

# Composition by Ivan Kliun. A revolutionary painting

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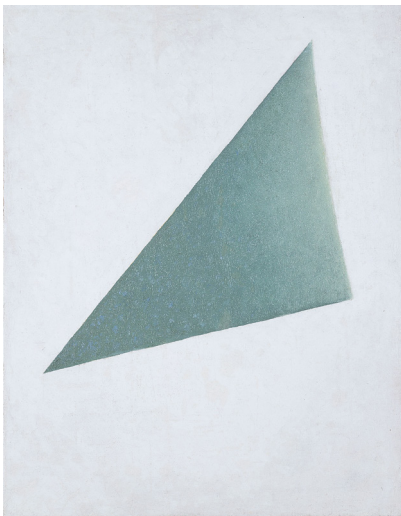


Fig. 1  
Ivan Kliun  
*Composition*, 1917  
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid  
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Fig. 2  
Ivan Kliun, 1920



Fig. 3  
Ivan Kliun and Kasimir Malevich, 1914-1915

Anyone interested in the great artistic renaissance that took place in early 20th-century Russia will come across the name of Ivan Kliun on more than one occasion. Kliun is associated with many of the movements that arose in the turbulent Russia of that time. Realism, Impressionism, Symbolism, Cubo-futurism, Suprematism and Purism successively make their appearances in his career, reflecting the changing history of Russian art in the early 20th century.

In contrast, however, to the attention that Malevich and other representatives of the Russian avant-garde have received for some decades, Kliun's importance has barely been recognised. To understand the obscurity into which his name fell we need to look back to the rigid artistic norms imposed by Stalin after his rise to power in the mid-1920s. Avant-garde art was accused of being "formalist" and of not promoting State proclamations. While Socialist Realism became the regime's official artistic idiom, abstraction was banned and its creators persecuted. The names of the artists involved were forgotten and for decades their works were kept hidden away in artists' houses or in Soviet museum stores.

The first to rediscover Kliun's merits as an artist was George Costakis. This important collector of Russian art met Kliun a couple of times in the early 1940s. Some time after the artist's death in 1943, Costakis made contact with Kliun's heirs in order to try to buy work by him. After various unsuccessful attempts he made contact with the artist's daughter. She had most of her father's works stored in her house and sold the majority of them to Costakis.<sup>1</sup>

The Costakis collection was shown in Düsseldorf in 1977 and at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, in 1981. The publications that accompanied these events cast new light on the figure of Kliun, who once again started to be referred to as a member of the avant-garde. In 1983 the Matignon Gallery in New York devoted the first retrospective exhibition to the artist<sup>2</sup> and in 1999 the Tretyakov Gallery celebrated the 125th anniversary of the artist's birth with another exhibition.<sup>3</sup>

While many art historians have acknowledged the originality and quality of Kliun's work,<sup>4</sup> most analyses of his career have been structured around his relationship with Kasimir Malevich. The close friendship that arose between the two artists in the early years of the 20th century when both studied with Fedor Rerberg in Moscow has been seen to indicate Kliun's willingness to follow Malevich's artistic theories and practices.

It cannot be denied that Malevich played a decisive role in Kliun's career and that his powerful personality left its mark. Nonetheless, it is also true that Kliun was able to break away and express his disagreement with Malevich's Suprematist theories. *Composition*, in the collection of the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, already reveals certain features that anticipate Kliun's break from the rigid premises of Suprematism, allowing him to embark on his own artistic path as an individual artist.



Fig. 4  
Photography with transversal  
light of *Composition*, 1917  
Photo: H el ene Desplechin

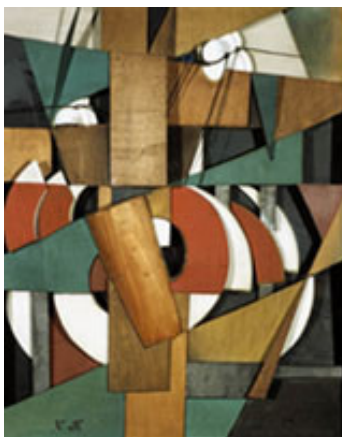


Fig. 5  
Ivan Kliun  
*Landscape Racing By*, 1915  
The State Tretyakov Gallery, Mosc u

Fig. 6  
Exhibition *0.10. The Last Futurist Exhibition*,  
Malevich Suprematist Section, 1915,  
Petrograd

### The secret of *Composition*

The Museo Thyssen has only one painting by Ivan Kliun in its collection. Dating from the artist's Suprematist period, it offers numerous keys to understanding his creative process and principal artistic concerns. In addition, thanks to the technical study undertaken by the Museum's Restoration Department, the painting can be used to analyse Kliun's evolution over the time that he was associated with the movement promoted by his friend Malevich as well as to appreciate certain features that anticipate the subsequent development of his work.<sup>5</sup>

Among the images taken of the painting during this technical study is a photograph that reveals the presence of an earlier composition below the visible paint surface (fig. 4). Taken with the light positioned behind the stretcher, this photograph reveals that when creating *Composition* Kliun reused a canvas on which he had previously painted. Beneath the white pigment it is possible to see a series of geometrical shapes, including a red triangle towards the bottom and various curved forms towards the top.

