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KANDINSKY: THE MUNICH YEARS 1896-1914

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INTRODUCTION

In 1896 Vasilly Kandinsky arrived in Munich from his native Russia. He had left behind an academic career, turned down a professorship in the University of Dorpat, and had set his mind on becoming a painter.

His choice of Munich was not casual or ill-considered for Munich was at the centre of artistic activity. A growing reputation for liberalism and intellectual freedom enhansed Munich's attraction for artists and intellectuals in search of patronage, stimulation and personal freedom. Munich enjoyed a great internationalism with more direct contact with what was going on in Paris and elsewhere.

Kandinsky lived in Schwabing, the bohemian sector of Munich, which he described as not so much a geographic location, but as a "spiritual island in the great world, in Germany, mostly in Munich itself". Kandinsky entered this spiritual situation with a feeling of "being reborn". (1)

In Munich, as elsewhere, there was the desperate search for a new, meaningful art, for a humanity that seemed to have been lost in the positivist streams of the 19th century, the artist sought complete freedom to create out of himself unhampered by the demands of naturalness. Artists aimed for a direct expression of personal subjectivity, a new means to represent unhampered by naturalness in colour and shape. They wanted a new "naturalness" in which colours and shapes speak their own language, in which they have something to say about reality rather than describe it. The colours and shapes in themselves were to express the idea, the feeling, the truth about something, by direct artistic means.

Kandinsky was an exponent of these ideas, and like many others held a strong antipathy to all naturalism for, as he believed, it had not only killed art but also killed the spiritual both in art and in man.

"We must destroy the soul-less, materialistic life of the 19th century", said Kandinsky, and "we must build the life of the soul and the spirit of the twentieth century". (2) He spoke of the nightmare of materialistic ideas that had degraded life into a monstrous, senseless play.

Kandinsky was moving among the ruins when he commented angrily on the contemporary art in the exhibitions:

> "Rooms hung with canvasses, on which elements of Nature are represented with paint: animals in light and shadow, standing near the water or lying in the meadow, beside a Crucifixion of Christ painted by an artist who does not believe in Christ: then flower pieces, or human figures, standing, sitting or walking, often nude; lots of nude women, sometimes foreshortened from behind; apples on a silver tray, a portrait of old Mr. Such and Such, a sunset ..(3)

To achieve a new, spiritual, truly human art, Kandinsky began by making art into art. He saw the elimination of representationalism as a way of expressing his rejection of materialistic values.

Kandinsky knew a great deal about science and was in touch with scientific discoveries. When he came to Munich it was a period of great upheaval in the scientific world and a difficult and major change of direction was taking place. One of the most revolutionary scientific events in the early years of the century was the publication of Max Planck's Quantam Theory. Before Planck, scientists regarded matter as indestructible, the ultimate irreducible fact of the Universe. Planck put forward the theory that matter was rather electricity in constant motion, that matter was energy and that the Universe was in a state of flux. Planck therefore not only called into question the very existence of the real world, but also, the authority of science itself. Einsteins general theory of relativity and Freud's discovery of the subconscious had similar effects. The material world for Kandinsky had been reduced to nothingness by scientific progress. The news of Rutherford's bombardment of the atom filled him with dismay, he realized that the world of apparent substances no longer had any real existence. The metaphysical, anti-materialistic side of Kandinsky's personality was strengthened.

"The destruction of the atom seemed to me to be the same as the destruction of the world.....science to me appeared to be dead".

The "reality" of the visible world appeared more and more to consist in the human faculty of apperception and was therefore no longer regarded as objective fact. And if scientists proved to be fallible, and the old and trusted picture of the world could so easily be shattered, then Kandinsky could feel the right to destroy the old "realistic, soul-less" type of art and create an art according to the principles of the "spirit" and the soul, principles which he believed were much better founded. For Kandinsky, spiritual realities were alone valid and he sought to reveal them. The content of his work, no matter how impossible it may be ever to seize and reduce it to a verbal formula is always of ethical as well as aesthetic significance. Kandinsky ascribed to his art an objective spiritual purpose. To examine his colours and shapes as ends in themselves would be to ignore what they were intended to do.

(1) Vassily Kandinsky "Der Blaue Reiter" (Ruckblick) 1930.

Kandinsky's reference to Munich as a "spiritual situation" was a paraphrase of the famous definition by Franziska Von Reventlow of Schwabing as a "spiritual movement, a niveau, a direction, a protest, a new cult or much more, the attempt to win once again out of ancient cults new religious possibilities...".

(2) Vasilly Kandinsky "Uber Das Geistige In Der Kunst". 1912.

(3) Vasilly Kandinsky "Uber Das Geistige In Derkunst". 1912.

Chapter 1.

THE DECORATIVE NARRATIVE

The Jugendstil Influence

The year Kandinsky arrived in Munich, George Hirth founded the Munich periodical "Jugend", which was to give its name to a style and an era.

Jugendstil (I) the style of youth, was the powerful arts and crafts movement that pervaded all aspects of Munich's artistic milieu at the turn of the century.

In Munich Jugendstil was to serve as a powerful catalyst for Kandinsky. At the base of Jugendstil aesthetics was the conviction that the artist had sovereignty over his materials and could evaluate them in their own terms. Freed from any absolute necessity to imitate nature, colour, line and form could yield the full range of aesthetic emotion. Jugendstil artists discarded traditional forms and invented new ones, startlingly abstract formal patterns based on a new-found regard for technology were derived. Motivating all these transformations lay the ultimate creation of a socially viable total aesthetic environment, informed by a fresh awareness of and respect for the psychological and symbolic potential of such fundamental aesthetic elements as colour, line and form.

Thus interwoven with the rise of the arts and crafts movement was a growing tendency to conceive of line, form and colour as independent entities capable of previously unsuspected energy. The unsuspected power of line-in-itself, colour-in-itself, form-in-itself was revealed with clarity by the Jugendstil artists.

Kandinsky had become friendly with a number of artists involved with the Jugendstil movement, which had absorbed aspects of Symbolism, particularly the visual ideas of Art Nouveau.

