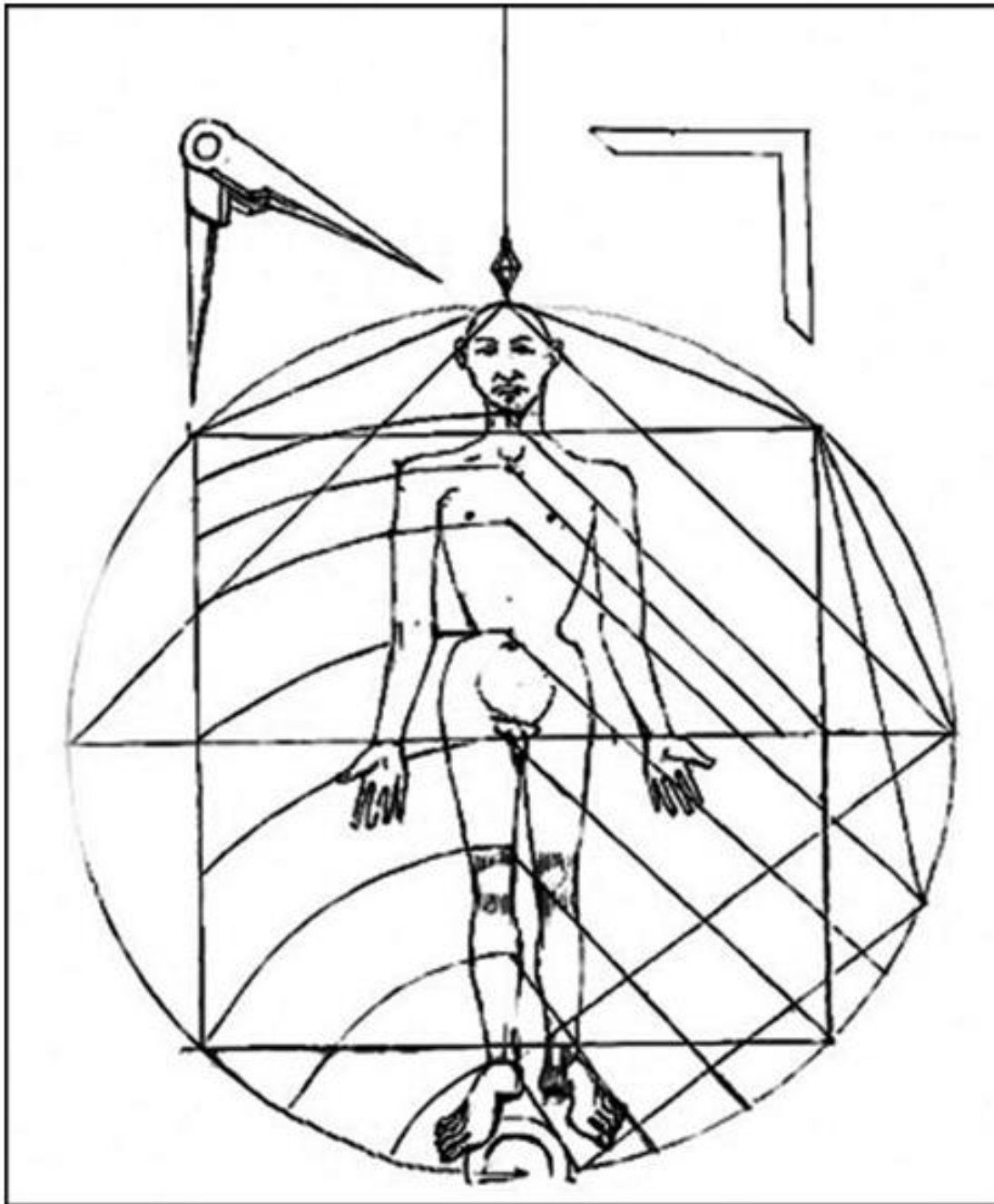
Figure 11. Natalia Malevich by her husband's grave in Nemchinovka, May 1935.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁷ Malevich and Vakar, 505



Figure 12.
Hildegard of Bingen, Liber Divinorum Operum, thirteenth century. Lucca, Biblioteca Statale,

Figure 13.