Kliun devised this composition during his early Suprematist phase. Probably painted in 1916, it reflects his rapid assimilation of Malevich's theories. His early period of training lay behind him, during which he had met Malevich and had been one of the artists that revived and renewed the pre-Revolutionary Russian art scene. This was the period when Kliun took an active part in Futurist projects and events in his spare time while continuing to work as a respectable accountant. During those years he met members of the Union of Youth, while he also ceased to sign his works with his real name, Kliunkov, in order to avoid possible problems in relation to his normal job.

Like many of his contemporaries, in a few short years Kliun evolved from the Symbolism of his early works towards Cubo-futurist forms. His assimilation of this new artistic idiom is evident in the sculptures and reliefs (fig. 5) that he showed in *0.10 Last Futurist Exhibition*, held in Petrograd (modern-day Saint Petersburg) in 1915.

It was at that celebrated event that Malevich showed *Black Square* for the first time, which was the work that marked the start of Suprematism (fig. 6). While Kliun exhibited works in the Cubo-futurist style, he co-signed the Suprematist manifesto that accompanied the exhibition, along with Malevich and Mikhail Menkov.<sup>6</sup>

Kliun's work thus evolved towards the complete abstraction of Malevich and of the other artists with whom he participated in the project for the magazine *Supremus*. Liubov Popova, Olga Rozanova and Alexandra Ekster were among the female artists who were involved in the project.

"After accepting the straight line as a point of departure, we have arrived at an ideally simple form: straight and circular planes (sounds and the letters of the words)."<sup>7</sup>

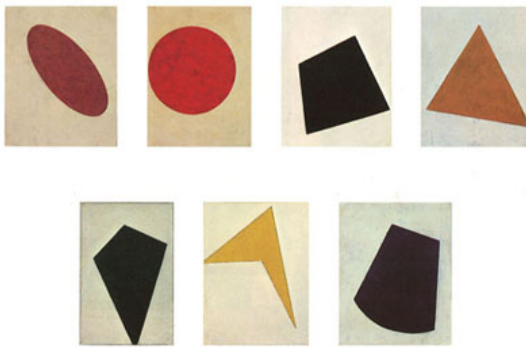


Fig. 7  
Ivan Kliun  
*Colour Researches Series*, ca. 1917  
George Costakis Collection

With these words, written at the early date of 1915, Ivan Kliun summed up the new artistic concept that aimed to achieve “the supremacy of pure sensibility”. In this approach, flat, geometrical planes are the key elements, located against a background on which they appear to float. The image that has been identified underneath the surface of the Thyssen-Bornemisza painting corresponds to this approach.

#### A revolutionary type of painting

Ivan Kliun returned to the canvas in question in 1917, the year of the October Revolution. Kliun was one of the oldest of the avant-garde figures. By this date he was forty-four and a fully mature artist.

In comparison to the complexity of the first composition, the definitive solution is extremely simple. The triangle of green tones that is the sole motif in the composition floats on a white background. The straight lines of which it is formed are not aligned with the edges of the canvas, giving the shape an effect of movement and a sense of weightlessness, as if liberated from the laws of gravity.

In addition to the simplification of forms, Kliun was clearly also interested in colour. As Andrei Nakov explained, February 1916 saw the start of a second phase within the Suprematism of Malevich and his colleagues and one that focused on the dynamic possibilities of colour. Colour ceased to be an attribute and became a self-sufficient entity. It was now material per se, liberated from the form that had controlled it up to that point.<sup>8</sup>

The colourful optimism that invaded the work of the members of Supremus due to the infinite possibilities of the non-objective universe was particularly evident in Kliun’s case. In November 1917, the year of the painting in the Museo Thyssen, he presented various works under the title *Colour Investigations* in the exhibition *Knave of Diamonds* (fig. 7).<sup>9</sup> These works are based on the interaction of colours and their relationship with the geometrical forms in which they are contained. In many of them Kliun depicted just one geometrical shape of a single colour. Their similarity with *Composition* has led Vassily Rakitin to suggest that the latter belonged to the same series.<sup>10</sup>