August Endell, critic and architect, could write in the November 1897 issue of "Dekorative Kunst" about "the begining of a totally new art, an art with forms that mean nothing and represent nothing and remind one of

nothing, yet that will be able to move our souls so deeply. (2)

Munich was becoming a hotbed of activity for the arts and crafts, particularly for those interested in developing an abstract ornamental design as the basis for a new style. The implications of the Jugendstil movement were not lost on Kandinsky. Their regard for the formal elements of design and their dealing with problems of ornament exerted a crucial influence on Kandinsky. In fact, Jugendstil and the arts and crafts movement in general, particularly in its' manifestation as graphic art, served as a bridge between the decorative arts and Kandinsky's ultimate break-through to abstraction.

Jugendstil provided not only a rich theoretical context but it also opened a vast arsenal of forms. It expanded the formal language permissible to the artist, encouraging the simultaneous exploitation of purely decorative motifs alongside abbreviated naturalistic motifs. It stimulated the imagination. Its emphasis on planar form was a result of its concern for inner necessity and honesty in the use of the artistic media. And the Jugendstil idea of the object d'art found expression as a new reverence for the painting as a work of art complete in itself, without reference to the real world.

From the beginning Kandinsky's most successful works were those that were ornamental or decorative. "Dusk", painted in 1901, which Kandinsky exhibited at the Second Phalanx exhibition, and which he catalogued under "Decorative Sketches", was perhaps one of the most successful and significant of his early works. The silvery horse and rider charging across the moonlit landscape bore a symbolic significance far beyond the immediate aim of a design for applique. It depicts a knight on horse back charging through a moonlit wood. Both horse and rider are romantically set off with silver paint. The moon, the backing of the flowers in the foreground, and the star are also silver. The star itself and the lance are gold, while the petals of the flower are blue. The horse is also pale blue, while the rider's cape and plume, the reins, saddle blanket, and harness plume are all a brilliant saturated red. The acid green of the turf contrasts sharply, while the mottled brownish tone of the wood balances the composition.

D U S K

ST. GEORGE AND THE DRAGON - Novgorod Icon

It is a bold painting. The waving line surrounding the rectangular area of the painting is an integral part of the design and has the effect of softening the rectangular contour of the composition.

St. George and the Dragon

For Kandinsky the horse and rider motif is associated with the knight-crusader image, the image of St. George, the riders of the Apocalypse and perhaps Russian fairy tales. It is a powerful motif in Kandinsky's oeuvre, derived from his Russian background, the folk, rooted in his decorative graphic art and evolved mainly through his wood-cuts. Kandinsky during this time was involved in what might be termed a 'Decorative Narrative' (5) style of painting. He wanted to communicate his messianic hopes and yet he found the abstract ornamental designs of Jugendstil too limited and decorative.

Kandinsky, in 1889, while on an ethnological survey in the Northern province of Vologda, encountered the colour and design of traditional Russian folk arts. So intense to him were the painted interiors of the peasants' houses that he felt as if he had stepped inside a picture, an effect he later hoped the spectator would experience in his own art. From then on Kandinsky immersed himself in his Russian heritage, drawing inspiration from "Lubok" (6), a kind of primitive broadsheet which enjoyed a wide circulation in Russia during the 18th and 19th centuries, and from the Icons. Early in his career Kandinsky adapted the St. George motif. In Russian icon paintings, St. George is depicted mounted on a splendid and spirited horse slaying the dragon, the dragon personifying paganism and magical practices. St. George came to be associated with the missionary activities undertaken by the church.

As an object the Icon was not intended to be merely visually appraised or sensually gratifying, it was above all a medium for the expression of ideas. This being its "raison d'etre".

The Icons have been referred to as "Russia's medieval philosophy in colour", a definition which helps to explain the way in which art and ideas can be integrated to form a synthesis. It shows how colour and shapes

can be used as a vehicle for the expression of a metaphysical "World-view".

The icon painters sought to initiate the onlooker into the inner meaning of the Icon, into a mystical world of spiritual realities rather than the earthly world of objective physical realities. The power of suggestion of symbols being the principal vehicle. Of real significance is the strong feeling of sincerity and unquestioning belief which the Icons emanate. This faith is the essence of the Icon. The Icon consists of a synthesis of art and idea, its form is derived from a spiritual vision of the universe, a synthesis of matter transformed by spirit.

"The Miracle of St. George and the Dragon" (3) of the Novgorodian school of paining is a good example. St. George is depicted wearing his armour over green garments trimmed with white borders embroidered in gold. His horse is black, his knees being protected with armour; his boots are green, his flowing cloak is of magnificent scarlet known as kinovar - a shade of red characteristic of the Novgorodian school of Icon painting. His pose is full of grace as he smites the Dragon. The Icon expresses a metaphysical philosophy which is mystically transposed into colours, line and shapes, and, it would appear, invested with the artists' spiritual consciousness.

Kandinsky saw that the Icon was somehow fundamentally different from western painting, and was aware that this difference stemed from a philosophical approach to life, which could be termed Byzantine. He recognized that the most basic assumptions and patterns of behaviour were moulded by a spiritual and idealogical consciousness of Orthodoxy.

Kandinsky seems to have accepted the notion that forms derived from folk art of a religious nature were the most appropriate to the creation of a style that he could consider both "child of its time..... and mother of the future", a style calculated to reach and to prepare a wide audience for the "coming spiritual realm". (4).

(1) Jugendstil which had its beginnings in England, was primarily a style of decoration and was concerned first and foremost with its application to architecture, to planning and design in the broad sense. Eventually it influenced painting and sculpture.

Jugendstil was designed to create a new attitude, not only to art but also to life. It was closely connected with symbolism, embodying the belief that art could affect personality in a positive way, and that good art could create or at least help to create a better society. Its forms were based on what its practitioners believed were the universal laws of nature and were thus derived from plant forms and other materials which reflects natural rhythms and forces.

Jugendstil had sound ideas about the expressive powers inherent in coloured forms; but wherever the ideas were actually applied, allegorical and metaphorical elements were quick to creep in.

(2) August Endell "Formenschoneit und Dekorative Kunst
D.K.12, November, 1897.

