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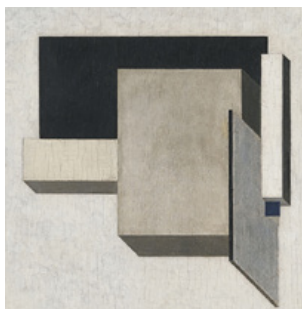
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Open Windows 12

# Blue and white: Willem Kalf and the 17th-century fascination with Chinese porcelain

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**Elsa Vallarino**

Translation: Jenny Dodman



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**Willem Kalf**  
*Still Life with a Chinese Bowl, Nautilus Cup  
and Other Objects, 1662*  
(detail)

[\[+ info\]](#)



fig. 1  
View of room 21 of the Museo Nacional  
Thyssen-Bornemisza

If you pay a visit to the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza's collection of Old Master paintings and stop to examine some of its still lifes, your attention will probably be powerfully drawn to a particular feature: pieces of exquisite porcelainware from the Far East enjoy pride of place among flowers, fruits, shells and other sumptuous objects in the oil paintings of Jacques Linard, Ambrosius Bosschaert I, Balthasar van der Ast, Jan Jansz. van de Velde III and, in particular, Willem Kalf [fig. 1].

It is no coincidence that the emergence of still life as a genre in its own right came at a time when large numbers of rare and costly items, mainly brought by the Dutch East India Company, were arriving in Europe. Painters, besides showing off their technical skills, reflected and intensified viewers' desire to own such pieces.

Out of all the imports that found their way into Europe, Chinese porcelain, exotic and delicate, ornamental yet functional, had the greatest impact on painting. It was depicted not only in sumptuous still-life scenes or *pronkstilleven* but also inside dressers and accompanying portraits and genre scenes, arranged on shelves and mantelpieces; it was even considered worthy of being carried by biblical and mythological characters in certain representations.

fig. 2

**Willem Kalf*****Still Life with a Chinese Bowl,******Nautilus Cup and Other Objects, 1662*****Oil on canvas, 79.4 × 67.3 cm****Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza,  
Madrid, 203 (1962.10)**

### ***Still Life with a Chinese Bowl, Nautilus Cup and Other Objects, 1662***

No other painter depicted Chinese porcelain with such dedication as Kalf. His works – particularly those of his Amsterdam period, to which the three paintings in the Thyssen-Bornemisza collection belong – reflect his firsthand knowledge of these imports, which he carefully arranged, using extraordinary light effects to portray them emerging from dark interiors. Possibly the most enthralling of his porcelain paintings is *Still Life with a Chinese Bowl, Nautilus Cup and Other Objects* (1662) [fig. 2], which was described in 1943 as the best still-life painting in the world<sup>1</sup> by Theodore W. H. Ward, who had gifted a large group of Dutch and Flemish still lifes to the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. Ward had wanted to add this canvas by Kalf to his own collection, but in 1962 it joined that of Baron Thyssen-Bornemisza in Lugano.

**1**

Quoted in Fred G. Meijer, *The Collection of Dutch and Flemish Still-life Paintings Bequeathed by Daisy Linda Ward* [exh. cat.], Zwolle, Waanders, 2003, 16.

fig. 3

**Paulus Willemsz. van Vianen**  
**Tray with *Diana and Actaeon*, 1613**  
**Silver, 50 × 40 × 6 cm**  
**Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam,**  
**BK-16089-A**



The canvas attests to the fascination felt not only by Kalf but also by 17th-century Holland for these sumptuous objects in circulation at the time. Arranged on a marble table and a tapestry from Herat (now Afghanistan) are a *façon de Venise* glass with red wine, a nautilus cup with silver gilt mounts, a Römer glass with white wine and a chased silver tray. According to Uta Neidhart, the tray is crafted in the style of Paulus van Vianen [fig. 3], a Dutch silversmith, medallist and painter who worked at the court of Emperor Rudolf II.<sup>2</sup> On it are a knife with a polished agate handle and a delicate lidded Chinese bowl with a silver spoon with lobed decoration inside. An orange, a lemon with its peel hanging in a spiral revealing its shiny pulp, and, at the corner of the table, some peach stones alluding to the passage of time or vanitas complete the array. Further into the background it is possible to make out, albeit with great difficulty, what appears to be a glass dish on a small box and another glass, all of which may be part of a pentimento.<sup>3</sup>

2

Uta Neidhardt, 'Ein Prunkstilleben von Willem Kalf als Leihgabe in der Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister', *Dresdener Kunstblätter*, Dresden, 1994, 1–3.

3

Sam Segal and Ubaldo Sedano, *Willem Kalf: Original y copia* (Contextos de la colección permanente no. 5) [exh. cat.], Madrid, Fundación Colección Thyssen-Bornemisza, 1998, 50.

4

Stadsarchief Amsterdam, notary H. Schaeff, notarial archives 422, 26/07/1653, 213ff; The Montias Database of 17th-Century Dutch Art Inventories, inv. 1156.

Kalf's height of development as an artist, when he began depicting Chinese porcelain in his works together with other select pieces which he modified and reorganised to create various settings, coincided with his return to the Netherlands following a short but fruitful sojourn in the French capital. It is tempting to establish a connection between the change in his still lifes and his stay at the home of Johannes le Thor in 1653. Le Thor was a jeweller, merchant and director of the Dutch West India Company in Amsterdam, as well as the owner of a considerable number of paintings, silverware, Turkish rugs, Asian porcelain and other curiosities.<sup>4</sup>

fig. 4  
Jan Jacobsz. van Royesteyn  
*Nautilus Cup*, 1596  
Toledo Museum of Art, Ohio,  
1973.53

↓



fig. 5  
Detail of the Chinese bowl

It seems unlikely that Kalf would have owned such valuable articles as there is very little trace of him in archives or notarial deeds of the time and nor is his last will and testament known. Like many other painters, he must have turned to collectors to depict objects that did not belong to him. Various artists may even have had access to the same piece, or at least to others that were extraordinarily similar. The nautilus cup in this painting is also featured in a still life by Pieter Claesz. dated 1636, albeit with certain alterations to the design. Although there are similar surviving examples, such as one in the Toledo Museum of Art in Ohio [fig. 4], none features the figure about to be devoured by the sea monster, which is depicted by both artists. The Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza also owns two nautilus cups, which are on view in room 21 [fig. 1].

Kalf's still life is arranged in a triangular layout in which the objects are larger the closer they are to the centre, rivalling with the Chinese bowl in beauty and importance [fig. 5]. As Lucius Grisebach explained in detail, this blue and white porcelain object appeared recurrently in the output of the artist, who portrayed it from different angles and with minor variations on at least five occasions.<sup>5</sup> It is decorated with pairs

5 See Lucius Grisebach, *Willem Kalf, 1619–1693*, Berlin, Gebr. Mann, 1974, 265–69, figs. 124, 125, 126, 150 and 151.



fig. 6

**Willem Kalf*****Still Life with Chinese Bowl, 1662*****Oil on canvas, 67 × 54.7 cm****Staatliche Museen zu Berlin,****Gemäldegalerie, 948F**

of figures in relief representing the Eight Immortals of Taoism clad in bright gold and red outfits. The lid is adorned with flowers and stylised leaves and is topped with the relief of a Fu lion, an auspicious and apotropaic element. The object, characteristic of the end of the Ming dynasty or the transition to the Qing dynasty (1620–1683), has a rather unusual shape for Chinese porcelain. It is generally termed ‘sugar bowl’, a use suggested by the spoon accompanying it and further borne out by the records of the East India Company, which specifically refer to the export of ‘porcelain pots with sugar’.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, some historians do not believe it was used for this purpose given that sugar was not yet refined then. The catalogue of the auction where this picture was sold in 1778 describes the piece as a punch bowl.<sup>7</sup>

There is a similar painting on canvas dated the same year in the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin [fig. 6]. In it Kalf reproduces some of the exquisite items, among them the Chinese ‘sugar bowl’. This time he depicts them with slight variations and with the lid in a different position, providing the spectator with a view of a different pair of Immortals. These eye-catching figures are taken from one of the most popular Chinese legends, that of the Eight Immortals or *Pa Hsien*, whose main characters achieve immortality through alchemy. The two who occupy a prominent place in the paintings are Lü Dongbin and He Xiangnu (right to left, respectively). The former is the patriarch of the *Pa Hsien*, portrayed as an old man attired in the dress of the academic class whose emblem is a double-bladed sword that can be carried in the hand or hung down the back. He Xiangnu is the only woman in the group. She usually wears elaborate tunics and carries a bamboo spoon, which is sometimes replaced by a long-stemmed lotus flower or fly swatter.

