

● PROLOGUE

Black Square, by Russian avant-gardist Kazimir Malevich (1879–1935), is one of the twentieth century’s emblematic paintings, the visual manifestation of a new period in world artistic culture at its inception. The work of Giotto once signaled just as visibly a new era in civilization, when artists turned to reality. The revolution of the Florentine who provided the impetus for the Renaissance ultimately rid religious and mythological images of the conventional symbolic and canonical presentation inherited from Byzantium. For the next few centuries artists made verisimilitude—the mimetic reproduction of reality—the basis for their work. *Black Square’s* creator thought his painting would be the endpoint of the era Giotto had initiated, on the one hand, and, on the other, the point of departure for the art of the coming age.

To use neo-Kantian Hermann Cohen’s formulation on man’s relationship to being, *Black Square* was not “given” to Malevich but rather “assigned.” The painting’s apparent simplicity conceals inexhaustible depth, and Kazimir Malevich devoted his entire life to explicating *Black Square’s*