(3) Paintings of St. George slaying the Dragon invariably depict him mounted on a beautiful horse. Sometimes he appears alone, but the Saviour is often seen looking down from Heaven, usually from the painting's upper right hand corner, though at times He is represented only by His hand which is shown performing a blessing. The inclusion of a Saint such as this on an Icon of St. George is unusual. In most cases a feature of this kind would be due to the personal wish of the person who commissioned the Icon.

(4) Vassily Kandinsky - "Concerning the Spiritual in Art".

(5) Roger Fry

(6) Lubki had begun to be distributed in the seventeenth century as inexpensive Icons. At first they were woodcuts often hand coloured,but by the eighteenth century engravings were used and in the nineteenth century lithographs were used.

Chapter II

FOLK ART, SYMBOLISM AND THEOSOPHY

Also during this time, the late 19th century and the first years of the 20th century, a study of the Folk, its' customs and its' lore, was viewed as one possible approach to the reconstruction of Society. The Folk was viewed as the transcendental essence of a people. Myths, legends and folklore were considered important links in the chain of knowledge by both Theosophists and Symbolists. In Russia second generation Symbolists such as Ivanov emphasized the importance of myth as an aid to the artist in reaching the people.

Ivanov

Ivanov, in 1910, published a lengthy article called "The Precepts of Symbolism" in which he strongly rejected the notion that Symbolism should be considered only an art form, and instead demanded that the artist communicate with the people. He spoke of the artist as having a prophetic mission, to transmit to the people the "Language of the Gods". He referred to the artist as the "carrier of the inner word, the organ of the world soul" (1).

Kandinsky's own predilection for viewing the artist as the communicator of a cosmic vision allowed him to identify with Ivanov's concept of the artist. Kandinsky (must) also (have) identified with Ivanov's deep concern with the artists' responsibility to communicate the knowledge of the cosmic. Ivanov saw the Symbolist movement as an attempt to uncover cosmic knowledge, to hear "the Language of the Gods" and transmit it to the people, through symbols. Ivanov, did recognise the danger that confronted the artist of not being able to communicate with the people. He emphasized that direct journalistic language, which he called the language of "empirical things and relationships" could not be used. He believed such language to be too rational, logical and analytical to appeal to the people, and therefore would not help them shed their "utilitarian morals" and regain their spirituality. Consequently he urged the artist to draw his symbols from mythology, to use language of another order to communicate "inner knowledge".

FAREWELL

STEFAN GEORGE

Ivanov clearly connected Symbolism to the folk, defining symbols as "feelings of a forgotten and lost property of the folk soul" (2), and defining the artist as an organ of folk self-consciousness.

For Ivanov the fact that myths had endured throughout the centuries indicated that they were not the result of personal but of collective knowledge. He viewed the contemporary artists' interest in folk art and "ancient folk animism" as only a beginning. He urged the Symbolists to concentrate on developing the religious ideas peculiar to the primeval symbol.

Ivanov offered a justification for the study of the folk art without calling for imitation. Kandinsky, echoed some of these ideas in "Concerning the Spiritual in Art", particularly when he stated that the study of folk art was to be just a beginning for future developments.

Stefan George

The Symbolist poet, Stefan George was an influential force in cultural life in Germany around the turn of the century. Four years before Kandinsky arrived in Munich Stefan George had founded a magazine called "Blatter fur die Kunst". In the first issue of "Blatter fur die Kunst", Stefan George declared himself against naturalism in poetry. He wrote that his journal demanded "a spiritual art based on the new mode of feeling", and that it was opposed "to that exhausted and inferior school which originated from a false conception of reality". (3)

Kandinsky would have been familiar with the ideas and poetry of Stefan George. They both shared an admiration for a number of artistic and literary figures and they understood the need for the search for "inner expression". Stefan George's quest for a new age, his interest in Rosicrucianism, (4) and his preference for Symbolism as opposed to Naturalism would have stimulated Kandinsky to search in similiar directions.

Kandinskys' woodcut of 1903 called "Farewell", depicts a Knight in armour, lance in hand, standing beside his horse, about to bid farewell to the lady at his side. The Knight, posed in profile, gazes stalwartly out of the picture giving the appearance of utter dedication to some

mission. The fact that the Knight bears a striking resemblence to the profile of Stefan George reveals, I believe, Kandinskys' affinity of purpose with that of George.

The Symbolist movement strongly reflected the anti-positivist feelings of the time in its' emphasis on creating a new aesthetic that was suggestive of the "higher realities, the cosmic orders", rather than descriptive of the mundane physical world. In Germany, Symbolist notions became entwined with the Romantic philosophy, from which Symbolism sprang. In Russia, Symbolism was viewed not merely as an aesthetic, but as a world-view from which a new society could be created. Symbolists approached subject matter with the belief that a picture is neither simply an arrangement of lines and colours nor a transcript from nature, but that behind a picture lies another order of meaning, and they held that the work of art is ultimately a consequence of the inner spirit of the artist, rather than of observed nature.

Just as the arts and crafts movement left its imprint on Kandinsky, so too did Symbolism. Kandinsky not only had direct, and indirect, contact with Symbolist artists in Munich, but in his own works literary and artistic, demonstrated clear stylistic and thematic associations with them. Kandinsky shared with Symbolists an enthusiasm for a spiritual art, and a belief in an epochal renewal of life through art.

Rudolf Steiner

Kandinskys' disposition of seeing the artist as a kind of mystic, a forerunner in a coming utopian epoch and his messianic vision, must certainly have been influenced by Theosophical and Rosicriccian ideas.

Rudolf Steiner, leader of the German Theosophical Society and resident in Munich, believed artistic experience to be the strongest means of developing an understanding of the Spiritual. Kandinsky re-echoes this in his declaration that painting could be a powerful instrument for social change. He felt that painting had a specific purpose -"to serve the development and refinement of the human soul". He added that "no other power" could replace the power of art in assisting with this goal.

Kandinsky had obviously read the writings of Helena Petrova Blavatsky, co-founder of the Theosophical Society. In his "Concerning the Spiritual in Art", Kandinsky mentions Blavatsky and the Theosophical Society as those who "seek to approach the spirit by way of the inner knowledge".