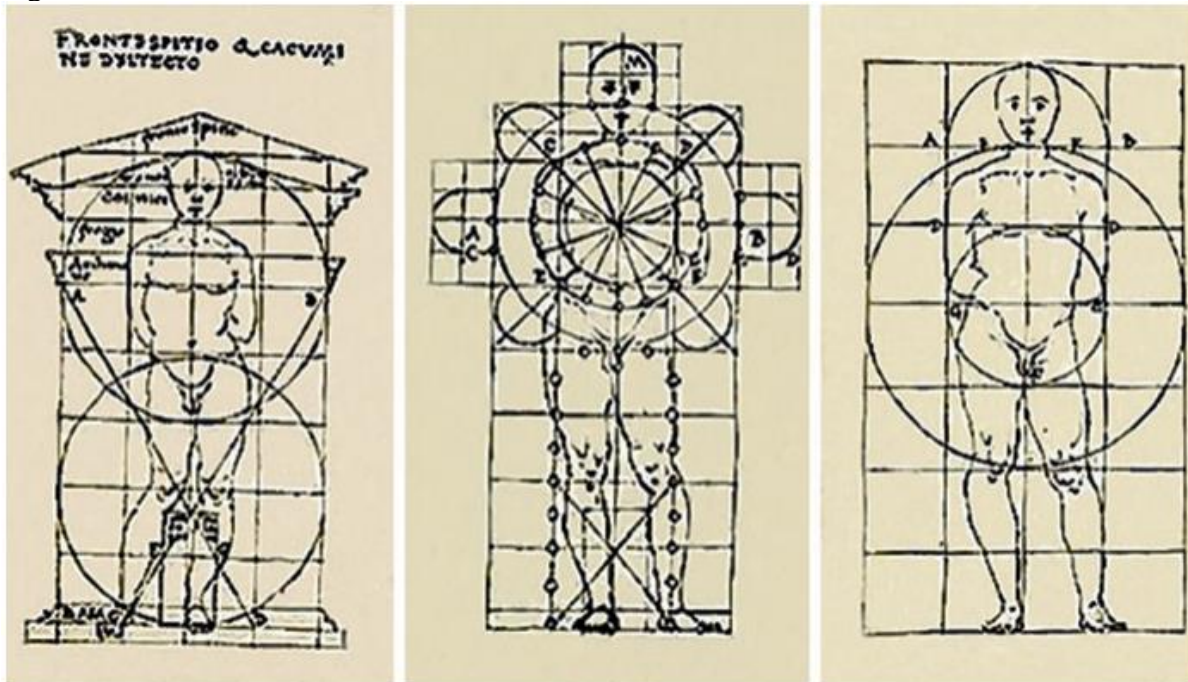
Taccola. *The Vitruvian Man* (detail), c. 1419–1450. *De ingeneis*, books I-II, f.36v, Cod. Lat. Monacensis 197 II (BSBM).

Figure 14.



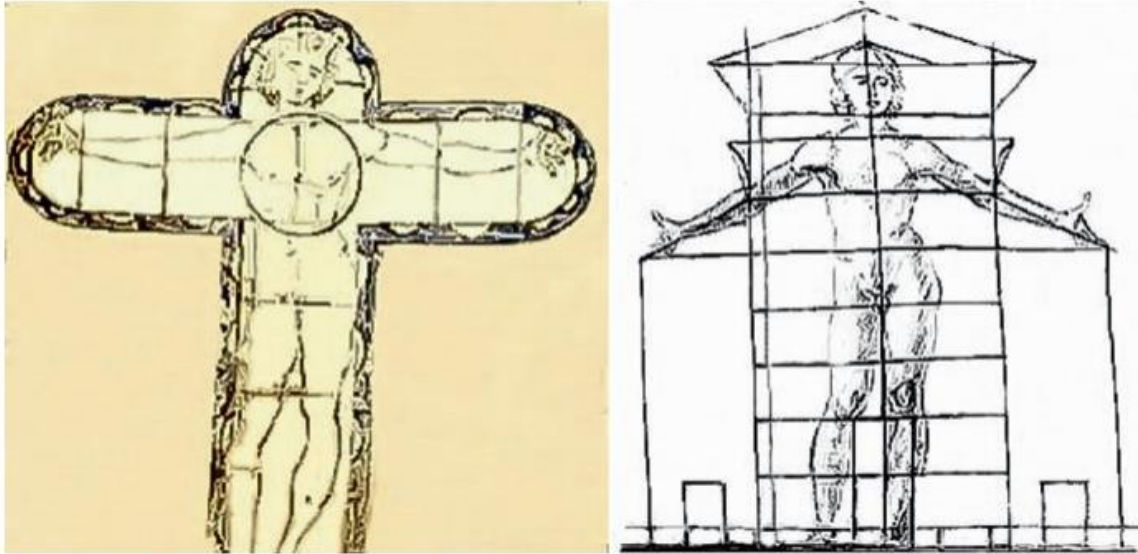
Francesco di Giorgio. *Vitruvian Man*, 1481–1485. Codex Ashburnham, folio 5r (detail). BMLF.

