



PATHS TO ABSTRACTION

1867–1917

SLIDE SHOW

26 JUNE – 19 SEPTEMBER 2010
ART GALLERY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

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INTRODUCTION

In the first decades of the 20th century, a radical new approach to art emerged almost simultaneously across Europe and in the United States: abstraction.

Abstraction was never a 'movement', it didn't originate in one place, and it wasn't practised by one cohesive group of artists. Instead, it evolved gradually, as artists experimented with colour, form and materials, calling into question some of the traditional functions of art – narrative and representation. The final decades of the 1800s saw a proliferation of artworks in which the figure or the landscape was – in increasing degrees – abstracted, distorted or simplified. The first purely abstract works were exhibited to large public audiences at the Salon d'Automne exhibition held in Paris in 1912.

The paths to abstraction were varied and unpredictable. In 1867, the London-based artist James McNeill Whistler began emphasising the 'musical' qualities of painting. In 1890 in Paris, Maurice Denis declared that 'a picture is essentially a plane surface covered with colours assembled in a certain order'. By 1917, many artists had abandoned representation altogether, while some moved freely between abstraction.

Terence Maloon

Curator, *Paths to Abstraction 1867–1917*

Both line and colour make us think and dream.
The pleasures we derive from them differ in nature,
yet they are perfectly equal and are absolutely independent
of the subject of the picture.

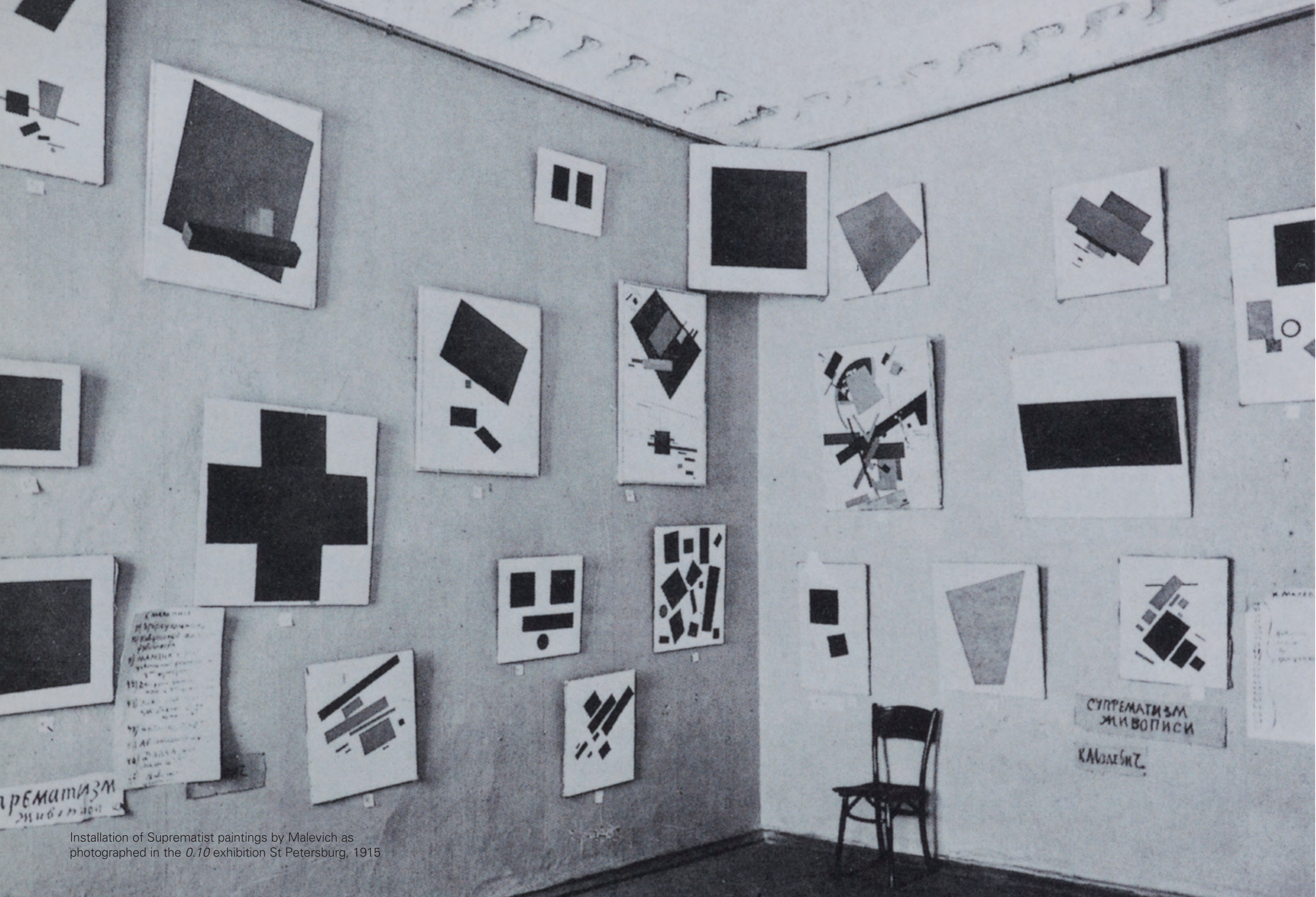
Charles Baudelaire, 1868

Remember that before being a war-horse, a nude woman, or some anecdote, a picture is essentially a plane surface covered with colours assembled in a certain order.