Furthermore Steiners' interpretation that Christianity incorporated the wisdom of all previous religions and cults and consequently offered the richest souce for advancing the destiny of mankind must have seemed expecially compelling to an artist such as Kandinsky, who, while rejecting the established church, compared himself and his friends on occasions to the early Christians in their endeavour to raise the weakest to spiritual battle. In "Concerning the Spiritual in Art", Kandinsky wrote :-

> "Only just now awakening after years of materialism our soul is infected with the despair born of unbelief, lack of purpose and aim. The nightmare of materialism, which turned life into a senseless game, is not yet passed, it still darkens the awakening soul".

Kandinskys' contacts with Theosophy reinforced ideas that he had been exposed to in both Russia and Germany, particularly by those associated with Symbolism. His stay in Paris in 1906-07 exposed him to more artists associated with Symbolism, and his visit back to his native land in 1910, where there was a great interest in Symbolism, Theosophy and Steiner particularly, strengthened his ideas about a "spiritual art".

RUSSIAN FOLK SCULPTURE

ST. GEORGE AND THE DRAGON

(1) Ivanov "Zavety simvolizma", Apollon, 1.8. (May, June 1910). Ivanov also characterized the poet as the "signifier of the secret communications of the soul, the secret seer of the creator of life".

Ivanov exerted a strong influence on Kandinsky.

(2) Ivanov, "Poet i Chern", March 1904.

(3) Stefan George ; Blatter fur die Kunst, October 1892. Introduction.

(4) A secret worldwide brotherhood claiming to possess esoteric wisdom handed down from ancient times. Their name derives from the orders symbol, a combination of a rose and a cross. Their teachings combine elements of occultism reminiscent of a variety of religious beliefs and practices.

Chapter 111

EXPRESSIONISM

Inner Necessity

This intense pre-occupation with the inner world of man was a dominant characteristic of Expressionism: Expressionism implying an art exclusively concerned with human passions and feelings.

Lothar Schreyer had defined Expressionism as "the spiritual movement of a time that places inner experience above external life" (1).

This turning inward was not only the defiant gesture of a generation in revolt against materialist standards, it also expressed a firm belief that the redemption of the world led through the forgotten inner world of man. The expression of emotion was proclaimed to the exclusion of nearly every other consideration. Profound emotion, Kandinsky reiterated again and again, was the sole "determining factor", the vital productive principle at the root of all genuine art. Kandinsky demanded that art branch out into the unknown, that it express emotions beyond those we normally experience in life.

In "Concerning the Spiritual in Art", Kandinsky spoke of the painters desire to arouse not definite feelings "like fear, joy and grief" - coarse sentiments in his opinion - but emotions "as yet un-named, moods subtle beyond words".

Aiming for direct emotional communication some Expressionist painters relied on the intrinsic life of the forms and colours themselves, pushing their autonomy to a point which nearly obliterated the representative element itself. The energy of lines and colours being deployed to express the dynamics of feeling. Often only the title provides a bridge to the meaning of such pictures precariously balanced on the borderline between representation and abstraction. It was left to Kandinsky to proclaim the absolute autonomy of the pictorial means and use them for purely "spiritual expression".

Kandinsky realized that painting had reached a stage of development where it violated both nature and art ; the former through the artists' wholly unprecedented and often wilful distortions ; the latter through his retention of natural forms while in the main making his emotional appeal through the

immediate expressiveness of lines and colours. As Kandinsky realized, this introduced an intolerable tension between nature and art, between the descriptive element borrowed from without, and the expressive element inherent in the pictorial means.

It was obvious to Kandinsky "the passion and the life, whose fountains are within" could only be expressed through a language no longer tied to the object, the object would interfere with the exactitude of such communication. For Kandinsky (1) art begins where nature leaves off and (11) art springs from an internal necessity, a need to communicate feeling.

Kandinsky insisted that all of life was movement, metamorphosis, the unfolding of a spiritual dynamic which continuously transcended the already attained. Spirit creates its' forms and passes on to the creation of others (2). Nothing remained static, nothing timelessly valid in this process. To declare any artistic norm as final, to cling to the concept of the ideal and universal form was to arrest the flow of life and thus thwart the creative movement of the spirit. The same point was expressed by Marianne Werefkin, friend and co-worker of Kandinsky. "The finished, closed and static form, curdles life and halts movement. Feelings and thoughts are in a continual flux and movement is the principle of life." (3).

Hence Kandinskys' insistence that each age has a freedom which it must realize in forms appropriate to itself. What applied to each age applied to every creative individual. The artist, as Kandinsky put it, possessed in advance "a tuning fork in his soul which he cannot tune to another pitch" (4). In other words each artist was unique, a creator of forms original and characteristic of himself. The creation of such forms was not dictated by formal rules in aesthetics, but by the artists' innermost feelings. Feeling always ruled over form and not form over feeling. The inner element determines the form of the work of art.

Time and again Kandinsky warned his fellow painters that an exclusive emphasis on formal aims killed the soul of art, that a work "whose point of departure was form revealed an emptiness that cannot be filled out" (6). Form had to be something spontaneous and positive, the expression of "an inner necessity", which selected the form most expressive of itself.

LANDSCAPE WITH TOWER

BEFORE THE CITY

Kandinsky denied all claims to form. "In principle there is no problem of form. The artist was free to choose whatever shape best expressed his meaning. Art was to the first and to the last a matter of content". Kandinsky, and the Expressionists, reacted against any purism which, reglectful of or indifferent to content, looked only for formal perfection.

The Significance of Colour

Given the Expressionists' pronounced anti-formalism, it was not surprising that they should have turned to colour as the medium best suited to carry emotional conviction, a medium naturally fluid and resisting the confinement of form. The Expressionists used colour dramatically and daringly. They possessed an intuitive understanding of colour as a quality immediately expressive of feeling. The general significance of colour in Expressionist painting hardly requires demonstration. It leaps from their canvases in glowing chromatic planes and rhythms culminating in Kandinskys' dramatic compositions in which colour and form are essentially one.

