



## Packaging a dream

By Alexandra Shatskikh

Malevich's biography follows with dispiriting precision the romantic myth of the great artist: unparalleled poverty and disparagement in life, tremendous fame half a century after death. Suprematism, the philosophy of non-objectiveness, architectons, canvases with faceless personages — those great masses have contours; we know for sure with what we are dealing. It gradually began to dawn on us that through Malevich we are able with a fair degree of approximation to grasp how anonymous works grow up, those that live independently among the people, without a creator. It needs only to be stated that in the twentieth century Europeans were predominantly an urban people, and anonymous works current in everyday life were flesh of the flesh of mass culture.

Kazimir Malevich, the provincial obsessed with painting moved completely from Kursk to Moscow in 1907 and soon brought his wife and two children to join him. In his thirties, he knew only one thing for certain — he would not work any longer as a civil servant, since such employment left him no time, as he put it, "for work in art". The family had no means of support and sometimes went hungry for days on end. The only salvation was commissions.

Very soon, in a dozen years or so, decorative and applied art would produce an ambitious offspring called Design that would jealously demand total loyalty from artists. For the moment, though, patterns and ornaments were produced by painters who could not find buyers for their works. Such perks came their way by chance: besides magazines that liked to adorn themselves with vignettes, headpieces and tailpieces, a certain amount of work was provided by the perfume industry — labels, containers and boxes were needed of a kind to inspire customers to buy.

Producing such graphic and painted "trifles for mass consumption" the professionals followed the instructions of those who commissioned them, businesspeople whose main interest was the commercial success of their goods. Artists who subordinated themselves to "traders" and "the vulgarities of everyday life" did not naturally proclaim their humiliation. There is, moreover, a paradox about collecting that became clear in the twentieth century — cheap items produced in large numbers survive worse than anything. Try to find a sweet-wrapper from the beginning of the last century. The same is true of labels, ordinary bottles and other paraphernalia of the perfume industry — who would hold onto such "litter", through the wars, through the revolutions... To this day we cannot obtain even a rough idea of the artists who worked for the perfume

companies of Moscow and St Petersburg, nor of the number of projects they worked on.

Kazimir Malevich's family and more distant kin were simple people; they liked their art to be beautiful. So Malevich's relatives preserved not only his real early works, but also his petty "potboilers". Without such authenticated provenance, nobody would imagine that the chocolate-box heads, pretentious vignettes and anaemic ornament were the work of the future creator of Suprematism. And although it now seems impossible to separate out from the mass of graphic miniatures those works produced by Malevich for this firm or that, one of his perfumery projects has come down to us today.

The work in question is an unusual bottle. I first heard about it from Una Kazimirovna Urman-Malevich in late 1988. Una, Malevich's daughter by his second wife, Sophia Mikhailovna Rafalovich, was the keeper of family legends associated with the Rafaloviches' house in Nemchinovka outside Moscow, a place that the artist loved more than anywhere else in the world. For the present owner of the house in Nemchinovka, Galina Zharkikh, who has only vague recollections of her cousin Una's father, the cracked, relatively new (1980s) scent bottle is an ordinary household article. It emerged from conversations with relatives that the bottle was first made some time in the early 1930s for a Soviet perfume factory. The toilet water called, they thought, Severnoe Siyanie ("Northern Lights"), was produced until the mid-1970s\*.

### Brokard

The memoirs of one of Malevich's closest friends, Ivan Kliun (Kliunkov), contain the following passage: "Autumn had come. [Malevich] did not have an overcoat, and suddenly there was the chance of some commissioned work. He came to see me and asked to borrow an overcoat so he could go and get this job. It was a Sunday and I was staying at home. Later too he came several times and asked me for the overcoat so as to pick up an order. At what was a difficult time for him, Malevich was supported by commissions from Brokard (a perfumer). The well-known scent: the bottle in the form of a cliff of ice with a polar bear on it, and the label too were Malevich's work."

The head of a Moscow perfume business that Kliun mentions was called Alexander Genrikhovich Brokard. He owned the largest scent factory in Europe, having inherited it in 1901 from his father, Genrikh Afanasyevich (Henry) Brokard, the founder of the Brokard & Co. Partnership.

