

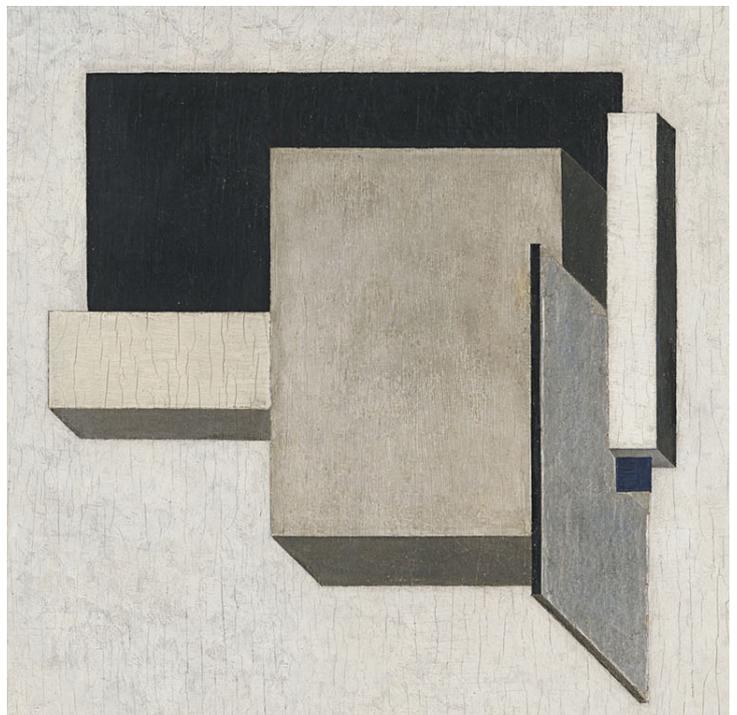
El Lissitzky's *Proun 1C*

Tatiana Goriacheva

I realised that easel painting was not self-sufficient perfection but a stage of development in my artistic process. I called this stage 'Proun'.¹

What we call a 'Proun' is a station on the way to creating a new form...²

The Proun moves from station to station along a chain of perfections.³



1
El Lissitzky, 'Vystuplenie v klube im. Sezanna 27 oktyabrya 1920 goda' [Lecture in the Paul Cézanne club on 27 October 1920], in Alexander Kantsedikas and Zoya Yargina, *El Lissitzky. Film Zhizni. 1890–1941* [El Lissitzky: A Cinematic Life, 1890–1941], vol. 7, Moscow, Novyi Ermitazh, 2005, 28.

2
El Lissitzky, 'Proun. Ne mirovidenie, a miroreal'nost'' [Proun: Not a Worldview BUT the World Reality], in Kantsedikas and Yargina 2005, op. cit. note 1, 31.

3
Ibid., 34.

El Lissitzky
Proun 1C, 1919
(detail)

[\[+ info\]](#)

A Path to Prouns

In 1919 El Lissitzky (Lazar Markovich Lissitzky, 1890–1941) invented a new artistic system, one he would later call 'Proun', an acronym for 'Project for the Affirmation of the New' in Russian. Proun was both the title of each individual work and the term denoting the system as a whole. This amalgamation of two meanings in one word responded to a desire to introduce Prouns not as another art movement but as a total world-constructing project with every individual work forming part of it. The seeming paradox of a station that moves between stations actually presented a key to the artistic phenomenon of the Proun and stressed its ambiguity and lability.

Calling the Proun a 'stage' or 'station' reflected both Lissitzky's concept and the real state of affairs: Prouns would come to be a stage in his artistic biography, one that made him famous and would later be used in architecture, printing and design. Becoming an integral part of the pan-European Constructivist movement, Prouns turned into a vector not only for Lissitzky's own work, as their influence on artistic thought transcended boundaries of genre and chronology and the concept remains relevant today.

Shortly before his death, in 1940, responding to a questionnaire, Lissitzky wrote: 'As they say, "modesty won't permit me" to talk about my influence in creating contemporary Western European art'.⁴ This was no overstatement. His friend, the architect Hans Schmidt, recalls: 'For us, he was more than a creative personality. He represented an idea that meant the world to us'.⁵

But let us backtrack in time. In 1918, while working in the art section of the Moscow Soviet of Workers, Peasants and Red Army Deputies, Lissitzky met Kazimir Malevich (they may have run into one another earlier, in November 1917, at the Jack of Diamonds exhibition in which they both participated). This acquaintance was followed by a series of events that culminated in the invention of Prouns. Invited by Marc Chagall, Lissitzky began teaching at the People's Art School in Vitebsk in May 1919. Lissitzky then summoned Malevich, who followed him in November. With Malevich's arrival, the art school and all of Vitebsk turned into a testing ground for a large-scale

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El Lissitzky, 'Information about the Furniture Designer: Answers to the Questionnaire', in Tatiana Goriacheva, 'El Lissitzky 1890–1941', *K vystavke v zalakh Gosudarstvennoi Tretyakovskoi galerei*, Moscow, State Tretyakov Gallery, 1991, 189.

5

Hans Schmidt, 'Erinnerungen an L. Lissitzky', in *El Lissitzky. Maler. Architekt. Typograf. Fotograf. Erinnerungen, Briefe, Schriften*, Dresden, Verlag der Kunst, 1976, 399.

utopian experiment – the construction of a Suprematist world. Lissitzky was assigned a crucial role in this experiment, that of translating Suprematism into three-dimensional forms. The three-dimensional interpretation of Suprematism was intended to lay the foundations of the architectural concept of the future.

An apology of the city has always been a key perspective of utopian thought. After all, a metropolis is an exemplary model of rationally organised human existence, the ideal social space. In utopian consciousness, the architect was a world-creator. In post-revolutionary Russia the idea of the city of the future, the 'City of the Commune', became especially relevant. In his 1919 article 'To the Innovators of the World', Malevich wrote: 'The city, the temple and the palace are living new forms of the international mission; the art of technology is the true framework of world transformation and creation'.⁶

Considering Suprematism the answer to all possible socio-aesthetic questions of the future, Malevich proclaimed it to be the method and means of total world transformation: 'Having established definite plans for the Suprematist system, I am handing over the development of what is now architectural Suprematism to young architects in the broad sense of the term, for it is only in Suprematism that I see a new architectural system. ... Long live the unified system of world architecture'.⁷ It is not surprising that he chose Lissitzky for this task; the gifted young artist with an architectural education and a burning desire to learn the language of the avant-garde found the basic plastic rules of the Suprematist system easy to master and was able to reveal their spatial potential.

