Finding aid for the El Lissitzky letters and photographs, 1911-1941

Finding aid prepared by Carl Wuellner.
Descriptive Summary

Title: El Lissitzky letters and photographs

Date (inclusive): 1911-1941

Number: 950076

Creator/Collector: Lissitzky, El, 1890-1941

Physical Description: 1.0 linear feet (3 boxes)

Repository:
The Getty Research Institute
Special Collections
1200 Getty Center Drive, Suite 1100
Los Angeles, California, 90049-1688
(310) 440-7390

Abstract: The El Lissitzky letters and photographs collection consists of 106 letters sent, most by Lissitzky to his wife, Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, along with his personal notes on art and aesthetics, a few official and personal documents, and approximately 165 documentary photographs and printed reproductions of his art and architectural designs, and in particular, his exhibition designs.

Request Materials: Request access to the physical materials described in this inventory through the catalog record for this collection. Click here for the access policy.

Language: Collection material is in German

Biographical/Historial Note

El Lissitzky (1890-1941) began his artistic education in 1909, when he traveled to Germany to study architecture at the Technische Hochschule in Darmstadt. Lissitzky returned to Russia in 1914, continuing his studies in Moscow where he attended the Riga Polytechnical Institute. After the Revolution, Lissitzky became very active in Jewish cultural activities, creating a series of inventive illustrations for books with Jewish themes. These formed some of his earliest experiments in typography, a key area of artistic activity that would occupy him for the remainder of his life.

He was invited by Marc Chagall in 1919 to teach architecture and graphics at the Vitebsk Art School. There Lissitzky was influenced by faculty-member Kazimir Malevich's method of Suprematism, a form of non-representational painting in which colored planes hover in space over a neutral ground. Inspired by Malevich's invention, Lissitzky introduced a new form of abstract composition that he called "Proun" (an acronym for "Project for the Affirmation of the New"). The Prouns consisted of sharply delineated arrangements of colored geometric forms, intended to suggest architectural structures floating in space. Lissitzky conceived of the Prouns as existing half-way between painting and architecture, an idea which epitomized the aesthetic of Russian Constructivism. Widely reproduced in books and journals, Lissitzky's Prouns influenced the work of many leading European modernists.

Lissitzky became a member of Moscow's INKhUK (Institute of Artistic Culture) and joined the faculty of VKhUTEMAS (The Higher State Artistic and Technical Workshops) in 1921. Later that year he returned to Germany. There he became an important representative of the Russian avant-garde to the West through friendships he made with artists such as Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, who transmitted Lissitzky's ideas on art to western Europe and the United States through his teaching at the Bauhaus, and Kurt Schwitters, with whom Lissitzky collaborated on a number of projects. Lissitzky's role as a cultural ambassador of Russian modernism was enhanced by his activities in publishing and writing on art. During the early 1920's he worked with writer Ilija Erenburg on a tri-lingual journal on modern art subjects, titled Vesch/Objet/Gegenstand. Other literary collaborations included an article and the design layout for a volume of the journal Merz, known as the Nasci-Heft, which he co-published with Kurt Schwitters in 1924, and a collaboration with Hans Arp on Kunstismen, a book chronicling the "isms" of art. He also translated Kazimir Malevich's writings on art in hopes of making the ideas underlying Russian Suprematism available to a wider European audience. Lissitzky was closely associated later in his life with the editorial board of the propaganda magazine begun by Maxim Gorky, USSR im Bau, contributing layout designs and photomontages for a number of commemorative issues devoted to the Stalinist Constitution, Soviet Georgia, and the Red Army. During these years in Germany he also gained recognition as a notable figure in experimental photography, developing techniques of graphic representation which would characterize much of his later work in publishing and exhibition design. Furthermore, it was during his stay in Hannover in 1922-1923 that he met Sophie.