**6**

Letter to Holland, dated 4 January 1636, from Batavia. Quoted from Tijs Volker, *Porcelain and the Dutch East India Company, as Recorded in the Dagh Registers of Batavia Castle, Those of Hirado and Deshima and other Contemporary Papers, 1602–1682*, Mededelingen van het Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde series, Leiden, no. 11, Ministerie van Onderwijs, Kunsten in Wetenschappen, Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1954, 39.

**7**

Sold, lot 43, Amsterdam, 16 March 1778.





fig. 7

**Anonymous**  
**Bowl with Landscapes and the Eight Immortals, about 1620–40**  
 Porcelain, 16.5 × 14.5 × 9.8 cm  
 Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam,  
 AK-MAK-563

### On the trail of the Chinese ‘sugar bowl’

Tracing the objects Kalf used in his compositions is by no means an easy task. Not only has it not been possible to link most of the pieces to their 17th-century owners, but the artist constantly introduced variations in their design. That is why, despite their undeniable resemblance to some real-life objects, possible identifications are merely hypothetical.

The 1654 to 1668 inventory of the collections of Amalia of Solms-Braunfels, the wife of Frederick Henry of Nassau, Prince of Orange, listed ‘two little round pots with lids and figures on them’,<sup>8</sup> though not specifying their location. The members of the House of Orange underscored their role as rulers of the United Provinces through the visible consumption and display of overseas treasures in the Huis ten Bosch palace in The Hague. Inside it they created Chinese porcelain rooms designed specifically to exhibit these pieces.

Two other bowls that were presumably similar to the one depicted by Kalf are now housed in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam and in the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem.

The piece in the Rijksmuseum [fig. 7], which is dated to around 1620–40, comes from Jingdezhen (in southeast China) and is painted in underglaze blue. The body displays a continuous landscape from which emerge four pairs of Immortals in relief with their attributes, and running around the edge of the bowl are a few floral volutes. The lid is decorated with a scene with two men playing ‘go’<sup>9</sup> and a third accompanied by his servant. The knob of the lid ends in the shape of a Fu lion whose paw leans on a post with an openwork sphere containing a marble. It belonged to Herman Karel Westendorp (1868–1941), a scholar of Asian art, collector of porcelain – though chiefly Japanese – and president of the Royal Asian Art Society of the Netherlands.

8

Quoted in William R. Sargent,  
*Treasures of Chinese Export Ceramics*  
 from the Peabody Essex Museum,  
 New Haven, Yale University Press,  
 2012, 45.

9

‘Go’ originated in China at least 2,500 years ago and is believed to be the oldest board game still played.

fig. 8

Anonymous

Lidded bowl, about 1625–50

Porcelain, 15.2 × 14 cm

Peabody Essex Museum, Salem,

AE85967.AB



fig. 9

Detail of the pair of Immortals  
in the Peabody Essex Museum

fig. 10

Detail of the pair of Immortals  
portrayed by Kalf

There is a practically identical object, slightly smaller and with a few faded motifs, in the Peabody Essex Museum [figs. 8, 9], an institution that houses one of the most comprehensive collections of Asian export ware. The red, black and gold pigments that are still visible match the shades used by Kalf in his still life [fig. 10]. This surviving example shows that pieces of this kind were decorated without being fired – that is, the figures were cold-painted, a technique that did not achieve lasting colours.

fig. 11  
Francisco de Zurbarán  
Detail from *Saint Hugo in the Refectory*,  
about 1655  
Oil on canvas, 262 × 307 cm  
Monasterio de la Cartuja de Santa María  
de las Cuevas, Seville



## The long journey

Until the 17th century, Chinese porcelain items were exceptional, rare and costly objects and any found in Europe were in royal collections. In the 16th century Portugal controlled the maritime trade in spices and Asian luxury goods. In 1580 Philip II took over this monopoly and evidently amassed the largest collection of Chinese porcelain in Europe. However, objects of this kind are considerably less present in Spanish paintings than in Flemish, Dutch and Italian pictures of the 16th and 17th centuries,<sup>10</sup> though we find them in unusual contexts such as on the Carthusian monks' table alongside Talavera earthenware in Francisco de Zurbarán's *Saint Hugo in the Refectory* [fig. 11].

**10**  
On Chinese porcelain in 16th- and 17th-century Spain, see Cinta Krahe, *Chinese Porcelain in Habsburg Spain*, Madrid, Centro de Estudios Europa Hispánica, 2016.

After coming by Portuguese nautical charts, various Dutch – and also English – companies soon competed with Spanish undertakings, setting out on their own expeditions to Asia. Their intention was initially to take over the spice market, though they ended up dealing in a wide range of goods such as porcelain, lacquer and textiles. One of the first pieces of news the Dutch received about the porcelain made in China came from the *Itinerario* of Jan Huygen van Linschoten (1596):

To tell of the porcelains made there, is not to be believed, and those that are exported yearly to India, Portugal and Nova Hispania and elsewhere! But the finest are not allowed outside the country on penalty of corporal punishment, but serve solely for the Lords and Governors of the country and are so exquisite that no crystalline glass is to be compared with them.<sup>11</sup>

But substantial amounts of porcelain were not received in Holland until 1602, when the Portuguese carrack *San Jago* was captured off the island of Saint Helena and its cargo was confiscated and subsequently auctioned at Middelburg. The following year the Dutch seized another colossal vessel in the Straits of Malacca, the *Santa Catarina*, whose cargo included ‘an untold mass of porcelain of all kinds’.<sup>12</sup> Its sale at auction in Amsterdam generated huge earnings and attracted buyers from all over Western Europe, among them Henry IV of France and James I of England.

In 1602 the Dutch companies that traded with Asia merged into an extremely powerful shipping company, the Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (Dutch East India Company or VOC). Its headquarters were in Batavia (Jakarta, Indonesia), as not all wares were sent to Amsterdam but most of its ships called at various Asian ports. Unlike the Portuguese and Spanish, the Dutch did not gain access to southern China until they managed to establish themselves in Formosa (present-day Taiwan) in 1615. Bearing in mind that the country never traded directly with China, it is surprising, to say the least, that such a huge number of luxury items from China found their way into the Netherlands. In the 17th century most porcelain came from either Formosa or from Portuguese and Chinese carracks that conducted trade in Batavia.

11

Quoted from Julie B. Hochstrasser, *Still Life and Trade in the Dutch Golden Age*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2007, 124.

12

Ibid., 126.



fig. 12

**Willem Kalf*****Still Life with a Porcelain Bowl and Nautilus Cup, 1660*****Oil on canvas, 64.1 × 55.9 cm****Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid, 202 (1930.37)**

fig. 13

**Jan Jansz. van de Velde III (attributed)*****Still Life with Chinese Dish, Rummer, Knife, Bread and Fruit, about 1650-60*****Oil on canvas, 44.7 × 38.8 cm****Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid, 376 (1930.111)**

The exported pieces – chiefly bowls, cups, plates and *kendis*<sup>13</sup> – were distinguished by their fineness and panelled decoration with naturalistic motifs and auspicious symbols such as the Eight Immortals of Taoism. This porcelain was mass-produced in Jingdezhen, a city ideally suited to its manufacture, during the reign of Emperor Wanli (1573–1620). It was called *kraakporselein*, as *kraak* was the Dutch term for Portuguese carracks. This was the type of porcelain most commonly portrayed by painters [figs. 12, 13].

During the transition period (1620–1683), porcelain ceased to be produced at the imperial kilns. The loss of the main investor, the empire, inevitably led Chinese potters to seek out new markets, and they continued to manufacture export ware adapted to European tastes. Around 1645, however, political instability in China triggered serious problems with supplies, and production even ground to a halt. It was at this point that Japan began exporting porcelain, and both the objects listed in inventories of the second half of the 1600s and those depicted in paintings might therefore be of the *kraakporselein* type, from the transition period, or Japanese; it is possible they are even copies or imitations.

**13**

The term derives from the Sanskrit *Kundika*, vessels used to contain water in Buddhist and Hinduist rituals.

Contact with China ended up changing Western tastes, giving rise to a completely new aesthetic in the early 17th century. Europe became inundated with hybrid objects, though they display an exceptional balance between Western and Asian. The records of the VOC attest to a growing desire to adapt the forms of European ceramicware: bowls and candelabra were taken to the country to be copied by Chinese potters, who were asked to produce porcelain with heraldic motifs, views or images based on drawings and prints. On arriving in Europe, many of these pieces were fitted with silver mounts for both aesthetic and functional purposes. Chinese porcelain furthermore had a direct impact on the Dutch ceramic industries, becoming a powerful source of inspiration for the blue and white Delft ware.