Figure 15.



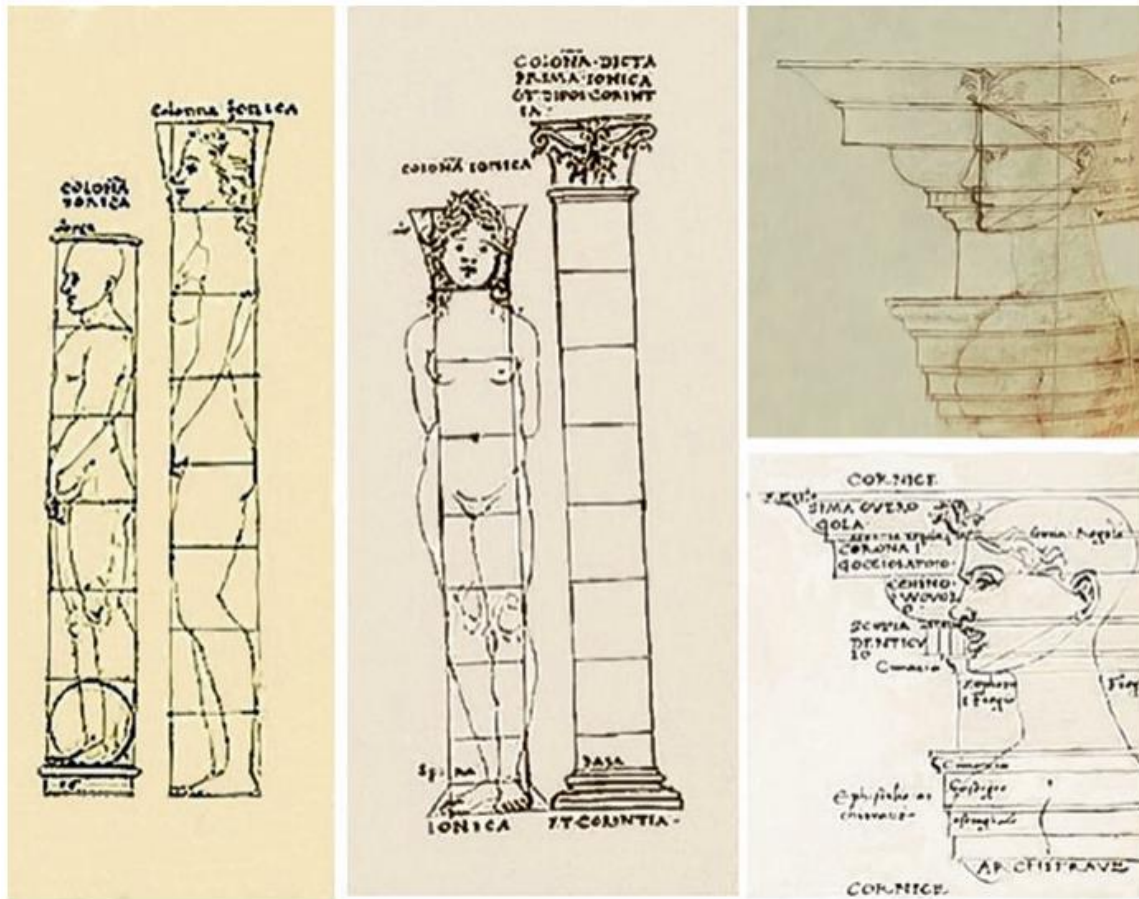
Francesco di Giorgio. *Trattato di Architettura*, folio 36, details (left), folio 42, (details), (center and right images). BNCF

Figure 16.