In February 1920 Malevich's followers – both students and teachers – founded the Unovis group (an acronym for 'Utverditeli novogo iskusstva', or 'Affirmers of the New Art' in Russian). Lissitzky was an active member and participated in all the activities of the Suprematist 'party', which had actually

6
Kazimir Malevich, 'Novatoram vsego mira. Tezisy' [To the Innovators of the World], 1919, Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (RGALI), Moscow, ф. 665, оп. 1, ед. хр.32, л. 1.

7
Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematizm. 34 risunka* [Suprematism: 34 Drawings], Vitebsk, Unovis, 1920, cited in Kazimir Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii v pyati tomakh* [Collected Works in Five Volumes], vol. 1, Moscow, Gileya, 1995, 189.

come together at the end of 1919. Also in 1919, with a view to participating in the celebration of the anniversary of the Vitebsk Committee to Combat Unemployment, he and Malevich made several posters and wall hangings. That same year Lissitzky designed the cover for Malevich's treatise *On New Systems in Art: Statics and Speed*, and his students, guided by their teacher, printed the brochure lithographically. In 1920 Lissitzky designed the typewritten *Unovis Almanac No. 1* and worked on his book, *About Two Squares in Six Constructions: A Suprematist Tale*. In 1920 and 1921 he developed a project for staging an 'electromechanical performance' of Mikhail Matiushin and Aleksei Kruchenykh's opera *Victory Over the Sun*, including the design of the figurines. The spring of 1920 also witnessed Lissitzky's first appearance as an avant-garde theorist as he wrote his first articles – 'Communism of Labour and Suprematism of Creativity' and 'The Suprematism of World Construction' for *Unovis Almanac No. 1*.

As soon as Malevich arrived in Vitebsk, Lissitzky began working on a three-dimensional version of Suprematism. He was learning about the laws and devices of classical Suprematism and, at the same time, experimenting with its spatial possibilities.

However, Suprematism as such only served Lissitzky as a starting point for moving in the direction suggested by Malevich. Since December 1919 he had been working in parallel on two versions of three-dimensional Suprematism. One involved the introduction of three-dimensional elements into flat Suprematist compositions (for instance, details like blocks of wood instead of drawn rectangles). This experiment did not particularly transcend the Suprematist system and appeared as an individual interpretation of it. Another version (a complex spatial construction made up of volumetric objects) had a clear architectural component and was a more promising exploration of the three-dimensional opportunities of Suprematism. It was this type of composition, reminiscent of an architectural model, that Lissitzky invented and which, a year later, he named 'Proun'.

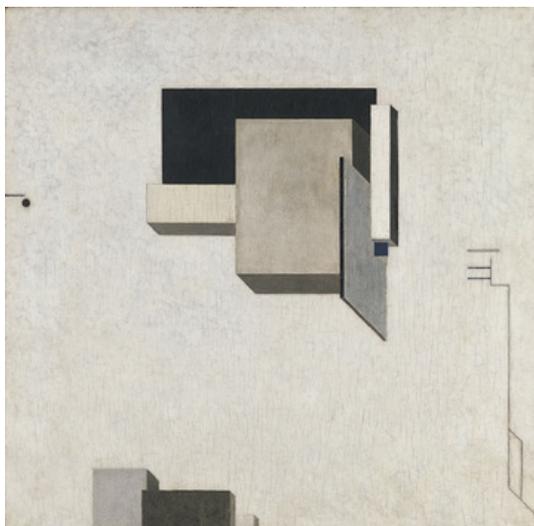


fig. 1
El Lissitzky
Proun 1C, 1919
Oil on panel, 68 × 68 cm
Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza,
Madrid, 652 (1988.20)

fig. 2
El Lissitzky
House above the Earth (Proun 1C), 1919
Lead pencil, ink and gouache on paper, 23.8 × 18.1 cm
State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, RS-3768

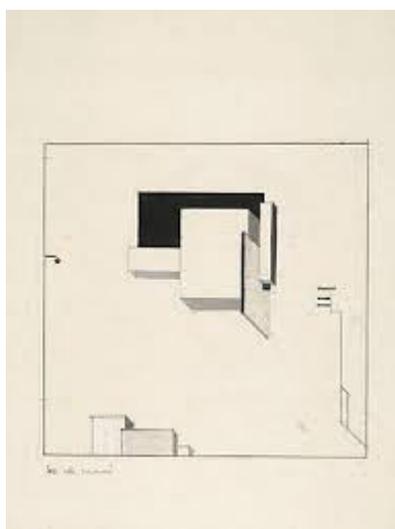


fig. 3
El Lissitzky in his studio in Vitebsk, with *Proun 23 (Arch)* on the easel and *House above the Earth (Proun 1C)* on the back wall, bottom centre, 1920

According to the artist's son, Jen Lissitzky, the first Proun was created in 1919. It was *House above the Earth* [fig. 1] and almost literally visualised Lissitzky's utopian programme ('In a city we go through the constricting foundation of the earth and we rise above it').⁸ The title of the work is recorded by Lissitzky on the gouache sketch now in the collection of the State Tretyakov Gallery [fig. 2]. The painting itself was documented in a photograph of the Vitebsk studio in 1920 [fig. 3]. At the moment of its creation and for some time afterwards the work kept the name *House above the Earth*. The new artistic system did not yet have a title or a theoretical basis; it existed as a derivative of Suprematism. In spring 1920 Lissitzky announced the publication of his forthcoming article, 'The Ex-painting and Architectural Suprematism', in *Unovis Almanac No. 1*.⁹ The text never saw the light. However, his use of the term 'ex-painting' (*ekskartina*) was his first attempt to summarise his work as architectural projects and to point out how it differed from easel-based Suprematism.

⁸ El Lissitzky, *Suprematism in World Reconstruction / Almanakh Unovis No. 1*, facsimile edition, text preparation, commentary and introductory article by Tatiana Goriacheva, Moscow, 2003, 71.

⁹ Lissitzky 2003, op. cit. note 8, 37.