Apart from pieces that were commissioned expressly, Chinese porcelain was also imported to be sold by East India merchants and shops in Amsterdam. Establishments of this kind had existed in other parts of Europe since the second half of the 16th century. In Lisbon, for example, there were stores specialising in luxury Asian goods, all in the same street. This also became true of Amsterdam, where at least fourteen shops opened in the Warmoesstraat and Pijlsteeg streets.<sup>14</sup> It is practically impossible to determine the identity of the customers who frequented them, because no accounting records of those shops have been found to date. It would be logical to think that they had a wealthy clientele, though Holland imported such huge quantities of Chinese porcelain that it ended up becoming affordable to the middle class too.

That was how it became possible for a few painters, such as Kalf, to demonstrate the role played by 17th-century Holland as a world power by means of a gesture – or rather a stroke of the brush – as simple as including a piece of Chinese porcelain in their works. ●

14

Jaap van der Veen, 'East Indies shops in Amsterdam', in *Asia in Amsterdam: The Culture of Luxury in the Golden Age* [exh. cat.], New Haven–London, Yale University Press, 2015, 137.

# New discoveries concerning the portrait of an unknown man, the Island of Dominica, and an unscrupulous dealer

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Dorinda Evans



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Circle of Sir Joshua Reynolds (?)

*Portrait of a Man from the Island of Dominica (?)*, about 1770–80  
(detail)

[\[+ info\]](#)

Circle of Sir Joshua Reynolds (?)  
*Portrait of a Man from the Island  
 of Dominica (?)*, about 1770–80  
 Oil on canvas, 76 × 63.5 cm  
 Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza,  
 Madrid, 383 (1983.37)



This bust portrait of an unknown man in white – long misattributed and misidentified – first came into public notice in England, where there is a precedent for this kind of likeness. Given its original location, it is possible that the sitter was the African servant or enslaved black attendant of a wealthy British citizen. In such a case, his outfit would bear witness to that citizen’s status. But while his striped silk coat could be seen as conventional household livery, the tall hat – in high-quality linen or silk, topped with lace – is quite extraordinary.<sup>1</sup> Its design makes the identity of the sitter open to question. In fact, the representation of this stunning crown has played (and must play) an operative role in the interpretation of the picture.

1

I am indebted to Aileen Ribeiro (Courtauld Institute of Art) and Clare Browne (Victoria and Albert Research Institute), specialists in costume, for identification of the fabrics. They differed in opinion on the hat. It could be silk (backed with cardboard) or starched linen.



fig. 1

**Agostino Brunias*****Free West Indian Dominicans, about 1770*****Oil on canvas, 31.8 x 24.8 cm****Yale Center for British Art, New Haven,****Paul Mellon Collection, B1981.25.74**

The portrait can be dated by the man's neckpiece and the cut of his coat, as well as the painting style, to about 1780. As a whole – including the canvas size and painted oval – the picture is convincingly English, but the sitter need not be. There are alternatives: he could be a foreign visitor from Africa or its diaspora, and this could explain the odd hat design.

Contrary to what might be expected, the closest approximation to this hat is not found on an African aristocrat or an African Muslim of the period. Instead, its twin – though not identical – is found sitting on the head of a free West Indian on the island of Dominica, as depicted by Agostino Brunias in about 1770 [fig. 1]. The analogous cylindrical headpiece in Brunias' picture is probably made from pleated linen capped with bobbin lace. Its well-dressed wearer has tentatively been identified as both a plantation official and a 'dandy'.<sup>2</sup> This headgear seems to be unique to Brunias' known work. A second version (with tufts of probably linen at the top) is worn by an Afro-Dominican man and child in other Dominican pictures by Brunias.<sup>3</sup> This strengthens the connection with that Caribbean island without being conclusive evidence of a link. If the Thyssen sitter is

**2**

For official, see Diana de Marly, *Dress in North America*, vol. 1, *The New World, 1492–1800*, New York, Holmes & Meier, 1990, 116. For dandy, see Mia L. Bagneris, *Colouring the Caribbean: Race and the Art of Agostino Brunias*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2017, 195. Unfortunately, there is no known Dominican / Caribbean expert in period dress.

**3**

See the similar hat in Brunias' painting, *Market Day, Roseau, Dominica*, about 1780 (Yale Center for British Art) and in the mistitled 1804 engraving after a lost picture by Brunias of the linen market on Dominica (Barbados Museum & Historical Society).



fig. 2

**Agostino Brunias*****The Linen Market, Dominica, about 1775*****Oil on canvas, 49.6 × 64.8 cm****Colección Carmen Thyssen,****CTB.1986.22**

Dominican, he probably fled to England as part of the exodus of English planters just before the French claimed the island from the English in 1778.<sup>4</sup>

Whether Dominican or not, the sitter might have been sufficiently successful to have commissioned the portrait himself. Alternatively, it could have been a gift from him or for him, relating to a friend. An example of such a gift – thought to have been bankrolled by the Duke of Montagu – is Thomas Gainsborough's 1768 portrait of Ignatius Sancho (National Gallery of Canada), the black composer, writer and anti-slavery campaigner who had once been a slave. The possibilities are almost endless. Yet further research is thwarted by the absence of the sitter's name, his profession or even the (certain) identity of the portrait's first owner. Unfortunately there is not enough evidence to draw any definite conclusions concerning his identity.

With the face and hat rendered in relatively broad brushstrokes, the portrait follows the general painting style of Sir Joshua Reynolds, the first president of the Royal Academy in London (1768–92). The artist of this likeness was clearly talented and apparently intrigued by the challenge of convincingly rendering flickers of light on the coat's slightly ribbed, cream-coloured surface. The dark colouring of the sitter's skin and hair in shades of brown, rust and black provides a marked contrast to the nuanced differences in the sheen of the off-white clothing. Although the position of the collar is distorted on the left side (as if not drawn when worn), it is perhaps to call attention to the smooth surface of the silk lining of the sitter's coat and the fine linen or muslin of his shirt ruffle and neckcloth. Sadly, in spite of the rarity of the subject and the pictorial merits of the portrait – which would lead to an expectation of its recognition when created – there is no record of it having been exhibited or engraved in England in the 18th century. Nor does it appear in any such records in the 19th century.<sup>5</sup>

**4**

The free people of colour and slaves in Dominica were remarkably fond of dressing up in fine clothes, including silk [fig. 2]. For this, see Thomas Atwood, *The History of the Island of Dominica*, London, J. Johnson, 1791, 220, 261. The island had been under British control since 1763. Governor Thomas Shirley left for England in June of 1778 with many Anglo-Dominican planters, and the French arrived on 7 September 1778. See Robert A. Myers, *A Resource Guide to Dominica, 1493–1986*, New Haven, Human Relations Area Files, 1987, vol. 1, 6. Unfortunately, Brunias' known patrons (who owned his pictures or to whom he dedicated his engravings of Dominica) and Shirley's papers do not lead to a connection.

**5**

The portrait, for instance, is not in image indexes for *The London Magazine or Gentleman's Monthly Intelligencer*, 1747–83; *Gentleman's Magazine and Historical Chronicle*, 1777–86; and *Lady's Magazine*, 1770–85. It also does not appear as a portrait of a black or 'negro' man in Algernon Graves' indexes to the exhibitions at the Royal Academy of Arts, the Society of Artists of Great Britain and the Free Society of Artists (scanned for mentions). Furthermore, it is not found in the present indexes



fig. 3  
**Angelica Kauffman**  
*The Ely Family, 1771*  
 Oil on canvas, 243 × 287 cm  
 National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin,  
 Presented, 4th Marquess of Ely, 1878,  
 NGI.200



fig. 4  
**Ozias Humphry**  
*Christiaan van Molhoop, about 1795*  
 Pastel on paper, 72.5 × 61 cm  
 Tate Britain, London, Purchased with  
 assistance from Tate Members and the  
 Sir Robert Horton Bequest, 2013, T13796

to English and Caribbean newspapers of the 18th century; the main published indexes of British auction records; and indexes to dealer stock books at the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

## 6

For the relatively recent re-identification of the artist and sitter in Humphry's portrait, which was exhibited at the Royal Academy, see the website for Tate Britain (<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/ozias-humphry-284>).