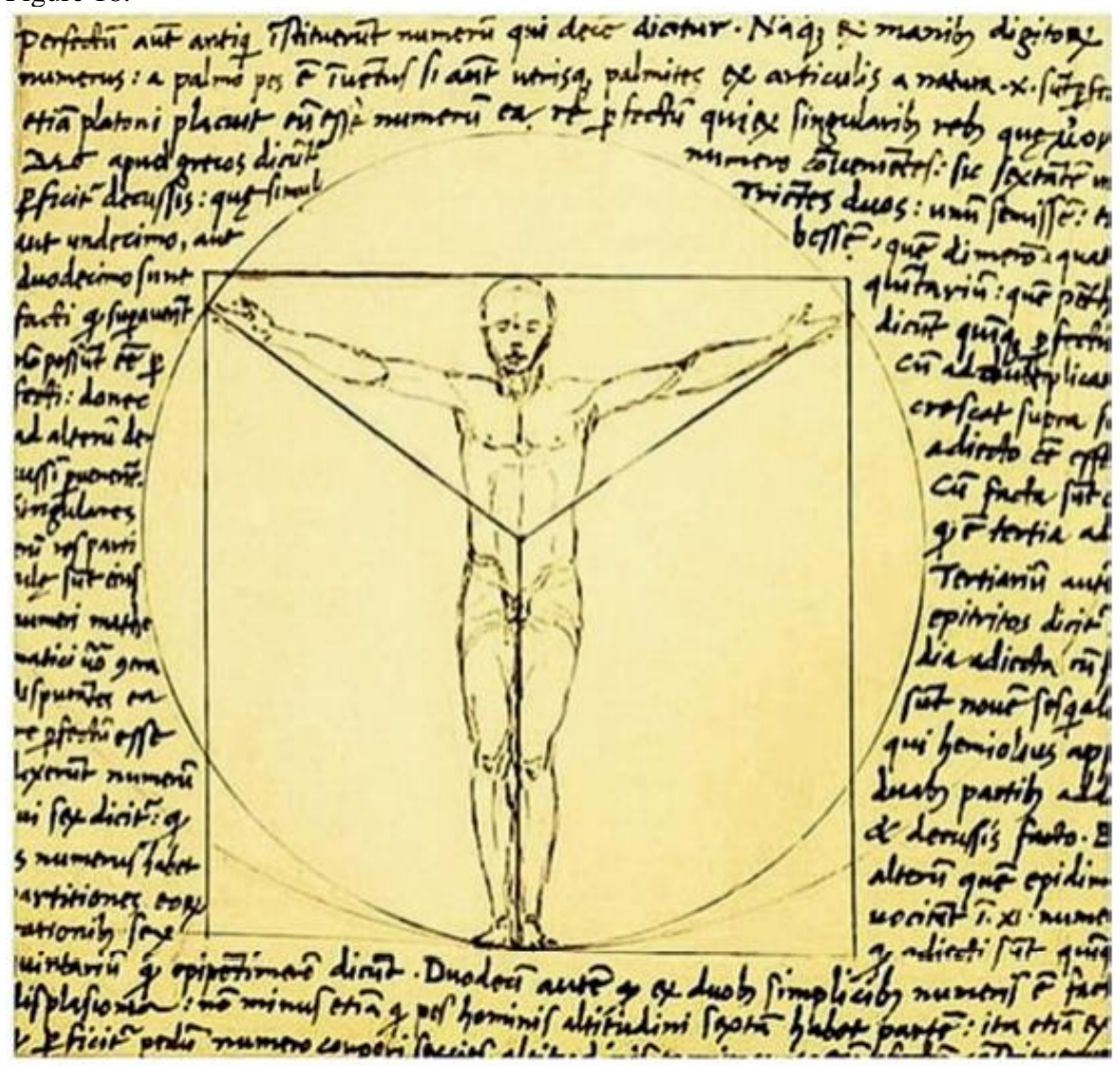
Francesco di Giorgio. Studies of dimensions of the human body to derive models for architecture, 1481–1485. Codex Ashburnham 361, folio 10v (detail), and folio 21r (detail). BMLF.

Figure 17.



