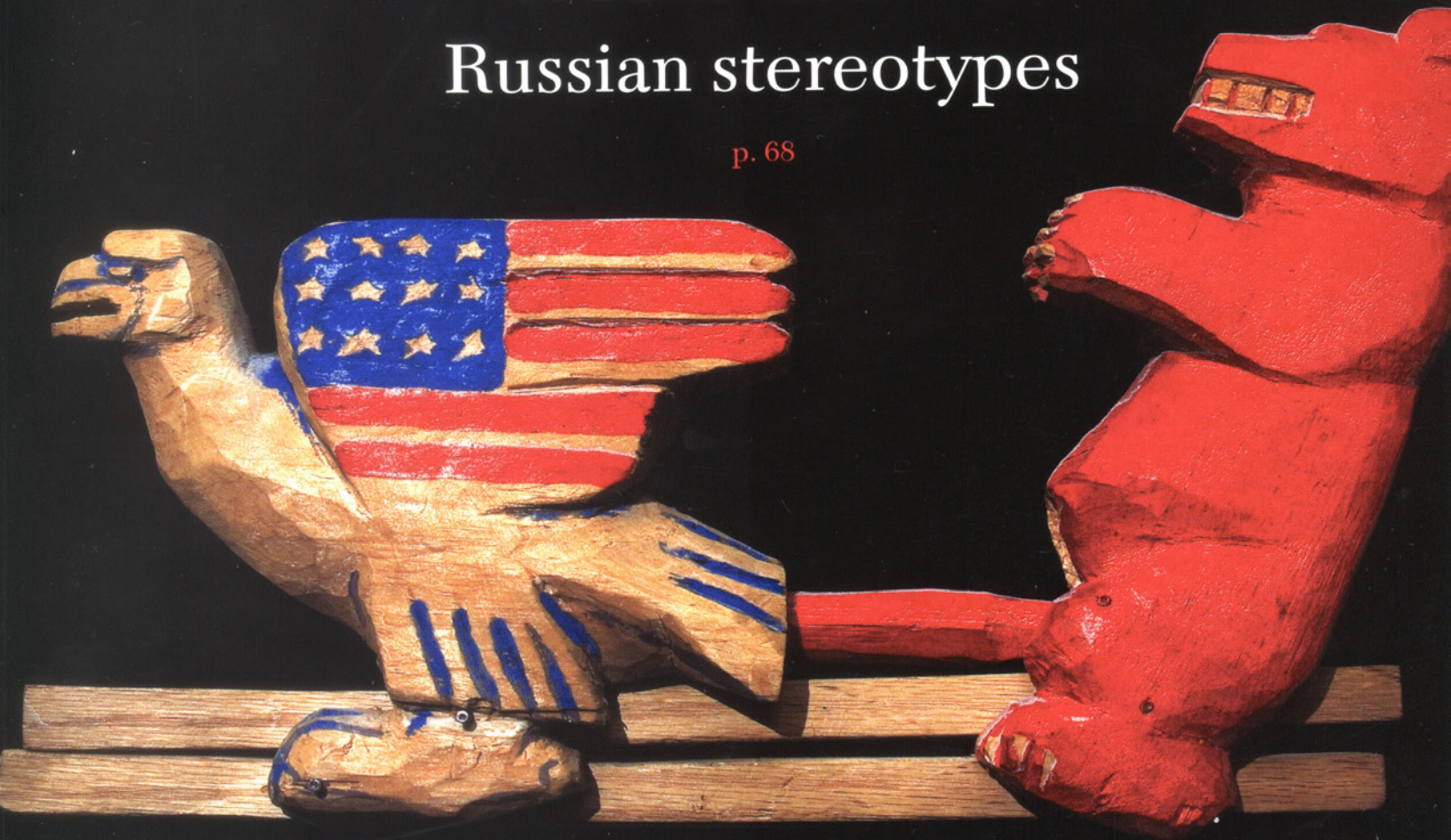


From Russia with Love

Russian stereotypes

p. 68



Sotheby's Moscow sale: Twenty years later
Art Market, p. 42

Igor Markin, owner of Russia's first private museum
Personal Matters, p. 52

"I've never held a machine gun."
Alexei Kallima, artist from Chechnya
Interview, p. 60

A cologne bottle by Malevich
Excursus, p. 100



1

2

1. Kazimir Malevich,
Severny cologne bottle,
1921-1922. Private collection,
United States

2. Kazimir Malevich, 1914

Bottling a D ream

ALEKSANDRA SHATSKIKH

The bottle for Severny cologne—a glass iceberg with a polar bear on the tip—ensured the scent's unprecedented popularity throughout almost all of last century. It's hard to believe that the bottle was designed by Kazimir Malevich.

