National College of Art and Design

Fine Art: Painting

Kandinsky and Theosophy

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MCMXCVII

... for john.

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Introduction

Introduction

> I know nothing more real than the painting of Kandinsky - nor anything more true and nothing more beautiful. A painting by Kandinsky gives no image of earthly life - it is life itself. If one painter deserves the name 'creator', it is he. He organises matter as matter was organised, otherwise the universe would not exist. He opened a window to look inside the All. (Diego Rivera, on the occasion of an exhibition in San Francisco)

Though the genesis of abstract art existed in the idea of pure aestheticism, a re-examination of the intellectual origin reveals the influence of the spiritual movement, Theosophy. In 1875, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky co-founded the Theosophical Society with Henry S. Olcott and Rudolf Steiner. Still active today, it is a society which addresses universal issues concerning the mysteries of nature, and the evolution of humanity, both spiritually and psychologically, in tandem with the cosmos. This new movement aroused the interest of poets, philosophers, writers, musicians and artists.

Wassily Kandinsky, one of these artists, was considered the most influential abstract artist of his time. His contempt for materialism and his belief in a perception of higher worlds opened his mind to many experiments in mesmerism, hypnosis, spiritualism and healing through colour. His interest in the Theosophy of Blavatsky and his involvement with the colour concepts of Steiner complimented his own need for spiritual evolution and his inner necessity. From 1908, Kandinsky saw abstract painting as an expression of the soul through which he could excite the spectator. In his book Concerning the Spiritual in Art, he displayed a deep knowledge of spirituality and an ability to unravel the mysteries of colour and form in relation to a universal language.

Through a close study of Steiner's colour theory he obtained knowledge of how particular colours can communicate a concept or a feeling, placing emphasis on the psychic effect of colour response, also believing that he could reach into the soul of the spectator.

Kandinsky's greatest execution of this concept is evident in the Compositional series. Even though he has limited these paintings to only ten,

they are essential for a full understanding of his ability to express his spiritual awareness through his universal language of colour and form. The word 'Composition' had particular significance for Kandinsky. It symbolised for him the complete realisation of a creative process which had its origin in the domain of representationalism, while seeking to go beyond its restrictions. Through a gradual process of eliminating the material world, Kandinsky believed that one could learn higher stimuli which would evoke an inner spirituality within the soul of everyone.

There are many differing beliefs regarding the extent of the influence of Theosophy on Kandinsky and his work. While I accept that it was not his single guiding influence, I contend that it was the dominant force in his understanding and application of the notion of spirituality in art. Also, the evidence of Steiner's impact on his colour theory is quite clear. Thus, through an examination of these factors and the subsequent Compositions, I hope to establish Kandinsky's Theosophical leanings.

Chapter One

Theosophy

Theosophy, The Theosophical Society and Helena Blavatsky

Were one to suppose that occult teaching only appeared in the last century, it would be to do a great injustice to prior studies in comparative religion which can be traced back to the Enlightenment. Events such as the revival of Rosicrucianism in France in 1885, the founding of the Theosophical Society, and the anthroposophical writings of Rudolf Steiner should instead be viewed as the culmination of such studies. By the end of the Eighteenth Century the world, predominantly the Western world, was at the heights of its scientific materialism, religious dogmatism and austere egoism. People were beginning to question their faith as Darwin's theory of evolution became ever more convincing. At the time of the foundation of the Theosophical Society in 1875 by Blavaksky, Olcott and Steiner, it could not have been more welcome. Wassily Kandinsky described it as "one of the most important spiritual movements" (Kandinsky, 1977, p.42) of his time and as a strong force in the "spiritual atmosphere, which offered redemption to many despairing hearts enveloped in gloom and darkness." (ibid. p.43)

Subsequently it blossomed into a world wide organisation of followers dedicated to the elevation of humanity through a more concise understanding of the oneness of life and the pragmatism of brotherhood. Its main objectives were as follows:

> 1.To form a nucleus of the universal brotherhood of humanity without the distinction of race, creed, gender, caste or colour.
> 2.To encourage the study of comparative religion, philosophy and science.
> 3.To investigate unexplained laws of nature and the powers latent in man.[1]

The need for companionship in the Theosophical Society is an acceptance of the fundamental truth of universal brotherhood. No tenet or creed is forced upon any

[1] Doctrine of the Theosophical Society.

person who wishes to become part of the society. One is free to accept, reject or render them according to one's own individual beliefs. Freedom of thought and expression are of paramount importance.

Helena Blavatsky, the prime mover in the foundation of the Theosophical Society, was also responsible for many literary contributions regarding the teaching of the occult. She was personally responsible for the initial introductions of Eastern religions to the Western world, including the notions of reincarnation and karma; for showing that all dominant religions are traced from one unique religious philosophy: for giving the occult a standpoint for morality and brotherhood in conformity with laws of logic. Her first major work, Isis Unveiled was a critical response to the spiralling materialism within establishments of scientific and religious beliefs. In her own words "Isis...", meaning mother, "is the fruit of a somewhat intimate acquaintance with Eastern adepts, and study of their science where religion, the existence of God and immortality of man's spirit may be demonstrated."

(Internet source: http://ezinfo.ucs.indiana.edu/~mcooke/mcooke/isis.html)

Her subsequent text, The Secret Doctrine(1888) attempted a synthesis of science, religion and philosophy. It is considered the most comprehensive source book of the ethnic tradition, outlining the concepts of humanity and the universe as they evolve alongside each other:

> The aim of this work may be thus stated: to show that Nature is not 'a fortuitous concurrence of atoms', and to assign to man his rightful place in the scheme of the universe; to rescue from degradation the archaic truths which are the basis of all religions: and to uncover, to some extent, the fundamental unity from which they all spring.
> (Blavatsky, 1972, Preface)

Blavatsky explains the evolution of humanity and the universe as a process of seven stages. For the universe the first three stages comprise the evolution from God to intensifying materialisation. Next, the crystallisation stage occurs, followed by the final three stages which involve the turning back to God

through spiritualisation, thereby forming a complete circle. As this takes place within the cosmos, humanity is also moving through seven stages called root-races. The first root-races lacked all concept of matter and functioned solely on their mental and spiritual powers. It was not until the Lemurians and the Atlanteans that they materialised into physical forms with physical attributes. The fifth root-race or the Aryan race, exists presently and is ascending towards the development of spiritual powers which will not be fully understood until the final two root-races have begun.

It was later written that each individual human being also comprises seven different divisions. The lower four are composed of the etheric body (life principle), the astral body (emotions and desires), the mental body (mind) and the physical body. The higher three are the casual body (superior intelligence), the spiritual soul (medium of the universal spirit) and the spirit itself. These latter three divisions establish the immortal divine element, bringing with it the introduction of reincarnation and karma.

The doctrine of reincarnation cannot be understood apart from that of karma, the law by which, in things both visible and invisible, effects and their causes are inextricably linked. There is no cause that, sooner or later, does not manifest itself in an effect just as there is no event or circumstance that is not the outcome of a prior cause. Here as in all departments of science, knowledge is power. In human life karma makes man master of his own destiny.

The truths of Theosophy have been sustained according to a scientific method, used for centuries, of thoroughly proficient testing, checking and verification of the results. Blavatsky accounts for this in the Secret Doctrine.

> It is answered: by checking, testing and verifying in every department of nature the traditions of old by the independent visions of great adepts; i.e. men who have developed and perfected their physical, mental, psychic and spiritual organisations to the utmost possible degree. No vision of one adept was accepted till it was checked and confirmed by the visions - so obtained as to stand as independent evidence - of other adepts and by centuries of experience. (Blavatsky, 1972, p.273)

The Theosophical Emblem

The emblem of the Theosophical Society is a composition of symbols which have been used through the centuries to represent spiritual and philosophical ideas in conjunction with man and the universe. Each symbol within the Theosophical emblem can be studied individually, but when joined together they illustrate an evolutionary scheme bringing together the whole of nature, spiritual and physical, and also bring forth questions dealing with all the mysteries of our whole universe.