Maurice Denis, 1890

We are on the way to a completely new art; it will be related to painting in the same way that, up until now, music is related to literature. It will be pure painting in the same way that music is pure literature.

Guillaume Apollinaire, 1912



Installation of Suprematist paintings by Malevich as photographed in the 0.10 exhibition St Petersburg, 1915

WHISTLER AND HIS INFLUENCE

As the light fades and the shadows deepen all petty and exacting details vanish, everything trivial disappears, and I see things as they are in great strong masses: the buttons are lost, but the garment remains; the garment is lost, but the sitter remains; the sitter is lost, but the picture remains.

James Abbott McNeill Whistler



James Abbott McNeill Whistler
Nocturne in grey and silver, the Thames, c1873
oil on canvas, 44.7 x 60.3 cm
Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales.
Purchased 1947

MONET AND CÉZANNE

A picture by Cézanne is a deliberately conceived object, isolated, sufficient unto itself, which finds its highest expression within the limits of its own frame.

Félix Vallotton



Paul Cézanne
Banks of the Marne c1888

oil on canvas, 65 x 81.3 cm
Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales. Purchased 2008 with funds provided by the Art Gallery of New South Wales Foundation, the Art Gallery Society of New South Wales, and donors to the Masterpiece Fund in joint celebration of the Foundation's 25th anniversary and Edmund Capon AM OBE's 30th anniversary as Director of the Gallery

NABIS

Had the Nabis wanted to make such a bold decision, abstract art could have been invented in 1895.

André Chastel

Édouard Vuillard
The doors 1894

gouache on cardboard, 50.8 x 41.6 cm
Collection: National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.
Felton Bequest, 1952 © Édouard Vuillard/ADAGP.
Licensed by Viscopy, Sydney



GAUGUIN AND THE PRIMITIVIST WOODCUT

Wood engraving is by definition stylised and leaves as much to the imagination as it gives us to see; it is an advantageous means of expressing the visionary character of all perception

Maurice Godé



Franz Marc
Tiger 1912

woodcut, 20 x 24.1 cm
Collection: Brooklyn Museum of Art,
Ella C Woodward Memorial Fund

THE EXALTATION OF COLOUR

... objects harmed my pictures.

Wassily Kandinsky



Wassily Kandinsky
Study for 'Painting with white border' 1913
watercolour, gouache, ink, 39 x 35 cm
Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales.
Purchased 1982 © Wassily Kandinsky/ADAGP.
Licensed by Viscopy, Sydney.

CUBISM

The Cubist reflection consists essentially of stripping back all the proportions and ends up with projective, primordial forms like the triangle, the rectangle and the circle.

Paul Klee

Georges Braque
Glass of absinthe 1911

oil on canvas, 37 x 28.7 cm

Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales. Purchased 1997
© Georges Braque/ADAGP. Licensed by Viscopy, Sydney.



1912–17: THE LIMITS OF ABSTRACTION

Art no longer cares to serve the state and religion, it no longer wishes to illustrate the history of manners, it wants to have nothing further to do with the object, as such, and believes that it can exist, in and for itself, without 'things'.

Kasimir Malevich

Kasimir Malevich
House under construction 1915–16

oil on canvas, 97 x 44.5 cm
Collection: National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. Purchased 1974





PATHS TO ABSTRACTION 1867-1917 EDUCATION KIT

This slide show is based on the *Paths to Abstraction 1867-1917* printed education kit which is also available online with extended education material:

- PDF Education kit.
- PDF *Paths to Abstraction 1867-1917* timeline.
- PDF Da Vinci Project Supplement

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EXHIBITION

Art Gallery of New South Wales
26 JUNE – 19 SEPTEMBER 2010

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Ernst & Young

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cover image:
Kasimir Malevich
House under construction 1915–16 (detail)
oil on canvas, 97 x 44.5 cm
Collection: National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.
Purchased 1974

All quotes are sourced from the exhibition catalogue,
Paths to Abstraction 1867–1917,
Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney 2010, except
Vallotton's quote on Cézanne which is from Phillippe
Dagen, *Pour ou contre le fauvisme*, Somogy, Paris 1996.

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