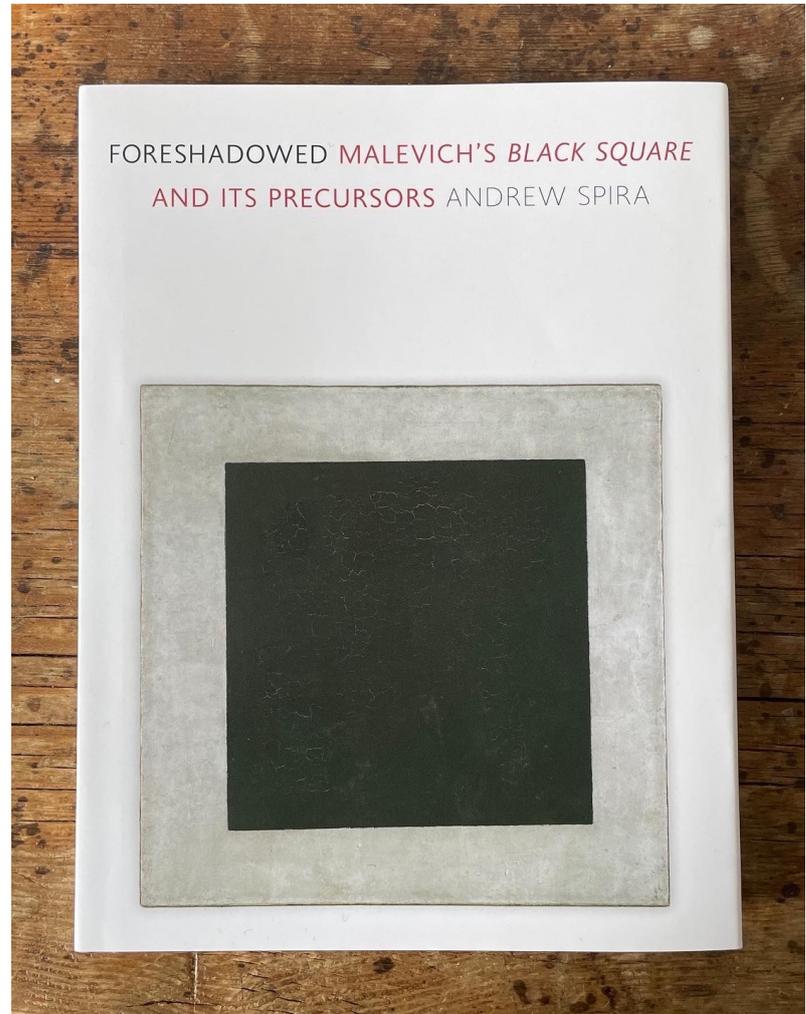


Foreshadowed: Malevich's *Black Square* and its Precursors

Andrew Spira

Kasimir Malevich's *Black Square* is one of the most challenging and perplexing paintings ever produced. For some people, it is quite literally iconic (as it was hung in the position of a sacred icon when it was first exhibited in 1915) while, for others, it epitomises the absurdity of modern art: *I could have done that!* Either way, whether people felt exhilarated or insulted by it when it first appeared, they had never seen anything like it before. In fact, it was so audacious that the painting of monochrome pictures has continued to



serve as an *avant-garde* rite of passage ever since. But this book is not about the *Black Square's* legacy. On the contrary, readers may be surprised to discover that, although the *Black Square* was shockingly innovative in its time - not even resembling other works in the milieu from which it emerged - it *does* have precedents. Indeed for over five hundred years, a number of painters, writers, philosophers, scientists and censors - all seeking an absolute in their own very distinct way - have alighted on the form of the black square or rectangle as a medium of expression, as if for the first time. While their journeys there were diverse - metaphysical, valedictory, comic, symbolic, psychological, political, optical - the end results have one feature in common:

each of them involved the process of an individual painstakingly blotting out a rectilinear space with the darkest possible pigment, to the point of exclusion. Some of the results of this process - end-points beyond which it was impossible for their authors to go - had as much pathos in their own contexts as Malevich's had in his; and many of them have an astonishing graphic power and freshness, even by today's standards.

This book explores the resonances between Malevich's *Black Square* and its precursors. Despite the lack of manifest connection between most of the examples cited (many of which are unknown to art lovers, academics and students), a 'genealogical' connection does link them together in an intriguing, and sometimes quirky, sequence of modulations. This project explores how each of these black rectangles both 'foreshadows' Malevich's work and, paradoxically, throws light on it, eliciting significances from it that are often overlooked but which are as relevant today as they ever have been.

"Andrew Spira has written an extraordinary and fascinating book about one of the simplest paintings ever made. Brilliant, witty, personal and inspired, it is full of surprises."

John Milner, author of Kazimir Malevich and the Art of Geometry

"This is a thought-provoking book which provides the philosophical background to the emergence of the most mysterious painting of the 20th century – *Black Square* by Kazimir Malevich – and enhances our understanding of it by making some completely new observations. Placing Malevich's *Black Square* in the most interesting and intriguing context, Andrew Spira develops a fascinating narrative that explores the possible precursors, origins, context and meaning of this iconic painting."

Natalia Murray, Associate Lecturer and Senior Curator, The Courtauld Institute of Art

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