Lissitzky was diagnosed with tuberculosis late in 1923, for which he sought treatment at a sanatorium in Switzerland. He paid for his treatment and accommodations there by executing advertising commissions for the firm Günther Wagner, the makers of Pelikan-brand ink and other office products, for which he received a monthly retainer of 300 Marks. He adapted
Lissitzky left Switzerland in the spring of 1925, and moved back to Russia where he subsequently taught as a member of the Wood and Metalwork faculty of the Moscow VKhUTEMAS. He had become associated by then with the group ASNOVA (Consortium of New Architects), which advocated a synthesis of architecture, painting, and sculpture as opposed to a plain utilitarian approach to architecture. The plans for Lissitzky’s Wolkenbügel project—a building conceived of as a horizontal skyscraper supported on three piers—were published in 1926 in the ASNOVA Bulletin, of which Lissitzky was co-publisher and designer. He continued working as well on an array of typographical projects, theater, furniture, and exhibition designs, and participated in various architectural competitions in Russia and Western Europe.

During the years immediately following his departure from Switzerland in 1925, Lissitzky began focusing his attention in earnest on his activities as a designer of exhibition spaces, one of his most influential areas of interest and, by his own account, the most important artistic activity of his career. His designs for international exhibitions in Dresden (1926, 1930), Hannover (1930), Cologne (1926), Leipzig (1930), Stuttgart (1929) and elsewhere remain some of his most significant and influential accomplishments.

His level of activity in later years was somewhat slowed by his continuing struggles with tuberculosis, for which he sought further treatment at Abastuman in the Caucasus Mountains for several months in 1935. Despite declining health during the last years of his life, however, he remained active in his work until his death on December 21, 1941 at his home in Schodnia, near Moscow.

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**Preferred Citation**
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http://hdl.handle.net/10020/cifa950076

**Acquisition Information**
Acquired in 1995.

**Processing History**
Carl Wuellner processed the collection and wrote the finding aid in December, 1995-March, 1996.

**Scope and Content of Collection**
The archive of El Lissitzky’s letters and photographs contains original manuscripts and documentary photographs from the personal papers of El Lissitzky, the Russian avant-garde artist who was a leader of Russian Constructivism. The bulk of the archive consists of all the surviving letters (1923-1935) written by Lissitzky, most in German, to his wife, the art historian Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers. The archive also contains rare photographs from the late 1920’s and early 1930’s depicting Lissitzky’s innovative designs for international exhibitions. Photographs include reproductions of some of his designs for art and architectural projects. Two address books, an original inventory of his work, professional contracts, a personal workbook and official papers, provide further documentation of Lissitzky’s personal and professional life.

**Arrangement note**
The archive is organized in three series: Series I. Letters, most to Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, 1911, 1923-1941, undated; Series II. Personal notes and documents, 1911-1912, 1924, undated; Series III. Photographs, ca. 1920s-1930s

**Subjects - Names**
Arp, Jean, 1887-1966
Gropius, Walter, 1883-1969
Lissitzky, El, 1890-1941
Lissitzky-Küppers, Sophie, 1891-1978
Malevich, Kazimir Severinovich, 1878-1935
Moholy-Nagy, László, 1895-1946
Oud, J. J. P. (Jacobus Johannes Pieter), 1890-1963
Roth, Emil
Tschichold, Jan, 1902-1974

**Subjects - Corporate Bodies**
Bauhaus
VKHUTEMAS (Art school)

Subjects - Topics
Advertising layout and typography
Architecture--Soviet Union
Book design--Soviet Union
Constructivism (Architecture)
Exhibitions--Soviet Union
Graphic arts--20th century--Soviet Union
Letterheads
Suprematism in art

Subjects - Titles
L'esprit nouveau

Genres and Forms of Material
Address books
Diaries
Drawings (visual works)
Ephemera
Photographic prints
Photographs, Original


Series I. Letters, most to Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, 1911, 1923-1941, undated