In order to fully comprehend the rationale behind an emblem one must understand the importance of symbolism, as in the teachings of the occult in this case. In a sense we are living in a world of symbols. The ordinary objects around us may appear true and lasting, or as in a constant state of flux of inner and permanent realities. "Man begins to know as soon as he divests himself of the illusion that the universe is material and matter the divine reality."(Hall, 1929, p.315) Everything around us is a visible manifestation of an idea which has a true home in another world. The first obstacle is differentiating between a symbol and a non-symbol. It has been said that symbols "are the windows through which the mind looks into other worlds of reality". (Coon, 1958, p.xvii) There are, in fact, two general classifications of symbols. One class is those invented by man himself for the purposes of more practically or economically transmitting his thoughts to others. Language itself is made up of symbols, purely for the purposes of communication. Some etymologists declare that the letters of the alphabets of ancient civilisations such as Egyptian, Hebraic and Hellenic were shaped as to both sound and form, to communicate certain ideas. For example, phonetically 'A' is created by the outgoing breath and therefore signifies life. Its written form is said to represent the bull and thus signifies strength. As Fabre d'Olivet says of *Aleph* (Hebrew for "A") , it represents "universal man, the ruling

being of earth. It characterises unity, the central point, abstract principle of a thing. As sign, it expresses power, stability, continuity." (D'Olivet, 1921, The Hebraic Tongue Restored)

The second class of symbols seems to be invested with powers possessing certain significant qualities inherent in their very forms and their compositions in relation to each other. These symbols are made up of angles, lines, circles and curves so organised as to imply a central value or concept of each figure, its particular and significant meaning by justification of this arrangement. For example, the point is said to represent origin, source or spirit; the circle represents a manifestation of time and space. The point within the circle should represent the sun, source and origin of life within the universe. In ancient scriptures it is the 'Jewel in the Lotus'. In occult human anatomy it is the symbol of the hidden force centres in the body. The cross symbolises the purely material side of nature and is thus connected with the human body and all its material qualities. It is with the second classification that the Theosophical Seal is connected. The symbols are composed of the basic geometric shapes, i.e. the point, line, circle, square and triangle, and their corresponding three dimensional forms.

In the centre of the emblem is the *Ankh*, the ancient Egyptian symbol meaning life. Is is made up of the Tau cross surmounted by a small circle. The *Tau* cross symbolises matter or universal form, the small circle here symbolises spirit. The *Ankh* therefore represents the victory of spirit over matter, of good over evil, of life over death. The interlaced triangles, one pointing upwards (bright) and the other downwards (dark) represent the spiritual and the physical respectively. The junction of the two represents the constant struggle between the light and dark forces innate in man and nature. When, as in the emblem, the double triangle is depicted within the circle of the serpent, the whole of manifested nature is represented - the universe bounded by the limitations of time and

space. In Hebrew religion the symbol of the six pointed star is known as the Seal of Solomon, or the Star of David. "The interlaced triangles are the innermost shrine, the holy of holies wherein is concealed the very nature of Being and man's relationship with God." (Coon, 1958, p.207)

Of all the symbols within the Theosophical emblem, the swastika is the only one which possesses movement. It is the sign of God as the Divine Creative Fire in the universe. It is a symbol from antiquity found in caves and tombs in every part of the globe, including the west. In ancient China, Egypt and India it is a sacred symbol to be placed in the tombs of 'great souls'.

> So ancient is the symbol [of the swastika] and so sacred, that there is hardly an excavation made on the sites of old cities without its being found....proof that the ancient Trojans and their ancestors were pure Aryans.
> (Blavatsky, 1972, p.106)

It is the fiery, cross with arms of whirling flames turning in a clockwise motion symbolising the overpowering energies of nature repeatedly creating and destroying the form, through which the evolutionary process occurs. Similar to the cross, the vertical line of the swastika symbolises the fatal side of life, while the horizontal line expresses life in manifestation. In an esoteric sense the vertical line might be said to symbolise God the Father who, when descending, crosses the horizontal line symbolic of the universal Mother, forming the cross symbol of the Son, thus of all living organisms.

The serpent is also open to many interpretations, though there are two definite aspects to it. One is the serpent itself: mysterious, deceptive, *subtil*, challenging. The other is the form which he takes, coiled in a circle and in the act of swallowing his tail. This idea represents the infinite and the eternal. The idea of something which is beyond the scope of our minds presents a problem, and the explication of such concepts has proven itself a stumbling block since the days of PreSocratic philosophy. What can the human mind know of eternity and infinity save that they both extend beyond the boundaries of our comprehension?

However, the idea of a circle which has a circumference is within our comprehension. It becomes the edge of a universe, the 'Ring-Pass-Not' beyond which that universe may not extend, or the time cycle setting the limits of endurance of a universe. The serpent carries the burden of the blame for all of the faults within man and the universe. Since the temptation of Eve, there is evidence to prove that the serpent as a symbol suggests a truth so profoundly occult. Around it have been woven more myths and, in our own 'enlightened' age, more religious dogmas than about any other symbol. The serpent is created by the fathers of our race, the one most adequate for preserving for our descendants the deeper meanings of the external struggles inherent in the human mind, between his mental and physical natures.

Above the emblem in Sanskrit lettering is the sacred word of Hinduism, *Aum.* Tradition has it that this word was so sacred that it could not be correctly pronounced by man and that it was only taught to certain spiritual men of humanity by an incarnation of the God, Vishnu. As Dr. George S. Arundale puts it: "Who seeks must err, who finds must err...yet must we seek and find and err, for only thus shall we, and all that lives, achieve Divinity." (Coon, 1927, p.307) It may be said to symbolise the creative word or *Logos*, the unspeakable reality which is the origin of all existence. It is a word of power and is to be spoken only with the most reverent respect.

The motto of the Theosophical Society, 'There is no religion higher than the Truth', circumscribes the emblem. Truth is the quest of every Theosophist, regardless of his faith, and every great faith is, in some measure, inclusive of that truth and a path towards its realisation.

Chapter Two

Wassily Kandinsky

The Life and Influences of Kandinsky

Upon his graduation in 1892 after six years of academic education, Wassily Kandinsky was assured a bountiful career but in 1896, at the age of thirty, he chose to pursue a different career and he left for Munich to study painting. There were many factors which drew Kandinsky to Munich. At the time it was considered the most cultural capital of Europe and *Jugendstil* (the German cousin of Art Nouveau) was the principal form of art while the governing philosophy was symbolism.

Kandinsky's interest in the arts ranged from the traditional Russian icons to the French Impressionists - which opened the door to Monet's 'Haystack' - to the musical compositions of Richard Wagner. The Symbolists had a great deal of admiration for the composer, for the way in which he combined musical and visual intensities. It was the performance of Wagner's 'Lohengrin' at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow which initiated Kandinsky's interest, and the former thus became a great source of inspiration.

> 'Lohengrin' seemed to me to be the complete realisation of my fairy tale Moscow...I saw all my colours, they stood before my eyes. Frenzied, almost insane lines drew themselves before me.
> (Bowlt & Rose-Washton (Eds.), 1980, The Life of Wassily Kandinsky in Russian Art)

It seemed natural for Kandinsky to express his emotions in visual terms. He saw the combination of music and colour as a completely new form of art.

Kandinsky began his painting studies under the tuition of Anton Azbe, at a private school. Two years later he transferred to the Munich Academy of Art under Franz von Stuck, who was considered a master draftsman in Germany, and was also a chief proponent of *Jugendstil.* Kandinsky's artistic prospects were greatly influenced by his teachers. From Azbe he learned about the significance of alertness to fundamentals at the expense of detail. Stuck taught him about composition and form, about the exploration of the quintessence of things, and a

deep understanding of colour. The conjunction of: Munich *Jugendstil*; the philosophy of French, German and Russian symbolism; theosophy, occultism and mysticism; music; and his Russian background, contributed to Kandinsky's development of his individual style into a non-objective, abstract art form. These factors culminated in his final Golden Works, the ambiguously titled 'Compositions'.