We shall never now find out why Brokard commissioned the design of the bottle from an impoverished artist wearing someone else's overcoat who had hitherto produced only labels. Not only commissioned, but then approved and put into serial production an item that totally broke with all the traditions of scent containers. We do not know either whether any other artist designed mass-market bottles for Brokard & Co. All the major glassworks had offices in the Russian capitals that took orders for wholesale consignments of bottles or jars, as well as for the production of original items from designs provided by anyone who could pay. The latter, however, as a rule required exclusive items made of crystal or coloured

\* This unverified information found its way into the large art book published by Andre Nakov in France in 2002 that laid claim to the academic title of "catalogue raisonné": "Perfume bottle. Design from the early 1930s (the original model is not known at the present time)... Originally created for the toilet water Severnoe Siyanie, manufacture of this bottle began in the early 1930s and continued — uninterrupted — until the mid-1970s. The bottles were produced at the Experimental Glass and Mirror Works in Leningrad... This work is known through the extensive testimony of members of the artist's family, particularly his sister Victoria and daughter Una, but there is no documentary confirmation."



glass with silver and sometimes gold. The design by the painter Malevich, by contrast, was intended to be mass produced. And, since no other comparable experiment in Russian perfumery before the revolution has yet come to light, we have to assume that the project of the future avant-garde artist was an exceptional occurrence.

The owners of the perfume company were deprived of the chance to enjoy the continued success of their Severny. Just like the family's art collection (one of the most impressive in private hands before the revolution), Brokard & Co. was nationalized early in 1918. Stripped of its bourgeois name, the scent factory became State Soap Works \_5, belonging to the State Trust Zhirkost' (from the words *zhir* — "fat" and *kost'* — "bone"), abbreviated to TZh. TZh Works \_5 continued to produce some articles from the previous range, including the popular eau-de-Cologne named Severny, even during the Civil War. The bottles of the former Brokard & Co. were marked with the letters TZh in this period. After the institution of the New Economic Plan, the works administration managed to acquire a more becoming name for their enterprise: on 1 November 1922 it became the State Soap and Perfume Works Novaya Zaria ("New Dawn").

Still today Novaya Zaria occupies the site of the old Brokard factory in Moscow. In the new capitalist Russia it is, as is well known, a private limited company. The last Severny eau-de-Cologne was produced in 1996.

#### The bear

Let us turn now to the design that Kazimir Malevich produced for Brokard & Co. sometime around 1910.

What we have here is a sculpture in the round, albeit of tabletop dimensions: a polar bear has climbed up a translucent iceberg and stopped at the edge of the precipice. Awareness of it being a container comes later, and then only because we are aware of its function. This is a gross trampling upon tradition: the utilitarian purpose of the perfume bottle takes not second but twenty-second place to the plastic image (something that would be highly characteristic of Malevich the Suprematist in the Constructivist 1920s).

Having grasped that this is a miniature sculpture, one is immediately struck by its creator's freedom, not to say rejection, of other traditions — sculptural ones this time. There is no landscape genre as a separate line within sculpture in the round, and understandably so — who would dream of shaping artificial three-dimensional hills or trees? In our bottle though, the relative sizes of the little bear and the large iceberg are unequivocal evidence that the work we are looking at belongs to the landscape genre — it presents characteristic Arctic scenery with a little staffage figure included to add detail and precision to the geographical allusion.

The unusual plastic quality of the glass cliff requires us to make a digression to examine another of Malevich's commissioned works from this period. The steep-sided iceberg was in a way a three-dimensional variation of a graphic motif in one of artist's drawings inspired by the Moscow Arts Theatre's production of *Anatema* based on the Symbolist drama by Leonid Andreyev. The main protagonist in the play was Satan, who visited Moscow then left after performing a number of miracles (we inevitably see this figure as a precursor of Bulgakov's Voldan).

The drama *Anatema* came to the stage in October 1909 under the direction of Nemirovich-Danchenko and Luzhsky. The production was designed by the theatre's staff artist Victor Simov. The impact of the play was increased a hundred-fold by the scandal it caused: on 9 January 1910 Stolypin issued an order banning its staging in Moscow and throughout Russia, since the Orthodox clergy had detected sacrilegious parallels with the Gospel in it.

Even before Stolypin's pronouncement of anathema on it, the photographer and publisher K.A. Fisher had produced a photoalbum of characters and scenes from the production. After the ban another publisher, Yu. Lepkovsky, made haste to put out his own folder of pictures from *Anatema*. That is how Malevich came to be commissioned to make drawings on the theme of the Symbolist tragedy that came out as an album of photoengravings in January 1910.