*Composition* is also notably close to various works by Malevich and by other members of Supremus. Nonetheless, although still corresponding to the “colourist” Suprematism of the moment, *Composition* already reveals some signs of the pronounced artistic personality of Kliun, who would soon break from Malevich. While *Yellow Quadrilateral* by Malevich (fig. 8) involves a gradual reduction of the pictorial elements that would culminate in his white series, Kliun had already embarked on his evolution towards “compositions in which the essential was the effect of luminescence”.<sup>11</sup>



Fig. 8  
Kasimir Malevich  
*Yellow Quadrilateral*, 1917-1918  
Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam



Fig. 9  
Kliun's chart on compositions problems of 1942  
George Costakis Collection

Fig. 10  
Ivan Kliun  
*Composition*, 1924  
Antigua George Costakis Collection

Colour, which had always been of outstanding importance for Kliun, becomes the principal subject of *Composition*. Over time it would become the basis of his painting, endowing it with movement, power and tension. Kliun's interests moved away from those of Malevich: while the former studied the optical effects of colour, the latter became immersed in a process of de-materialisation that would culminate in the application of white onto the white of the canvas.

In the *Tenth State Exhibition: Non-Objective Creation and Suprematism* of 1919, Kliun expressed his disagreement with the process initiated by Malevich in an essay in the catalogue. Entitled "The Art of Colour", it attacked Suprematism for being a "decorative art" and accused it of being "the cadaver of pictorial art". In contrast, Kliun upheld the "vitality of colour", arguing that it was from colour that "the painting of the future" would spring.<sup>12</sup>

In the 1920s, after his break with Malevich, Kliun embarked on a period of continuous experimentation. Stimulated by his new position as a teacher at the Svomas (Free State Art Studios) where he gave classes on colour, Kliun returned to creating more complex compositions in which he investigated the relationship between colours and geometrical, spatial tensions. While his works continued to conform to many of the Suprematist theories, he now used them in the realisation of his new artistic aim, namely that of depicting the movement of light through colour. *Composition* of 1924 (fig. 10) appears to be a firm critique of Malevich. It uses a typically Suprematist composition but distorts the form and makes the colours transparent.

## Notes

- 1 The more than 200 works that Costakis acquired are to be seen with the rest of his collection in the State Museum of Contemporary Art in Salonica.
- 2 *Ivan Vasilievich Kliun*, [exhib. cat.]. New York, Matignon Gallery, 1983. Introduction by John Bowlt, pp. 3-6.
- 3 Ia.V. Bruk: *I.V. Kliun in the State Tretyakov Gallery: On the 125th anniversary*, [exhib. cat.]. Moscow, Tretyakov Gallery, 1999.
- 4 The only monograph on the artist was written by his granddaughter in 1993: Svetlana Kliunkova-Soloveichik: *Ivan Vasilievich Kliun*. New York, IVK Art, 1993 [copyright 1994]. In addition, John Bowlt's work in this area should also be mentioned. Finally, a recent doctoral thesis places considerable emphasis on Kliun with regard to the evolution of the avant-gardes: Marina Bordne: *Landschaft als Fluchtraum: zum Problem des Genre in der Geschichte der Russischen Avantgarde*. [Doctoral thesis]. Heidelberg, Universität, 2005 (<http://www.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/archiv/6417>).
- 5 I would like to thank the Museum's Restoration Department for its technical study of the painting, which provided the basis for further research.
- 6 The part signed by Kliun was devoted to the issue of sculpture breaking away from the imitative function that had characterised it until then. Published in English by John Bowlt (ed.): *Russian Art of the Avant-garde. Theory and Criticism. 1902-1934*. London - New York, Thames and Hudson, 1988, p. 114.
- 7 Ivan Kliun: "Primitives of the Twentieth Century" (1915). In Bowlt 1988 (op. cit.), p. 137.
- 8 Andrei B. Nakov: *Kazimir Malewicz. Le peintre absolu*. Paris, Thalia, 2007, vol. 2, pp. 264-269.
- 9 Some of these works are now in the Costakis Collection. See Rowell and Angelica Zander Rudenstine: *Art of the Avant-Garde in Russia: Selections from the Costakis Collection*, [exhib. cat.]. New York, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1981, p. 112.
- 10 See John E. Bowlt and Nicoletta Misler: *Twentieth-century Russian and East European Painting. The Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection*. London, Philip Wilson - Zwemmer, 1993, p. 158.
- 11 Paloma Alarcó: *Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza. Pintura Moderna*. Madrid, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, 2009, p. 303.
- 12 Ivan Kliun: "The Art of Color" (1919). Quoted in Andrei B. Nakov: *Tatlin's Dream. Russian Suprematism and Constructivist Art 1910-1923*, [exhib. cat.]. London, Fischer Fine Art Limited, 1974, p. 63.