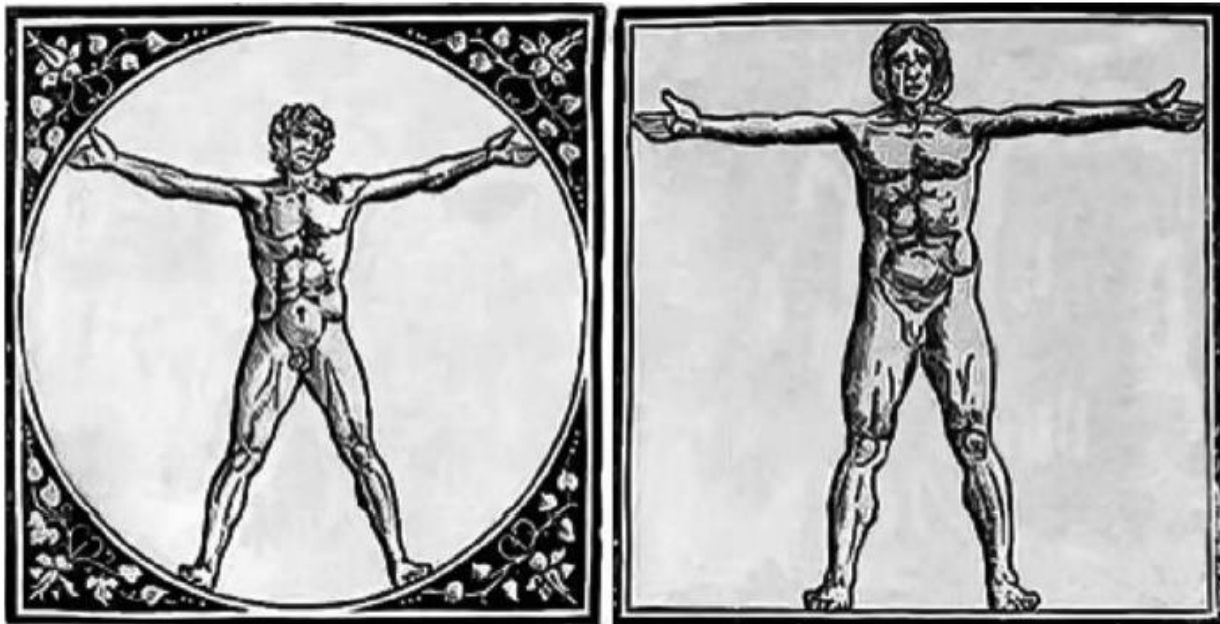
Francesco di Giorgio. *Trattato di Architettura*, details from folio 25 (left), folio 26 (center), and folio 35 (bottom right). BNCF. Codex Ashburnham 361, folio 20v (top right). BMLF

Figure 18.



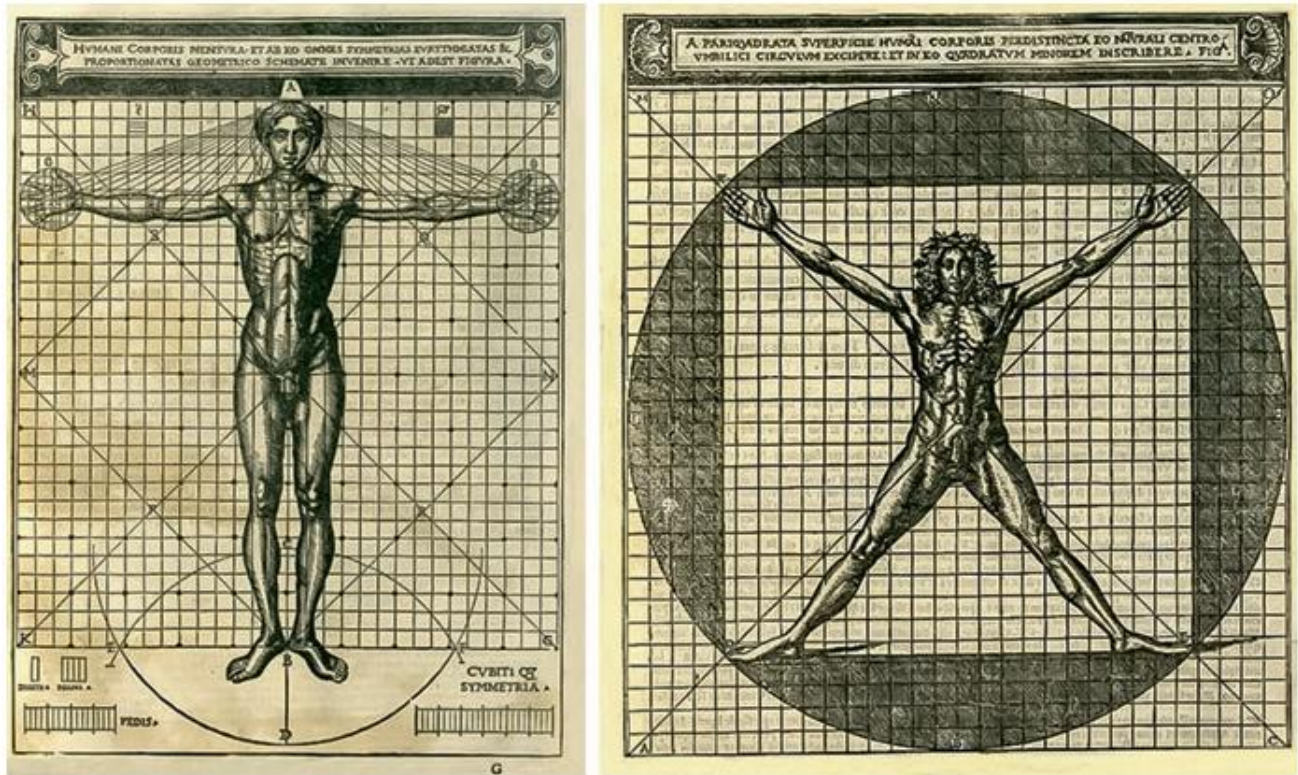
Giacomo Andrea da Ferrara. *The Vitruvian Man*. Biblioteca Ariostea, Ferrara. (Cart. Sec. XVI, Fol. Figurato, Classe II, N. 176, fol. 78v)

Figure 19.