As for the subject's characterisation, the Thyssen likeness is distinctive when compared to the usual treatment of an African attendant to a European or to a Briton. In contrast to such renderings, his hat is not the plumed, Orientalising concoction habitually used in a fashionable attempt to make the black slave or servant more 'exotic'. The practice served as an expression of foreign luxury or empire. In 1771 the Swiss-born artist Angelica Kauffman painted a portrait of the aristocratic Ely family in Ireland accompanied by a young (albeit Indian) page, at right, depicted in this tradition [fig. 3]. Another example is the English painter Ozias Humphry's portrait of about 1795 of Baron van Nagell's running footman [fig.4], who would accompany his employer's coach. His livery, including an elaborate, feathered headpiece, befitted a public person and, in its exoticism, was almost certainly not the same as that of other household servants. Since the baron was the Dutch ambassador to Great Britain, this servant (who had once been a slave) was unusual in wearing the red, white and blue colours of the Dutch flag.<sup>6</sup>



fig. 5

**Sir Joshua Reynolds**  
***The Right Honourable John Manners, Marquess of Granby, and a Groom, 1766***  
Oil on canvas, 245.5 × 207 cm  
Royal Collection Trust,  
RCIN 405894

The representation of well-dressed dark attendants (usually a turbaned boy or young man) became so fashionable that Reynolds used his own black footman as a model for several pictures, casting him in the role of a groom in his 1766 portrait of the Marquess of Granby [fig. 5].<sup>7</sup> Such additions – like the horse, the uniform and the military background – served to increase the sitter's status. As the dark-skinned subordinate to a powerful man, the groom could easily be read as either a slave or a freed servant.

Like Reynolds' footman, the Thyssen sitter might have been an artist's model. However, the argument against this is that in such a case, it is likely that the portrait would have been exhibited or engraved as an advertisement, showcasing the artist's talent. Besides this, the sitter might be expected to appear in other pictures. So far there is no record to support this, and the peculiarity of the headdress is difficult to understand in the context of a model.

7

On Reynolds' servant, see James Northcote, *The Life of Sir Joshua Reynolds...*, London, Printed for H. Colburn, 1818, vol. 1, 204.

In general, there are differences between the Thyssen portrait and the exotic type that are consistent enough to merit noting. Humphry's portrait is executed as if the sitter were a theatrical character with his head tilted and a look of suspicion or scepticism. This must have been in accordance with the baron's wishes in the commission. By comparison, the Thyssen sitter, with his upright posture, reveals less about his personality, but has greater dignity or gravitas. As in Humphry's portrait, there is also a psychological presence, in acknowledgment of the viewer. This is not always found in portraits. Surely this sentience and characterisation are due to the artist's skill, but they suggest a degree of respect for the subject that adds to the mystery of this unknown individual.

With so much undisclosed, the prominent hat in the Thyssen portrait inevitably played a role in an accretion of erroneous interpretations. Superficially it resembles a standard chef's toque, but that archetypal hat did not come into being until the 1820s, too late for this sitter but perfect for complicating interpretations of the portrait.<sup>8</sup> The chef's identification not only stuck but also got to be elaborated over time. For about forty years in the 20th century, the Thyssen portrait was misidentified and published as Gilbert Stuart's portrait of George Washington's cook. It is neither by Stuart – who is famous for having painted admired portraits of the first president of the United States – nor of Washington's cook. Such a person never wore a hat like this.

The first part of this mix-up – the mistaken attribution – was apparently due to a self-educated art dealer from New Zealand, Reginald Nankivell (1898–1977), who styled himself Rex de Charembac Nan Kivell and ran the Redfern Art Gallery in London. He was the one who publicised the portrait as by the English-trained, American artist Gilbert Stuart, and affixed a small plaque with Stuart's name (and wrong dates) on the 17th-century English frame, which he might have provided.<sup>9</sup>

**8**

Cooks did not wear toques before 1821, when French chef Marie-Antoine Carême introduced and popularised the hat. See Daniel Engber, 'Who Made That? (Chef's Toque)', *The New York Times Magazine*, 28 March 2014, 24.

**9**

Clara Marcellán Fernández, curator at the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, found a similar silvered, bunched-leaf frame on John Hay's 1666 portrait of Samuel Pepys (National Portrait Gallery, London).



fig. 6

**Unidentified photograph of the painting, 12.7 × 10.2 cm, in Scrapbook, [52], Papers of Rex Nan Kivell, 1938–1977, Archive, National Library of Australia, Canberra**

**10**

See the *Papers of Rex Nan Kivell, 1938–1977*, Ms 4000, at the National Library of Australia, Canberra. The photograph is found in Ms 4000, Series 2, Miscellaneous – Nan Kivell's Scrapbook Albums, item 6 (listed as Box Folio), [52].

**11**

The date of the scrapbook is estimated by Nathaniel Williams – Nan Kivell's biographer and formerly an archivist at the National Library of Australia – in a letter to Dorinda Evans of 2 December 2021. He thought the photograph was probably a reprint and checked to find that nothing is written on the reverse. I am indebted to him for his help.

**12**

The Witt photograph (filed under Gilbert Stuart, *Unknown Sitter*) is close to but not the same as the one in Nan Kivell's album. It shows more sheen on the bridge of the sitter's nose. A photocopy of a sheet of paper with the provenance is pasted on the reverse of the photographic mount. Because it is a photocopy, the mount must date after 1959.

**13**

The handwriting was identified by Nathaniel Williams in a letter to Dorinda Evans of 21 November 2021.



fig. 7a

**Detail of lighting on the lips of the sitter in fig. 6**

fig. 7b

**Detail of lighting on the lips in the Portrait of a Man from the Island of Dominica (?)**

Fortunately, the National Library of Australia has preserved Nan Kivell's surviving papers, which include an early photograph of the portrait with its plaque [fig. 6].<sup>10</sup> The image is undated and unidentified in a scrapbook album that he compiled probably in the mid-1970s.<sup>11</sup> As a document, it is useful in establishing that the portrait has since experienced minor retouching, as in the lighting on the lips [figs. 7a, 7b]. Another early photograph of the portrait, on a mount from probably the early 1960s, is in the Witt Library's archive at the Courtauld Institute of Art, London.<sup>12</sup> Attached to the mount is a photocopy of a piece of paper giving the early provenance or history of the picture. Significantly, the writing is in Nan Kivell's own hand.<sup>13</sup>

**14**

Curiously, Nan Kivell's papers include a variation on his Thyssen provenance. See his copy of a letter of 4 February 1969 to Alan Walker of the National Library of Australia (Ms 4000, Correspondence, January–July 1969 [File 51] – Box 5, National Library of Australia), in which he states that his formerly-owned portrait of Lord Hobart (National Library of Australia) by Sir Thomas Lawrence 'came from the Hulbert family who originally lived at Tilshead Manor, Wiltshire'. The family was 'friendly with the Lawrence family (Sir Thomas' father) ... and apparently the friendship lasted through Sir Thomas' life time because the Hulberts had several Lawrence portraits and a portfolio of Lawrence's drawings'. Rather than supporting the Thyssen provenance, this record of origin – which shifts the friendship to an earlier generation – contributes to doubt. John Hulbert's brother purchased the Tilshead Manor Farm but not until 1864. John Hulbert's father, Thomas, was ten years younger than the artist and lived on a farm, away from the town of Devizes. Moreover, the artist lived in Devizes only from the ages of three to ten. Additionally damning, Nan Kivell's portrait of Lord Hobart is now not considered to be by Lawrence. In truth, there is no known, supporting evidence that the Hulberts ever owned any work by Lawrence. I am grateful to Wiltshire historian Lyn Dyson for Hulbert and Lawrence family research.

**15**

Lucy Peltz, senior curator at the National Portrait Gallery, London, has worked on Thomas Lawrence's collection, which was primarily focused on drawings. She confirms that there is no known inventory of the collection in her email to Dorinda Evans of 8 July 2021.

He wrote that the original owner was the English artist Sir Thomas Lawrence, and that Lawrence gave the portrait to John Hulbert of Lavington, Wiltshire, at the time of Hulbert's marriage to 'the daughter of Lord Wolsley'. As he explained, Lawrence and Hulbert had been 'boyhood friends' in Devizes, Wiltshire. Two parts of this record are particularly troublesome: Hulbert provably did not marry a daughter of a Lord Wolsley; and the two men could not have been childhood friends because Lawrence was about forty-six years older than Hulbert.<sup>14</sup> There also is no surviving support for the story that Lawrence, who had a notable art collection, ever owned the portrait.<sup>15</sup>

Mention of the Hulberts reveals more than a mere recital of the picture's history. John Hulbert's heir and youngest daughter was Fanny Louisa Hulbert, who had an interest in art and, in her old age, effectively adopted the much-younger Nan Kivell.<sup>16</sup> After she sold the art that she possessed along with inherited belongings (catalogue not extant), she purchased a controlling interest in the Redfern Art Gallery in 1930 and, a year later, put Nan Kivell, who worked there, in charge as managing director.<sup>17</sup> When she died in 1934, he became her executor and sole heir. This is one way he could have acquired the Thyssen portrait if it had descended to her.