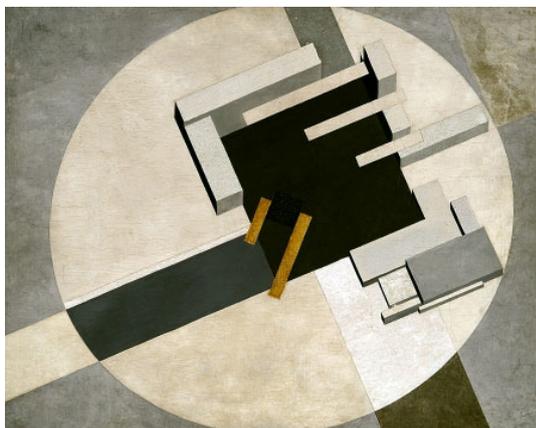


fig. 4
El Lissitzky
Proun 1E (City), 1919–20
Oil on panel, 47 × 63.5 cm
Rustam Mustafaev National Art Museum
of Azerbaijan, Baku, R-20/1175

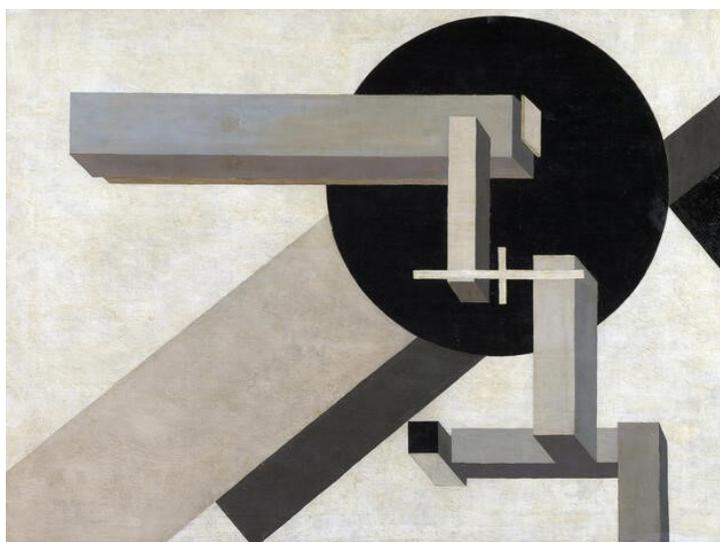


fig. 5
El Lissitzky
Proun 1D (City), 1919
Oil on canvas, 71.6 × 96.1 cm
Kunstmuseum Basel, Gift of Oskar
and Annie Müller-Widmann,
G 1965.12

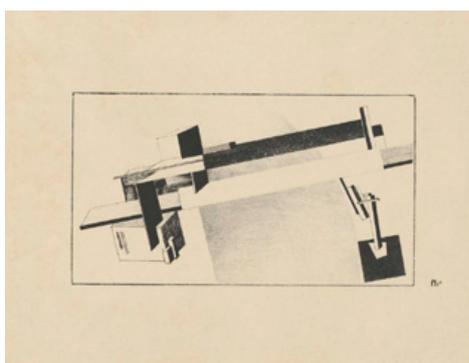


fig. 6
El Lissitzky
Proun 1A (Bridge), 1919
Sheet from the *Proun Portfolio*.
Lithograph on paper, 35.1 × 45.4 cm
State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow,
GRS-2905

The concept of 'ex-paintings' (Prouns) was based on integrating architectural devices with the plastic principles of geometrical abstract painting. This transcended the boundaries of both; the conditionality of the flat surface of a painting allowed for daring architectural utopias while the engineering convincingness of the structure gave the work project status. Drawing on the architectural methods he knew so well, Lissitzky aestheticised the discipline's basic categories – mass, weight, space, rhythm – without abandoning the utilitarian functions of an architectural project. Many of his works had titles that underlined the architectural or technical nature of the image, such as *House above the Earth* [figs. 1, 2], *City* [figs. 4, 5], *Bridge* [fig. 6], *Arch* [figs. 7, 8], *Beam and Moscow*.

fig. 7

El Lissitzky
Sketch for *Proun P23, no. 6 (Arch)*, 1919
 Graphite pencil, ink, pen, brush and
 gouache on paper, 17.7 × 22 cm
 State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow,
 RS-3763

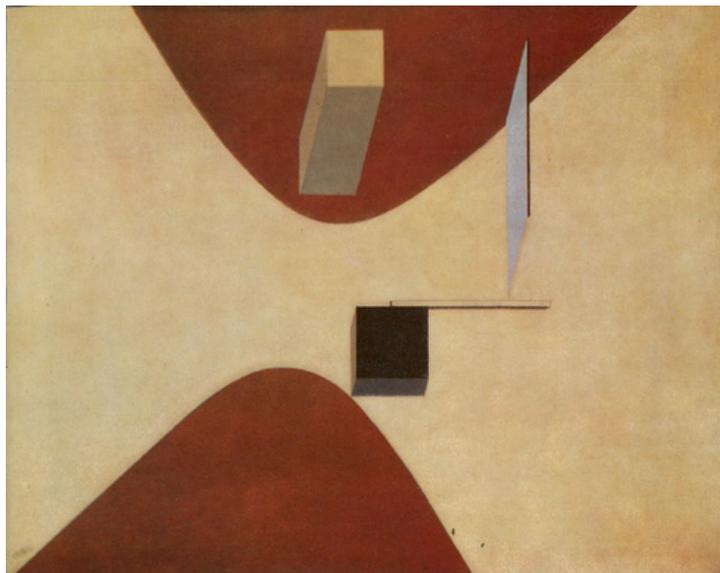
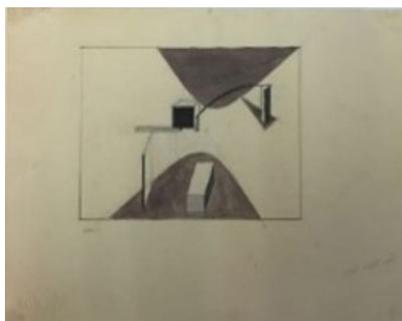


fig. 8

El Lissitzky
***Proun P23, no. 6 (Arch)*, 1919**
 Tempera on canvas, 62.9 × 77.5 cm
 Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, 2311

