

**Opposite:**  
No. 239  
Acrylic & varnish  
on wood  
124 x 99 cm  
2010

## HENRIJS PREISS: CONSTANT SYMBOLISM

*At first glance Henrijs Preiss' abstract work seems extremely well structured and symmetrical. Basic colours and gold working together to create perfectly balanced compositions. Henrijs Preiss went through a rigorous academic training, where he learned about artistic movements, and found a source of inspiration in the reinterpretation of archetypal symbols from Russian icons and the Italian Renaissance, symbols that are present all over history and all over the world. Using this permanent symbolism, he manages to create pieces that are both old and new, constant in values and that reveal the continuity of art history.*

*What made you interested in painting?*

I was born in Latvia, ex-Soviet Union, into a family of artists and my parents insisted on an early art education. I went through all the possible influences from different art history periods and styles. When I finished art school, I didn't yet have ideas of my own. I went to London to study set design and trained myself to have vision on the flat surface, seeing the beginning and the end in terms of time. Like picturing all the dimensions and times of the play into one flat image. Bit by bit, I slowly realised that I could put that all the time and dimensions onto one flat board and I started to find my own voice on the canvas. Those previous twelve years of education were just preparation for that moment.

*Why do you feel it is important to look at the past?*

I examine all the art that has gone before that could be termed abstract by

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contemporary standards, but was never pigeon-holed as such at the time. This allows me to broaden my horizons and look at all kinds of artistic output. This also explains why one of my principal influences is the Orthodox icon painting tradition – a very non-Renaissance approach to structuring figurative painting, and also in creating the painting as a physical, tactile object rather than a naturalistic representation on a visual plane. This is why I work on wood, and why the paintings have that physical quality to them.

*Can you explain the use of icons and symbolism in your work?*

The main abstract paintings I am interested in are Russian constructivism: a utopian view of the world. But what I do in my paintings is draw on a symbolism and a geometry that has appeared and re-appeared in artistic and aesthetic systems across the world over hundreds of years. Until the last century, most art was intrinsically related to systems of belief and, by extension, to systems of government. This is why it has a religious quality to it. The same geometry and symbols arise in Hindu mandala or Islamic patterning as in medieval icon paintings, in temples, and architecture (which explains why there is so much Masonic symbolism in my work – it draws on the same sources).

*Do they relate to each other?*

They all come from the same basic visual language. The patterns, geometry and structures in art, especially religious art, are the same across the world – it's only the stories that are different. What I do is remove the particular stories or narratives, and take what's underneath, so that I end up with what you could call symbolic archetypes, both in motifs and in geometrical structures. I then layer

these into the paintings to create objects that are like a kind of universal geometry, or a basic symbolic language, which is common to all human visual systems. As a result, this more historical approach broadens my artistic horizons a bit, and gives some sense of longevity and continuity to both art and the articulation of values in art.

*What is the new meaning you try to express?*

I think it is this sense of order that I am trying to express in my work – exploring constants. Even though my work is all about the systems of value, rather than individual values themselves, it still represents a feeling of continuity of art being a valid and necessary activity, regardless of the historical moment it exists in.

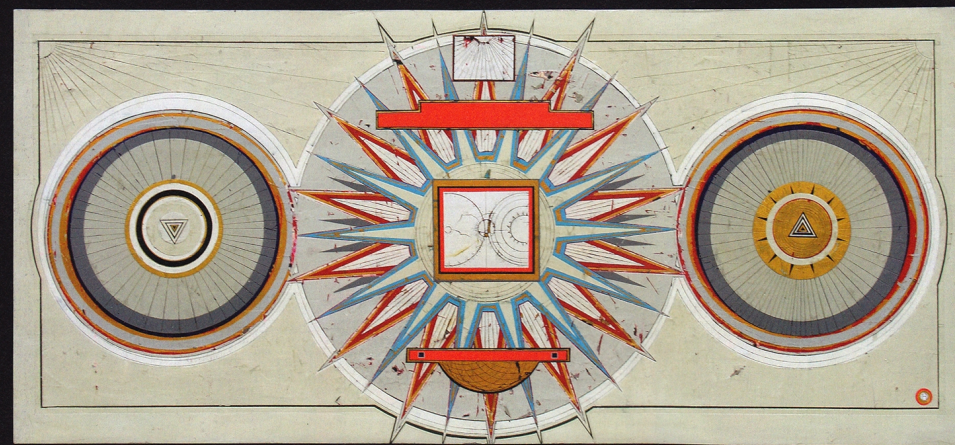
*How close is your relationship to art history?*

I was the first student at art school who managed to get lowest mark ever – it was so unheard that all two hundred students knew about it. But my interest in art history is thanks to this same teacher, who gave me this mark. She taught us to tie processes in art with politics and anthropology. This way of looking at the world through art history still affects me and history in general is my favourite subject.

*Do you feel as if you were working from within a certain tradition?*

I like the idea of solitary man in a black hood somewhere in the desert constructing an artefact. I guess it suggests some medieval setting of an early scientist lab. It's not that much about style or tradition. It's more about how I do my work. But as far as a tradition, I would be a propaganda artist. I am fascinated by the simplicity and boldness of soviet posters of the twenties and thirties and the whole idea of manipulating masses for a greater good ●

**Below top:**  
No. 241  
Acrylic & varnish  
on wood  
73 x 159 cm  
2010



**Below bottom:**  
No. 252  
Acrylic & varnish  
on wood  
65 x 121 cm  
2010