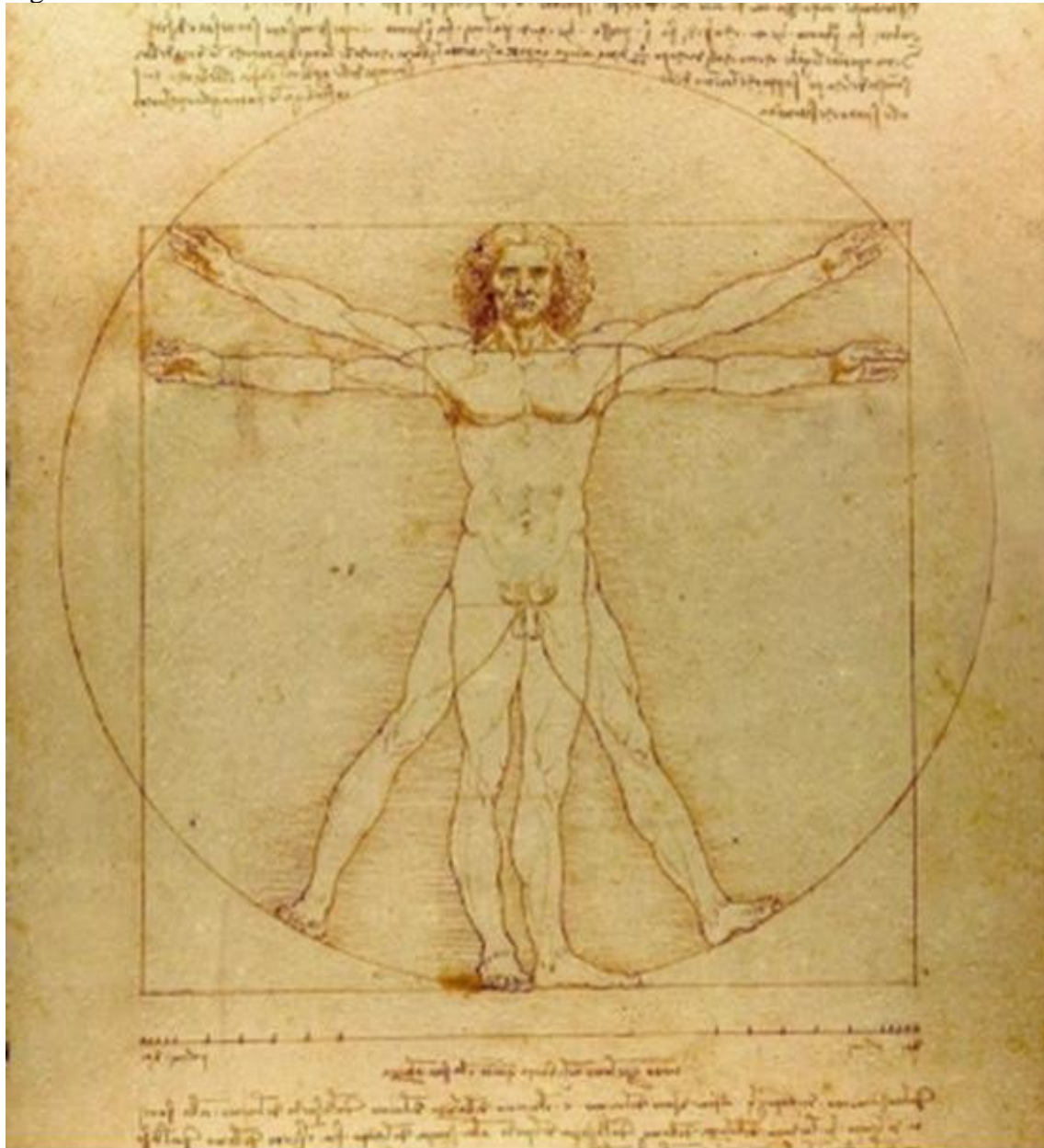
Fra Giocondo. *Vitruvian Man* (Illustrations from *De Architectura* of Vitruvius) [*Human Figure Inscribed in a Square*] (from Vitruvius, *On Architecture*), c. 1511. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.11177722>.

