

Learning to love abstract painting from square one.

I must admit, I didn't love abstract painting from square one; it was a love that grew over time, a love for me at least, that had to be learned. And Kasimir Malevich didn't trigger that love, it would have been far more 'expressive' abstract painters like Willem de Kooning or Sam Francis who did that. Only later did I come to understand what an extraordinary visionary Malevich was.

KASIMIR MALEVICH (1878-1935) was born in Kiev but worked for most of his life in Moscow. I find it amazing to think that his painting *Red and Black Square*, was done in 1915, two years before the Russian revolution and forty years before abstract painting became the 'avant garde' painting movement in the western world.

With close observation, we see this painting isn't quite as simple as it first appears. For a start, the squares are none perfectly square, a fact that seems to play a part in the harmonic interdependence of the squares. The larger black square is balanced by the colour and angle of the smaller square- imagine if those colours were reversed - it just wouldn't work. The size and shape of the white field (or size of the squares within... it) is also crucial. So it was that in 1915, the simple square became established as a key device in modern art.

PIET MONDRIAN (1872-1944) is no doubt best associated with carefully positioned horizontal and vertical stripes, lines which inevitably form a background of squares and rectangles. Yet in abstract painting the notion of a foreground and background seems totally misplaced. The painting *Composition 1933*, is interesting in that it moves away from Mondrian's usual discipline of using only primary colours and the lines are at an angle. Mondrian's paintings are a masterclass of achieving perfect visual balance using the simplest elements. Like so many things, it seems so very easy - until you try it.

The thought of being obsessed by a square might seem madness to some, but not to JOSEF ALBERS (1888-1976). Over 1,000 versions exist in Albers' most famous work, the *Homage to the Square* series of paintings, which were done over a period of 25 years. An accomplished designer, typographer, photographer and printmaker, Albers was a very cerebral artist who was a notable colour theorist, and it is colour more than anything else that the Homage to the Square series is all about. Albers carefully recorded technical details on the back of each painting to keep stock as the series endlessly evolved. The paint was, perhaps unexpectedly, oil applied by palette knife. A close inspection will show that the edges of the squares are slightly ragged which prevents them from simply being cold, hard blocks. It is a good idea to look at the Homage to the Square series on your computer to see the colour differences in the series, which is so important to understanding Albers' motivation - better still to see the originals, of course.

No one could claim that VICTOR VASARELY (1906-1997) was obsessed with the square. His vast range of lively geometrical paintings contain every possible shape, and yes, that includes the inescapable square. The painting *Retay-Va* shows how the square is the starting point for Vasarely's typical visual dynamism. His startling use of colour and optical illusion have made Vasarely the daddy of the Op Art movement if not its actual founder and his influence has been profound.

As a young man, when studying art at the Muehly Academy in Budapest, Vasarely became familiar with the work and theories of Kasimir Malevich and Josef Albers. As the endless cycle of influence passes on from artist to artist throughout time, one irrefutable truth becomes clear:

The humble square, in certain hands, can possess its own kind of magnificence.