Although the gallery promoted contemporary art, Nan Kivell, on the side, was an avid collector of artefacts and art related to the past of Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific. Eventually, he sold his huge, historically important collection to the Australian government for a fraction of its real value, and this generosity led to a long-desired knighthood.<sup>18</sup> His preferences in his collecting add to the enigma of the origin of the Thyssen portrait in that they suggest – importantly – that the picture could easily have been purchased without Fanny Hulbert playing any role in its acquisition.

**16**

John Hulbert (1815–1853) was a prosperous Wiltshire farmer who left his household goods to his wife, Louisa, including ‘books, prints and pictures’. See his will in *Wiltshire Wills and Probates*, P1/1853/19, Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre, Chippenham, Wilts., England. His wife’s will (P31/1/38/194, Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre) divided her possessions between her two daughters with the proviso that the survivor would inherit everything. The survivor, Fanny Louisa Hulbert, left her entire estate to ‘my dear and adopted son’, Rex Nan Kivell (her will, proved 19 March 1934, London Registry).

**17**

Fanny Louisa Hulbert sold the contents of her house in Codford, Wiltshire, on 4 September 1930 through an auction conducted by Woolley and Wallis. It was advertised in the *Western Gazette* of 29 August 1930. I am indebted to Lyn Dyson for this find.

**18**

On his quest for knighthood, see John R. Thompson, ‘Nan Kivell, Sir Rex De Charembac (1898–1977)’, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 2000, vol. 15, 460.

**19**

According to biographer Nathaniel Williams, ‘Nan Kivell wouldn’t be beyond inventing a provenance’. Email to Dorinda Evans of 5 October 2021. Numerous lies that he told about himself are known, such as that he had been ‘gassed on the Western Front’, although he saw no action. For this, see Thompson 2000, op. cit. note 18.



fig. 8

**John Webber*****A Chief of the Sandwich Islands, 1787*****Oil on canvas, 147.3 × 114.4 cm****Rex Nan Kivell Collection, The National Gallery of Australia and the National Library of Australia, Canberra**

For instance, one of Nan Kivell’s characteristic acquisitions is a 1787 oil portrait of a chieftain of the Sandwich Islands by John Webber [fig. 8], the English artist who accompanied Captain James Cook on his third Pacific expedition. The man’s fantastic, plumed headpiece is expressive of Nan Kivell’s taste for the rare, exotic and flamboyant – as is the hat in the Thyssen portrait. Moreover, if he had bought the Thyssen portrait without a known provenance, he would have been acting in a way consistent with his past to supply one from his imagination.<sup>19</sup> Whatever its origin, the portrait meant more to him than most of the pictures he handled because, toward the end of his life, he pasted a photograph of it in the one preserved album that contained his favourite gallery memories.



The Thyssen portrait's provenance is indisputable only after it came into Nan Kivell's possession, which was probably about 1935/40. Regrettably, the gallery's records up to 1939 were destroyed during World War II, and there is a gap in what survives that might cover the period of its acquisition.<sup>20</sup> In fact, there is no mention of the portrait in Nan Kivell's surviving papers – just the lone photograph. Nor does it appear in the Redfern Gallery's early 20th-century catalogues and clippings at the Victoria and Albert Museum.

A socialite, heiress and author – Daisy Fellowes (1890–1962) – purchased the portrait from the Redfern Gallery apparently by about 1945. This is when she mentioned it as representing a 'chef' in an undated letter to the British diplomat, Duff Cooper, who was close to her and must have known the portrait. She refers to her friend Jean Cocteau, who was a Surrealist artist and had written an Orphic Trilogy, as Orpheus, and writes: 'Orfaus [sic] is downstairs with pencil and paper prepared to make me look like a cross between the chef and Lloyd George'.<sup>21</sup> David Lloyd George, the British prime minister, was easy to caricature because of his inordinately bushy moustache, but the Thyssen portrait could top that as being of a black man with an outrageously elaborate – as it would seem – chef's toque. From Daisy, the portrait descended to her daughter, Ermeline Isabelle Edmée Séverine, Countess A. de Castéja (1911–1986). Before her death, Baron Thyssen-Bornemisza acquired the portrait in 1983 at the Hôtel Drouot sale of her collection, with the Hulbert provenance still intact, and he sold it to the Spanish state a decade later.

The picture might have been forgotten if it were not for an undated photograph of it in a small room used for dining, taken in Daisy Fellowes' house [fig. 9]. The image was reproduced in a 1977 article on Fellowes when the painting belonged to her daughter, Ermeline. Shown above a sideboard, the unknown sitter is now understood as projecting such an undeniable chef's identity that he exemplifies the use of the room. Taking a cue from its attribution to Stuart, who was closely associated with George Washington, Ermeline identified the picture for the journal *Connaissance des Arts* as allegedly that of Washington's cook. Whether that idea dates further back is not known, but this label – provided just after

## 20

It does not appear in the Redfern Gallery catalogue for a 1937 *Portraits* exhibition; the Redfern Gallery Press Cuttings, 1923–59; or the Redfern Gallery elephant folios for 1937–40 in the library of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. I am grateful to assistant-librarian Alex Chanter for checking. According to Nathaniel Williams, Nan Kivell's archives, 1920–39, were destroyed during World War II. Email to Dorinda Evans of 2 December 2021.

## 21

See her undated letter, now numbered 8, in 'Daisy Fellowes' Letters to Duff Cooper, 1934–1948', DUFC 12/16, Churchill Archives Centre, Churchill College, Cambridge, England.



fig. 9

**Roger Guillemot**  
**Interior View of Daisy Fellowes' House,**  
 undated. Lost photograph reproduced  
 in *Connaissance des Arts* 302,  
 April 1977

the American Bicentennial – gave a new, self-propelling fame to the sitter with the showy hat. Indeed, it was not long before the name of the real cook – Hercules Posey, as the slave was called – could be supplied. Wrongly understood, the picture appeals to ameliorating fantasies about American slavery and helps fulfil a desire in the United States to find overlooked African-Americans of historical importance.

Due to its mistaken identity, the portrait was lent to the exhibition *Lives Bound Together: Slavery at George Washington's Mount Vernon* held in 2016 at Washington's home in Mount Vernon, Virginia. To take advantage of its presence, Mount Vernon's senior curator, Susan P. Schoelwer, convened a small group of scholars and conservators – including specialists on Stuart – on 13 March 2017 to discuss the work. The focus of the meeting was its questionable attribution. Two authenticated portraits by Stuart were present for comparison. The conclusion of those present, that not only the attribution but also the sitter's identification were wrong, caused the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza to remove both designations.

With the present undermining of what was thought to be known, scholars are left with the portrait itself as the only reliable document on which to base further research. The artist, the sitter or the meaning of the costume might be determined in the future, especially if historical mention can be found. Meanwhile the picture's history tells an enlightening tale about a London dealer's deception; the ways in which a misidentification can build on itself; and the fame that naturally accrues to a work that can be linked to both Washington and African American history. As it is, the picture assumes value as a well-painted, arresting portrait. In all likelihood, with so much missing, it will always remain completely or partly a mystery. ●

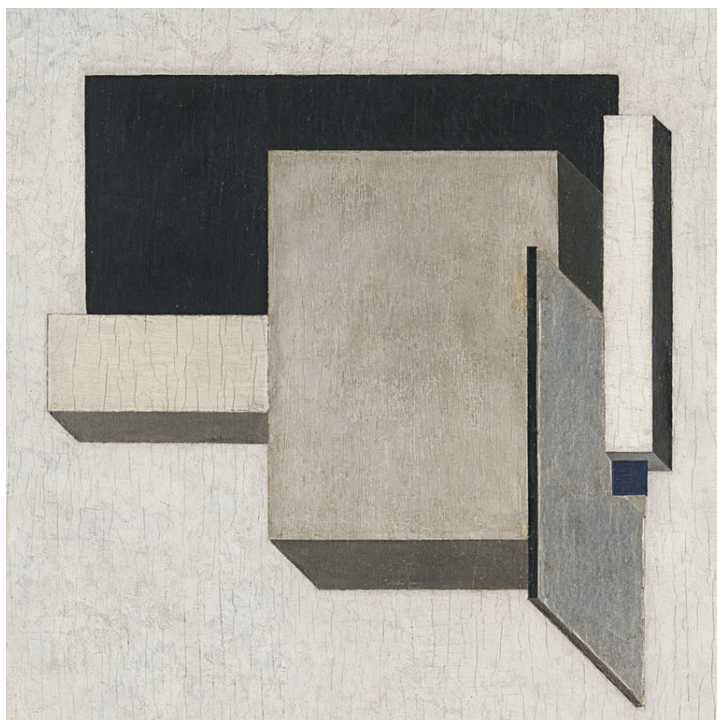
# El Lissitzky's *Proun 1C*

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'.<sup>1</sup>

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

The Proun moves from station to station along a chain of perfections.<sup>3</sup>



**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

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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'.<sup>4</sup> 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'.<sup>5</sup>

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

#### 4

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'.<sup>6</sup>

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'.<sup>7</sup> 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'.