Kandinsky's interest in music was awoken due to its ability to evoke visual images and emotional powers, as expressed in his reaction to 'Lohengrin'. As music is the manifestation of the meeting of sound, rhythm and harmony, it gives the listener the freedom of personal interpretation, allowing imagination and emotion form through an abstract language - something with which the mundane, physical world could not comply.

> The violins, the deep bass tones and most especially the wind instruments embodied for me then the whole impact of the hour of dusk...It became entirely clear to me that art in general is much more powerful than I had realised.
> (Lindsay & Virgo, 1994, p.364)

Kandinsky's comprehension of the connection between art and music is echoed in his text, 'On Stage Composition'[2], and his play, *'Der Gelbe Klang'* [3]('The Yellow Sound') and his collection of prose poetry.

The *Jugendstil* accepted and promoted the idea of a complete aesthetic in the production of all fine and applied arts, a concept which the Symbolists had initiated in France and Russia in the last years of the nineteenth century. It also placed great importance on the ideas of non-objective, non-representational art, and of abstraction. Additionally, Symbolism promoted the idea of the artist as "prophet, seer, and crusader for change in society and culture" (Dabrowski, 1995, p.14), a concept strongly adhered to by Kandinsky.

Between 1906 and 1907 he lived in Sevres, near Paris, where he was exposed to the art of Neo-Impressionism, the Nabis, Fauves and French

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[2] Published in Blaue Reiter Almanac., 1912

Symbolism. His experiences meeting artists in these fields were very beneficial to his understanding of the movements themselves. He was attracted to the Symbolists' need to express the 'mysterious' and 'intangible', to suggest rather than describe and to appeal to feeling. He particularly appreciated Maurice Maeterlinck, a Belgian writer whose philosophy emphasised 'feeling' as the element of absolute importance in art. Kandinsky also attended many important exhibitions while in Paris, one of which was the Salon des Independents where the Fauves exhibited. It was here that he saw the brightly coloured work of artists such as Matisse and Gaugin, which was to have an indelible effect on his expression of colour.

Even though Kandinsky was widely travelled, his Russian background sustained its influence on him. This is evident throughout his work - some of it formal, some spiritual. His early paintings were inspired by Russian fairytales and motifs. His flat stylised paintings echoed the work of the Mir Iskuostua, a Russian art group. After 1910 Kandinsky adopted a more subtle, spiritual approach that was more appropriate for Russian symbolism. This played a vital part in his journey towards abstraction and his Compositions. Contributing to Kandinsky's consent to an abstract language, which was informed through his experience of music and spirituality, was his interest in the theosophical and anthroposophical writings of Helena Blavatsky and Rudolf Steiner. Kandinsky's interest in theosophy was a means of apprehending inner values in his art, from which he derived his concept of vibrations. He believed that human emotion consisted of vibrations of the soul, and that the soul is set into vibration through nature and music.

> Words, musical tones and colour possess the physical power of calling forth soul vibrations...they create identical vibrations ultimately bringing about the attainment of knowledge.
> (Tuchmann, 1986, p.35)

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[3] ibid..

One main reason why occult teachings were so prominent in Russia was that the Symbolists had been advancing similar ideas for many years beforehand. Like many artists linked with the Symbolist movement, Kandinsky believed he possessed many insights and visions known only to themselves, and saw this new religion of the occult as the missing link between artist and spectator. He painted and composed his images in such a way that the spectator would be drawn into the picture. His art is much more to do with the experience than the image. If he was simply to do a representational painting of objects the spectator would not be seduced by the experience, but would merely look without observing. The spiritual understanding would not even be noticed and so the whole purpose would be defeated. It is only through experience that a spiritual understanding can be stimulated. His search for shapes and forms which would be suggestive of 'higher realities' and 'cosmic order' was an echo of the ideas of Symbolism.

Theosophy and Kandinsky

There are many different ideas regarding Kandinsky's interest in Theosophy. Some feel that Theosophy made only a small contribution to his artistic theories and even less towards his painting, whereas others felt it was of primary importance, at least to his theories. It is true that Theosophy was only briefly dealt with in Kandinsky's essays, save for *'Uber das Geistige'*. In this essay he described Theosophy as one of the greatest spiritual movements of his time and as a strong agent in the spiritual atmosphere. Also, in his much acclaimed volume Concerning the Spiritual in Art, Kandinsky specifically refers to Mme. Blavatsky in the use of spirituality over materialism.

> Art is looking for help from the primitives and is turning to half-forgotten times in order to get help from their half-forgotten methods...
>
> Mme. Blavatsky, after many years in India, was the first person to see a connection between those 'savages' and our 'civilisation'. From that moment there began a tremendous spiritual movement which today

includes many people and has even assumed a material form: the Theosophical Society.
(Kandinsky, 1977, p.13)

Kandinsky names Blavatsky's Key to Theosophy as the dissertation just described. When he began to cultivate his own hypothesis and eventually put it into practice, he made ample use of The Secret Doctrine. Dr. Lasmi Sihare documented this in his doctoral thesis, Oriental Influences on Wassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian, 1909 - 1917. He indicates a particular idea which he found to be of great importance: "It is on the doctrine of the illusive nature of matter and the infinite divisibility of the atom that the whole science of Occultism is built."(Blavatsky, 1972, p.520) Kandinsky also kept in touch with scientific progress that supported this view, such as J.J. Thomson's discovery of the electron. Kandinsky had many opportunities to come into contact with Rudolf Steiner, Secretary to the Theosophical Society in Munich at the time of Kandinsky's residency there. Steiner had the capacity to inspire followers, many being writers and artists, as well as art critics. Among them was a poet named Christian Morgenstern, who wrote that Steiner was a great leader and that his lectures on the Apocalypse were magnificent. It is possible that Kandinsky met Steiner while in Paris, as during this time the latter gave a total of eighteen lectures. It was at this time that Kandinsky was beginning to have doubts about himself and his work. Perhaps Steiner's compelling attitude would have attracted Kandinsky, but there is no real proof that Kandinsky attended any of the lectures. One can only speculate.

Kandinsky had been previously using quite muted colours in his work, and his confidence was waning. In 1906 his work changed direction. He now began to use bright colours, larger canvases and produced more work than he had done before. During this period he also began to give religious titles to his paintings, and introduced sacred motifs and references, in particular to 'Last Judgement'.

Steiner's perception of the rebirth of the Theosophical Society was based on his understanding of The Revelation to John, which he viewed as "the most vivid metaphor in the Bible, of the evolution of the world spirit". (Washton-Long, 1986, p.28) In June of 1908 he began voicing his ideas on The Apocalypse and The Revelation, through a series of lectures given in Nuremberg. He explained that "once the Revelation was understood, the destiny of mankind would be greatly improved" (ibid.), but he emphasised that "before the final spiritual world would emerge, a great catastrophe would occur". (ibid.) He went on to describe that, according to the Theosophical doctrine, the "present epoch was the fifth of seven epochs" (ibid.), and the one that Steiner called the post-Atlantean had "emerged after the destruction by flood of the fourth, the Atlantean". (ibid.)

Kandinsky's colour theory and the theories of Rudolf Steiner

Through an intense study of colour-music charts, and the writings of Rudolf Steiner from the time he was head of the Anthroposophical Society, Kandinsky acquired knowledge of how specific colours can convey an idea or a feeling. Steiner wrote that:

> The influences of true art affect the human being. When through the outer form, colour or sound of a work of art man penetrates with thought and feeling to the spiritual sources that underlie it, the impulses the ego thus receives do in effect reach the etheric body. Thinking this through to its conclusion, we may gain some idea of the immense significance of art in human evolution.(Steiner, 1972, Occult Science: An Outline)

Colour is easier to comprehend when broken down into different categories. American experimental psychologist James J. Gibson distinguishes between the colour of the visual world, "the world as we normally experience it during our day-to-day activities" (Gibson, 1950, The Perception of the Visual World), and the visual field which "we see if we introspect our visual sensations and concentrate on the actual nature of the information that falls on our retina" (ibid.). The colour

of the visual world has been further broken down into three categories by David Katz: surface colour, film colour and volume colour.