In Kandinskys "Composition No. 2" expressionist characteristics predominate. Subject matter is neither quite present nor quite absent. Without defining it Kandinsky presents us with a landscape in which people on foot and on horse back move about in varying degrees of agitation. Land and sky, trees and clouds, and other natural formations set the scene. The centre of the picture is occupied by a group of horses and riders as well as other figures that seem to stand, sit and move in various directions. Natural forms and human figures merge, dark heavy lines define the free forms and enclose clear and joyous colours. The primary colours predominate, and their strength is increased by the white areas that run in broad currents throughout the picture space. The texture is rough, and the surface is made active by short strokes moving in different directions. An effect of shallow depth is created through converging lines, through the devise of structuring the painting so as to suggest that its bottom edge is nearer to us than its top, and through the use of projecting and receding colours. These means, however, are applied loosely, often contradicting one another, so that an illusion of the third dimension never quiet results.

Kandinsky realized that colour is made expressive, not by overcharging it with significance and laying it on as thick as possible, but by giving full play to its sorority. He applied a technique of extreme dissonances and contrasts

SKETCH FOR COMPOSITION II

LYRICAL

ROAD AT MURNAU

CHURCH

which raised the colder colours to the same degree of intensity as the warmer ones. In this way every part of the picture, however minor or obscure, could be fanned into glowing life.

Kandinsky did not feel restricted to describe, he selected colours he found most telling and used distortions and repetitions to achieve greater expressiveness of form. In his early Murnau landscapes the treatment is direct, the layout horizontal. The village street occupies the foreground, the walls and roofs stand back, touched with fiery red. Soon a re-arrangement of the component features occurs ; the silhouettes of the houses, the overhanging trees, and the spectral church tower are placed in conflicting perspective centred below the picture, in front of, or behind the clumps of vegetation that take up the middle of the composition. As a result they seem to float among the clouds in a space striped by diagonal lines, which are a direct affirmation of forces and impulses. At the same time, the colours became increasingly simplified and large detached areas, enlivened by vibrations or occasionally by unevenly distributed luminous patches, begin to appear. These areas have a clearly defined form and direction. In a series of works based on Oriental themes and of purely imaginary inspiration, which Kandinsky painted between 1909 and 1914 they are at first contained within black lines ; these lines later gained such allusive force as to be capable of acting in isolation. Kandinsky called this series "Improvisations", 1 to 35. For each painting in this series there were numerous preparatory drawings, variations or replicas. The series thus formed a fairly extensive whole.

Kandinsky spoke of these paintings as having originated in the unconscious, but in the earliest ones it is possible to distinguish figures, dames, and horsemen. They also appear to contain features borrowed from the Murnau landscapes - streets, towers, spires, mountains - distorted so that they become increasingly unrecognizable. Eventually only a few broken curves, dominant lines, angles, stresses, and touches of colour remain.

By reducing the naturalism in his art, Kandinsky greatly extended its lyrically expressive power. Glowing colours and somewhat fervent brush strokes were sufficiently communicative for him to depend less and less on subject matter. During the following years Kandinsky developed this

subjectless art further, not necessarily eschewing all hints of figuration but placing his emphasis on the total expressiveness of his pictures and at times using semi-improvisatory techniques to get the greatest possible immediacy. Kandinsky worked towards a more powerful design and the release of colour from its subservience to the object. Even in a black and white reproduction of a painting of this period the pattern of values is more assertive than the subject matter. The colours are so saturated that they seem to detach themselves from the forms, creating a design which exists apart from their descriptive function. Kandinsky in the years prior to 1910, learned how to endow colour with an independent existence and came to an understanding of the possibilities of non-representational design.

On returning to his studio one evening in Munich, in 1910, Kandinsky failed to recognize one of his own paintings. It was standing the wrong way up and in the bluish dusk, he saw only a picture of "extraordinary beauty, glowing with an inner radiance". The discovery that coloured forms have inherent expressive properties regardless of their relation or lack of relation to objects in the phenomenal world was of the greatest importance to him, for it confirmed his belief that the artists task is to present the reality of spiritual rather than sensational experience.

(1) L. Schreyer, quoted in R. Samual and R. H. Thomas "Expressionism in German life, literature and theatre".

(2) Kandinsky "Uber die Forinfrage".

(3) Werefkin "Briefe an einen Unbekannten".

(4) Presumably the opening words of Kandinskys' projected "Cologne Lecture" quoted in Grohmanns Vasilly Kandinsky Life and Work".

(5) Kandinsky "Concerning the Spriritual in Art".

(6) Schelling "Uber das Verhaltnis der bildenden Kunste zu der Natur".

Chapter IV

EXPERIMENTS WITH MUSIC AND HIDDEN CONSTRUCTION

The Methods of Music

Kandinsky continued to paint in the Murnau style and at the same time produced work which was more experimental. The landscape from Murnau changed too, becoming more completely charged with emotion and so less like the subjects which inspired them. As Kandinsky moved away from a realistic rendering of what his eyes saw, he began to transform his pictures into evocative objects, from the construction of which an inner sense would be evoked which was intended to touch the spectator in the same way as the pictures of nature itself. Through the raw material, colour form and line-painting came close to music and Kandinsky hoped that it would eventually be able to express experience as directly as music with its tones, melodic construction and rhythm.

For Kandinsky music was an important ingredient for his painting. Music was analogous with colour. Colour had its tones and could produce corresponding resonances in the inner mind. (1) Kandinsky sought in music inspiration for purer or more absolute or concrete forms in his quest for a language that would communicate his beliefs in the coming spiritual epoch. In "Concerning the Spiritual in Art", Kandinsky declares a spiritual basis for art in which the role of the new painting, taking music as its guide, will be to help overcome the remnants of materialism by asserting the primacy of inner values.