Daily Bread

A provincial from Kursk obsessed with painting, Kazimir Malevich finally settled in Moscow in 1907 and brought his wife and two children there shortly after. After he turned thirty, he decided he could no longer serve as a government functionary, because, he complained, state service left him without any time “for work in art.” For a long time after his resignation, Malevich had no money at all, and sometimes went starving for days. He survived thanks to commissions.

In ten years, the applied and decorative arts would beget a power-hungry offspring named design, which would jealously demand the absolute

devotion of its practitioners. But for the time being, sketches for patterns and ornaments were made by painters who had trouble finding buyers for their artwork. Artists' earnings would come from random sources. Besides magazines—which needed to be swathed in flowery frontispieces, headpieces, and endpieces—a sure bet was the perfume industry, where labels, vials, and boxes all had to arouse shoppers' appetites.

Malevich's descendents have preserved not only the artist's early artworks, but also the drawings he made to earn his daily bread. Without these reliable sources, it would never have occurred to anyone that so many



A sketch of an advertisement that Malevich drew for Severny makes it certain that the popular glass iceberg was the work of the charismatic creator of Black Square

claying headpieces, pretentious vignettes, and effete ornaments were created by the future Suprematist. And though it may seem wrong to separate designs Malevich made for a certain product from the rest of his sketches, only his cologne bottle is still known to this day.

I first heard about this unusual vial from Una Kazimirovna Uriman-Malevich in late 1988. The daughter of Malevich and his second wife, Sofia Mikhailovna Rafalovich, Una was the keeper of the family heirlooms at the Rafalovich home in Nemchinovka, near Moscow, a place the artist loved more than any other on earth. The current owner of the Nemchinovka house, Galina Efimovna Zharkova, barely remembers her cousin Una's father, and thinks the cracked cologne vial, produced in the 1980s, is an ordinary knickknack. But Malevich's relatives believe their illustrious

forbearer devised the vial sometime in the early 1930s for a Soviet perfume factory; that the cologne bore the name Severnoye siyaniye, or Northern Lights; and that it was released through the mid-1970s. That's close to, but not quite, the truth.

Painter and Perfumer

The memoirs of Malevich's closest friend, Ivan Kliun, contain this passage: "Autumn came, [Malevich] didn't have a coat, and then he was offered a commission; he came to me and asked me to give him my coat, so he could go retrieve the assignment—it was on a Sunday, and I was sitting at home. And after that he often asked to borrow my coat so he could retrieve a commission. At that difficult time for Malevich, Brocard (the perfumer)

to early twentieth-century Brocard bottles the scents Fountain (left) and Japanese Clover

supported him with his commissions. The famous cologne—the vial in the shape of an icy cliff with the polar bear on it, as well as the label—is the work of Malevich.”

The Moscow perfumery owner mentioned by Kliun was Alexander Brocard. Brocard and Co. was the largest perfumery in Europe; Brocard inherited it from his father, the founder, in 1900. We will never know why he commissioned a design for the vial from an impoverished artist in a borrowed coat, who up until that point had only sketched labels for Brocard’s products. And he did more than commission the vial—he approved it and sent it to the factory, even though it broke with all traditions of perfume vessel design. Nor will we ever know if any other great painter drafted mass-market vials especially for Brocard and Co. All the glass factories that took orders for bulk quantities of finished glassware had representative offices in Russia’s two major cities, and most of them accepted designs for custom-made vials. This usually meant expensive bottles made of crystal, colored glass, silver, even gold. Their shapes could be fanciful. Compared with those special orders, Malevich’s sketch may not have seemed extraordinary. But it was intended for mass consumption. And, since no other similar experiment has been identified in Russia’s pre-Revolutionary perfume business, we can only assume that Malevich’s case was exceptional.

Brocard never saw Severny, or Northern, reach the height of its popularity. Brocard and Co., like the Brocard family’s art collection—one of the most representative private collections of pre-Revolutionary Russia—was nationalized early in 1918. The perfumery lost its bourgeois name and became State Soap Factory No. 5, and on November 1, 1922, it was renamed the Novaya Zarya State Soap and Perfume Factory.