In *House above the Earth* (later known as *Proun 1C*) Lissitzky outlined the bases of the plastic task of organising the three-dimensional spatial dimensions of objects. This was further developed in subsequent Prouns. But in this early work Lissitzky was still searching for a way to depict the weightlessness of the monolithic construction. Its interaction with space was treated literally; the surface of the earth, above which the house is hovering, is marked by the fragment of a building below. Here he already undertook experiments with colour and texture as the equivalent of material which later became one of Lissitzky's main artistic methods; gradations of black, white, grey and beige created the effect of conditional architectural reality. In 1920 Lissitzky wrote in 'Suprematism in World Reconstruction': 'The new element we have grown in painting – a texture we will pour out on all the world we are building. The roughness of concrete, the smoothness of metal and the reflection of glass will become the outer membrane of the new life'.¹⁰

In this and several other early Prouns the concrete (but utopian at the same time) nature of the architectural sense of images is underlined: the house hovers above the earth. *Bridge* is a plastic allusion to the tectonic laws of bridge engineering. The metropolis in two versions of 'Suprematism of a City' is a model of the city of the future (later renamed *Proun 1D* and *Proun 1E*) and appears as an architectural plan projected onto planet Earth or onto round and square spaces in which complex constructions spread out and expand as well as increment lateral elements. The city is projecting in the universe as if it is a separate planet. In this context the contrast between monoliths and empty space, typical of architectural thought, reveals the cosmic scale. These are not utilitarian projects, but rather a pre-form, universal model of utopian architecture, devoid of the characteristics of real structures or workable urban planning. (A few years later Malevich would come up with an ingenious definition for his 'architectones'; he would call them 'blind architecture' and would explain the lack of windows in his projects by recourse to the notion that 'windows will perforate a volume'.)

The Birth of the Term 'Proun': The *Proun Portfolio*

By the autumn of 1920, a conflict was brewing between Lissitzky and Malevich. Among other reasons for the rift were the underlying competition between teacher and pupil, Lissitzky's desire for independence and a strong disagreement about Suprematist architecture. Lissitzky's artistic concept and pedagogical system were oriented towards city planning. He wrote: 'What is the concrete final goal of the Proun? The creation of the city. The architecture of the world'.¹¹ This does not seem to contradict Malevich's task. However, real architectural work required a functional approach and this was categorically unacceptable to Malevich, who insisted on the priority of abstract plastic experiments. (This remained his point of view. In 1929, he claimed that the aesthetic functional solutions in Constructivist architecture were based on the 'Suprematist formula of pure art'.)¹²

¹¹ El Lissitzky, 'Preodolenie iskusstva' [The Overcoming of Art], in Kantsedikas and Yargina 2005, op. cit. note 1, 47.

¹² Kazimir Malevich, 'Russkie konstruktivisty i konstruktivism' [Russian Constructivists and Constructivism], cited in Malevich 1995, op. cit. note 7, 207-12.

As a result of the tension with Malevich, Lissitzky moved to Moscow in the autumn of 1920. This did not mark a breakdown in their relationship: Malevich and Lissitzky remained friendly and respectful towards each other. However, Lissitzky did not want to linger in Malevich's shadow. He realised that the plastic concept he had invented could be recognised as an autonomous phenomenon. Like any new direction, it needed to be named and presented, so he coined the term 'Proun'. The sonorous acronym was analogous to that of Unovis. While stressing its relationship to Unovis and the typological closeness of Lissitzky's discoveries to Malevich's school, 'Proun' also proclaimed the sovereignty of its author, which contradicted Unovis's emphasis on anonymous collective work. The birth of this term signalled his final separation from Suprematist theory.

The word 'Proun' was first pronounced during Lissitzky's 'Lecture on the Present Moment' at the Paul Cezanne Club in Moscow on 27 October 1920. The Proun was proclaimed as a universal artistic system that could transfer the achievements of easel painting into real space.

In 1932, in one of the versions of his autobiography, Lissitzky wrote: 'The year 1919 resulted in a cycle of artworks. I called them "Prouns" so that people would not look for paintings in them. I considered these works to be a transfer station between visual art and architecture. Each one represented a problem of technical stasis or dynamics expressed through painting. These works formed the basis of later concrete [projects]'.¹³

The opposition between Prouns and traditional paintings became one of the main features of Lissitzky's doctrine. In many respects his opposition was demagogism (Prouns were still paintings) based on implicative statements. ('We saw that the surface of the Proun stopped being a painting. It became a construction and, like a house, one needs to go around it, to look at it from above and to study it from below'.)¹⁴ The declaration that a Proun was not an easel painting but a pre-form of innovative architecture endowed it with serious status in contemporary art, nipping in the bud any discussion of the

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RGALI, ф. 3145, оп. 1, д. 556, л. 2.
The last word in the quote is missing from the original and has been added by the author.

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El Lissitzky, 'Proun. Ne mirovidenie' [Proun: Not a Worldview], in Kantsedikas and Yargina 2005, op. cit. note 1, 32.

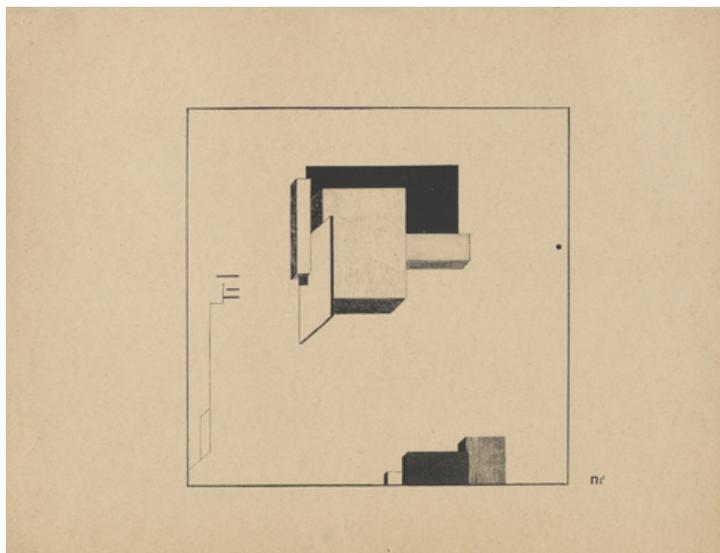


fig. 9

El Lissitzky**Sketch for *Proun 1C*, 1919****Sheet from the *Proun Portfolio*.****Lithograph on paper, 34.2 × 44.8 cm****Library of the State Tretyakov Gallery,****Moscow, 90.128**

fruitlessness of yet another art movement. Lissitzky proclaimed a new type of artist, one who created 'the City of the Commune ... with paintbrush, hammer and compass in hand'.¹⁵ This ambitious project designated Prouns as the foundation for constructing a new world: 'The Proun begins its work on the surface, proceeds towards spatial models and then goes on to build all forms of life. ... through Prouns we will construct ... a unified world city for all the people on the planet'.¹⁶