Kandinskys' work of this period are full of pulsating colour, melodic line and swelling shapes that hover un-hinged and weightless in an im-precise space. Film colours are often suggested by juxtaposing large areas of strongly contrasting colours which work together producing effects of glare and simultaneous contrast which make the colours appear to vibrate and produce the illusion that they are not lying firmly on the picture plane, but hovering slightly in front of it or behind it - using the tendencies of blue to appear to "retreat optically, yellow to advance". The large areas of colour are amorphous, indefinite and do not denote precise objects. They bring to mind Steiner's description of the "Spirit Land" of which he wrote as

IMPROVISATION 19

IMPROVISATION 27

"Continuous mobile activity, a ceaseless creating, where each colour, each perception of light, represents a spiritual tone, and every combination of colours, corresponds with a harmony, a melody. The floating of colours....without ground or basis, without physical object, is the revelation of the spirit which constantly surrounds man." (2)

For these experimental pictures Kandinsky ceased to use objective titles and chose instead musical terms "Improvisation" and "Composition". His paintings were now meant to have life, not only through what they represented, but also through effects unique to art, through colour vibrations and linear configurations which attempted to make visible a dramatic or lyrical state of the sensibilities. The "Improvisations" were what the name implies ; spontaneous expressions of experience. The "Compositions" on the other hand were slowly formed. Kandinsky also at this time, discriminated between two further types of painting, the "melodic" and the "symphonic". In the "melodic" the composition is based on a single form, in the "symphonic" on several forms subordinated to an overall design. Much of Kandinsky's work of this period is reminiscent of the music of Wagner which Kandinsky so greatly admired. Just as Wagners' music calls forth associations in the listener's mind, so the tonal play of colour and line in the paintings stimulate associations with the real world - horses, Russian churches, country scenes. But the paintings quickly become more difficult to decipher and the music of Schoenberg rather than of Wagner comes to mind. Schoenberg was a friend of Kandinsky and developed his theories of modern music in close collaboration with him, at the same time Kandinsky was struggling with his theories of art. Schoenberg's music, like Kandinsky's paintings of this period, exist unto itself in its own terms and does not call forth associations with anything outside itself. It has within itself true inner expression.

Roger Fry, in 1913 wrote of Kandinsky's paintings :

As one contemplates, one finds that after a time the improvisations became more definite, more logical, and

> closely knit in structure, more surprisingly beautiful in their colour oppositions, more exact in their equilibrium. They are pure visual music, but I cannot any longer doubt the possibility of emotional expression by such abstract visual signs". (3)

Kandinsky knew that music devoted itself not to the re-production of natural phenomena, but rather to the expression of the artists soul. And for this reason, to express his inner-need, Kandinsky sought to apply to his own art the methods of music.

Kandinsky was convinced he could synthesize the multiple effects of the other arts such as music, dance and poetry into a painting. His view that a total art work might be realized in a painting was based on his belief that painting was both the most permanent and the most immediate of the arts. In "Concerning the Spiritual", he wrote :-

> ..."painting is ahead of music in several particulars. Music for example, has at its disposal duration, the extension of time. Painting, on the other hand, can present to the spectator the whole content of the work at one moment".

This acceptance of synaesthesia was important to his development towards abstraction. He maintained that in a painting colours used with lines could suggest movement or direction and would be akin to the role dance played in stage composition. Colour could evoke the same emotional intensity as music, and specific colours could actually communicate specific moods. But at the time he was writing "Concerning the Spiritual in Art", Kandinsky still did not believe that colour and line alone were powerful enough to achieve the effects of a multiple art work. He felt he needed objects to provide the additional stimuli necessary to communicate his messianic vision.

The Role of Hidden Images

The object, Kandinsky maintained, like colour and form, had its own psychic effects, its own spiritual possibilities. Three aspects of the object - its colour, its form, and the object itself independent of its colour and form contributed to that effect. He stressed that if the object were used effectively, it could have extraordinary power in a painting.

Rather than depict the object naturalistically, Kandinsky proposed to hide its physical aspects through the combination of "veiling" and "stripping" - "das kombinieren des verschleierten und des blossgelegten". The process of veiling involved placing the object where it would not be expected or blurring its outline with unrelated colours. The process of stripping involved simplifing the object to a partial outline. The union of these two methods produced what Kandinsky called the hidden construction - "versteckte Konstruktion". Through the hidden construction, Kandinsky hoped to avoid the materialism of representational art while still involving the spectator by providing familiar key motifs. Kandinsky felt that the spectator needed help to learn to understand the new painting and that the spectator needed help to learn to understand the new painting and that the artist would have to lead him into the abstract sphere step by step. Even in 1913, Kandinsky wrote of the necessity for the gradual involvement of the spectator:

> ".....the removal of the object in painting makes very great demands on the inner experience of the purely painterly form.....therefore an evolution of the observer in this direction is absolutely necessary and can in no way be lacking" (4)

Kandinsky felt hidden images would lead the spectator to take part in the creation of the work almost as if he were taking part in a mystic ritual. By forcing the spectator to decipher mysterious ambiguous images, he would involve him in the process of replacing, confusion with understanding. Kandinsky maintained that if both content and form were too readable, and if the painting did not reflect the confusions of the present with which people identified, the work would not be meaningful.

COVER FOR 'BLAUE REITER'

PAINTING WITH WHITE BORDER

Kandinsky, in 1911, produced a cover for the "Blaue Reiter" almanac which is a variation of a glass painting done the same year. The leaping horse and rider reveals how Kandinsky transposed elements borrowed from folk and primitive art into a new style. The cover motif of the almanac with the heavy black outlines, the elimination of modelling, the bright colour, and the placement of St. George in the centre of the composition all suggest the influence of Bavarian glass painting and craftwork. The motif on the almanac cover is less distinct than the image in his glass painting, representation has been minimized to suggest spirituality.

In an important oil painting of 1913, which Kandinsky called "Painting with White Border", and which appears rather non-representational, Kandinsky echoed the motif of the horse and rider, with a lance used on the cover of the "Blaue Reiter" almanac. In "Painting with White Border" the lance is emphasized and apocalyptic images are added. Although these images are not immediately recognizable, they are clearly delineated in several of the preparatory sketches. Kandinsky had great difficulty in completing this painting, which he had begun in 1912 after a trip to Moscow. The title was derived from the addition of the curved white border which he felt enabled him to solve the problems of the painting.

