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• EXPERTISE •

Kazimir Malevich

Suprematism [Black Ellipse]

(1916)

80 x 49.4 cm.

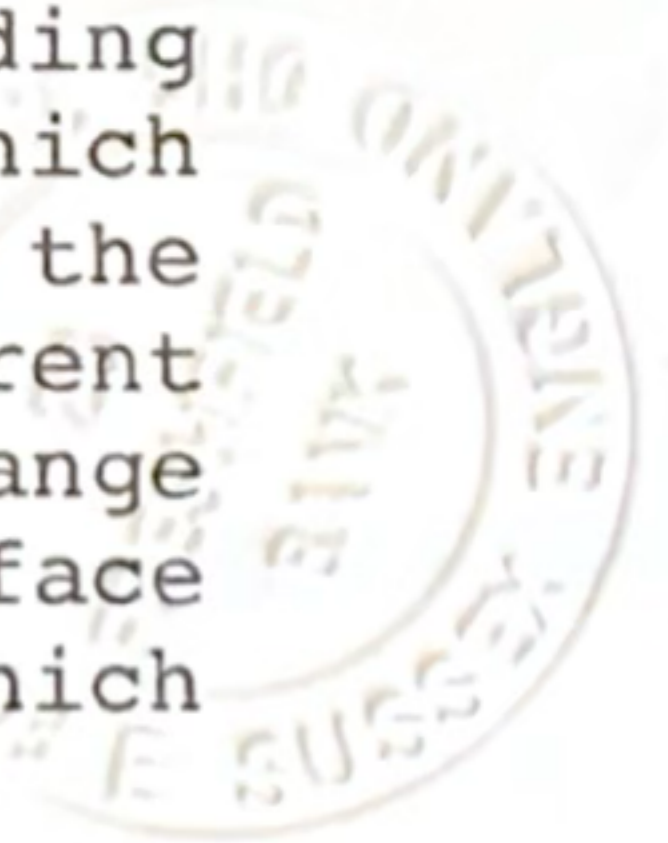
Oil on canvas

Signed and titled on the back in Malevich's hand:

'K. Malevich Suprematism with No. 53'

Kazimir Malevich (1879-1935) first exhibited his Suprematist paintings in December 1915 at the Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings 0.10, in Petrograd. His 39 works were classified as static or dynamic. Throughout 1916 and 1917 his paintings continued to develop 'in different and complicated compositions' to 'express different sensations, primarily dynamic and static', as Malevich wrote in an undated manuscript, *Suprematism. Its Phases of Development*, 1923/1927. This *Suprematism [Black Ellipse]* belongs to the large group of Suprematist paintings inspired by a 'dynamic sensation', as Malevich called it.

The Dynamic Sensation: Animated Surfaces, Contrast, Depth  
What Malevich meant by 'dynamic sensation' varied according to different kinds of sensations of colour and light, which he made visible in the juxtapositions of planes over the surface of the painting, as well as by creating an apparent depth by changing the sizes amongst them. He would arrange the groups so as to create a certain kind of surface movement, and in 1916 he did a group of paintings in which



the surface is very animated by impasto brushwork and variegated colours.

There are perhaps 12 known works of 1916 in which Malevich has heavily worked the surface of his paintings; 6 of these belong to a group of paintings of ellipses or circles over which hover perpendicular bands. The colours are always red and black, and there are subsidiary groups which may have other colours as well.

### Suprematism: Aspects of the Dynamic Sensation

#### Shifts Between Light and Dark: the Impasto Technique

In *Suprematism* Malevich has captured the dynamic sensation of reflections of planes caused by an abrupt transition from brightness to cloudiness, as in the sky. This is what explains the juxtaposition of black and red, the normal occurrence of light shifting dramatically.

The colours of the ground are rendered as an animated surface that captures tones of light, shifting through luminous pinks to yellows.

The equally animated surface of the black ellipse captures the tones of darkness, the impasto brushwork picking up the dark purples to reds or to deep blues.

The painting, then, is a masterly play between bright light and deep darkness, captured by the wide ranging tones found on the planes in the variegated brushwork.

#### Black Ellipse and Red Perpendiculars

The black ellipse is a bright surface that has turned dark due to dramatic changes in the light.

The perpendicular red bands indicate two perpendicular edges of planes; they are red because that is the colour that first appears in conditions of such abrupt transitions from light to dark.

#### A Dynamic Structure

This central and dominant group of ellipse and perpendiculars are placed on a diagonal in the picture plane, the diagonal always indicating a movement away from the vertical, or a static position.