In the late summer and early autumn of 1920 Lissitzky printed a series of Proun lithographs in Vitebsk. He titled them using a combination of numbers and letters (*Proun 1A*, *Proun 1C*, *Proun 1E*, *Proun 2B*, *Proun 2D*). These lithographs reproduced his Proun paintings and formed the *Proun Portfolio*, a set of eleven lithographs and unique manifesto, colophon, and front and back covers in gouache, ink, and pencil, which announced the new direction proclaimed by Lissitzky. *House above the Earth*, one of his most valued compositions, was also included in the collection [fig. 9].

15El Lissitzky, 'Vystuplenie v klube' [Lecture in the Paul Cézanne club], in *ibid.*, 28.**16**El Lissitzky, 'Proun. Ne mirovidenie' [Proun: Not a Worldview], in *ibid.*, 34.



figs. 10–11
 'PROUN 1c' and 'UNOVIS'
 inscriptions, and Unovis drawn seal,
 on the reverse of El Lissitzky's
Proun 1C, 1919

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The practice of giving artworks titles based on a shared term and a number/letter code was not new; indeed, it was adopted by many abstract artists. Malevich, for instance, exhibited sixteen paintings called *Suprematism* plus a letter of the Russian alphabet from A to П at the Jack of Diamonds exhibition (1917). In fact, this method was used as a solution to the puzzle of finding titles for non-figurative works. Perhaps the particular combinations of numbers and letters that Lissitzky used with the word *Proun* had a meaning, describing series and connections. However, if this was the case, Lissitzky's intentions are unclear: sorting prouns by letter/number designations does not give a clue to the understanding of the principle of seriality.

Lissitzky's association with Suprematism, previously manifested in the titles of his works, was severed completely at this point: *City Suprematism 1* and *City Suprematism 2* became *Proun 1E* and *Proun 1D*. The 'narrative' component explicit in titles that made reference to objects (*Arch*, *Bridge*, *Beam*, *House above the Earth*) also vanished, underlining the break with easel painting. Single works were declared to be a part of an overall 'Project for the Affirmation of the New'.¹⁷ In this way, the Thyssen-Bornemisza's *House above the Earth* received the new title of *Proun 1C*. It was at this time when the inscriptions 'PROUN 1c' 'UNOVIS' and the drawn version of the Unovis seal appeared on the reverse of the painting [figs. 10–11]; they gave the composition a new status. The Unovis symbol – a red square in a circle – had its own history.

Declaring itself a 'party', Unovis acted as a community of ordained members. Anyone who wanted to join the group had to fill out a long application. A charter and a programme were drawn up and a 'Creative Committee' was elected. In order to increase the self-esteem of the participants as a sect of the glitterati, special emblems were adopted; members of the group wore black squares on the sleeves of their shirts or on their chests like square badges. One of Unovis's slogans instructed: 'Wear the black square as a sign of the economy of the world'.

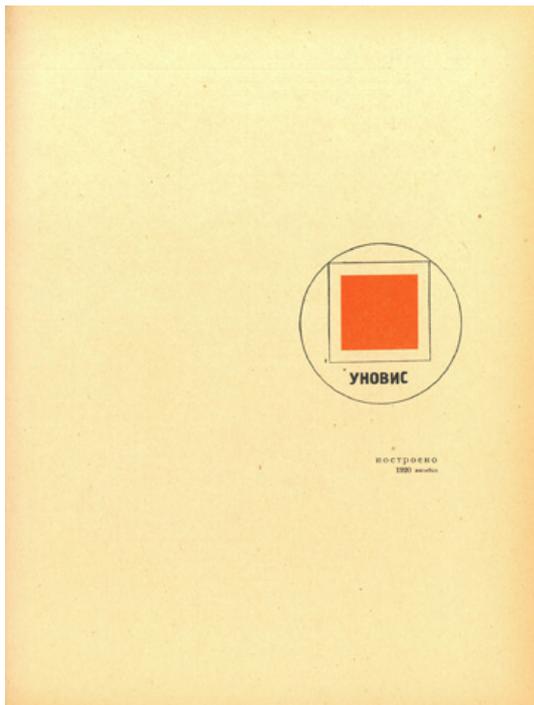


fig. 12
Unovis seal on the end page of El Lissitzky's book *About Two Squares in Six Constructions*

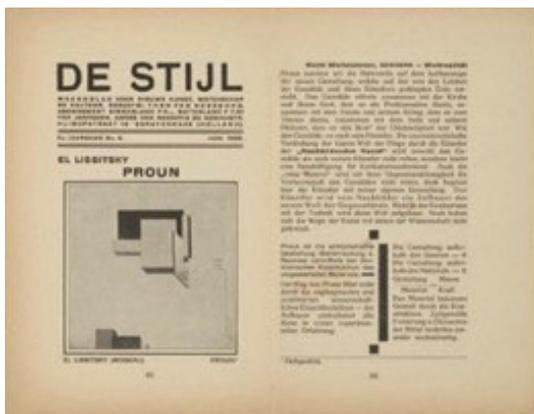


fig. 13
El Lissitzky, 'Proun', in *De Stijl*, vol. 5, no. 6, June 1922

Lissitzky designed the Unovis seal – a red square displaced towards the top of a black circle with the Unovis inscription below [fig. 12]. It was used to certify important documents. Though the square was stamped on paper in black paint, originally it was meant to appear in red referencing the end of Lissitzky's book *About Two Squares in Six Constructions* (the concept of this Suprematist tale was worked out in the spring of 1920 in Vitebsk, but realised in 1922 in Berlin. The final phrase, 'and on the Black was established Red', signified the use of the red square).

