

***Chagall, Lissitzky, Malevich:  
The Russian Avant-Garde in Vitebsk, 1918–1922***  
**Opens at the Jewish Museum on September 14, 2018**

New York, NY, April 17, 2018 – The Jewish Museum will offer museum visitors a rare opportunity to explore a little-known chapter in the history of modernity and the Russian avant-garde. On view from September 14, 2018 through January 6, 2019, ***Chagall, Lissitzky, Malevich: The Russian Avant-Garde in Vitebsk, 1918–1922*** will focus on the People's Art School (1918–1922), founded by Marc Chagall in his native city of Vitebsk (in present day Belarus). Through some 120 works and documents loaned by museums in Vitebsk and Minsk and major American and European collections, the exhibition will present the artistic output of three iconic figures – Marc Chagall, El Lissitzky and Kazimir Malevich – as well as works by students and teachers of the Vitebsk school, such as Lazar Khidekel, Nikolai Suetin, Il'ia Chashnik, David Yakerson, Vera Ermolaeva, and Yehuda (Yury) Pen, among others. *Chagall, Lissitzky, Malevich: The Russian Avant-Garde in Vitebsk, 1918–1922* is organized by the Centre Pompidou, Paris, in collaboration with the Jewish Museum, New York.

The year 2018 marks the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Chagall's appointment as Fine Arts Commissioner for the Vitebsk region, a position that enabled him to carry out his idea of creating a revolutionary art school in his city, open to everyone, free of charge and with no age restrictions. The People's Art School was the perfect embodiment of Bolshevik values, and was approved in August 1918. A month later, Chagall was appointed Fine Arts Commissioner. El Lissitzky and Kazimir Malevich, leading exponents of the Russian avant-garde, were two of the artists invited to teach at the school. A period of feverish artistic activity followed, turning the school into a revolutionary laboratory. Each of these three major figures sought, in his own distinctive fashion, to develop a "Leftist Art" in tune with the revolutionary emphasis on collectivism, education, and innovation. The exhibition traces the fascinating post-revolutionary years when the history of art was shaped in Vitebsk, far from Russia's main cities.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 had an enormous effect on Chagall. The passage of a law abolishing all discrimination on the basis of religion or nationality gave him, as a Jewish artist, full Russian citizenship for the first time. This inspired a series of monumental masterpieces, such as *Double Portrait with Wine Glass* (1917), celebrating the happiness of the newly married Chagall and his wife Bella. As the months went by, Chagall felt the need to help young residents of Vitebsk lacking an artistic education, and to support other Jews from humble backgrounds. Once he was named commissioner for the arts in his city, his first task was to organize festivities marking the first anniversary of the October Revolution. The streets of Vitebsk were transformed into a sea of colorful banners and signs designed by Chagall and the young David Yakerson. Studies for these banners will be on view in the exhibition. After the celebrations, Chagall devoted himself to creating his school which was officially inaugurated on January 28, 1919 with the goal of providing a high level of teaching in all art styles.

While the first teachers left before the spring, they were replaced by others. El Lissitzky took charge of the printing, graphic design, and

architecture workshops. The leader of the abstract movement, Kazimir Malevich, founder of Suprematism, was a charismatic theorist who galvanized the young students upon his arrival in November 1919. He formed a group with sympathetic teachers and students called Unovis (champions of new art). Suprematist abstraction became the new paradigm. Lissitzky, as a trained architect, played a crucial role in the newly founded collective. With his extraordinary *Proun* series (projects for asserting the new in art), he was the first to extend architectural volume to the pictorial plane, considering the series as “stations where one changes from painting to architecture.” Chagall continued to produce his individualist art while making ironic use of the language of non-objective art promoted by Malevich and his students. Meanwhile, during his time in Vitebsk, Malevich began to abandon painting – an exception being his magisterial painting *Suprematism of the Spirit* (1919), included in the exhibition – in favor of his main theoretical writings and education. A methodical and stimulating teacher, he attracted more and more students, while attendance to Chagall’s classes gradually dwindled.

Chagall’s dream was to develop a revolutionary art independent of style or dogma but this came to an end in the spring of 1920. He decided to leave Vitebsk in June and went to live and work for the Jewish theater in Moscow. After Chagall’s departure, Malevich and the Unovis collective, now in command, worked at “building a new world.” Collective exhibitions were staged in Vitebsk and major Russian cities. With the end of civil war in 1921–1922, the political climate changed again. The Soviet authorities decided to impose ideological and social order, eliminating artistic movements which did not directly serve the interests of the Bolshevik party. In May 1922 the first graduating class of the Vitebsk school of art was also the last. During the summer, Malevich left for Petrograd (now Saint Petersburg) with several of his students, and continued to develop his ideas on volumetric Suprematism, building models of utopian architecture called *Architectones*, and designing porcelain tableware. A number of these works will be shown in the exhibition. Moving to Berlin in 1922, Lissitzky further developed his *Prouns* and, later, had his first solo exhibition in Hanover.

*Chagall, Lissitzky, Malevich: The Russian Avant-Garde in Vitebsk, 1918–1922* is organized by the exhibition curator, Angela Lampe, Curator of Modern Art, Musée National d’Art Moderne, Centre Pompidou, Paris, in collaboration with Claudia J. Nahson, Morris & Eva Feld Curator, The Jewish Museum, for the New York presentation. The exhibition is being designed by Leslie Gill Architect. The exhibition graphics are being designed by Topos Graphics.

A full-color catalogue, edited by Angela Lampe, the exhibition curator, will be published by Prestel Publishing. The 288-page book will include essays by leading experts on the Russian and Soviet avant-garde, biographies of the artists, and an illustrated chronology of the years 1919 to 1923.

### Support

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**About the Jewish Museum**

Located on New York City's famed Museum Mile, the Jewish Museum is a distinctive hub for art and Jewish culture for people of all backgrounds. Founded in 1904, the Museum was the first institution of its kind in the United States and is one of the oldest Jewish museums in the world. Devoted to exploring art and Jewish culture from ancient to contemporary, the Museum offers diverse exhibitions and programs, and maintains a unique collection of nearly 30,000 works of art, ceremonial objects, and media reflecting the global Jewish experience over more than 4,000 years.

Location: 1109 Fifth Avenue at 92nd Street, New York City  
Hours: Saturday, Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday, 11am to 5:45pm; Thursday, 11am to 8pm; and Friday, 11am to 4pm.  
Admission: \$18.00 for adults; \$12.00 for senior citizens; and \$8.00 for students. Free for visitors 18 and under and Jewish Museum members. Pay What You Wish on Thursdays from 5pm to 8pm. Free on Saturdays and select Jewish holidays  
Information: The public may call 212.423.3200 or visit [TheJewishMuseum.org](http://TheJewishMuseum.org)

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