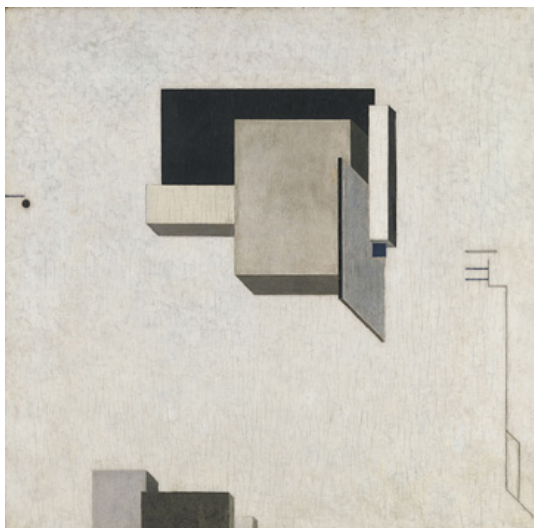


fig. 1  
**El Lissitzky**  
*Proun 1C*, 1919  
 Oil on panel, 68 × 68 cm  
 Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza,  
 Madrid, 652 (1988.20)

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

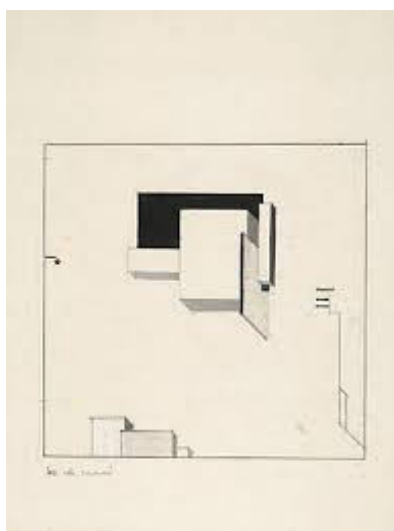


fig. 3  
**El Lissitzky in his studio in Vitebsk, with *Proun 23 (Arch)* on the easel and *House above the Earth (Proun 1C)* on the back wall, bottom centre, 1920**

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').<sup>8</sup> 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*.<sup>9</sup> 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

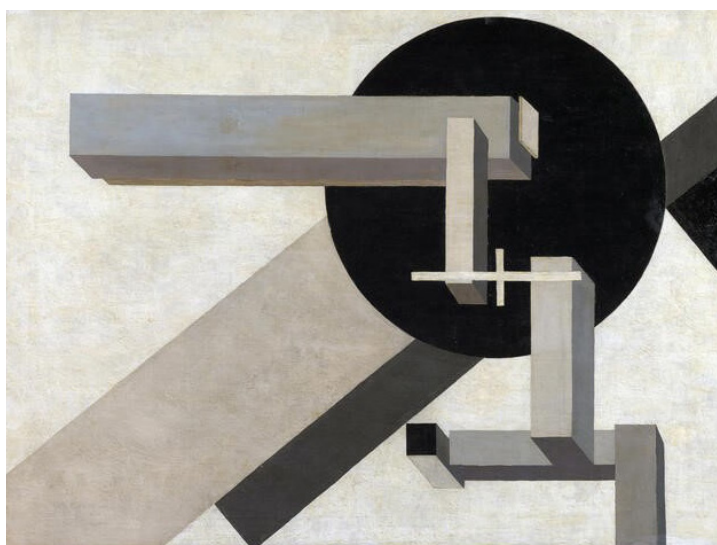


fig. 5  
El Lissitzky  
*Proun 1D (City)*, 1919  
Oil on canvas, 71.6 × 96.1 cm  
Kunstmuseum Basel, Gift of Oskar  
and Annie Müller-Widmann,  
G 1965.12

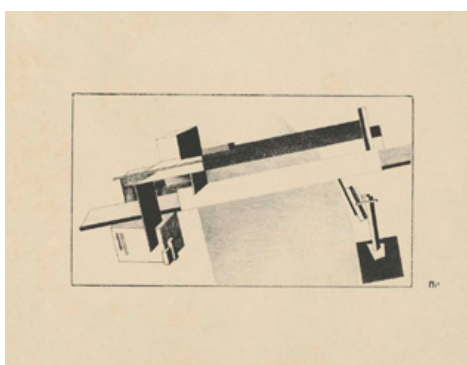


fig. 6  
El Lissitzky  
*Proun 1A (Bridge)*, 1919  
Sheet from the *Proun Portfolio*.  
Lithograph on paper, 35.1 × 45.4 cm  
State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow,  
GRS-2905

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

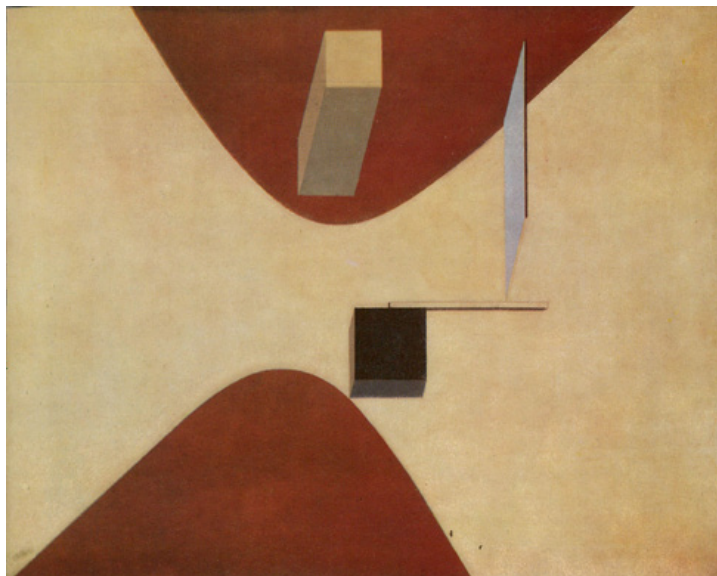
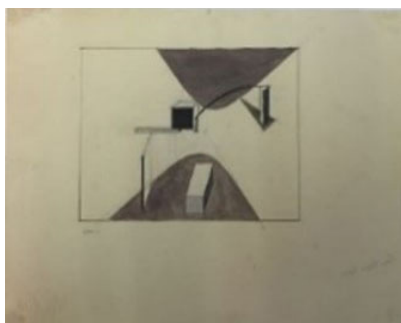


fig. 8

**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'.<sup>10</sup>

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'.<sup>11</sup> 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'.)<sup>12</sup>

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]'.<sup>13</sup>

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'.)<sup>14</sup> 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

**13**

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.

**14**

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

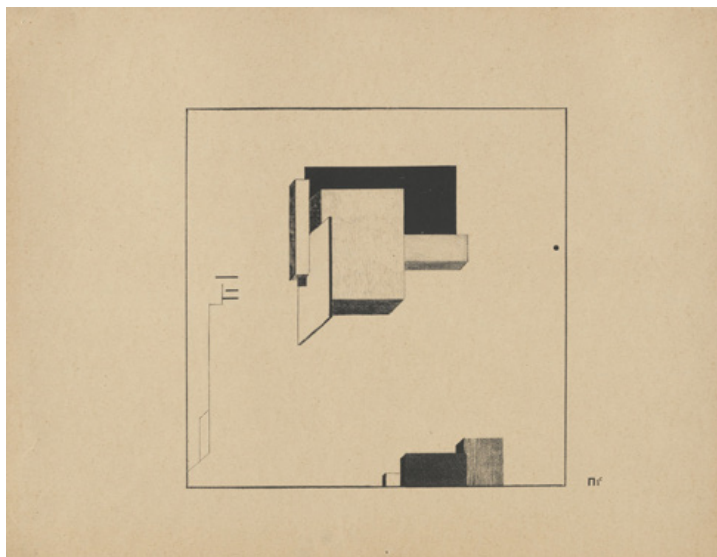


fig. 9

**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'.<sup>15</sup> 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'.<sup>16</sup>

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].

**15**El 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

## 17

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'.<sup>17</sup> 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'.