In redrawing Fisher's photographs of the production which in turn reproduced Simov's designs, Malevich was, as we look at it today, "appropriating" the work of both the one and the other. Yet his works were signed with the monogram KM, occasionally more fully K. Malevich — back then copyright was not an issue.

One of these illustrations is of particular interest in the light of our scent bottle: in a mountainous landscape *Anatema* strangely stuck to the side of a precipice casts up his arms in desperation to the envoy of Heaven. A figure in a broad hooded cassock towers above a coarsely faceted rocky peak...

Returning to Malevich's glass cliff, we notice that the breach with the primary function of the scent container brought the other professional absurdities in its wake. The bottle has not a hint of the centrosymmetry that was de rigeur for exquisite perfume bottles. It is heavy, angular and asymmetrical. More over, the chunk is crowned not by any elegant stopper, but by the figure of the bear on the massive three-dimensional summit.

The non-professional appearance of then Severny bottle is aggravated by the drawbacks in its construction: it consists not of two pieces — bottle and stopper — as usual, but three. The upper part of the iceberg, including the bear, is in fact purely decorative. It is a removable cover hiding the real stopper beneath it. The blatant anti-functionalism of this arrangement led to the premature loss of stopper or lid.

Severny is one of the earliest scent bottles we know of with a superfluous, non-functional top. Malevich's innovation, totally determined by the plastic imagery of the container was not, however, the last. There are several more examples of decorative knobs masking the actual stopper. But with Brokard & Co. and the other perfumers three-part bottles appeared, after 1910.

This is by no means a complete list of the unusual features of the Severny bottle. Both the body and the removable cover have irregular broad surfaces like broken ice — a real iceberg. The translucent cliff seems to be saying something about the common nature of ice and glass: ice is frozen water; glass is a liquid mixture that has hardened. Malevich's bottle not only seemed to be a mass of frozen water, transforming a natural landscape into an artistic image, but actually was a hardened translucent lump of some one-time liquid.

Like its natural prototype, the glass iceberg is covered with cracks, like pack-ice in spring. A silvery cobweb of craquelure hangs in its matte depths. This too is one more unique feature of the design, since a study of scent containers worldwide has not yet revealed a single bottle made of traditional craquelé glass. The sparkling play of cracks in the icy semi-transparency of the bottle is very dependent on the lighting. It is particularly impressive when direct sunlight falls on the surface. (Three years later Malevich would stun the public with light effects in his designs for the Futurist opera *Victory over the Sun*.)

The depiction of the master of the Arctic that crowns the glass iceberg is static and dynamic at the same time: the polar bear has dug its front feet into the ice at the edge of the abyss, while its back legs are still walking. The sculptural miniature is marked by fine detail-work: here we find the textured strands of fur, distinct separate paws on each leg, and tail, and also a muzzle that is monumentally generalized despite its tiny size.

In the original Severny bottle the removable top concealed a carefully fitted ground-glass mushroom-shaped stopper. It was made of the same material and therefore invisible, not disrupting the matte translucency of the container as a whole.

#### Transformation

The Brokard Severny bottles were produced at a glassworks near Penza that had been founded in 1764 by members of a noble family named Bakhmetyev. Over a hundred years later, the last of the line bequeathed the Bakhmetyev factory to his great-nephew Prince Dmitry Obolensky who in turn left it to his son, Prince Alexei Obolensky. And this is an appropriate moment to stop and examine the inaccurate information published about the history of Malevich's bottle.

Alexei Obolensky, for all his princely lineage, displayed a thoroughly bourgeois entrepreneurial spirit and a desire to keep pace with the age. In the first decade of the twentieth century he invited Adele Yakobson to become artistic director of his glassworks. Yakobson developed designs for a variety of glass items and she was also responsible for scent containers.

The design submitted by Brokard & Co. to the Moscow office of Obolensky's glassworks was passed on to the works outside Penza to be given material form. The name "Malevich" meant nothing to anybody, and, most probably, was not even mentioned in the drawings sent on from Moscow.