Physical Description: 138.0 items
Scope and Content Note
In his letters, most of which were written in German, Lissitzky discusses in some detail his professional and personal associations with other artists and architects. Many of the letters concern Lissitzky's contributions to Russian and European art journals, including the volume Merz/Nasci, the journal for the group ABC, the journal L'Esprit Nouveau, and the ASNOVA Bulletin. He discusses each stage of his translation of Malevich's writings and evaluates the significance of Malevich's work and artistic theory. He also writes on some of his own designs, including the beginning of the Wolkenbügel project and his design work for the Pelikan office-supply firm. A number of letters contain sketches of Prouns and Pelikan projects and other designs, as well as humorous drawings Lissitzky made for his children. The letters also show the evolution of Lissitzky's typographic letterhead, which appears in preliminary handwritten versions and in final printed form. Together with Lissitzky's discussions of his graphic work, the letterhead underscores the importance of his avant-garde typography and design. Two early letters, 1911, are in Russian and not addressed to Sophie.
Series I. Letters, most to Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, 1911, 1923-1941, undated

Box 1, Folder 1

**Five letters, , 1911 1923**

Scope and Content Note
The two earliest letters (not to Sophie) are written in Russian, the remainder to Sophie are in German, arranged chronologically. In one letter to Sophie, Lissitzky describes his attempts to console Moholy-Nagy who was despondent after the cancellation of an exhibition; in the same letter Lissitzky comments on the striking effect of the Bauhaus on the architectural character of Weimar.

Box 1, Folder 2

**ca. 49 letters to Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, 1924-1925**

Scope and Content Note
The majority of these were written by Lissitzky from Switzerland. Arranged chronologically. Lissitzky discusses his relations with other artists (Moholy-Nagy, Gropius, Malevich, Arp, Oud) throughout the letters. He writes in a letter dated 28.12.1924 of his excitement at having met and befriended an engineer (Emil Roth) who agreed to collaborate on the Wolkenbügel project. Many letters discuss the progress of ongoing projects, including his translation of Malevich's writings, contributions to the issue of *Merz/MASC*, and his advertising work for the Pelikan office-supply firm, about which he was often unenthusiastic. In a letter dated 7.4.1924, he defends modern Russian art in response to attacks from a newspaper critic. In a letter dated 21.3.1924 he remarks on the difficulty of translating Malevich's writings on Suprematism due to the ethereal, mystical quality of Suprematist aesthetics. On a postcard he draws the device of two faces linked by one shared eye, presaging his well-known poster for the 1929 *Russische Ausstellung* at the Kunstgewerbemuseum, Zürich. The letters as a group record the development of his typographic letterhead device in hand-drawn designs.

Box 1, Folder 3

**ca. 34 letters to Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, 1925**

Scope and Content Note
Letters document Lissitzky's deteriorating relationship with Arp through the late 1920's. Arranged chronologically. He describes his own works, and especially his Prouns, as having a purity not found in Impressionism or Expressionism. A picture postcard of the shipyard at Stettin, Germany, is indicative of the interest in industrial landscape found in his later photographic work. In a letter dated 26.6.1925, Lissitzky writes of his close friendship with Malevich despite their differences of opinion regarding architecture, and notes that Malevich wanted Sophie to be the sole agent of his works chosen for sale or exhibition. He writes of his activities for various publications, including *Kunstismen* (with Arp), *ABC*, and the *ASNOVA Bulletin*.

Box 1, Folder 4

**ca. 22 letters, 1925-1935**

Scope and Content Note
Letters begin 14.7.1925. Several letters (including letters dated 1.7.1925, 24.9.1925, 18.10.1925, 30.1.1926) tell of his activities as a faculty member at VKhUTEMAS, including one letter (24.9.1925) in which he states that he takes inspiration for his work there from the example of Trotsky. He mentions his satisfaction in working with typographer Jan Tschichold in an undated letter probably from November, 1925. His typographic letterhead appears in drawn and printed form on several letters.

Box 1, Folder 5

**ca. 18 letters to Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, 1935-1941**

Scope and Content Note
Letters begin 16.6.1935. One in Russian, arranged chronologically
Box 1, Folder 6  
**Ten letters, sketches, undated**

**Scope and Content Note**
Two of the items are humorous drawings, including one done while he was at the 1928 Pressa Exhibition in Cologne. One item is a sheet of instructions, with sketches, for a Pelikan design project. There is also a postcard from the Graphisches Kabinett Israel Ber Neumann, Berlin, with greetings to Sophie written by Lissitzky and additional greetings written in two other hands.