Novaya Zarya is still located on the old territory of the Brocard factory in Moscow. In the new, capitalist Russia it has become, naturally, a private corporation. It stopped producing Severny in 1996.

Bear on the Cliff

But let us return to Malevich’s design, which dates to 1910. It is essentially sculpture on a tabletop scale, depicting a polar bear that has ascended a translucent iceberg and stopped at the edge of a precipice. We are confronted with a coarse violation of traditions: the utilitarian purpose of perfume packaging was clearly the last thing on the artist’s mind. His main goal was to create a remarkable image. This estrangement of form and function would characterize Malevich’s Suprematist output in the 1920s, a decade otherwise dominated by his rivals, the Constructivists.

4

5



When considered as a small sculpture, the Severny vial reveals its creator’s total disregard for the traditions of that medium. The landscape does not exist as an independent genre of sculpture, since no one would want to chisel artificial mountains and trees in three dimensions. But in this perfume vial the proportions of the little bear and the big iceberg unambiguously attest to the work’s affiliation with the landscape genre—a typical polar landscape with staffage that confirms its geographical location.

The atypical form of the glass cliff requires an excursus on another commissioned Malevich work from the same period. The steep iceberg was a three-dimensional variation on a motif from one of the artist’s drawings based on the play *Anathema*, a Symbolist drama by Leonid Andreyev that was staged by the Moscow Art Theater (MKhAT). The main character in the play was Satan, who visited and then departed Moscow after several mysterious events (present-day readers are bound to see him as a precursor to Woland in Mikhail Bulgakov’s novel *The Master and Margarita*).

4. Galina Zharkova, current owner of the Malevich’s house in Nemchinovka. Summer 1999

→ 5. A label depicting the Brocard factory



Anathema premiered in October 1909, directed by Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko and Vasily Luzhsky. The set was designed by MKhAT's on-staff artist, Viktor Simov. The considerable success of the play grew one-hundredfold due to the consequent public scandal: In January 1910 the show was banned in Moscow and the rest of Russia because the Orthodox priesthood found blasphemous parallels with the Gospels.

Even before the church's anathema, the photographer and publisher Karl Fischer had issued an album of large portraits of the characters and views of the stage. After the controversy, another publisher hastened to issue a portfolio with pictures of *Anathema*. He commissioned Malevich to draw scenes from the Symbolist tragedy, and they were included in a photointaglio album in January, 1910.

Malevich used both Fischer's staged photographs and Simov's stage designs in his drawings, but added the monogram KM, and sometimes signed "K. Malevich"—in those years no one knew about copyrights.

6. Kazimir Malevich,
Cow and Violin, 1913. State
Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow



6

One illustration is of special interest in the context of our investigation. Amid the craggy landscape *Anathema*, a figure at the edge of a precipice throws his arms up to a celestial emissary. Wearing a broad, hooded cowl, he stands atop a coarsely faceted stone peak, like the bear atop of the glass cliff of the Severny bottle.

Malevich's departure from the fundamental functions of perfume glassware opened the door to other irregularities. His design blatantly lacks rounded symmetry, which was considered obligatory for elegant perfume vessels at the time. It is heavy, angular and asymmetrical. And the vial's crest is crowned not with a refined stopper, but a bear figurine on a massive outcropping. The bear on the tip of the iceberg, in fact, is pure decoration—it is a removable knob that hides the true stopper. The device's patent lack of function often led consumers to prematurely lose both the stopper and the lid.

Severny is one of the first known playful designs for perfume glassware with nonfunctional lids. But Malevich's innovation, while it was entirely conditioned by the vial's imagery, was developed further in other projects. Brocard and other perfumers would use three-part vials, with a decorative knob masking the stopper, after 1910.

The oddities of the Severny vial do not end there. Wide, uneven planes line the main vessel and the removable peak like sheets of ice—a true iceberg. The translucent cliff seems to hint at the common ground shared by ice and glass: Ice is hardened water, and glass is also a solidified liquid. Malevich's vial not only looks like a cliff of frozen water, a natural landscape transformed into an image—it actually *is* a frozen piece of a previously liquid, transparent substance.