The working up of the Brokard commission was done by Adele Yakobson as head of technology. The people at the factory knew that she was the person who put the "bear on the cliff" into production and naturally she was also reckoned to be the originator of this glass iceberg. And the industrial artist too evidently considered herself the creator of the bottle: a design on paper is one thing (especially an anonymous one), but she it was who produced an object.

It should be emphasized that, right up to her departure for Moscow in 1921, Adele Yakobson was indeed the creator of almost all the new designs produced by the former Bakhmetyev works. In Soviet times the experienced artist became artistic director of the All-Russian glass production. As design engineer she created prototypes for items made of glass and her original works became







museum pieces. However, Adele Yakobson's artistic oeuvre contains not a single work in which the specifics of utilitarian glass-making are spurned in favour of "pure art". Like any outstanding craftsman, this artist respected the traditions and "laws" of her craft.

By virtue of her professionalism it was Yakobson who had to wage a consistent struggle against Malevich's project in the pre-war years. The original Brokad Severny bottle was produced until 1921–22. Starting in 1925 Yakobson, now based in Moscow, played a managing role in the work to restore full production of high quality bottles and jars at her former workplace, now the Krasny Gigant glassworks. Malevich's bottle underwent its first "technological improvement", i.e. simplification. The loss was in the light-bearing characteristics of the original. Now silvery rays no longer played in the depths of the walls: the craquelure was imitated by pressing. But the inner ground-glass stopper remained, the little figure of the bear still had an expressive face, the animal had a tail and four paws, the back two still walking...

In the following decades the bottle underwent a further transformation. The composition of volumes remained the same, but the little statuette of the denizen of the Far North merged into the top of the iceberg: the "sugar candy" bear now stood stock still on two pillar-like supports that ran smoothly into the "ground"; a stylized stipple of mechanical dashes provided the "ripple" of fur; the animals rounded rump lack even the hint of a tail; there was nothing to see of the animal's face from in front — the left and right profiles did not match. The ground-glass stopper was replaced by a brass screw-cap — the bright yellow metal shone tranquilly through the matte top, betraying its sham nature. With further minor modifications the bottle was produced in this form right up to the late twentieth century. The variations affected the internal construction above all: the brass cap was replaced by a plastic one, but the summit of icy cliff continued to fit loosely on the top of the body.

In the 1990s it was decided to take radical steps to deal with the non-functionality of the top: a polymer cap was welded into the summit of the iceberg and now the whole upper part had to be screwed onto the neck of the bottle — the figure of the bear became a sort of handle. However, this "improvement" did not last long. It was soon abandoned as the upper part no longer touched the body of the iceberg, but hovered comically above it on the thin neck of the bottle\*.

#### Mass market

The original Brokad Severny bottle with the sparkling play of its craquelure and expressive sculptural qualities is undoubtedly a piece worthy of a place in a museum\*\*. However, both Brokad and Novaya Zaria

looked on it as a mass-market product. And it became one with a vengeance. The social order changed, tsardom gave way to the Soviet state, the Soviet state to a new presidential republic, the people of a great empire changed, the territory of that empire changed, while the glass iceberg fitted into every interior, found a place on furniture of any style and of none at all — on dressing-tables, cupboards and bathroom shelves.

Inexpensive, democratic Severny was not one of the high-class toilet waters. But its scent did not concern anyone. People did not buy it for the smell. In other words, the commercial success of a perfumery product was not founded on its olfactory qualities.

We are accustomed to believing that elegant simplicity and functionality are the passport to consumer attractiveness and stylistic longevity for a product. None of that applies to our little glass iceberg which is awkward, massive and inconvenient. The bottle was, in effect, nothing but a slap in the face — a slap in the face to perfume bottles, a slap in the face to perfumery itself, a slap in the face to sculpture, a slap in the face to good taste, a slap in the face to utilitarianism... It was so far beyond the pale that it managed to go beyond the pale of its own time and become the only one of its fellows to pass from small time to big time.

Thirty years after his tabletop iceberg, Malevich designed a Suprematist teapot with a soldered-up spout — in case, God forbid, anyone should take it into their head to use it for a practical purpose. To go with the architecton teapot the artist created a half teacup that is just as difficult to use — if the cup does not tip when you pour the tea in, your nose gets in the way. Those designs were provocatively a-functional. Malevich was waging war on Constructivism he hated because in his opinion it had degraded art to the position of a lackey serving the "mug of life". The creation of an anti-functional "functional object" was for the non-objective artist taking the fight to enemy territory.

