

VICTOR VASARELY: BIOGRAPHY

Victor Vasarely was born Vásárely Győző in Pécs, Hungary, on April 9, 1906, but was active in France for most of his artistic career. Before moving to Paris, Vasarely studied under the artist Sándor Bortnyik at the Műhely academy, Budapest—a Hungarian equivalent to the German Bauhaus—from 1929 to 1930. Vasarely's training at this institution is reflected in the artist's focus on patterned forms in his early commercial work doing poster design and graphic arts. This early education in the Műhely principles of functionality and applied arts would also have a resounding impact on his later work. Still, Vasarely is primarily known for his later involvement in the international Op-art movement of the 1960s. The artist left Budapest in 1930 and resettled in Paris, first seeking employment at several advertising agencies in order to continue his work in the graphic arts, which he would continue to pursue for the next decade.

It was only after World War II and the success of his first important Paris exhibition at the Galerie Denise René, Paris, in 1944, that Vasarely left the graphic arts to begin crafting his signature style of pure abstraction in painting. At this point he started to move beyond the technical applications inherent in Bauhaus-style applied art and focused on the geometric abstraction of artists such as Kazimir Malevich and Piet Mondrian. In fact, the works for which he is best known utilize the principle of optical illusion as filtered through the simple forms of artists such as these. Vasarely used Malevich's Suprematist black square as the building block for a dynamic display of optical effects in a series of works entitled *Homage to Malevich* (*Hommage à Malévetch*, 1952–58). One incarnation of this series is a group of ceramic works that was displayed in an open-air passage in the Ciudad universitaria Caracas (University City of Caracas), Venezuela, in 1954, creating a vibrant, shimmering display that created the illusion of movement. In the 1950s Vasarely's works moved more directly into Kinetic art and in 1955 he wrote his famous *Manifeste jaune* (*Yellow Manifesto*) for a major exhibition of Kinetic art, *Le mouvement* (*The Movement*) (in which he also participated), held at the Galerie Denise René. Yet it was not until 1965 that the Op-art exhibition *The Responsive Eye* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, consecrated his international recognition as the central figure of the Op-art movement.

Vasarely was the recipient of numerous prestigious awards, including the Guggenheim Prize in New York (1964); the Grand prix at the So Paulo Biennial and the Grand prix de la gravure in Ljubljana, Slovenia (both 1965); and the French Chevalier de l'ordre de la Légion d'honneur (1970). He was widely influential for later artists, especially those of GRAV (Groupe de recherche d'art visuel) (Research in Visual Arts Group) in the 1960s. Vasarely died in Paris on March 15, 1997.