Surface colours are those with which we are most familiar. They are those which cover an object and tend to be solid or opaque, :

> the surface presents a barrier beyond which the eye cannot pass...we have a phenomenon of visual resistance which in its way contributes to the structure of the perceptual world, as something existing in actuality. (Overy, 1969, p.80)

Film colours can be described as colours of light. They are transparent like the colours in a rainbow. They do not possess the physical aspects of the surface colours, but give the impression of space. "If on lies on one's back in a large open meadow and looks upward, the sky produces the impression of a very extended film colour." (ibid.) Volume colours are those which fill in a three-dimensional space. They are transparent and often appear indistinct. "The voluminousness of a fog is given clearly only as long as objects can be perceived through it."(ibid.)

As artists use pigment which is by its very nature a surface colour, film colour and volume colour can only be created through an illusion. Kandinsky's fluency in the spatial aspects of these colour theories enabled him to create these illusions, through the psychological effects of colour. In The Language of Form and Colour he divided colour into two main groups: the light and dark, and the warm and cold. Warm colours tend to advance visually while cold colours tend to retreat. Steiner spoke in depth about the spiritual impact of particular colours, in his lectures dividing them into 'lustre' colours and 'impact' colours. It was his theory on colour movement which influenced Kandinsky's own theory. Steiner spoke of yellow being a colour which appears to come out against the spectator reflecting itself towards us. He suggested that when painting the colour, darkening the middle and lightening the edge would emphasise the eccentric quality. Blue is the opposite. It draws itself away from the spectator, receding into a centre in the distance enticing us to follow it. He suggested when painting blue

to darken the edge and highlight the centre to emphasise the concentric quality. Red is the third of the three 'lustre' colours. It is between blue and yellow, and as there is no movement it is a colour of rest. It remains on the surface holding the balance with its stillness.

Steiner believed that artists of his time had lost their relationship to painting, and no longer possessed the ability to express or know the inner spirituality of colour. "Yellow is the lustre of the spirit; Blue is the lustre of the soul; Red is the lustre of the living."(Steiner, 1992, Lustre and Image)

The two 'image' colours which Steiner has defined are green and peach blossom. Green represents the 'dead image of life'. This apparently morbid nature is due to its complementary colour being red, the colour of the living. Thus when placed together, their combination is much stronger. Green is also considered as restful as red as it is a combination of blue and yellow, thus negating any sense of movement. Peach Blossom, according to Steiner, represents the "living image of the spirit of man." (ibid.) It is the colour of human skin and is ever changing as it is constantly trying to free itself from the physical world. "Peach Blossom or fresh colour do not really assert themselves but always tend to assume new forms because they want to vanish." (ibid.) Kandinsky adopted Steiner's theory that warm and cold colours also possess qualities of eccentric and concentric movements respectively.

> If two circles are drawn and painted respectively yellow and blue, a brief contemplation will reveal in the yellow a spreading movement out from the centre, and a noticeable approach to the spectator. The blue on the other hand, moves into itself, like a snail retreating into its shell, and draws away from the spectator. The eye feels stung by the first circle while it is absorbed by the second.
> (Overy, 1969, p.93)

Kandinsky advances this theory by drawing attention to the relationship between yellow and white, and blue and black.

> Yellow inclines to the light (white) to such an extent that there can be no very dark yellow. The relationship between white and yellow is as close as between black and blue, for blue can be so dark as to border on black.
> (Kandinsky, 1977, p.37)

By placing strongly contrasting colours beside each other he creates the effect of glare and simultaneous contrast, i.e. film colour, causing the colours to vibrate and thus appear as though they are not actually on the surface, but either behind it or in front of it. Also, as Kandinsky does not paint actual objects, but rather shapeless forms, he gives the illusion of film colour rather than surface colour as the latter is that which always appears on an object.

Film colour as used by Kandinsky can be further divided, as suggested by colour theorist Oliver Jelly, into field colour and spectral colour. Field colour is that used by Van Gogh, the Fauves and the German Expressionists. It is based on the idea of automatic colour, which does not exist in the visual world, but in the visual field - colours which appear when the retina has been exposed to particular situations. These arise when the eye has been exposed to bright sunlight or strong artificial light, causing bright patches of colour to appear. These colours are also produced under the influence of drugs in the form of hallucinations, or when pressure is applied to closed eyelids. Automatic colours often appear in geometric form and are quite fantastic

> Goethe's account of his own phantasm of a flower is well known. It came in the middle of his visual field whenever he closed his eyes and depressed his head, unfolding itself and developing from its interior new flowers, formed of coloured or sometimes green leaves, not natural but of fantastic forms, and symmetrical as rosettes of sculptors.
> (Overy, 1969, p.81)

Goethe was Steiner's precursor in relation to colour. Steiner believed that Goethe's theory of colour was in keeping with the concept of spiritual science.

A possible explanation for artists' use of field colour at the end of the Nineteenth Century is the contemporary research into the psychological and physiological elements of colour. Also, about this time tube paint was invented, allowing the artist to experiment easily with colours, creating an endless spectrum not previously available within the limits of self-made colour. The spectral field is based on the "seven colours visible in the visual spectrum" (ibid.

p.82), adding magenta (red-violet) which is necessary to complete the colour sequence from red to blue, giving us: red, orange, yellow, green, cyan, blue, violet and magenta. Kandinsky did not limit his colour to this theory but his colour relations are founded on it. This application can be seen in his study for Composition IV (1910). He also increased his spectrum by adding white to his palette, creating colours such as 'Pistachio Green', 'very light violet' and 'Egg Yellow', all of which can be seen quite clearly in later works, e.g. The Good Contact (1938). This was also the technique used when applying volume colour to his work.

> Here the pink and the white are mixed in a form which gives the impression of neither lying on the canvas nor on any ideal plane. Rather it seems to hang in the air and appears to be surrounded with haze.
> (ibid. p.83)

He could see that, initially, colour could only have a physical effect on the individual and that this impact would only last as long as the eye was exposed to that particular colour: "physical sensations can only be of short duration" (Kandinsky, 1977, p.23) He went on to say that even though the initial effect of the colour disappears once the eye has turned away, it can spark off a series of sensual vibrations: "The superficial impression of varied colour may be the starting point [but] they produce a corresponding spiritual vibration." (ibid. pp.23-24) He places greater emphasis on the psychic or psychological effect of colour which is more permanent, evoking an inner sense in the viewer and having greater influence. Kandinsky discusses colour in relation to the concept of association, suggesting that possibilities are only relevant to the individual who made the association. "One might say that keen yellow looks sour, because it recalls the taste of a lemon. But such definitions are not universally possible." (ibid. p.24)

There are many examples of this theory which cannot be applied on a universal level. But colour does have an effect on the soul and the body is only a

catalyst, and so it was on this basis that Kandinsky chose his colours. He believed that colours which are warm and clear are universally the most attractive. He sees red as possessing an "unbound warmth [which] rings inwardly with a determined and powerful intensity." (ibid. p.40) Even though red is seen essentially as a warm colour, it can also appear cold: "By a skilful use of it in its different shades, its fundamental tone may be made either warm or cold." (ibid.) While this is possible with every colour, perhaps because of red's position on the visual spectrum it has more varieties. As red is exactly half-way between blue and yellow on the visual spectrum its movement is within itself, possessing an element of restfulness - a theory previously posited by Steiner. It possesses neither the concentric nor the eccentric qualities of blue or yellow respectively. "It flows in itself, maturely, and does not distribute its vigour aimlessly." (ibid.) When yellow is added to warm red, orange is created. While taking on the outward movement of yellow it still retains the strength of red: "the element of red is always sufficiently strong to keep the colour from flippancy. Orange is like a man, convinced of his own powers." (ibid. p.41) Blue added to red, creating violet, causes the opposite sensation from orange: "Just as orange is red brought nearer to humanity, so violet is red withdrawn from humanity by blue." (ibid.) Kandinsky sees green as "the most restful colour", being a combination of blue and yellow, indicating once again the degree to which he adopted Steiner's theories.