Like its natural counterpart, the glass iceberg is covered with cracks, and their silvery web hovers in the bottle's matte depths. This is yet another unique characteristic of the project, because in the perfume industry all over the world, even today, it is impossible to find a single vial made from traditional crackle glass. The glistening play of lines in the icy, translucent vial depends largely on lighting; it is especially impressive when sunlight falls directly on its surface. (The attention to the design's interaction with light is not likely accidental: Three years later Malevich would shock the public with light effects in his stage design for the Futurist Opera *Victory over the Sun*.)

The image of the bear that crowns the glass iceberg is at once static and dynamic. His front paws stand firmly on the ice at the edge of the precipice, while his two hind paws are still in motion. Subtle detail distinguishes the miniature. There are textured tufts of fur, distinct paws on each of his four legs, a tail, a face that is monumental even at that small scale.

—>

The Perfume Business



The life of the elder Brocard mirrored the history of Russian perfume's extrication from the medicine business. Henry Brocard came to Russia in 1861. He began his career boiling inexpensive soap by hand. Once he had saved enough money, he began producing aromatic mixtures. At first his fragrant liquids were sold in pharmacies and released in flasks that differed little from medicine bottles. But perfume and cologne's status as luxury items gradually led to the development of suitable designs. Perfumery, glassmaking and demand all grew rapidly and simultaneously in Russia, and by the early twentieth century no shopper was surprised by the breadth and variety of the perfume assortment. In the field of mass-market perfumery, Henry's son Alexander Brocard was one of the first to put art on the conveyer belt. The Brocards were canny businessmen who knew how to exploit the zeitgeist. For example, a perfume called The Empress' Favorite Bouquet was created for the three-hundredth anniversary of

the House of the Romanovs. The scent's splendor earned it the reputation of "Russia's Chanel No. 5," and experts have noted a certain similarity in the scents. The tragedy of Russia's history has all too often robbed the nation's best of their potential. The Bouquet was created far earlier than Chanel No. 5. But it should be noted that this sad case was caused not only by the injustice of history, but by the injustice of language. At Coco Chanel's order, a perfume specialist prepared several scents, and she liked the scent in the fifth vial best. Coco ingenuously gave her signature scent a neutral, technical name, Chanel No. 5, and its mysterious simplicity ensured the brand's longevity. After the October Revolution the pompous, loyalist Empress' Favorite Bouquet became the equally politicized Red Moscow. The scent is hard to find in capitalist Russia; the current owners of Novaya Zarya are said to export it to France... Alexander Brocard's commercial instincts helped him harness the public imagination after it was ignited by new geographical discoveries. The North Pole, the long-coveted goal of great explorers, was conquered by the American Robert Peary on April 6, 1909. This brought about an international euphoria. Brocard could not miss the chance, since the vogue for everything polar meant guaranteed financial success for an Arctic-themed scent evocative of masculine virtue. Brocard's cologne, which appeared in stores in 1910, was given the laconic name Severny, or "Northern." The scent and the name of the cologne were invented at the perfume factory, but Severny's look evidenced the interference of an extraordinary artistic will, so powerful that neither the past nor future of the Brocard company would yield an equally compelling masterpiece.

7

8

7. Company founder Henry Brocard with his wife, Charlotte, 1864

8. Perfume bottle by Brocard & Co, ca. 1900



In the original Severny vial, the base of the peak hides a mushroom of a ground-glass stopper in the bottle's neck. The internal stopper is made of the same material, and its invisibility helps maintain the matte translucency of the vial as a whole.

Transformation

The vials for Severny were manufactured at a glass factory near Penza, founded in 1764 by the noble Bakhmetyev family. A little more than a century later, the last heir to the Bakhmetyevs bequeathed the factory to his great-nephew, Prince Dmitry Obolensky, and it was in turn inherited by Alexander Obolensky. And this brings us to the perfect spot where to address the errors that cloud the history of Malevich's vial.

Unseemly as it may be for a prince, Obolensky displayed a bourgeois knack for entrepreneurship, along with a desire to keep up with the times. At the turn of the century he hired Adel Yakobson as his factory's artistic director. She designed a variety of glass wares, including perfume bottles.

The design that Brocard and Co. brought to the Moscow office of Obolensky's factory was transferred to the Penza facility to be realized. The name Malevich was of no importance at

the time, and in all likelihood it was not even on the sketches sent from Moscow. Yakobson, responsible for technical design, prepared the Brocard commission for realization. The people at the factory knew she was the one who had sent the "bear on the cliff" to production, so naturally she was ascribed authorship of the glass iceberg. And Yakobson clearly considered herself the vial's creator; sure, she had been given a design (an anonymous one), but she was the one who produced the actual object.