Figure 20.



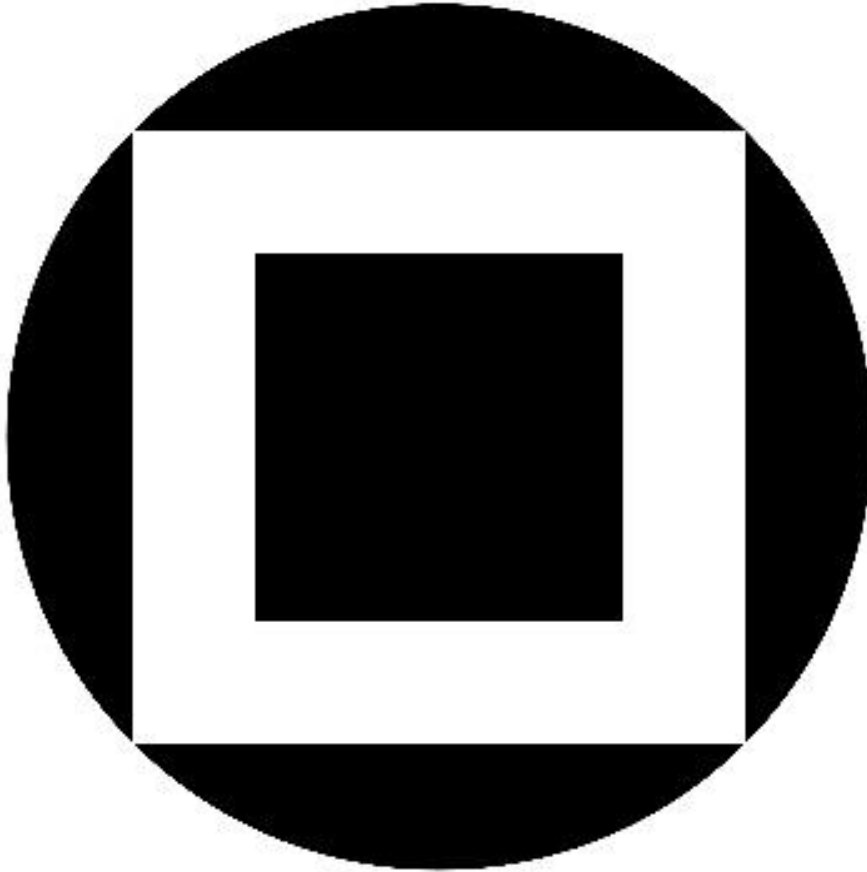
Cesare Cesariano. *Symmetry of the Human Body (First Vitruvian Man)* and *The Human Body Inscribed in a Square and a Circle (Second Vitruvian Man)*, 1521. Woodcut. The Warburg Institute Library, London, United Kingdom. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.12251878>.

Figure 21.



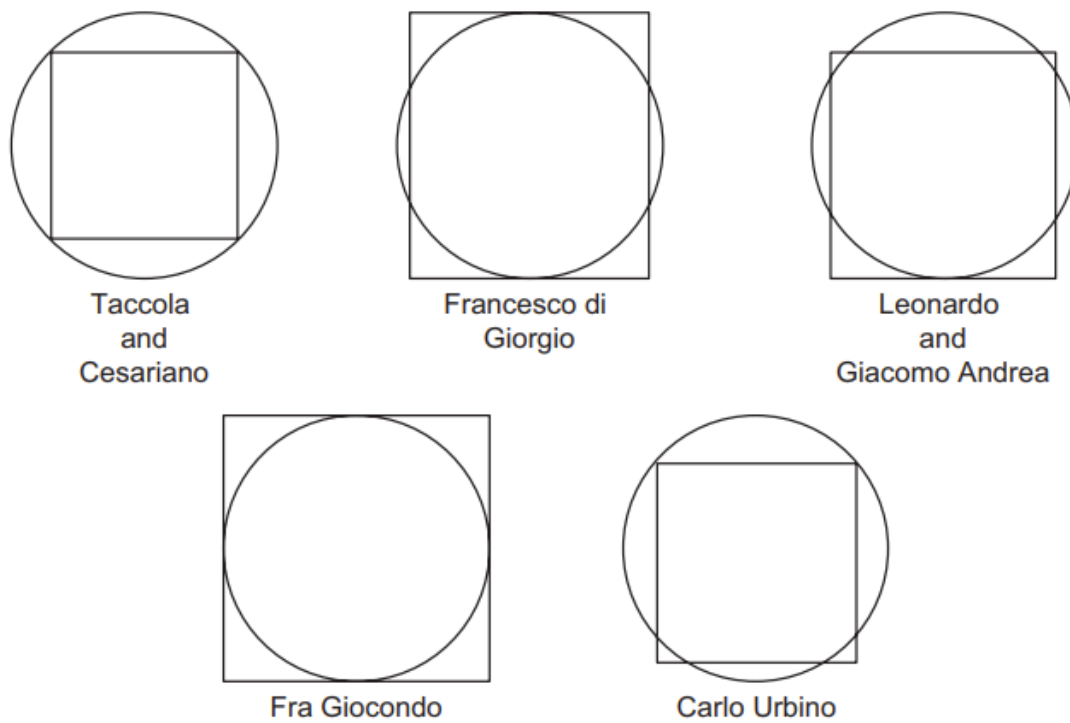
Leonardo Da Vinci. *Study of a Man According to Vitruvius (Vitruvian Man)*, c. 1485-1490. Pen & ink, 34.3x24.5cm. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.18117172>.