It was only through a concise knowledge of colour that Kandinsky felt he could reach into the soul of the spectator, but he had to be careful only to use this knowledge to aid him in his creative process, and not to allow it to take over the process. Creativity had its roots in Kandinsky's heart and soul.

> The artist must have something to say, for his task is not the mastery of form, but the suitability of that form to its content...From which it is self-evident that the artist, as opposed to the non-artist, has a threefold responsibility:
> 1.He must render up again that which has been bestowed upon him.

2.His actions and thoughts and feelings, like those of every human being, constitute the spiritual.
3.Those actions and thoughts and feelings are the material for his creations, which likewise play a part in constituting the spiritual atmosphere.
(Tuchmann, 1986, p.35)

Chapter Three

Kandinsky's Compositions

Art in Theosophy

A recurring concept throughout Theosophical writings is the exclusion of the material and physical worlds which allegedly obstruct pure thought forms, to reveal a more spiritual world. Annie Besant, an English Theosophist and literary contributor speaks of these thought forms, or "vibrations" as Kandinsky called them:

> These vibrations, which shape matter of the plane into thought-forms, give rise also - from their swiftness and subtlety - to the most exquisite and constantly changing colours, waves of varying shades like the rainbow hues in mother-of-pearl, etherialised and brightened to an indescribable extent, sweeping over and through every form, so that each presents a harmony of rippling, living, luminous, delicate colours, including many not even known to earth.
> (Ringbom, 1986, p.134)

Kandinsky believed that by disregarding inessential influences of the material world, one could learn to receive higher stimuli. As we are constantly surrounded by the physical world this proves difficult, but it is through this meditative process which reveals pure thought, that one could experience a higher conception of the universe, a concept for which Kandinsky strove throughout his painting career. Steiner has spoken of this same idea in his occult texts, to which Kandinsky turned as an aid to his ambition.

> To learn to perceive the higher worlds, the occult disciple should possess six qualities, including control of thoughts (focusing on one thought), endurance and open-mindedness.
> (Ringbom, 1986, p.132)

This aspiration toward formless meditation is central to both Buddhist and Hindu tantric teaching. Visual aids are regularly part of their practice which can be classed as non-representational art. According to Buddhist esotericism, the route to a formless state passes through seven levels. The first four levels deal with the physical body of form, *rupa*, and the higher three deal with the incorporeal, or formless, body, *arupa*. *Arupa dhyana* is the name given to the experience of passing through all seven levels to a state of complete freedom

from forms and images. This notion is parallel to that of the Christian mystics of the Middle Ages whose ultimate goal was to achieve an image-less and purely intellectual vision. This link between the East and West was instrumental in the attempt to create a universal concept.

In Theosophical aesthetics the work of abstract art is in its own way a thought form, created by the artist's thought vibrations. Kandinsky adapted the vibration theory in his own work. "Finer emotion consists of vibration, vibration shapes the work of art, the work vibrates and the soul of the beholder is set into vibration." (ibid. p.148) Kandinsky's paintings can be divided into three categories. The first is "Impressions" which are direct recollections of the physical surroundings within nature, expressed in a linear, painterly form. The second category is "Improvisations", these being impressions of internal nature, "a largely unconscious, spontaneous expression of inner character, the non-material nature" (Kandinsky, 1977, p.57). The most aspiring of these categories is "Compositions" which he describes as:

> an expression of a slowly formed inner feeling, which comes to utterance only after long maturing. This I call a 'Composition'. In this reason, consciousness, purpose, play an overwhelming part. But of the calculation nothing appears, only the feeling.
> (Kandinsky, 1977, p.57)

Compositions are the language of emotions and inner feelings which blossom in the wake of much experience. These ideas have firstly been sketched in an unconscious manner and then slowly with an almost obsessive precision, have been studied repeatedly until, for Kandinsky, they have been resolved. Even though the method seems quite rational and devoid of emotion, it evokes in Kandinsky the essence of the original sketch. Only now can he advance and create. Through this painstaking process of creating his Compositions, Kandinsky believed that eventually art would become so pure that it could be an alternative to meditation in the search for the spiritual. It was for this reason that Kandinsky

painted his Compositions, naming them I to X, as the purest form he could achieve, each surpassing its predecessor.

As these ideas travel from the physical studies through Kandinsky's emotions, the impressions experienced become real and are seen as images which the artist can then paint. The process is as important as the product. The work therefore, is the unification of the physical and spiritual forms. The intense emotion which Kandinsky experiences is intended give rise to the same emotion in the spectator through his own external form - painting - as Kandinsky's spiritual self is trying to communicate with that of the spectator using the painting as his guide. "The emotional response of the viewer is conditioned by the pictorial means rather than by the objects depicted." (Dabrowski, 1995, p.12) In Kandinsky's career where production was plentiful, he only gave ten paintings the title 'Composition'.

Pre-War Compositions

Composition I

According to Gabriele Munter, Composition I (Illus.1) was completed in January, 1910. Although the painting was destroyed during World War II, there exist many good black and white photographs, and pencil studies (Illus.3 & 4) in which a few colours have been indicated. It appears to illustrate the Apocalyptic riders mentioned in the Revelation. Kandinsky's interpretation of the Apocalypse seems to have been highly influenced by Steiner, though he used brighter colours to make the painting more positive and, more importantly, eliminated the horse of death, the one being ridden by a skeleton, to achieve the same purpose. According to Steiner the horse of death should be replaced by a symbol. It is now replaced by a second horse, the conqueror. He is resplendent in white, to represent his success.

> And I looked and beheld a pale horse...this falls away, falls into the race of evil...They now appear under the symbol of those who are clothed in white garments. (Washton-Long, 1986, p.110)

Steiner believed Christ had conquered death in the fourth age.

Composition I has been executed as a spiritual person would see the Revelation. The remaining three horses have been arranged in a horizontal fashion echoing the Revelation of St. John as it is illustrated in German painted bibles such as the *Quentell*. The first horse, as already outlined, is the white one of spiritualised intelligence, the conqueror of death and evil. The second, in red, is the one sent to take peace from earth but who spared (as in Revelation) those worthy of taking part in the 'ascent of humanity'. The three figures in front of the riders are hunched in prayer, again echoing Revelation. The figure in the lower right of the composition is possibly borrowed from Kandinsky's Improvisation 10, which has a similar figure kneeling, also wearing a trapezoid hat.

Composition II

Unlike Composition I which depicts the most familiar of the apocalyptic symbols, three of the four horsemen leaving the fourth seal, Composition II (Illus.5) deals with two aspects of the Revelation: destruction and salvation. Even though it too was destroyed during World War II, the final study is amazingly similar and is of great relevance when depicting the motifs. In the study four figures can be seen sinking into the waves. In Composition II they have emerged in a shapeless, uncrystallised form. The yellow figure standing in a boat has its arms outstretched forming a cross. Lightning, falling trees, tumbling towers and dark clouds all combine to suggest chaos and destruction, all on the left side of the painting. These are all motifs suggested in the painting 'Deluge' (flood) (Illus.2). In the middle of the piece, neatly bisecting it, are two horse-riders who appear to be in conflict, leaping towards each other, one in white, the other in blue. On the right side of the two riders appears a group of children playing with

balls, kneeling figures in prayer, a reclining couple and a figure lying face down. The white and blue sky with yellow and red clouds emphasises the contrast between the two halves. While its opposite implies destruction, this implies peace and happiness - implying salvation. The reclining couple is reminiscent of that in Improvisation 27 (Garden of Love) (Illus.6), possibly Adam and Eve. The drowning figure on the right side is said to represent 'materialistic nightmare', one who is lost and helpless. It was suggested by Kandinsky in his manuscripts of 1914, that it could be seen as a more sensitive version of *'das tragische'* - chaos of the day.

