Notes on the Chronology of El Lissitzky’s Proun Compositions

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Since the retrospective exhibition of the work of El Lissitzky (1890–1941) in 1965–1966, increasing attention has been paid to this seminal figure in Russian and Western European art. Lissitzky’s work revolved around the concept of Proun, a Russian acronym signifying “for the new art.” Non-objective and/or chronology remained growing (1890-1941). Opera, russo Lissitzky, Worth, Frampton, knigi,” Lissitzky-Kippers, Lissitzky-Khovens; conciseness characterizes catalogue 71-8i. The G. Elderfield, “Proun in Russia” (1967, viii, 1969, 65–70, and November, 1969, 68–73). As Lissitzky developed, his works themselves now permit the formulation of a reliable chronology for this work. With this knowledge, one is able to place the Proun compositions in the context of developments in Russia and in Western Europe where Lissitzky served as a cultural emissary from the Russian avant-garde.

In recent years, observers of Lissitzky’s art have proposed various criteria to help establish a chronology for the Prouns. For example, it is maintained that the Proun compositions gradually turned away from color, displayed a growing sense of clarity and economy, and/or tended to diffuse the areas of tension in the formal interrelationships over the entire picture surface. Yet when these characteristics are set against Prouns whose date is certain, one quickly realizes the inadequacy of these criteria. Proun 23, No. 6 (Fig. 1), done in 1919, shares all the above features ostensibly characteristic of the later Prouns. Thus one is compelled to look more closely into the Prouns to understand the great difference separating Proun 23, No. 6 from one of the last works in the series, Proun 99 (Fig. 2).

It is important to recognize that Lissitzky approached a Proun composition essentially as a problem in the definition of space. As the Proun series developed, the spatial interplay increased both in dynamism and in subtlety. Proun 23, No. 6, at the beginning of these experiments in space, contains spatial ambiguities in the tangent relationships and in the illusionistic effect of volumes projecting in front of the picture plane. But the spectator’s position is static as he views these forms from below, with this overall calm supported by the muted red and cream colors. In Proun 99 the spatial configuration has changed dramatically. Tangent relationships thoroughly confuse the positions of the cube, curved lines, grid, and the vertical form in the background. Lissitzky enhances the tonal contrasts to give the surface a pulsating rhythm. The grid, with its delicate linear interplay, acts as a repoussoir into three-dimensional space and as a flattened shape reasserting the painting’s two-dimensionality. The cube also reads as a hollow, three-sided part in the development of Malevich’s Suprematism (T. Andersen, Moderne Russisk Kunst 1910-1930, Copenhagen, 1967, 49f). An English translation of Victory over the Sun appears in Drama Review, xv, Fall, 1971, 107–124.


8 For information on the Proun compositions destroyed in Germany during the 1930’s, see F. Roh, “Entartete Kunst, Künstbarbare im Dritten Reich, Hanover, 1962, passim.


10 Lissitzky in 1922 identified color, as a vehicle of emotion, with the Russian village, “close to the soil, colorful, still enclosed in medieval manner” and thus to be diminished in the Prouns (E. Lissitzky, “New Russian Art,” 148).


13 This date is certain because of the work’s appearance in a photograph of Lissitzky in his studio in Vitebsk in 1919 (Lissitzky-Küppers, El Lissitzky, pl. 28).

14 “He saw essentially a technical problem in every work” (J. Tschichold, El Lissitzky, Berlin, 1971, 3).


3 El Lissitzky, *Proun*. Eindhoven, Stedelijk van Abbemuseum

geometrical form. Finally, the lowest edge of the “cube” is not parallel to the horizontals above, thereby suggesting the form has moved as the spectator, too, seemingly changes his position. In summary, onto the three-dimensional armature of Proun 23, No. 6 Lissitzky has added the dynamic fourth dimension of time. Movement and time later formed the dominant factors in Lissitzky’s exhibition designs.15

On the basis of a recognition of Lissitzky’s concern with a dynamic space in the Prouns, one can reformulate the dating for these works. One Proun painting, in the Stedelijk van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven and dated “before 1924” (Fig. 3), clearly falls among the earliest Prouns not only because of its formal association with Lissitzky’s academic position in Vitebsk at this time, but also because of the lack of spatial interplay among the forms. Proun 95 (Fig. 4), formerly dated ca. 1920, is close to Proun 99 in such features as the curved forms that confuse the spatial relationship of the rectangular solids to the triangular shapes below, the positioning of the horizontal division of the canvas just below the center, the shift in tonalities, and the ambiguity of two- and three-dimensional forms.

For Lissitzky, the “cosmic space” of the Prouns came to symbolize the utopia he envisioned in the new social order of the Revolution.17 In marking the steps toward this goal of an active, four-dimensional space, one possesses a reliable means for determining the chronology of the Prouns.

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15 In Das Abstrakte Kabinett (Hanover, 1927), for example, the entire tonal configuration of the room changed with each step by the spectator. See Helms, “Demonstrationsräume.”

16 A red square (dark blue in the Proun) was the symbol of the Vitebsk UNOVIS (Institute of New Art) where Lissitzky served in 1919 under Chagall, and later Malevich. The painting also relates to Lissitzky’s poster “Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge” (1919) in which red triangular forms break apart an inert circular configuration (photo: Lissitzky-Küppers, El Lissitzky, pl. 40).