In the spring of 1921, fifty copies of a portfolio featuring eleven lithographs with an accompanying text, 'Proun. Not a Worldview, but a World Reality' (the text was later expanded and published in the magazine *De Stijl* in 1922) [fig. 13], were printed by INKhUK (the Institute of Artistic Culture). This portfolio including prints of Lissitzky's most important works from 1919 and 1920 along with a declaration was a successful channel of presentation that partly served as a substitute for exhibitions, which were difficult to organise at that time. Lissitzky began to promote his invention focusing also on the West; the text was bilingual with an abbreviated version in German. In the late summer of 1920 he gave several copies of the lithographs (or perhaps of the portfolio) to a participant at the 2nd World Congress of the Comintern held in Moscow, probably the Dutch communist David Wijnkoop, who was an executive member of the Comintern and one of the founders of the radical Marxist newspaper *De Tribune*.

The Fate of *House above the Earth/Proun 1C*

In late 1921 Lissitzky moved to Germany. This decision was motivated by a number of circumstances, his artistic ambition probably being a key factor among them. Emigration gave him the opportunity to introduce Prouns into the European art market, to meet the great masters of the European avant-garde, to exhibit his innovations to like-minded Western artists and potential buyers, to bring to fruition publishing projects planned back in Vitebsk and to write articles for the press. In the milieu of poverty and chaos that prevailed in post-revolutionary Russia such opportunities were rare.

Lissitzky took with him all the paintings he had made in Vitebsk and Moscow except for two. They both stayed in Moscow, the painting *House above the Earth/Proun 1C* with his brother Ruvim and a second work in the collection of Kagan-Shabshay. One can only speculate as to why Lissitzky did not take *Proun 1C* with him to Germany. He did not intend to leave Moscow permanently and planned to return, but he travelled with most of his paintings hoping to exhibit and sell them in Europe. As for the very first proun – he cherished it especially and wanted to save it until homecoming.

Whether Lissitzky recovered *Proun 1C* from Ruvim when he returned to Moscow in 1925 we do not know. What is certain is that his wife Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers (née Schneider) did not take the Proun with her into exile. Being a German national, in 1944 she was deported to Siberia and denied the potential right to return to Moscow. Leaving for Siberia, Sophie took with her only the essentials, leaving Lissitzky's entire archive with Ruvim.

In 1947 Lissitzky's son Jen ventured to travel from Novosibirsk (Siberia) to Moscow, where he met with his uncle Ruvim. Jen took back to Siberia the documents which Ruvim had kept for years. The entire archive fitted into two crates and consisted of watercolours, sketches, books and manuscripts. Perhaps *Proun 1C* was among them.

Another possibility is that Sophie received the Proun from Ruvim in 1956, when her exile ended and she was finally able to travel from Novosibirsk to Moscow. In any case, in her memoirs of Lissitzky, which she began to write in the early 1960s, Sophie mentions this Proun as being in her possession

'by chance'.¹⁸ This fortuity would appear to indicate that at some point, Sophie somehow recovered it from Ruvim's family.

In 1959 Sophie began selling Lissitzky's works. Money was not her first priority, though she was in dire need of cash. Her main goal was to place the artist's works and manuscripts in respectable museums and private collections, which would help bring his name back from obscurity. In 1959 she sold part of the archive together with some 300 graphic works to the State Tretyakov Gallery. The collection included drafts and sketches of prouns, lithographs, sketches of architectural and exhibition designs, poster and book designs, as well as the unique *Unovis Almanac No. 1*, of which Lissitzky and his Vitebsk pupils made only five copies in 1920. In 1961, the remaining part of the archive, which included drawings, was sold to the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (RGALI).

However, Lissitzky's works were not publicly displayed, as avant-garde was banned in the USSR during that period. The brevity of the list of Lissitzky's exhibitions in the Soviet Union speaks for itself. In 1960 the collector and archivist Nikolai Khardzhiev, a connoisseur and a keen advocate of the Russian avant-garde, organised a small exhibition of Lissitzky's print projects at the State Museum of Vladimir Mayakovsky in Moscow. Another was held in Novosibirsk in 1967, but it received virtually no publicity other than a short announcement in a local newspaper.

Sophie was active in the preparation of both exhibitions. *Proun 1C* was not put on view in them; the organisers succeeded in mounting shows and presenting Lissitzky as a book designer only (not as one of the key figures of the international avant-garde). Apparently, at about the same time part of Lissitzky's archive – his letters, newspaper clippings of articles about him and some works (possibly including *Proun 1C*) were found in the possession of Khardzhiev, who collected materials for his book on Lissitzky. Sophie appreciated him as an expert on the Russian avant-garde and an enthusiast for its popularisation, and provided him with all the materials. In the hands of this art historian, Lissitzky's

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Ulrich Krempel, *El Lissitzky – Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers: Von Hannover nach Moskau / From Hanover to Moscow*, Göttingen, Wallstein Verlag, 1915, 95.

fig. 14

Proun 1C in the Costakis Collection,
1975



heritage had more promising prospects than if it remained stored in her tiny room in a communal apartment in Novosibirsk. In the early 1960s Sophie received a commission from a German publishing house for a monograph about Lissitzky and started to work on it. Khardzhiev's book was never completed, as no publisher showed interest in it.

As for the transfer of *Proun 1C*, eyewitness reports differ. In his memoirs, journalist and art collector Sergey Grigoryantz states that he saw this Proun when he visited Khardzhiev, who later sold it to the collector of Russian avant-garde art George Costakis. But there are many inaccuracies in Grigoryantz's recollections. Soviet art historian Vasily Rakitin comments in Costakis's memoirs that, 'the master's favourite Proun was bought from Lissitzky's family'. This may have been the case: it is likely that *Proun 1C* remained with Khardzhiev for some time (not acquired, but on temporary loan), subsequently returned to Lissitzky's family and then was sold to Costakis.

There is no information in Costakis's archives about the date of his purchase. In 1977 Costakis, together with his family, left the Soviet Union and moved to Greece after making an agreement with the Soviet government that he would leave half of his collection in Russia.



figs. 15-17

Inscription, stamp of the Ministry of Culture and temporary inventory number of the State Tretyakov Gallery on the reverse of *Proun 1C*

During the split of the collection and transfer of its part to the State Tretyakov Gallery, the painting *Proun 1C* was, at Costakis's own insistence, placed in the lot intended for the museum, and was even transported there. The inscription on the back of the painting, the stamp of the Ministry of Culture and the temporary number of the State Tretyakov Gallery, which accepted it for temporary storage until the documents were finalised, bear witness to this [figs. 15-17].