Kandinsky mentioned that "Painting with White Border" had two centres. The left centre he described as having red and blue colours and the right centre as composed of thick bent forms with white edges. Within each of these centres, images can be discerned. On the right, a thick curved, black line suggests the head and back of a horse and rider. At the end of the thick, curved, black line a few thin black lines indicate the tail of the horse. The construction of the horse and rider in earlier works such as Lyrical of 1911, in which the rider has been simplified to a double comma, has been further transformed in this oil into a curved line with a projecting semi-circle for the rider's head. This simplification of the horse and rider motif is similar in all of the preliminary studies except for the early drawings where the horse and rider is more detailed. In a water colour study from the first phase a black outline clearly defines the head, neck, and crossed forelegs of the horse in addition to the tail. The yellow colour of the rider's body and the rose area of the head explain the two semi-circular curved black lines. The lance being indicated in pencil by two parallel lines. In many of Kandinsky's versions of St. George an extremely

long lance has been the dominant feature. In the "Painting with White Border" it is the central placement of the long lance and the contrast of the white colour against the dark background that provided the clearest indication of the theme of the painting. The lance connects the two areas which Kandinsky described as the centres of the painting. However, the image in the left does not directly resemble the Dragon usually found at the bottom of the lance in Kandinsky's paintings of St. George. It is more like the Russian folk sculpture, an illustration of which appeared in the Almanac of 1911, which depicts a rider with a lance spearing the beast with its seven long necks and horned heads; the seven headed beast described in The Revelation to John :

> "And I saw a beast coming up out of the sea, having ten horns and seven heads" (5)

Rudolf Steiner had explained that those who rejected Christ would appear with horns and seven heads - the unenlightened - whom the knight has to subdue or overcome. This must have certainly influenced Kandinsky's decision to develop the role of the hidden object.

Describing Painting in White Border, Will Grohmann wrote in 1913 :

> "At the subline point of the operation there is always at least a faint echo of what had originally been a boat, a mountain, a horse, St. George, the Kremlin, a Troika. They are all there without really being there, or, if they are there, they are present in conformity with a nature that is to pass away, to vanish, to become absent".

(1) Kandinsky "Concerning the Spiritual in Art".

(2) Steiner, Theosophie 5th Edition 1910.

(3) Roger Fry, "The Allied Artists".
The Nation, Vol. 13, August 1913.

(4) Kandinsky, "Malerie als Reine Kunst", September 1913.

(5) The Revelation of John 13 : 1.

Chapter V
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Seven Compositions

Klaus Brisch of the University of Bonn, 1955, maintained that Kandinsky retained imagery in his painting for expressive purposes longer than had previously been thought. He emphasized that the imagery contained Apocalyptic motifs. He stressed that Kandinsky's seven large Compositions originated from eschatoligal themes and that such imagery persisted in a number of his paintings until 1912 and a few in 1913.

Kandinsky thought of the seven Compositions as his most important works. The Compositions, despite their non-specific titles, do contain veiled religious motifs. Kandinsky specifically stated that two in this series, Composition V and VI, had their origin in the Biblical themes of the Last Judgement and the Deluge. Although he did not clearly identify the themes of the other Compositions, they also have their roots in Kandinsky's religious philosophy.

The Compositions are the largest of all his paintings; only I and IV are less than eight feet in length. Kandinsky made numerous sketches for each and emphasized in his explanation of this series that "Reason, consciousness, deliberation, and purpose" played a predominant role in their creation. The Compositions, Kandinsky said were slowly formed, which after the first sketch were tested and worked over protractedly and almost pedantically. (1).

Kandinsky began working on the series at the end of 1909 and had completed the fifth by the end of 1911. He completed two more in 1913. Kandinsky gave the title Composition to only seven paintings before 1914, the outbreak of the first World War. For many seven had a religious and mystical significance. It is the most frequently repeated number in The Revelation to John : John is instructed to write to the seven churches.

> "I saw seven golden lamp-stands; And in His right hand
> He held seven stars; And there were seven lamps of fire
> burning before the throne, which are the seven spirits
> of God; a Lamb, standing, as if slain, having seven horns
> and seven eyes" (2)

COMPOSITION I

SKETCH FOR COMPOSITION I

HORSEMEN OF THE APOCALYPSE - Quentell Bible

HORSEMEN OF THE APOCALYPSE

Indeed all seven Compositions seem to be related to some aspect of the Revelation.

Composition I the first completed work of 1910, appears to depict the apocalyptic riders mentioned in the Revelation. Although the painting was destroyed, several good black and white photographs exist in addition to a small preliminary sketch in pencil on which a few colours are noted in handwriting. In this Composition three horses and riders are placed in the centre of the canvas. In front of the riders are three hunched figures whose hands seem to be clasped in prayer. In the lower left corner is the head of a fourth figure and a fifth stands in the lower right corner. Bushes are indicated between each group and behind the riders are two twisted trees. Two mountains with several walled cities and seperate towers surrounded by clouds loom behind the riders. The diagonal axis on which the cities and towers are placed suggests a feeling of tumbling. Only three horse men are shown instead of the four as described in the Revelation. Kandinsky also depicted only three riders in two glass paintings (1911 and 1914) where the inclusion of bow and arrow, scales and a sword leave no doubt as to the riders' identity. While the horsemen in Composition I are grouped as closely together as they are in the glass paintings, they are not depicted as leaping in the air, but instead follow the left-to-right horizontal movement of the horsemen as in such 15th century German printed bibles as the Quentell. The fourth horseman carrying death, traditionally represented as a skeleton, is omitted by Kandinsky, and the other three riders are given colours that do not correspond to their description in the Apocalypse. In the Revelation the rider with a bow is on a white horse, the rider with a sword on a red horse; the third, a black horse, "and he who sat on it had a pair of scales in his hands;" and the fourth "an ashen horse, and he who sat on it had the name Death". (3) By eliminating the horseman of Death and by changing the colours of the horses, Kandinsky suggests a more positive interpretation of the Apocalypse ; He may have done this because he believed, like Steiner, that Christ conquered Death in the "fourth Age". (4)

Whereas Composition I deals with one aspect of the Apocalypse the horsemen, Composition II incorporates two opposite aspects of The Revelation - destruction and salvation. Although Composition II was destroyed during the second World War, the final study is strikingly