Series II. **Personal notes and documents, 1911-1912, 1924, undated**

**Physical Description:** 14.0 items

**Scope and Content Note**
The archive contains an assortment of personal notes and official documents in German, French, and Russian. These include approximately a dozen private, informal, handwritten sheets on which Lissitzky wrote down thoughts on art and aesthetics, variously written in German and Russian. Two personal address books indicate the international extent of his connections and associations in the art world. A numbered list of 98 of Lissitzky's artworks includes descriptions and prices. The small number of official documents includes Swiss residency visas, two contracts typed in Russian, and a personal workbook or diary, handwritten in Russian.

Box 1, Folder 7  
**Notes and documents, , , 1911-1912 1924 undated**

**Scope and Content Note**
Three handwritten notes in German include Lissitzky's speculations on art and aesthetics, one of which is tinged with political views. Three handwritten notes and two typewritten contracts for lectures and publications are in Russian. Two Swiss residency permits are included, dated 1912 (in German) and 1924 (in French). There is included a typed transcription of a letter published in Paul Westheim, *Künstlerbekenntnisse* (Berlin, 1925) to an unnamed museum director, in which Lissitzky expresses disagreement over the appropriate installation of one of his works. There are two of Lissitzky's personal address books, and a checklist of ninety-eight works of art by Lissitzky, which includes titles, dimensions, brief notes on each work, and prices.

Series III. **Photographs, ca. 1920-1931**

**Physical Description:** ca. 165 items

**Scope and Content Note**
The archive contains an important collection of ca. 115 photographs demonstrating Lissitzky's contributions to exhibition design. They document some of his most prominent international exhibitions, including the Dresden Internationale Kunstaustellung and the Room for Constructivist Art in Hannover, both from 1926, the 1928 Pressa exhibition in Cologne, and the Internationale Hygiene-Ausstellung in Dresden, 1930. The photographs of these and other exhibition spaces illustrate Lissitzky's application of Russian Constructivist principles to exhibition design, and also reveal his skillful use of political and cultural propaganda to promote the Russian state and the utopic vision of the Revolution. There are additionally over 50 original photographs and printed reproductions of a variety of his art and architectural projects.
Box 2  

**Photographic and printed reproductions, ca. 1920-1931**

**Physical Description:** ca. 65 items

**Scope and Content Note**

27 photographic and printed reproductions of art and architectural works by Lissitzky. These are mostly of Prouns, but also include photomontage, Pelikan advertisements, and the *Lenin Tribune* project (ca. 1920). There are twenty-three reproductions of architectural projects. Included are photographs and printed reproductions of sketches for the Wolkenbügel, the facade of the Cologne Presse Exhibition pavilion (1928), a Five Year Plan Architecture model (1930/1931), and designs for Gorky Park (ca.1931).

Ca. 38 photographs of national and international exhibitions designed by Lissitzky are arranged chronologically by city and exhibition: Raum für konstruktive Kunst, Internationale Kunstausstellung, Dresden, 1926; Kabinett der Abstrakten, Niedersächsische Landesgalerie, Hannover, 1927-1928; Polygraphic Union Exhibition, Moscow, 1927.

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Box 3  

**Photographs of exhibition designs, ca. 1928-1930**

**Physical Description:** ca. 100 items

**Scope and Content Note**

Arranged chronologically by city and exhibition as follows: International Press Exhibition (Pressa), Cologne, 1928, including unaddressed picture postcards from the exhibition and photographs of Lissitzky’s displays under construction; Internationale Werkbundausstellung Film und Foto (FIFO), Stuttgart, 1929; Internationale Hygiene-Ausstellung, Dresden, 1930, including exterior views; Internationale Pelz-Fachausstellung, Leipzig, 1930, including views of construction and installation of the exhibition; unidentified exhibition spaces.