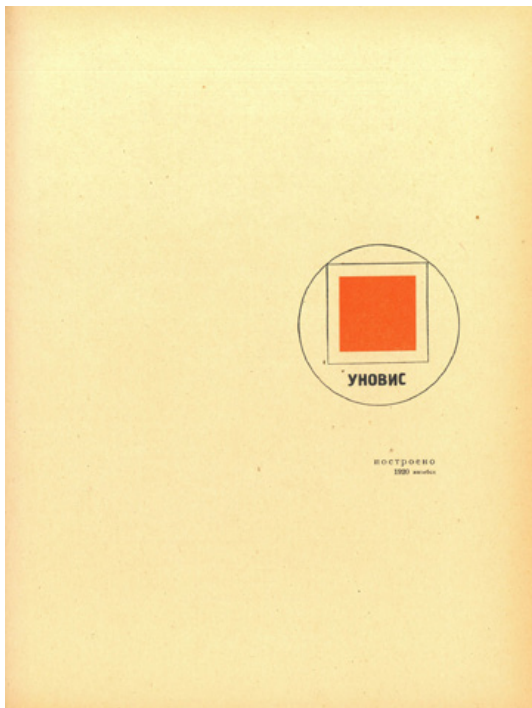


fig. 12  
**Unovis seal on the end page of  
El Lissitzky's book *About Two Squares  
in Six Constructions***



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*

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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'.<sup>18</sup> 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

18

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.

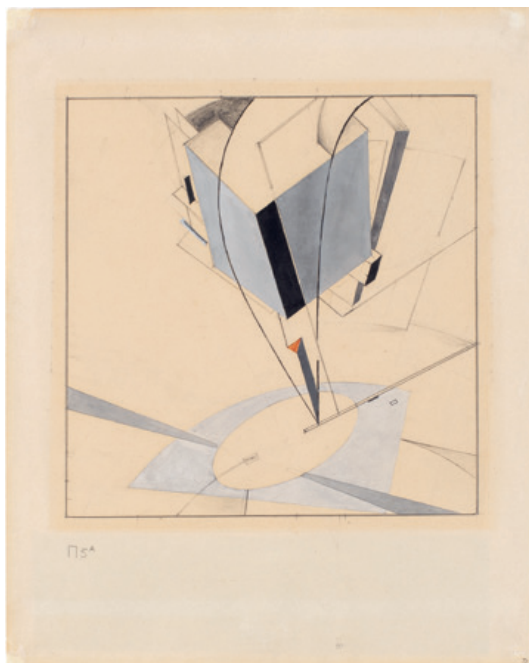


fig. 18  
**El Lissitzky**  
*Proun 5A*, 1920. Pencil and gouache  
 on paper, 22 × 17.5 cm. Museo  
 Nacional Thyssen- Bornemisza,  
 Madrid, 650 (1977.103)

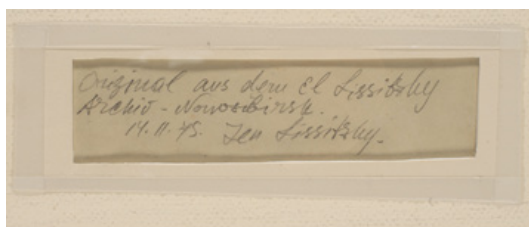


fig. 19  
**Certificate of authenticity issued by  
 Jen Lissitzky on 14 November 1975  
 on the reverse of *Proun 5A***

### ***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].<sup>19</sup> According to Sophie, this drawing became a sensation among the city's artistic circles<sup>20</sup> 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.

<sup>19</sup>  
 Kempel 1915, op. cit. note 18, 82.

<sup>20</sup>  
 Ibid.

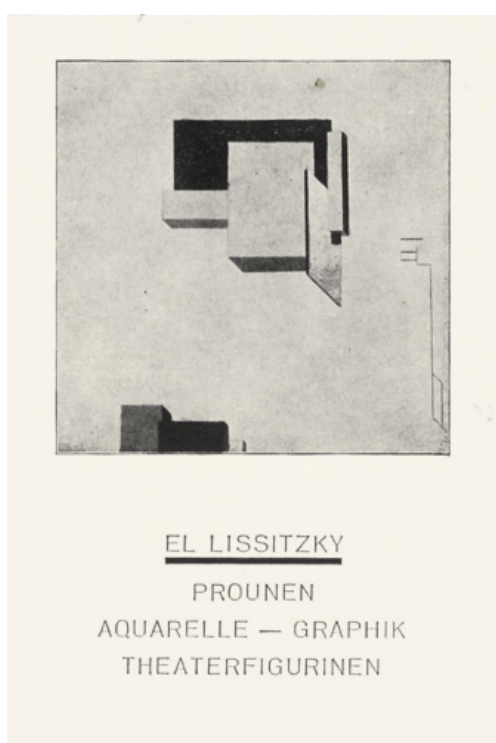


fig. 20

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.

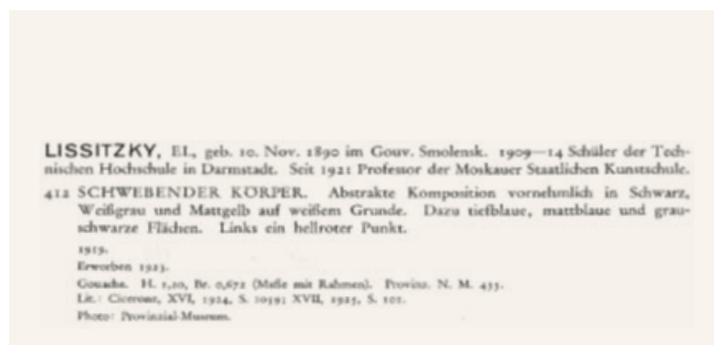


fig. 21

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.<sup>21</sup> 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*'.<sup>22</sup>

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				
Franzose, in Paris				fr.
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	10x3,4x25	1912 700
65	Nature morte	Bronze	30x40x14,5	1913 6000
66	Femme et guitare	Bronze versplattet	30x28x28	1917 3600
EL LISSITZKY				
Russa, in Moskau				
67	Proton, schwebender Körper	Toupeur auf Pappe	60x39	—
68	Proton II geklebtes Papier u. Toupeur auf Pappe		61x34	—
69	Proton 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

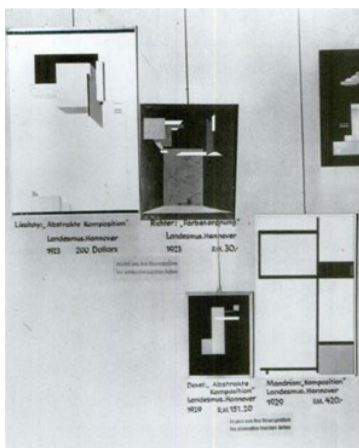


fig. 25  
Lissitzky's *Hovering Body* on show in the *Degenerate Art* exhibition in Munich in 1937

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.<sup>23</sup> 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].<sup>24</sup> 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]. ●

<sup>23</sup> Krempel 1915, op. cit. note 18, 92.

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

# Master of the Monogram TK

**Dolores Delgado**

Translation: Jenny Dodman



**Master of the Monogram TK**  
Active around 1518

[\[+ info\]](#)

*Portrait of a Man (Georg Thurzo?),*  
1518  
Oil on panel, 45.5 × 33.5 cm  
Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza,  
Madrid, 213 (1930.44)

[\[+ info\]](#)

*Portrait of a Woman (Anna Fugger?),*  
1518  
Oil on panel, 45.5 × 33.2 cm  
Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza,  
Madrid, 214 (1930.45)

[\[+ info\]](#)

fig. 1

**Hans Baldung Grien*****Portrait of the Margrave of Baden-Baden, Christopher I***

Oil on panel, 46.9 × 36 cm

Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen,

Alte Pinakothek, Munich, 1407



These two exquisite German Renaissance panels are companion pieces that follow the usual scheme of portraits of this kind. They were probably painted in Nuremberg or Augsburg. The couple, the man on the left and the woman on the right, gaze at each other, interacting. The figures are likewise set against the same green background. This backdrop colour was very common in the German Renaissance and was used by prominent artists like Albrecht Dürer, Lucas Cranach the Elder and Hans Baldung Grien, and subsequently by other German painters up to Otto Dix in the 20th century. The sitters are depicted half-bust length with their heads in three-quarter profile. The man takes up more of the picture space. He is attired in black clothing with a white shirt whose collar sticks out slightly, a cape with a large fur collar and a large hat with applied gold decoration worn at an angle. Peeping out from beneath it is a sort of cap, also gold, similar to the one depicted in other works such as the *Portrait of the Margrave of Baden-Baden, Christopher I* by Hans Baldung Grien in the Alte Pinakothek in Munich [fig. 1]. His right hand appears to be resting on the picture frame. His gloves, in the fashionable style of the period, are similar to those found in works by other artists including Lucas Cranach. The white of his shirt contrasts with the flesh tones, which are pale in both faces. The underdrawing is visible to the naked





fig. 2  
Infrared reflectogram  
of *Portrait of a Man*  
(*Georg Thurzo?*)



fig. 4.  
Infrared reflectogram of  
*Portrait of a Woman (Anna Fugger?)*

1  
Kurt Löcher, 'Ein Bildnis der Anna  
Dürer in der Sammlung Thyssen-  
Bornemisza', *Wallraf-Richartz-  
Jahrbuch* 39, 1977, 83–91.