COMPOSITION IV

COMPOSITION V

similar to it. In both the motifs of destruction and salvation are present. In each lightening, falling trees, tumbling towers, dark clouds, a boat with upright figures in it and figures submerged by waves. In the middle two horses and riders leap towards each other. In the oil "Study for Composition II" the motifs are firmly outlined and colour is confined by black outlines. The clouds, for example, are painted brown, green, orange with red spots and blue within black out-lines. The zig-zag form of the lightening is directed at the dark trees on top of a mustard - coloured hill. At the bottom of the hill a yellow figure with outstretched arms, suggesting a cross, stands in a purple-maroon boat, surrounded on each side by leaning towers. In the lower left several figures sink into the waves. Kandinsky in discussing the materialistic nightmare of his time, compared the helplessness of the lost and the frightened to a drowning swimmer. At the same time, he described how hope existed within the nightmare. On the right side of Study for Composition II children playing with balls, kneeling forms, a couple reclining, several figures in red, maroon and white, a woman lying under a tree which has red and green patches hanging from its' drooping branches, can all be identified. The white and blue sky with yellow and red clouds contrasts sharply with the dark sky in the left corner. In this study Kandinsky combines his vision of the Deluge and his dream of Paradise.

The mood of Composition III, also destroyed during the second World War, has been described as "threatening" and "catastrophic" and motifs such as waves, horses and human figures have been tentatively identified, all evoking a mood of turbulence perhaps referring to the theme of the Deluge. In Composition IV, as in Composition II, images of upheavel are combined with images of hope. While Composition IV follows the general division of motifs in Composition II into right and left sides, a greater integration of opposing motifs is achieved. The Rainbow, for example, is placed behind the guns. None the less the guns, the waves, and the battling horses are on the left while the couple, the saints, and the sun are on the right. Kandinsky described Compositions IV and II as related. He stressed, however, that the conflicts and the contrasts were stronger and clearer in Composition IV. He explained that the colours were both sweeter and colder and the angles sharper. His inclusion of the images of the saints may also suggest the stronger religious connotation intended for Composition IV.

STUDY FOR COMPOSITION VII

COMPOSITION VII

Kandinsky began to paint Composition V and Composition VI at about the same time in 1911. The former having as its' starting point the theme of the Last Judgement, the latter originated from the theme of the Deluge. Overlapping colours and amorphous forms create a chaotic unearthly effect in both Compositions. The motifs in both Compositions are quiet hidden, with a pronounced diagonal organization of the shapes, especially in Composition VI. Both are much more abstracted than the preceeding Compositions. Although Kandinsky did not mention a theme for Composition VII, which he completed in November 1913, an examination of the work and its numerous preliminary studies reveal several motifs related to themes in the other Compositions. The swirling masses of colour, arranged with a strong diagonal accent, as in Composition VI, prevents immediate recognition of the images and ultimately conceal many that were quiet recognizable in the drawings. None the less the painting can be shown to have origins in Kandinsky's general embracement of an apocalyptic framework. Such motifs as a mountain, placed at an angle in the upper right corner, its blue-greenish colour outlined in yellow-white and a red patch, associated with the walled city placed at the top of the peak. A boat with oars can be identified, the construction of the boat lies in the lower left with the black semi-circular outline of the hill intersected by the three parallel black lines of the oars.

Conclusion

In all of the Compositions Apocalyptic and eschatological imagery is used to some degree. The motifs become increasingly veiled and stripped into hidden constructions. Bright colours predominate and images of hope are placed in proximity to those of upheavel. Each of the Compositions is a testament to Kandinsky's belief that a new spiritual epoch would emerge from the destruction of the old.

> "Out of the most effective destruction sounds a living praise, like a hymn to the new creation, which follows the destruction". (5)

Kandinsky like Steiner, George, Ivanov and other Symbolists and Theosophists, took an apocalyptic view of History and attached great importance to The Revelation to John. He believed, like many others,

that an eschatological upheaval was at hand. With all the emphasis placed on The Revelation to John as a secret document containing the key to the understanding of the Future, it is not surprising that Kandinsky used apocalyptic motifs to communicate his concept of a coming spiritual realm. Having associated naturalism with materialism, to realize his anti-materialistic vision, Kandinsky sought to develop a language without losing the communicative power of images. Kandinsky wanted to shed the skin of nature but not its laws, the cosmic laws. He was looking for a restoration of Art and Life, hoping to regain something that was lost in the nineteenth century, the deeper structure and law of reality, the life of the spirit. Kandinsky was aware of what he was aiming at, and what was involved in the search. In his quest he realized the senses were not the only source of knowledge, he sought the principles that governed life, art and perception, the deep reality of human life, the truth of things behind their appearance. Kandinsky was convinced that the traditional representational art was dead, and he was equally sure that non-objective art needed a subject in order to survive. The subject needed to be an experience, an emotion or spiritual disposition which could be communicated through the language of painting. Kandinsky ended "Concerning the Spritual in Art" with the optimistic statement that the type of painting he envisioned would advance "the reconstruction already begun, of the new spiritual realm.....the epoch of great spirituality" (6) This ending is a forceful indication that a messianic vision influence Kandinsky's development, it shows the extent to which his commitment to the development of a new style is interwoven with his religious and philosophical beliefs. I believe that only by understanding these beliefs and their sources, particularly his belief in a coming Utopia, can one understand the forces that drove him in his development. Similarly the paintings would be more understandable and meaningful. Art of the twentieth century is not simply a matter of formal problems, equated with movements. I do not think it is a matter of style. I believe it is more an attitude, a spiritual insight, a feeling for the predicament of Man, defined, not by its' style, but by its' content.

(1) Kandinsky "Concerning the Spiritual in Art".

(2) The Revelation to John 1 : 12, 1 : 16, 4 : 5

(3) Ibid 6 : 2, 4, 58.

(4) Steiner : 'Apokalypse'

"And I looked and behold a pale horse;.... - this all falls away, falls into the race of will; but that which heard the call, which overcame death, partakes in the spiritual life. Those who have understood the "I am" and his call are those who have overcome death. They have spiritualized the intelligence. And now what they have become can no longer be symbolized by the horse. A new symbol must appear for those who have understood to follow the call of him who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars. They now appear under the symbol of those who are clothed in white garments, who have put on the robes of the immortal, eternal, spiritual life".

(5) Kandinsky, Ruckblicke.

(6) Kandinsky, "Concerning the Spiritual in Art".

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