Costakis's attitude towards the division of the collection was noble – he himself offered the museum the best works of Russian avant-garde art in his possession. However, when Costakis was forbidden from taking the icons in his collection out of the USSR, he negotiated an exchange: instead of seven emblematic works he took *Proun 1C* back (lamentably, at the time the Ministry of Culture did not understand the value of Lissitzky's painting). Subsequently Costakis sold the *Proun* to the Gmurzynska Gallery in Cologne, from whom it was purchased by Baron Hans Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemiza. His collection has been exhibited at the Museo Thyssen-Bornemiza since 1992, where the *Proun* remains to this day.

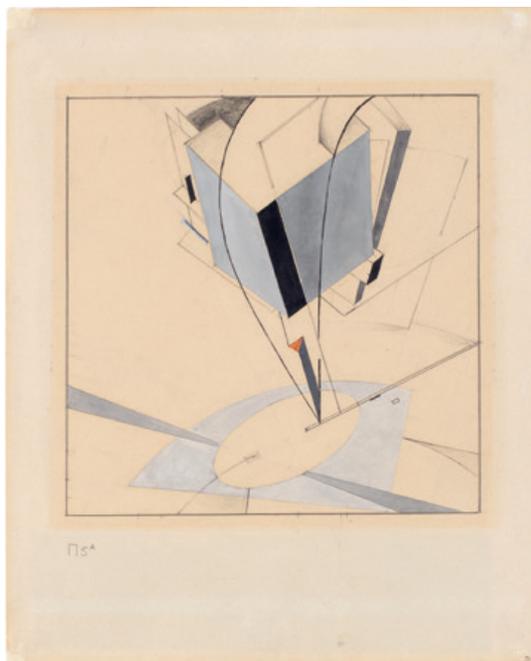


fig. 18
El Lissitzky
Proun 5A, 1920. Pencil and gouache
 on paper, 22 × 17.5 cm. Museo
 Nacional Thyssen- Bornemisza,
 Madrid, 650 (1977.103)

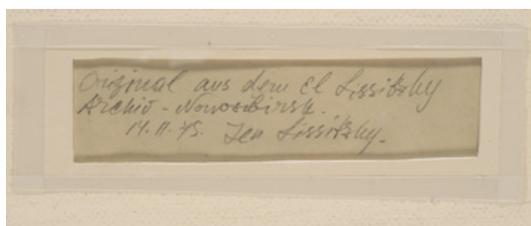


fig. 19
**Certificate of authenticity issued by
 Jen Lissitzky on 14 November 1975
 on the reverse of *Proun 5A***

Hovering Body, the Variant of Proun 1C

Interestingly, the 'biography' of *House above the Earth/ Proun 1C* is not limited to the creation and subsequent existence of the 1919 version. At the end of 1922 Lissitzky made a duplicate of his original work.

In the fall of 1922 Lissitzky met Sophie Küppers, who was closely associated with the Kestner Society through her late husband, who had died a few months earlier. Paul Erich Küppers had been the first director of the art gallery of the Society, an organisation dedicated to the promotion of culture and art in Hannover. The Society organised exhibitions and performances and published catalogues. Sophie was immensely impressed by the works of the Russian artist. Thanks to her recommendations and introductions Lissitzky received support from the Society in various forms: the Kestner Society provided him with studio space, arranged a solo exhibition of his work and ordered a lithograph portfolio from him.

At the end of 1922 Sophie bought a gouache from Lissitzky. Apparently, after her acquisition of *Proun 5A* Lissitzky told her, 'You have chosen my best work!' [figs. 18, 19].¹⁹ According to Sophie, this drawing became a sensation among the city's artistic circles²⁰ and as a result, the Kestner Society decided to hold a one-man show of Lissitzky. The exhibition, which took place in January–February 1923, met with great success and several of Lissitzky's works were purchased. *Proun 5A*, which had previously been acquired by Sophie, was definitely on display at the exhibition. It is now also a part of the collection of the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza.

¹⁹ Kempel 1915, op. cit. note 18, 82.

²⁰ Ibid.

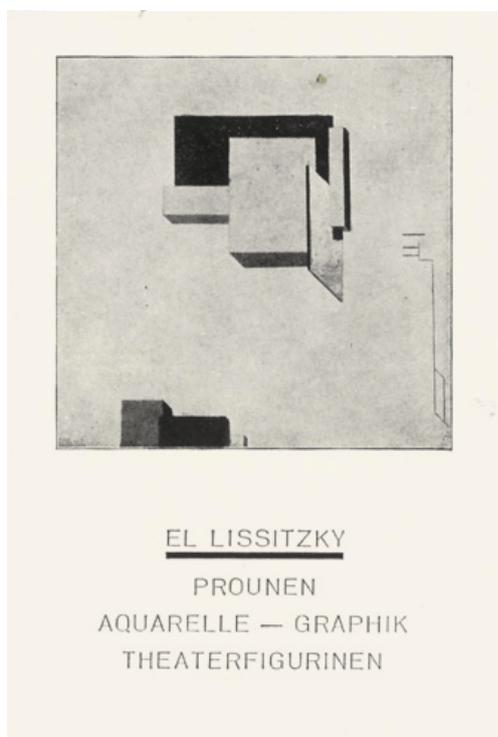


fig. 20

Invitation to the *El Lissitzky: Prounen, Aquarelle - Graphik Theaterfigurinen* exhibition organised by the Kestner Society in Hannover in 1923

21

Ernst Callai, 'El Lissitzky', *Cicerone* 22, 1924, 1059.

22

Ferdinand Stuttmann, 'Hannover', *Cicerone* 17, 1925, 101.