fig. 3  
Barthel Beham  
*Portrait of Magdalena Neudörffer*, 1527  
Oil on panel, 50.5 × 38.5 cm  
Museumslandschaft Hessen Kassel,  
Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister,  
Kassel, GK 10



eye in both the husband's countenance – in his nose, mouth and ear – and that of his wife, but above all in her hand. The infrared reflectogram of the painting of the man reveals a change in the size of his ear, which was initially smaller but was finally enlarged by the artist [fig. 2]. The woman is portrayed with her arms in the characteristic pose of the period,<sup>1</sup> both resting on her lap, one on top of the other, though, somewhat unsettlingly, her left hand is not visible. A very similar position is found in the *Portrait of Magdalena Neudörffer* by Barthel Beham in the Kassel Gemäldegalerie [fig. 3], a later work than the one in the Museo Thyssen. The woman in the Thyssen portrait is attired in a black damask dress with dark red details and fur cuffs, and over it a black cape that appears to be made of velvet. On her head she wears a gold and white headdress covered with a fine veil, behind which there is a noticeable *pentimento* in the green background. The reflectogram of this painting [fig. 4]

fig. 5.

**Albrecht Dürer****Portrait of *Elsbeth Tucher*, 1499****Oil on panel, 29.1 × 23.3 cm****Museumslandschaft Hessen Kassel,****Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister,****Kassel, GK 6**

fig. 6

**Wolf Traut****Portrait of a *Woman*, 1510****Oil on panel, 37.5 × 28.5 cm****Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza,****Madrid, 408 (1928.23)****2**

Christian Salm, 'Hans von Kulmbach. The Rosary Triptych, portrait of a man and portrait of a woman', in Rudolf J. Heinemann, ed., *The Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection*, vol. I, Lugano, Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection, 1969, 182–83, nos. 158 and 159.

**3**

See Isolde Lübbecke, ed., *Early German Painting, 1350–1550: The Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection*, London, Sotheby's Publications, 1991, 328–29, nos. 76 and 77.

**4**

For more information on this subject see the study of the pigments and their materials carried out in connection with this article at the restoration workshop of the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Archivo del Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza.

shows that the head covering was originally more voluminous and ended in an almost circular shape that fully coincides with the *pentimento*. This leads us to think, as Christian Salm noted<sup>2</sup> – unlike Isolde Lübbecke,<sup>3</sup> who considered it to be a halo – that the initial headwear was designed to be larger and more rounded, a very common style during that period. Headpieces of this kind are found in other paintings, notably Albrecht Dürer's *Portrait of Elsbeth Tucher* in the collection of the Kassel Gemäldegalerie [fig. 5] and Wolf Traut's *Portrait of a Woman* in the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza [fig. 6]. The analyses carried out on the green pigments in the background and in the area around the headdress show that different materials were used for each. It may therefore be assumed that it was not the artist who made the change but another painter using a different composition to achieve a shade of green similar to that of the background and at some point after the panels were created.<sup>4</sup>

This interesting pair of portraits was initially attributed to Hans von Kulmbach, chiefly on account of the initials beside the date, which seemed to read 'HK'. This hypothesis, maintained by Jacob Rosenberg,<sup>5</sup> and subsequently by others such as Friedrich Winkler,<sup>6</sup> was not, however, unanimously accepted by specialists.<sup>7</sup> The technical studies carried out on the works proved that the two letters were, in fact, overpainted and therefore not original. Among the main test methods used, X-radiography and infrared reflectography, the latter clearly revealed – in addition to the aforementioned underdrawing – an original monogram with the letters 'TK' and above it a date, 1518. Based on these findings, Lübbecke<sup>8</sup> proposed that their maker was an anonymous master with these initials, known as the Master of the Monogram TK, whom it has not yet been possible to equate with any known artist. In both paintings the monogram is roughly at the height of the sitter's left shoulder. In the female portrait only traces of the monogram are visible today together with the date.

As stated earlier, the style of the two panels is consonant with that of the German Renaissance, and the as yet unknown Master of the Monogram TK may possibly have been based in the Augsburg and Nuremberg area, though this is more difficult to determine. The overall scheme of the works is compatible with the stereotype of the period, though the softness of the modelling of the faces is very different from the harsher manner of the circle of the German master Albrecht Dürer.

The two subjects are elegantly dressed and adorned with jewellery. The woman sports two necklaces and several rings, while the man wears a necklace similar to one of hers, of which only a small part is visible, and several rings that can be made out through the slits in his gloves. His hat, with applied gold decoration, and cap, as well as part of the woman's headdress in the same shade denote a certain luxury and ostentation. This indicates that they both enjoyed a high social status and came from influential families in the Holy Roman Empire of Germany. The identification of the sitters as Anna Fugger and Georg Thurzo was suggested by Eisler<sup>9</sup> based on comparison with two prints of them made by Holbein the Elder and preserved in the

**5**  
Sammlung Kommerzienrat Otto Held, auction catalogue of Cassirer-Helbing, Berlin, 1929, nos. 26 and 27, pls XVI and XVII.

**6**  
See Friedrich K. Winkler, *Hans von Kulmbach*, Bayreuth, Kulmbach Freunde der Plassenburg, 1959, 87.

**7**  
See Ernst Buchner, 'Hans von Kulmbach als Bildnismaler', *Pantheon* 1, 1928, 135–42, 140 note 2.

**8**  
See Lübbecke 1991, op. cit. note 3, 328–29.

**9**  
János Eisler, 'Zwei Kulmbach Bildnisse', *Acta Historiae Artium* 20, 1974, fasc. 1–2, 81–86, here 81–82, figs 4 and 5.



fig. 7  
**Hans Holbein the Elder**  
**Georg Thurzo, about 1511**  
 Engraving, 15.1 × 9.3 cm  
 Kupferstichkabinett,  
 Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin,  
 KdZ 2514



fig. 8  
**Hans Holbein the Elder**  
**Countess Thurzo, Wife of Count**  
**Georg Thurzo, about 1511**  
 Engraving, 13.5 × 9.2 cm  
 Kupferstichkabinett, Staatlichen  
 Museen zu Berlin, KdZ 2516

Kupferstichkabinett of the Staatliche Museen in Berlin [figs. 7, 8]. The similarity between the painting and the engraving of Georg Thurzo can be seen in the wide forehead, small mouth, long, round-tipped nose and powerful chin. Georg Thurzo hailed from a family of prominent mine merchants with properties in northern Hungary (now Slovakia). Their headquarters were in Krakow, from where they moved to Augsburg. Anna Fugger was the daughter of Ulrich Fugger and belonged to one of the most influential families of the period who were based in Augsburg and owned businesses all over the empire. The two families entered into a partnership, founding a joint company, and these ties were further strengthened by the marriage of their children. The couple wedded in 1497 in that city, where they both died. The courts of most of Europe and the whole empire were among their clients. Nevertheless, the resemblance between the print of Anna Fugger and the woman in the Thyssen portrait is less evident.

These panels may possibly have come from the collection of Countess Hertzberg in Düsseldorf. They later passed to Sir Charles Turner in London, where they remained until 1908. Critics had been familiar with the works since the start of the 19th century, as they were published by Woltmann and Woermann in 1888. They were sold at auction at Rudolph Lepke, in Berlin, in 1908, and were subsequently located in Otto Held's collection in Berlin. In 1915 they featured in an exhibition at Paul Cassirer's gallery in that city,<sup>10</sup> and in 1929 they were again put up for auction at Cassirer-Helbing in the German capital. The following owner was the Goudstikker gallery in Amsterdam, where Baron Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza acquired them for what was then known as the Sammlung Schloss Rohoncz, later the Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection, from which they passed to the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza in Madrid in 1993. ●

**10**  
 Exhibition *Ausstellung von Werken  
 alter Kunst aus Berliner Privatbesitz*,  
 Berlin, 1915.