



THE BOTTLE FOR SEVERNY COLOGNE – a glass iceberg with a polar bear on the tip – ensured the scent's unprecedented popularity for nearly a century. The bottle was designed by Kazimir Malevich.



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LEFT: Kazimir Malevich *Severny* cologne bottle, 1921-1922. Private collection. United States.

INSET: Kazimir Malevich, 1914.

From Russia with Love:

How a single polar bear conquered the scent industry for nearly a century — the artistic brilliance of Kazimir Malevich

Adapted from the article *BOTTLING A DREAM. A COLOGNE BOTTLE BY MALEVICH* written by Dr. Aleksandra Shatskikh for *ARTCHRONIKA*; and from *43info.com* published on March 18, 2015. Submitted by Felix & Marina Segal

KAZIMIR MALEVICH (February 23, 1879-May 15, 1935) was a Russian avant-garde artist and art theorist, whose pioneering work and writing had a profound influence on the development of non-objective, or abstract art, in the 20th century. His concept of Suprematism sought to develop a form of expression that moved as far as possible from the world of natural forms (objectivity) and subject matter in order to access “the supremacy of pure feeling” and spirituality. Malevich studied and worked in a variety of styles, including Impressionism, Symbolism, Fauvism, and Cubism. Gradually simplifying his style, he developed an approach with key works consisting of pure geometric forms and their relationships to one another, set against minimal grounds. His *Black Square* (1915), a black square on white, represented the most radically abstract painting known to have been created so far and drew “an uncrossable line (...) between old and new art.”¹ Malevich also laid down his theories in writing with such works as, “From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism” (1915) and “The Non-Objective World: the Manifesto of Suprematism” (1926).

A provincial from Kursk obsessed with painting, Malevich 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 hungry for days. At the time, artists’ earnings would come from random sources: sketches for patterns and ornaments; illustrations for magazines; and the perfume industry, where labels, vials, and boxes all had to arouse shoppers’ appetites. Malevich’s descendants have preserved not only his early artwork, 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 cloying headpieces, pretentious vignettes, and effete ornaments were created by the future Suprematist. He survived thanks to commissions.



Kazimir Malevich, 'Black Square', 1915

Founded in 1900, Brocard and Co. was the largest perfumery in Europe, and Alexander Brocard supported Malevich with commissions. 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. Since the vogue for everything polar meant guaranteed financial success for an Arctic-themed scent evocative of masculine virtue, Brocard commissioned a bottle design to

hold a cologne called *Severnny*, or *Northern*. Malevich's design dates from 1910 and depicts a polar bear that has ascended a translucent iceberg and stopped at the edge of a precipice. It is essentially sculpture on a tabletop scale. Unlike the rounded symmetry, typical of elegant perfume vessels at the time, the design is heavy, angular and asymmetrical. Wide, uneven planes line the main vessel and the removable peak like a true iceberg. 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 even today, it is impossible to find

perfume vials made from traditional crackle glass. The glistening play of lines in the icy, translucent vial changes with the light and is especially impressive when sunlight falls directly on its surface.

The image of the bear that crowns the glass iceberg is at once static and dynamic. His front paws stand firmly at the edge of the precipice, while his two hind paws are still in motion. Subtle detail distinguishes the miniature: textured tufts of fur; distinct paws; a tail; and a face that is monumental even at that small scale. The bear on the tip of the iceberg is actually a removable cap that hides a ground-glass stopper in the bottle's neck. Made of the same material, the stopper's invisibility helps maintain the matte translucency of the vial as a whole. *Severnny* is one of the first known playful designs for perfume glassware with a nonfunctional lid. Malevich's innovation, while entirely conditioned by the vial's imagery, was developed further in other projects, as Brocard and other perfumers would use three-part vials, with a decorative cap masking the stopper, after 1910.

¹ Tolstaya, Tatiana. "The Square," *New Yorker*, June 12, 2015. Retrieved March 21, 2018.



Kazimir Malevich
(1879-1935)

TRANSFORMATION

The vials for *Severn* 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. The factory was in turn inherited by Alexander Obolensky who displayed a knack for entrepreneurship and a desire to keep up with the times. At the turn of the century he hired Adel Yakobson as his factory's artistic director. Yakobson, responsible for technical design, prepared the Brocard commission for realization. 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. 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."

The original *Severn* vial was manufactured until 1922. In 1925 Yakobson, who had already moved to Moscow, was managing the restoration of the full line of glassware at KrasnyGigant, 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. The silvery crackle glass rays that played within the vial's walls were replaced by lines of pressed glass. In subsequent decades other changes occurred: the Arctic bear merged with the cliffs apex and stood as though frozen on 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; and 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 also replaced with a screw-on brass cap which shone through the matte top. With minor modifications, such as replacing the brass cap with plastic, the vial was manufactured in this form until the late twentieth century. In the 1990s the company decided to radically correct the anti-functional top by adding a polymer insert that allowed the entire cap to be screwed on the vessel's neck. This "improvement," however, did not last long. The company soon rejected this "improvement" since the peak no longer touched the body of the iceberg, but hovered awkwardly above it.

Only one complete *Severn* 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.

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 unreliable since there were no supporting documents. But there was a sketch of an advertisement that Malevich drew for *Severn*, 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*. This advertisement 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.

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. 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*.

While the original vial for *Severn*, with its sparkling play of cracks and expressive sculptural form, is truly a museum piece, Brocard 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 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 — all by itself.

Advertisement for **Severny** cologne, 1911.



The original Malevich-designed glass perfume bottle with craquelures for **Severny** was produced from 1911 until approximately 1921-1922 (1925?) and never exhibited outside Russia. It is an extremely rare Art Object. LEFT: Original Malevich's version, 1911-1917 during the Russian Empire. BELOW: Elements of the label preserved to the present after the Russian Revolutions (1917), Russian Civil War (1918-1921), and two World Wars in 20th Century.



The evolution of Malevich's perfume bottle: (LEFT) by Novaya Zarya in the 1930s and (RIGHT) those produced in the 1990s.