Figure 22.



The frame of the hollow white square in front of a black circle representing infinite nothingness.

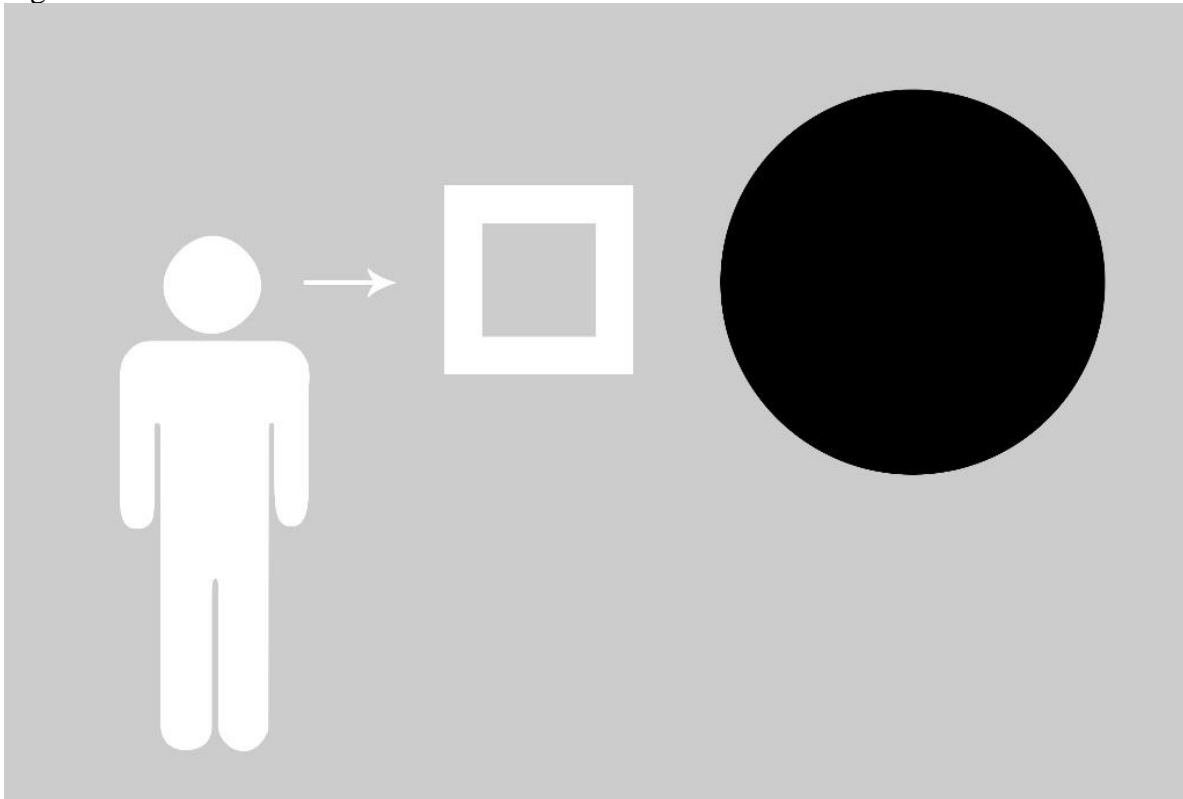
Figure 23.



The different geometric solutions adopted for the *Vitruvian Man*.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁸ Innocenzi, 201

Figure 24.



The tripartite structure of the Vitruvian figure as expressed in the *Black Square*.

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