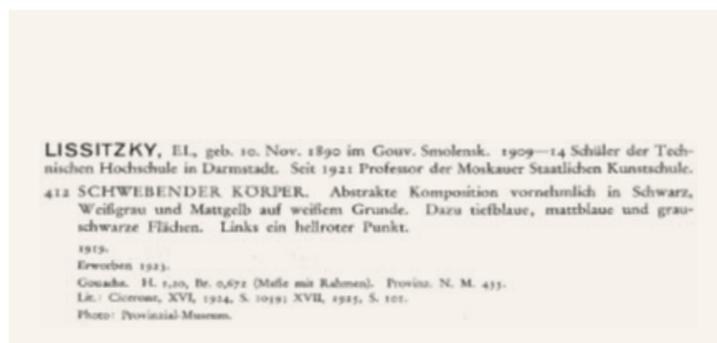


fig. 21

Page from *Katalog der Kunstsammlungen im Provinzialmuseum zu Hannover* (1930)

House above the Earth/Proun 1C, which dated from 1919, appeared on the invitation [fig. 20], though it was the 1922 replica that was put on display at the exhibition. It is likely that this second version was specifically made at the end of 1922 for this show, but Lissitzky exhibited and dated it as a work from 1919. The 1922 copy differed from the original in format and colour (we can only evaluate its appearance from the black and white photographs and description made by the Hannover Provinzialmuseum) [fig. 24]. The gouache sketch (stored in the Tretyakov Gallery) as well as the large painting on panel from 1919 (housed in the Thyssen) and the lithograph *Proun 1C* had a square format. The 1922 variant was rectangular, and the lower part of the composition coincided with the gouache sketch in colour and construction. Whereas the circle to the left of the 'floating house' in the sketch was red, in the painting from 1919 the initial red was painted over in black. In the 1922 variant, Lissitzky returned to his original design and made the circle red (as noted in the detailed catalogue of the Hannover Provinzialmuseum: 'Links ein hellroter Punkt') [fig. 21].

The second version of *Proun 1C* appeared with the date 1919 in later publications – in the description of the reproduction in Callai's article in the journal *Cicerone* in 1924 as well as in the catalogue of the Hannover Provinzialmuseum, published in 1930.²¹ Earlier (in 1925), Ferdinand Stuttmann had written in his overview on the new acquisitions of recent years in the Provinzialmuseum: 'But the focus of the show is the one that has almost become classic – El Lissitzky's *Hovering Body*'.²²

At the *Degenerate Art* exhibition which opened in Munich in 1937 it was displayed as a work dating from 1923, but at that time the exhibition organisers did not firmly adhere to academic accuracy. The 1923 date refers to the year of the acquisition of the work by the Hannover Provinzialmuseum.

Dating the second version of *Proun 1C* as 1919 was probably intended as a hoax. It was a move similar to Malevich's insistence that 1913 was the date of his *Black Square*. It is highly unlikely that Lissitzky would have duplicated one of his paintings in 1919; during this period he had a much more pressing need to create new Prouns. It is equally improbable that he created this replica in Russia before leaving for Germany (it would have been easier to take the original *House above the Earth* with him). In view of the fact that the first confirmed exhibit of this version took place at the beginning of 1923, the time of its creation was most likely the end of 1922.

Lissitzky's show at the Kestner gallery was his first solo exhibition. While building a strategy of self-representation, he surely wanted to present the evolution of the Prouns, starting with the very first experiment: this would have been the intriguing narrative of the exhibition. *Proun 1C* acted as a manifesto and reference point for all his Prouns, much as Malevich's *Black Square* had done at the exhibition *0.10*. Hence the need to prevaricate and pass the later version of the work as the very first Proun in existence.

FERNAND LÉGER				Fr.	
Franzose, in Paris					
57	Composition, le passage à niveau	Oil auf Leinwand	110x97	1919	—
58	Femmes créatives	" " "	82x94	1919	—
59	Nature morte	" " "	110x91	1924	—
60	Nature morte	" " "	64,5x58	1924	3200
JACQUES LIPSCHITZ				Pole, in Paris	
61	Sculpture	Kunstholz	37x35x29	1916	5000
62	Bas-Relief, Nature morte	Bronze	35x29	1916	2500
63	Pierrot à la mandoline	"	10x9x5,40	1912	1000
64	Pierrot assis	Bois	10x3,5x25	1912	700
65	Nature morte	Bronze	30x40x14,5	1913	6000
66	Femme et guitare	Bronze versplattet	30x20x28	1917	3600
EL LISSITZKY				Russa, in Moskau	
67	Preson, schwebender Körper	Toupeur auf Pappe	60x39	—	—
68	Preson II geklebtes Papier u. Toupeur auf Pappe	61x34	—	—	—
69	Preson III	" " " " " "	30x28	—	—
RENÉE MARGRITTE				Belgier, in Paris	
70	A l'appel des choses par leur nom	Oil auf Leinwand	81x118	1919	—

fig. 22
Page from the catalogue of the exhibition *Abstraction and Surrealism* held in Zurich in 1929

figs. 23–24
Hovering Body, the replica of Lissitzky's *Proun 1C*, on show in the 'Cabinet of Abstraction' in the Hannover Provinzialmuseum in 1927

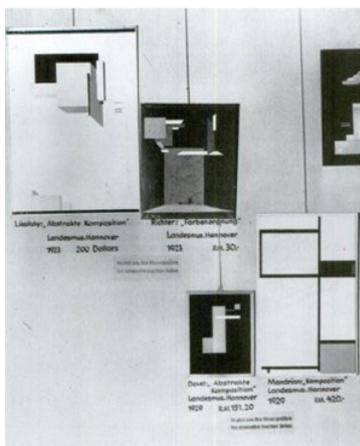


fig. 25
Lissitzky's *Hovering Body* on show in the *Degenerate Art* exhibition in Munich in 1937

However, the invitation to the Kestner exhibition shows the original with its square format. The reason behind the decision to use the 1919 piece for the invitation remains unclear. Perhaps it fit better into the ticket format or it was a self-indulgent move from Lissitzky.

After the exhibition the replica was purchased by Alexander Dorner, a curator who became the director of the Hannover Provinzialmuseum in 1925.²³ When the painting entered the museum in 1923, it received the new title of *Hovering Body* (*Schwebender Körper*). The variant Proun was subsequently put on display under this title at the Lissitzky exhibition in Berlin in 1924 and at the *Abstraction and Surrealism* show in Zurich in 1929 [fig. 22].²⁴ It was also featured in the 'Cabinet of Abstraction' commissioned by Dorner in 1927 for the Hannover Provinzialmuseum [figs. 23–24]. From there, in 1937 *Hovering Body* travelled to Munich for display at the *Degenerate Art* exhibition, where it was confiscated and disappeared without a trace [fig. 25]. ●

²³ Krempel 1915, op. cit. note 18, 92.

²⁴ *Abstrakte und surrealistische Malerei und Plastik*, Kunsthaus Zürich, 6 October–3 November 1929.