Below it Malevich has placed a subsidiary group of red to violet planes, with a blue line, in a more accentuated diagonal position. Set against the angle of the major

group, Malevich shifts the movement between the major and minor groups, juxtaposing the angles, and so he activates the eye, makes it move dynamically.

#### A Dynamic Space

As well as shifting the eye in the surface arrangement, that is, between the groups, Malevich creates a visual depth in the picture plane by changing the size and proportions between the major and minor groups. He creates the sensation of depth.

While the black ellipse and red perpendiculars appear to shift in the plane because they are placed on a diagonal, the small red rectangles and thin lines in the subsidiary group appear to glance across the surface as well as into depth.

#### The Dynamic Sensation of Light

So in using only a few elements, Malevich has created a highly animated painting both in its surfaces, in the light-colours and darker colours of light, in their shifting captured by the heavy brushwork, and in the juxtaposition both of size of groups and their placements along different angles.

*Suprematism* is truly a work of the dynamic sensation.

#### Comparison to *Supremus*

There is what could be seen as something of a companion piece in a work: it is titled *Supremus* by Malevich on the back of the canvas, and is dated 1916. It is in a private collection (reproduced overleaf).

In both *Suprematism* and *Supremus*, the ellipse and perpendicular planes are similar, they are placed similarly in the space of the canvas, and the canvases are large and of similar proportions.

Their differences, however, are significant, especially in that in the private collection painting, the ellipse is red, while the perpendiculars are black. This indicates that the visual experience of the light is opposite to that of *Suprematism* of this Expertise.

Indeed, the ground in both paintings, which is equally heavily treated in impasto brushwork, moves dramatically through a transition of light so that in the private collection painting the black perpendiculars are seen against a bright and changing light but surrounded by



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darkness. In *Suprematism*, on the other hand, the red perpendiculars occur as a result of a more constant light.

#### The Pigments and Brushwork

The pigments in the ground of *Suprematism* include zinc white and white lead, chrome yellow, vermilion, terre verte, and the violet is manganese, each of which is mixed with white.

These pigments also appear on the black ellipse, unmixed and pure, bringing light to the edge of it: that is, a source of light strikes the edge and brightens it.

That Malevich should mix his colours is typical of this group of paintings and of other works of 1916, made necessary by the heavy impasto and tinted brushwork, especially of the ground.

The red and black planes are in vermilion and lamp black, while the blue line is ultramarine blue.

#### Title

It is curious that Malevich should write "Suprematism" on the back of the painting of this Expertise, since on the back of the three other known paintings in this group he wrote "Supremus" or "Sup." - by which he meant "Supremus".

Because the *Suprematism* of this Expertise belongs to this group - i.e., because the particular subject matter in the kind of light is the same, and because the handling of the brushwork is also the similar - it belongs to the *Supremus* group of paintings.

That he titled it "Suprematism", however, may be related to the number on the canvas - No. 53 - which refers to an inventory number. It may have been the case that this painting was deposited with the Museum of Artistic Culture and the painter wished it to be grouped under the more general title, "Suprematism", especially should it be purchased or exhibited.

Without archival information, however, this must remain speculative.

#### Date

Malevich did not date this canvas.

Because of its obvious relationship to *Supremus* in the private collection, which is signed and dated on the back of the canvas, "1916", *Suprematism* is also thought to be of 1916.

The date is placed in brackets at the top of this Expertise to indicate that it is not given by the painter himself on the canvas.

#### Exhibited?

Malevich showed 60 canvases in the Moscow Knave of Diamonds exhibition in November 1916, all of them grouped under one title: "Suprematism of Painting". Only 4 of these 60 paintings have been identified, three of them from the 1915 exhibition, Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings 0.10.

So if Malevich showed other paintings from 1915, even all of them, then there would be at least 20 new paintings of 1916. However, based on his usual practice of exhibiting all new work unless specified in the catalogue, and because the exhibition was dominated by the SUPREMUS Society of Artists which would suggest that Malevich's work, too, fell into that new category, there would probably have been something like at least 50 new paintings. At present there are about 30 known paintings dated to 1916.

That is why it is possible that *Suprematism* may have been exhibited at the Knave of Diamonds in 1916. But without documentary evidence, this cannot be asserted with any authority and must remain speculative.

#### Provenance

*Suprematism* comes from state stores in Russia incorporating those of the Museum of Artistic Culture, formally shut by 1929.

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I examined this oil on canvas, *Suprematism*, in June 2007. Based on this and on art historical analysis, technical analysis of pigments, canvas and stretcher, documentation, and other information available at the time of writing, it is my belief that this work is by Kazimir Malevich.

Patricia Railing  
27 Novemeber 2007

Patricia Railing 6  
authenticated copy of 2 Feb 2023.