ART AND OCCUPATION

Kazimir Malevich, *The Knife Grinder (The Glittering Edge)* 1912–13

An extraordinary kaleidoscope of metallic colours, like multiple reflections in a broken mirror—this confusing jumble of repetitive, shimmering, geometric shapes slowly unravels to reveal a complex dynamic scene of human motion and energy. The central figure, a moustached man in a peaked cap, crouches over a pale blue, rotating, grinding wheel. His right hand grips a blue/grey knife, while his left guides the blade forward into contact with the sandstone as his legs pump the grinding wheel into action. Repeatedly overdrawn outlines impart a cinematic sense of movement, mechanical vibration and dynamic rhythm which meld into the dense abstract industrial background as man, machine and manufactory are fused into one giant system. *The Knife Grinder* hails the start of a new industrial age where working people will be masters of the world [1] and Malevich uses his 20th century Cubo-Futurist interpretation (oil on canvas 79.5 × 79.5 cm) of a humble rustic 19th century peasant occupation to celebrate the symbolic passing of the old to the new.

Please note that this image could not be reproduced due to restrictions from the rights holder.
Kazimir Severonic Malevich was born near Kiev, Ukraine (1878) the first of 14 children, of whom only 9 survived. He started painting aged 12 and for a brief period attended the Kiev School of Art [2]. At 16, he joined his father as a draughtsman in the Kursk railway offices and by 1904 had saved enough money to enrol at the Moscow School of Painting Sculpture and Architecture but failed to gain admission. Undeterred, he continued his studies at Ivan Rerberg's studio, exhibiting frequently at the Moscow Community of Painters (1907–1909) [3]. Over the next 4 years, his style radically changed from the Cubo-Futurism of The Knife Grinder to the totally abstract suprematism of the Black Square [4]. He espoused the aesthetic and moral superiority of his ‘new’ art, which he called ‘unobjective creativity’ [2].

Following the 1917 Revolution, the Soviet government encouraged Russia’s leading artists to take up prominent administrative and academic positions and in 1919 Malevich, by now one of the country’s pre-eminent avant-garde artists, left Moscow to teach at the Vitebsk Popular Art School (Belarus) replacing Marc Chagall. Later, he became director at the State Institute of Artistic Culture (1922). However, Stalin’s burgeoning regime had begun to promote Socialist Realism, an art form completely at odds with Malevich’s suprematism. He was ‘sacked’ as director (1926) for ‘counterrevolutionary sermonizing’, dismissed from the Institute and briefly jailed as a German spy (1930) [5].

On his release, he continued to paint but in a style acceptable to the regime although he signed his last great work, Self-Portrait (1933) with a subversive black square. In 1934, diagnosed with cancer he began to plan his own funeral. He designed the coffin, which would be decorated with a black square at the head and a black circle at the foot and subsequently carried on a lorry through the streets of Leningrad (St. Petersburg) before being taken by train to Moscow for cremation (1935). His ashes were buried in a field near his dacha at Nemchinovka just west of Moscow and a white cube with a black square marked the ‘grave’, now the site of a luxury housing complex, Romashkovo-2 [6]. After his death, Malevich became largely forgotten and his ideas suppressed. It would be another 27 years before his work would reappear in Russia. Now he is generally recognized as a pioneer of geometric abstract art and the originator of the Suprematist art movement. His work is much sought after and while Knife Grinder originally sold for a meagre $40 US [5], his later painting Suprematist Composition (1916) recently reached a dizzying $60 US million [7].

In the current state of economic uncertainty, the old English adage ‘keeping one’s nose to the grindstone’ might be more appropriate than the US constitutional pursuit of happiness, a laudable but unworldly concept, which provokes the less than polite Russian observation that ‘a person who smiles a lot is either a fool or an American’ [8]. Yet the UN recently held an International Day of Happiness to promote social, economic and environmental welfare [9] in the heuristic belief that well-being at work (WAW) [10] may deliver improved productivity as well as better public health [11]. Each year, the UN promotes 54 such International Days including an International Jazz Day. Enlightened employers wishing to pursue the ‘Devil’s music’ might find the Miles Davis Quintet’s 1956 album Workin’ [12] the ideal vehicle with which to ‘break down barriers and create opportunities for mutual understanding and tolerance’ [13]. Though they might want to take five....

Mike McKiernan
e-mail: art@som.org.uk

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank John Dilley for recommending Patrick Connor’s book Looking at Art: People at Work [14] from which this painting is taken.

References

5. Cole TB. Spring. JAMA 2011;305:1066, the cover.