It should be emphasized that right up to her departure for Moscow in 1921 Yakobson designed almost all of the Penza factory's new models. In Soviet times the experienced designer became artistic director of the All-Russia Glass Manufacture. As an engineer she created patterns for glass products, and as an artist she made individual works that were acquired by museums. But in all of Yakobson's varied output, there is not a single work that abandons the specifics of utilitarian glassware for the sake of "pure art." Like any master artisan, Yakobson heeded the laws and traditions of her craft.

Her professional habits apparently compelled her to lead the struggle against Malevich's design in the early Soviet years. The original Severny vial was manufactured until 1922. In 1925 Yakobson, who had already moved to Moscow, was managing the restoration of



9-10. The idea of the three-part perfume bottle evolved

Right: A cologne bottle commemorating the centennial of the War of 1812, produced by A. Siu Co. (1912)

Left: A perfume bottle commemorating the tercentennial of the House of the Romanovs, produced by Brocard and Co. (1913)

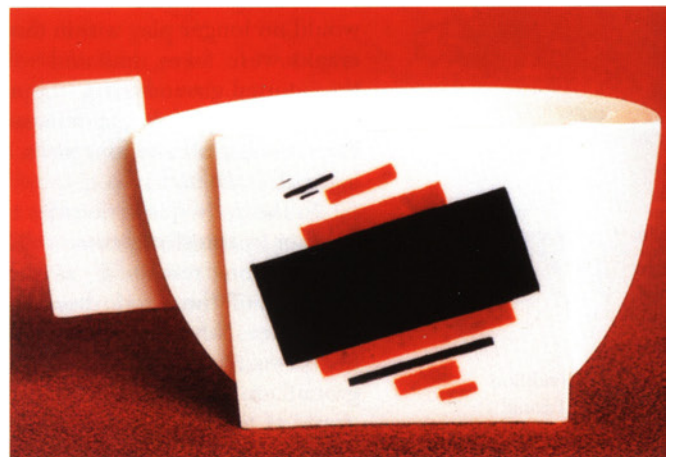


11

12

11. Kazimir Malevich,
teapot with a lid, 1923.
Porcelain, 16 x 22.2 x 8.8 cm.
State Russian Museum,
St. Petersburg

12. Kazimir Malevich,
teacup, 1923. Painted
porcelain, 7.2 x 12.5 x 6 cm.
State Russian Museum,
St. Petersburg





13

the full line of glassware at Krasny Gigant, the factory where she got her start. There Malevich's vial underwent its first "technical improvement" (read: simplification). The first victim was the initial design's luminosity. Now the silvery rays would no longer play within the vial's walls—the cracks were fakes, imitated with a press. But the internal ground-glass stopper remained the same, the bear figurine retained its expressive face, it had a tail and four paws, and its two hind legs still froze mid-step...

In the subsequent decades the vial endured another transformation. The sculptural composition remained as before, but the statuette of the Arctic bear merged with the cliff's apex. Now the bear stood as though frozen on its two, trunk-like legs, which melted into the ground. A mechanical dotted line formed the ripple of the bear's coat. His rounded rear lost even a hint of a tail. The bear looked odd from

the front, since the right and left sides of his face did not meet up at the nose. The ground-glass stopper was replaced with a screw-on brass one, and the bright yellow cap shone through the matte top, exposing it as pure decoration. With minor modifications the vial was manufactured in this form until the late twentieth century. The variations applied primarily to its internal devices: The brass cap was replaced with a plastic one, but the peak of the cliff still sat on the bottle's body. In the 1990s the company decided to radically correct the anti-functional top: The tip of the iceberg gained a polymer insert, and the entire cap had to be screwed on the vessel's neck. The bear figurine became something of a handle. This "improvement," however, did not last long. The company rejected it, since the peak no longer touched the body of the iceberg, but hovered awkwardly above it, perched on the bottle's narrow back.

13. Malevich's rendition of a scene from Leonid Andreyev's *Anathema*, 1909, included in a commemorative album of the Moscow Art Theater

Social structures
changed. Tsars, leaders,
presidents came and
went. But through
it all the glass iceberg
remained a fixture in every
interior



Only one complete Severny vial as produced by Brocard and Co. has survived to this day. This realization of Malevich's original project, issued in 1922, is in a private collection in the United States.