Composition III

As Composition III (Illus.8) was also destroyed, and existing photographs(e.g. Illus.7) are of very bad quality, we have little evidence from which to glean any information about the piece. It has been suggested by Washton-Long that this Composition is related to the theme of 'Deluge', indicated by the "wavelike shapes and zigzag lines" (Washton-Long, 1986, p.112.), but any definitive deductions would be based on pure hypothesis.

Composition IV

The theme of Composition IV (Illus.9) is conflict. Kandinsky emphasised that the black lines, the *spiesse* (lances or spears), and the horses in the top left corner are the two focal points of the painting. They are also in stark contrast with the previous paintings with their sharp angles and strong black slashes creating a feeling of violence. On top of the blue mountain is a *burg* (fortress), whose colour is painted in such a way as to imply camouflage. The reclining couple, *die liegenden*, in the bottom-right are again reminiscent of the 'Garden of Love'. The three spear holders represent in both number and position the three saints from the painting 'All Saints Day'. The black lines coming from the blue rectangular

shapes (on the left of the painting) suggest, as in Improvisation 31 (Illus.10), guns on boats, and the irregular black lines suggest waves. As in Composition II, the picture has been split with the left side being more violent, having horses knotted in conflict and the heavy black lines of the guns, while the right side is one of rest. On the yellow hill stand two figures symbolic of a human form of God. These resemble the hooded female saints in 'All Saints Day'. Their identification would have been impossible to decipher without the aid of Kandinsky's sketches. The rainbow is the only aspect of the left side which shows any form of radiance, symbolising hope for those yet to be spiritually informed.

Kandinsky himself has acknowledged the similarities between Compositions II and IV. However, the contrasts in IV are much more severe and the black lines heavier, with colours being richer and colder in accordance with their purpose. Iconographic references are also more prevalent.

Composition V

> I calmly chose the resurrection as the theme of Composition V and the 'Deluge' for the sixth. One needs a certain daring if one is to take such outworn themes as the starting point for pure painting. It was for me a trial of strength, which in my opinion has turned out for the best.
> (Lindsay & Virgo, 1994, p.399)

Composition V (Illus.11) is more abstract than any of the paintings upon which it was based (i.e. The Last Judgement (Illus.30); All Saints I (1911) (Illus.12 & 13); All Saints II (Illus.14); four glass paintings of Resurrection (Illus.16); All Saints Day I; All Saints Day II; Large Resurrection (Sound of Trumpets) (1911); two water colours; Composition with saints (1911); Sound of Trumpets (Large Resurrection)), though we can study them in order to get a clear understanding of it. Beginning with 'Sound of Trumpets', a walled city is revealed outlined in dark blue on top of a black hill at the centre of the composition. Although most of the featured angels have been veiled by an olive green colour, hints of them appear in the upper corners with the black parallel lines describing their hair. The

strongest aspect of this painting, the thick turning black line, mirrors a purple ray evident in the 'Last Judgement', describing the voice of the trumpet. The walled city with leaning towers in the most distinguishable of all motifs, although now painted in white with red domes. The only other distinct feature relating to 'All Saints Day' or 'Last Judgement' is the collection of candles which extends from the lower right side of the blue mountain. The appearance of St. John is somewhat obscured. The patches of blue and green around his thin triangular face and his rust coloured clothing mirror the colours of the earlier work. St. Walburga has changed positions since 'All Saints Day', and is now in the lower left. The outline of her reaching arm and hooded head is alike, but her colour has changed to olive green and light brown.

In many instances, Kandinsky used an earlier motif in altered form. The figure of the decapitated man in 'Sound of Trumpets' is now depicted by a black contour in the lower centre as a figure with wide shoulders pointing with one arm to the profile contour of a head. The black lines protruding from the back of the head resemble the hair of the angels. The shapes of two other motifs in Composition V have also been altered. In place of the boat motif of a triangular sail, we now find a rowing boat in the shape of a semi-circle containing three figures painted in yellow, orange and blue all with white, oval heads. The second motif is that of Elijah - two red curved lines set against a field of blue, found in the same position in 'All Saints Day'.

One of the more astonishing alterations in Composition V is the prevalence of the trumpet motif. Instead of the usual two, as found in the 'Last Judgement' series, there are now five; two being played by angels while three are in suspension. Also, instead of the usual gold colouring, a transparent effect has been achieved by the use of the same background colours - blue, rust, white and olive-green. In addition to the increase in the number of trumpets, Kandinsky has tried to illustrate the fearful resonance of the trumpet on 'Judgement Day' by

the use of a thin black line, which broadens as it winds around the walls of the city, ending its journey in the middle of the painting.

Composition VI

Kandinsky began painting Composition VI (Illus.17) almost sixteen months after completing his previous Composition. His inspiration on this occasion was his glass painting 'Deluge'. He said that the idea for the painting had been haunting him for some time and it was not finally resolved until May 1913. "My starting point was the 'Deluge'. My point of departure was a glass painting that I had made more for my own satisfaction."(Lindsay & Virgo, 1994, p.385) As in Composition V the motifs are veiled, creating a complex image, one more difficult to decipher. It is obvious that Kandinsky did not enjoy creating this Composition as much as he did 'Deluge'. Although the nude can only just be discerned, many other motifs can be more readily identified as those from 'Deluge'. The motif of two trees on top of a hill is particularly evident, with one bent by the force of the rain which has been illustrated using black parallel lines. The contour of the ant-eater is similar to that painted on glass, but without detail, of the dragon who has since lost his face and freckles, but is found in the same position. Also retained is the wave-like motif illustrated by a zigzag , which seems to have recurred in many previous studies.

One of the more distinguished motifs is that of a boat in the lower left corner. Several preliminary studies had been done for this which seem closer in their design to the final version of Composition IV. It is also more of a constructed motif than in his previous Compositions where it appeared as a simple, basic shape.

Kandinsky's anguish when doing this piece, by comparison with the glass painting, is evident in the lack of light-heartedness. The smiles of the almost caricature-like figures have disappeared. Kandinsky felt that his earlier use of

"humorous animals" was too "specifically physical", and he also decided to use "warm colours instead to counteract the tragic effect" (Washton-Long, 1986, p.117) of the subject of 'Deluge'. He described how he equalised a 'great red-blue', which he saw as sharp, somewhat angry and strong, with a slight pink in the centre. Corresponding to this is the intense brown in the upper left, which was intended to suggest a "feeling of hopelessness contrasted with green and yellow which denoted activity" (ibid. p.118). From Kandinsky's study of Steiner's lectures on colour, he had become familiar with different colour effects and appears to be quite successful in deciding which colours would "offset the feeling of general agitation with a note of calmness and universality" (ibid.).

The reason for Kandinsky's hesitancy with Composition VI is, as he stated, that "he did not listen at first to the expression of the word 'deluge'" (ibid.). He also felt that his anxiety did not agree with the inner sense of 'Deluge', and not until he was able to lift himself out of the trap he had created, could the painting be resolved. This resolution eventually came with Kandinsky's conclusion that something new could only be created when first the old was destroyed. "Out of the most effective destruction sounds a living praise, like a hymn to the new creation, which follows the destruction." (Ringbom, 1970, p.169)

Composition VII

Composition VII (Illus.31) is the largest and most complex of all Kandinsky's pre-war paintings. It represents an apex in his abstract development. Because of its deliberate abstract design it is difficult to decipher the theme, although through an examination of his thirty preliminary studies the apocalyptic reference becomes evident. These studies executed in water-colour, pen and ink, and oil, can be divided into three categories. Even though their chronological order is not clear, it seems Kandinsky's exploration span a lengthy period, moving back and forth between several motifs when working towards the final Composition.