In 1910 the glass iceberg did not have, so it seemed, any such ambitions: Suprematism was still a long way off, Constructivism even further, not to mention the whims of the dictators of design.

The iceberg was not ashamed to be a fellow to the immortal bazaar carpets bearing scenes of earthly paradise; it was in essence "anonymous", because its promise of happiness was founded in the depths of the collective unconscious. The irrationality of its "beauty" (should the inverted commas be there?) is further increased by the fact that its material embodiment — the spirit and pride of "production art", of the Constructivists, of the fans of high-tech — does not in actual fact play a major role. The transformations that the bottle underwent did not kill it. The nation valued the "beautiful utopia" in it above all.

Magical sensations were evoked by the massive angular container with its thoughtful polar bear gazing into exotic space: it was the animal that caused Malevich's relatives to rebaptise the toilet water "Northern Lights" — of course, a polar bear should embody something unprecedented and beautiful. It was in this character that the "bear on the cliff" graced shop windows and shelves throughout the twentieth century. People who bought it were indeed buying the "northern lights", taking home a romantic dream.

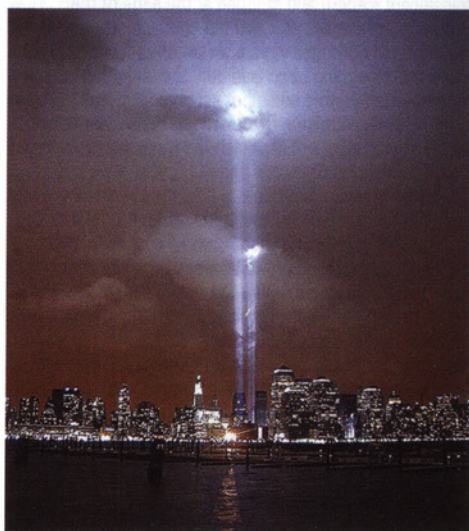
For someone of a creative bent, the highest achievement is to create "a work for the people", something so much in demand that the fact that it has a creator becomes a detail of little importance. When the famous couturier Yves Saint Laurent was asked about his dream, he replied, "I would like to be the man who created jeans." In his career he ascended to all sorts of exalted peaks, but to create a model that would prove as internationally popular as jeans sadly proved beyond him.

Malevich attained that stratospheric height, without even noticing it. The folklore "bear on the cliff" lived through the twentieth century without a creator — on its own. Its parent, the man who managed to produce an immortal authorial masterpiece to the glory of Art from the anonymous shape of a black square, did not realise that his great creation was preceded by a "by-blow" that was loved by the people and never bore its father's name.

**P.S.** In conclusion, the author, who has spent many years hunting for the "bear on the cliff" suggests to the shareholders of the Moscow company Novaya Zaria that they: 1) bring back the name of the true creator of the bottle for Severny toilet water and 2) consider this publication a detailed authorial project/proposal for the restoration (reconstruction) of production of the unique bottle that the great artist Kazimir Malevich created in 1910 for Severny eau-de-Cologne.

\* A single fully complete example of the Brokad bottle made of craquelure glass with a ground-glass stopper and the original top survives. It is marked with the letters TZH, meaning it was produced before 1922. This unique embodiment of Kazimir Malevich's original design is in a private collection in the USA.

\*\* Brokad & Co. and its post-revolutionary successors kept samples of their products. Despite this, neither the internal "factory" museum, nor the museum that has been opened by the Novaya Zaria boutique in Gostiny Dvor in Moscow can boast a "Brokad bottle". The firm's present generation of perfumers, moreover, are not even aware of the existence of a version in craquelure glass. A bottle from 1961 is on display in Gostiny Dvor, together with anonymous technical specification drawings.



## Architecture of light

By Konstantin Akinsha

*"If you can see the light at the end of the tunnel, it means that in few seconds you'll be hit by a train"*  
(Serbian joke of the period of the wars of secession)

On March 11, 2002, six months after the September 11 attack, two powerful beams of light rose in the night sky over New York City: the Twin Towers returned to the skyline in the form of immaterial ghosts. The unusual memorial was originally supposed to be called the Towers of Light, but the victims' families protested against the name, because they wanted the 3,000 lost lives commemorated, not the destroyed architectural