Black on White

For years, many refused to believe that Malevich's authorship of the vial had been proven beyond a doubt. The recollections of family members seemed like an unreliable legend—there were no supporting documents or attestations. But there was a sketch of an advertisement that Malevich drew for Severny, which makes it certain that the popular glass iceberg that beat all records for design longevity in the twentieth century was the work of the charismatic creator of *Black Square*.

The advertisement for Severny appeared in major newspapers in early autumn of 1911. In the first runs, the initials K and M, couched

opposite one another in the bottom corners of the drawing, are visible as clearly as the other features of the composition—the fractured crosshatches of the frame, the curly fur modeled on the bear figurine—though these quickly vanished as the printing press wore down.

Like the vial, Malevich's print ad is unique. Besides the fact that it is the only commercial work of his known today, the signed drawing unambiguously attests to the future radical's pride in his authorship of an utterly utilitarian work. The entire composition of the ad—besides the canonical depiction of the Brocard and Co. coat-of-arms, which indicates the company's high status—was drawn by hand. The central "mirror" with the smiling bear and the two plates are united by the artist's grooved frame. (Now we know well that Malevich always put frames in his drawings.) He also handwrote the text, and this is the first known instance of a font by

14

—> 14. Kazimir Malevich, advertisement for Severny cologne, 1911

the artist. It is worth nothing that Malevich's text compositions were usually "concrete" in that they had narrative content, and here, too, the idea behind the lettering was embedded in the advertisement's visuals—the dripping words seem to be made of melting icicles.

In the central part of the newspaper ad for Severny cologne we can see Malevich's original design for the glass iceberg. From a contemporary perspective, the motif of the rising sun seems to foreshadow subsequent developments in Malevich's career, for we know all too well the role that the myth of the sun would play in his art. There would be the Futurist opera *Victory over the Sun*, the persistent phrase *Partial Eclipse* in the titles of his Cubo-Futurist works, and then the "total eclipse," the elimination of natural light in *Black Square*.

Another signature characteristic of Malevich's art casts a shadow from the future—the drawing of the white bear against the black Arctic sky with the blinding sun is made in white and black, like the famous primordial shapes of his *Black Square*, *Black Circle* and *Black Cross*.

15. The evolution of Malevich's project. Bottles produced by Novaya Zarya in the 1930s (left) and 1990s



Mass Consumption

The original Brocard vial for Severny, with its sparkling play of cracks and expressive sculptural form, is truly a museum piece. But Brocard himself and Novaya Zarya saw it as a product for the masses. And that is what it became. Social structures changed. Tsars, leaders, presidents came and went. The people of an enormous empire moved along with its borders. But through it all the glass iceberg remained a fixture in every interior. It found a place for itself alongside furniture of all styles and in the midst of a total absence of style—on commodes, bathroom tables, vanities, shelves of medicine cabinets...

The inexpensive, democratic Severny was not a high-class cologne. But its aroma did not stop anyone from buying it—or at least, its success did not rely on the scent alone.

Thirteen years after the iceberg, Malevich would design a Suprematist teapot with a sealed spout to deter anyone from thinking of using it to functional ends. To match his architecton of a teapot, the artist created a half-teacup, also difficult to use for its intended purpose. The cup either turns over when tea is poured into it, or its nose gets in the way. These designs were provocatively anti-utilitarian. Malevich was waging war against Constructivism, which he believed was dragging art down to the status of a "lackey," serving the "snout of life."

The glass iceberg did not seem to have such ambitions in 1910: Suprematism was still a long way off, and Constructivism was even more distant, to say nothing of the whims of the dictators of design. There was nothing shameful about the iceberg sitting alongside bazaar-bought rugs woven with scenes of earthly paradise; in essence it was "anonymous," since its promise of happiness had its basis in the depths of collective subconscious. Those close to Malevich mistakenly called the perfume Northern Lights for a reason—by purchasing it, shoppers brought home a romantic dream of a distant frontier.

The greatest achievement for any creative person is to create a work for the people, something so popular that the fact that it has an author becomes an insignificant detail. When asked what his greatest wish was, Yves St. Laurent replied: "I'd like to be the inventor of jeans." Alas, though his career hit all the highest peaks, creating a model with even a fraction of the popularity and universal appeal of jeans remained an unattainable fantasy for the great couturier. Malevich, on the other hand, conquered just such a peak without even noticing it. The bear on the cliff survived the twentieth century without an author—all by itself. ■