The most intelligible of the three categories is comprised of four pen and ink drawings(Illus.20, 21, 26 & 27) and three water-colours (Illus.18, 28 & 29), each titled *Zu Komposition 7*, and numbered 1 through 7. The pen and ink drawings are executed using thin, swift, deliberate strokes, dealing with the general character of elements, describing particular motifs such as the oval boat-like shape, the triangular boat-like form and the oval form crossed by an unusually shaped rectangle. All of these forms have appeared in previous Compositions depicting the constant theme relating to the apocalypse. His repeated studies of these motifs demonstrate Kandinsky's intention to achieve absolute precision within his Compositions.

The three water-colours are all executed through the use of brilliant patches of colour combined with powerful linear elements. These studies deal specifically with Kandinsky's religious references, relating to his glass painting 'The Last Judgement' (1912). Here the same motifs are distinguishable - colour composition being of prime importance; the head of an angel blowing a golden trumpet, the black boat-like shape hovering in the lower right representing the saints depicted in the glass painting, and the red patch of colour crossed by waving black lines referring to Elijah alighting from his chariot. In relation to space, the water-colours seem disconnected, though they possess an organised structure which appears quite deliberate. The construction and composition of all the motifs in these water-colours are constant and indicate Kandinsky's precision when working towards the final execution.

The second group of informative studies is a collection of diagrammatic studies (Illus.22 & 23). These include several references in Russian and German, illuminating with brisk, thin strokes the fundamental draft of the overall idea of the Composition, and particularly the specific colours and ideas. The instructions Kandinsky has inscribed on these drawings - "discontinuity", "clear and divided", "genesis" - and the colour references - "yellow dirt", "on white exact",

"red (hot)" - demonstrate his process of creation. This is stressed in other similar diagrammatic studies which further dissect the design of the Compositions' structure regarding the action and interaction of the forms and colours.

The most significant of all Kandinsky's studies is a collection of six oil paintings. The first of these (Illus.19) is a fully-developed composition of his preparatory studies executed in lustrous colours of high concentration. The juxtaposition of all forms and colours within this piece seems to have been resolved. He has obtained perfect equilibrium in this arrangement. The upper section of small swirling forms is perfectly balanced with the contrasting lower section, which is painted more boldly in vivid, fluctuating hues of brilliant reds and yellows. These colours are repeatedly echoed throughout the composition, creating a "resounding effect" (Dabrowski, 1995, p.42) and stress the "tumultuous darker" (ibid.) middle section.

In the remaining five oil studies, Kandinsky experiments with the complexity of his previous studies in order to obtain absolute control of his expanding palette of information. Through these experiments he applies his knowledge of colour effects creating an explosion of vibrant and illuminating hues. He explores potential combinations of his dynamic forms in order to resolve a perfect balance centred around the small red oval enclosed in a ring of blue, which remained the focal point of these works from the inception of Composition VII.

The final scheme is an exact and fully developed conception of the work, in minute detail, in order for Kandinsky to execute the completion of Composition VII. This represents the conceptual and expressive eminence of his Munich period, and incorporates his philosophical and pictorial notions. It also underscores his dogged determination, necessitated by his desire for a greater overall abstraction.

Post - War Compositions

A complete decade elapsed before Kandinsky painted his next Composition. It was while he was teaching at the Bauhaus in 1923 that he painted Composition VIII. He spent the years from 1915 to 1921 in Russia, where he began to adopt a new language of geometric form. Combining this rather clinical approach with the earlier liberated style of the pre-war paintings, he found he was drawing nearer to a universal art, yet philosophically he still employed some ideas regarding his 'thought forms'.

> In this way the art that is termed 'new' comes about, which apparently has nothing in common with the 'old', but which shows clearly to every living eye the continuing thread. That thread is called Inner Necessity. Thus the Epoch of the Great Spiritual has begun.
> (ibid. p.46)

During Kandinsky's Bauhaus period, he wrote three essays outlining his new theory: The Basic Elements of Form, Colour Course and Seminar, and Abstract Synthesis on the Stage. Although to an extent they echo some of the ideas portrayed in his pre-war essay, On the Question of Form, and his acclaimed volume, On the Spiritual in Art, a major shift in his overall theory can be discerned. He no longer perceives colour as his primary element. Form now dominates. The hidden imagery of his pre-war Compositions was also left behind, as his work became purer, adopting geometry as a new form of universal language. This concept echoes the words of Mme. Blavatsky:

> Dots, lines, triangles, cubes, circles, and finally 'spheres'...such is the first law of nature, and because Nature geometricises universally in all her manifestations.
> (Blavatsky, 1972, p.97)

When executing these Compositions, the lack of preliminary studies is noteworthy. According to his wife, Nina, Kandinsky had cultivated the ability to plan these works mentally. He could see their structure and colour in his head.

> He had the rare ability to visualise the world in his paintings in his head, with their colours and their shapes, exactly as he carried them out on canvas later.

(Dabrowski, 1995, p.50)

Composition VIII

The forms used in Composition VIII (Illus.35) have been condensed to a relatively small selection of geometric shapes; circles and semi-circles, squares and rectangles, and acute and obtuse angles. These are suspended against a background painted in pale lines of blue, yellow and white. The horizontal arrangement of these shapes seems to have been inspired by a landscape. The largest circle, coloured purple with a thick black outline set against a red glow appears like a sun overlooking the mountain-like forms, one of which is in blue with the other more acute in pink. These colours create a transparent effect which emphasises the layering aspect of the forms, thus producing an impression of space in front of and behind the pictorial field. This spatial aspect is echoed in the undefined background symbolic of "the absolute, the cosmic and the higher spiritual plane." (ibid. p.48) Kandinsky creates an obscure sense of perspective within the expansive structure of the painting. As we have seen, his colour theory dictates that yellow advances and blue recedes. The arrangement of the colours in the pale background - yellow at the top, white in the middle and blue at the bottom - implies that the top part of the painting should appear to come towards us while the bottom part should appear to move away, but the other circular elements do not work in harmony with this, making it difficult to determine the movement of these shapes. This factor gives the painting its sense of ambiguity. This confusion is offset by the sense of balance achieved in his careful positioning of the circular and linear forms throughout the pictorial field, thus creating a sense of movement stimulating the surface.

The circle, which was a dominant form in this Composition, represented for Kandinsky a synthesis of 'inner force'. The circle:

> is a link with the cosmic. But I use it above all formally... Why does the circle fascinate me? It is:
> 1. The most modest form, but asserts itself unconditionally.

2. A precise but inexhaustable variable.
3. Simultaneously stable and unstable.
4. Simultaneously loud and soft.
5. A single tension that carries countless tensions within it.
   The circle is the synthesis of the greatest oppositions. It combines the concentric and the eccentric in a single form, and in balance. Of the three primary forms [triangle, square and circle], it points most clearly to the fourth dimension.
   (Grohmann, 1958, pp. 187 - 188)

Kandinsky allows the circle to interact with the dynamic movement of the triangle in Composition VIII, creating various effects of activity stimulating vibrations within the viewer, whether it is exciting or in repose.

Composition IX

Kandinsky completed this next Composition in France. He introduced a new idiom of 'biomorphic' and 'amorphous' forms, possibly influenced by exposure to Surrealism. He combined his geometric language with these unusual new forms. Composition IX (Illus.36) integrates his hypothesis regarding the connection between art, nature and technology.

This painting is a complicated arrangement of superimposed geometric and amorphous abstract forms. His use of thick diagonal stripes in the background creates an unusual perspective. The forms appear to hover above the colourful stripes as if the spectator perceives the image to be floating above their head. This sense of space is quite splendid. Some of the geometric forms evoke those of Suprematism, but when confined to a rigid structure, they counteract the freedom of the amorphous shapes, creating a balanced tension.

Colour and form are equally important in the spatial and energetic forces. The exact, pure forms and the buoyant shades of colour subscribe to the controlled powerful activity within Composition IX. However, it does not equal the expressive force conveyed in his pre-war Compositions. Even so, Kandinsky's main objective is to evoke in the emotions and an inner sense of passion, which he achieves through a harmonious composition of colours and

forms: "The harmony of the new art demands a more subtle construction...something that appeals less to the eye and more to the soul." (Kandinsky, 1977, p.52)

Composition X

Kandinsky completed his extraordinary series of Compositions in January 1939. Composition X (Illus.37) marks his advanced form of abstract style, representing the culmination of the knowledge he accrued during his explorations of form, colour and language, exhibiting his inner compulsion and creative spark. This final Composition was executed in a language even more advanced than before. He had adopted the concept of free form and was engaged in the phenomenon of positive-negative forms. It is a large, energetic interaction of simple of simple and complex polychromatic free forms. The brilliant forms set against the jet-black background assume the appearance of paper cut-outs, echoing Russian folk-art adornments, but are suspended in an infinite space, symbolic of the absolute cosmic plane.

The black background of Composition X is its most powerful aspect. Is sets the forms and colours into vibration causing an enormous transition, and gives a certain radiance to the colours. Though Kandinsky did express a disdain for the use of black in a painting, he uses it here to evoke a mood and to allow o 'physical' and 'psychological' alleviation of the multicoloured forms set against it.

> Black is something burnt out, like the ashes of a funeral pyre, something motionless like a corpse. The silence of black is the silence of death. Outwardly black is the colour with least harmony of all, a kind of neutral background against which the minutest shades of other colours stand clearly forward.
> (Kandinsky, 1977, p.39)

Composition X marks Kandinsky's last great achievement in his creative life, bringing it full circle. It embraces his passionate search for a universal language with which he hoped to evoke an inner sound in the spectator.

Conclusion

Conclusion

> We are fast approaching the time of reasoned and conscious composition, when the painter will be proud to declare his work constructive. This will be in contrast to the claim of the Impressionists that they could explain nothing, that their art came upon them by inspiration. We have before us the age of conscious creation, and this new spirit in painting is going hand in hand with the spirit of thought towards an epoch of great spiritual leaders.
> (Kandinsky, 1977, p.57)

With these words Kandinsky concluded his germinal text, Concerning the Spiritual in Art, thereby outlining his hopes for the future of abstract art. We can see the evolution of this abstract art as having its genesis in the work of Kandinsky, a body of work which culminated in his series of Compositions.

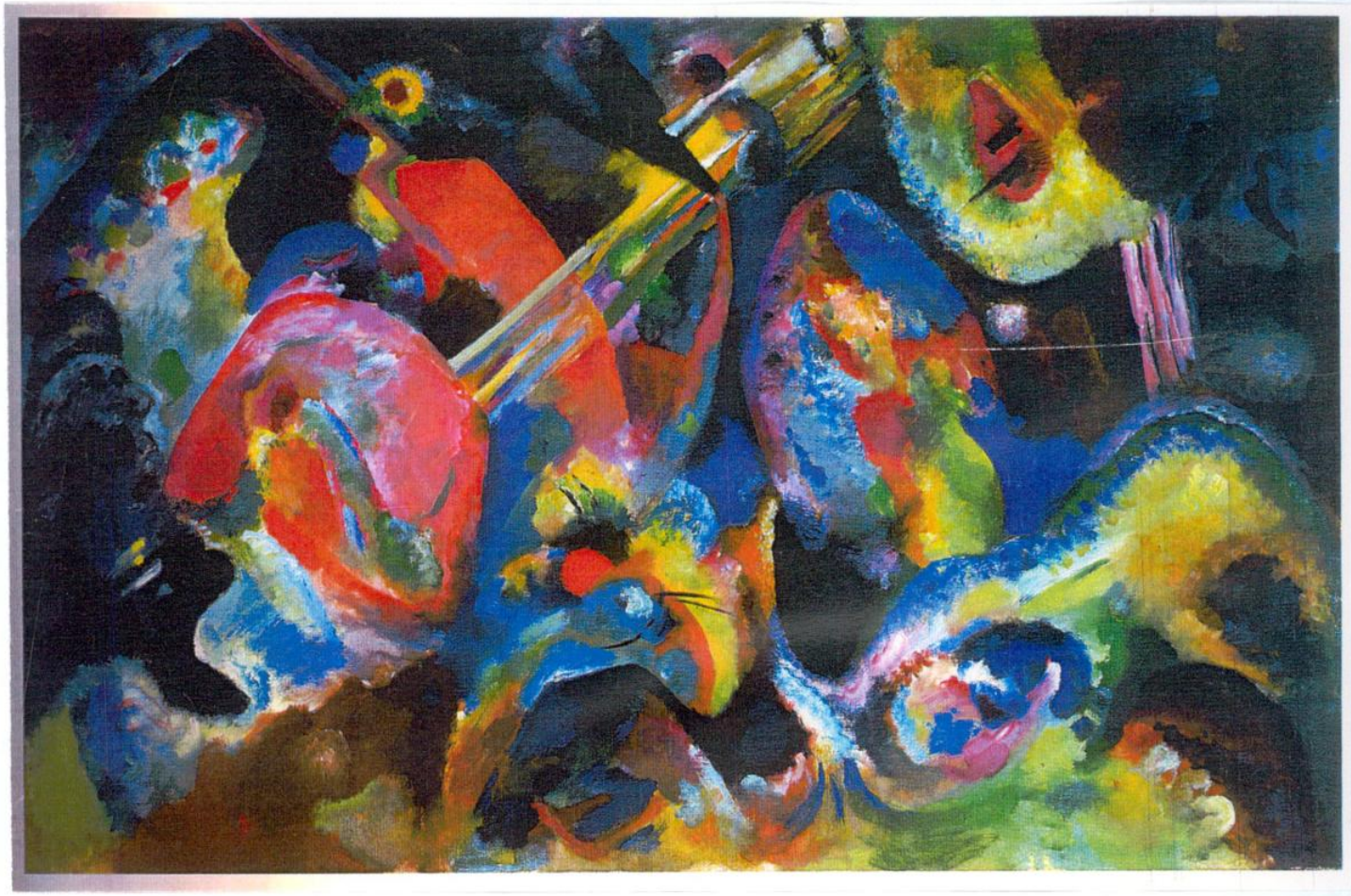
Though it would be impossible to undertake an appreciation of the career of Kandinsky without reference to the influence of the Theosophy of Helena Blavatsky and the colour theory of Rudolf Steiner, it is important to remember that many more factors played their own individual part in the development of Kandinsky's style, namely: music, which evoked his ability to stimulate images and emotional energies bringing with it notions of rhythm, melody and harmony; the *Jugendstil*, which enhanced his concept of non-representational art forms; the philosophies of French, German and Russian Symbolism, which promoted the idea of the artist as protagonist in the struggle for change; his Russian background which aided him in his iconic references; the Fauves, whose brightly coloured work informed his expression of colour; and the elements of mysticism and occultism. However it is the influence of Theosophy that concerns us here, and I believe that through an deep analysis of these concepts and the resulting Compositional series, we can establish a firm link between Theosophy and the work of Wassily Kandinsky.

It would be impossible to overstate the influence of Kandinsky in the years since his death in 1944. His fusion of the old with the new, of the art of the Symbolists and the Impressionists with a spirituality derived from cosmic laws, was to have an indelible effect on subsequent generations of abstract artists, most

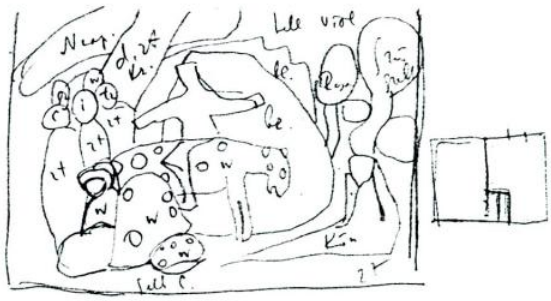
notably in his arrival at the universal language of art, a process which was his main objective. Any analysis of the post-World War II era of art, were it not to make reference to Kandinsky's ground-breaking achievements, would be inherently flawed. Perhaps this is the greatest tribute we can pay to the father of abstract art.

Illustrations

1. Composition I, 1910
Oil on canvas.



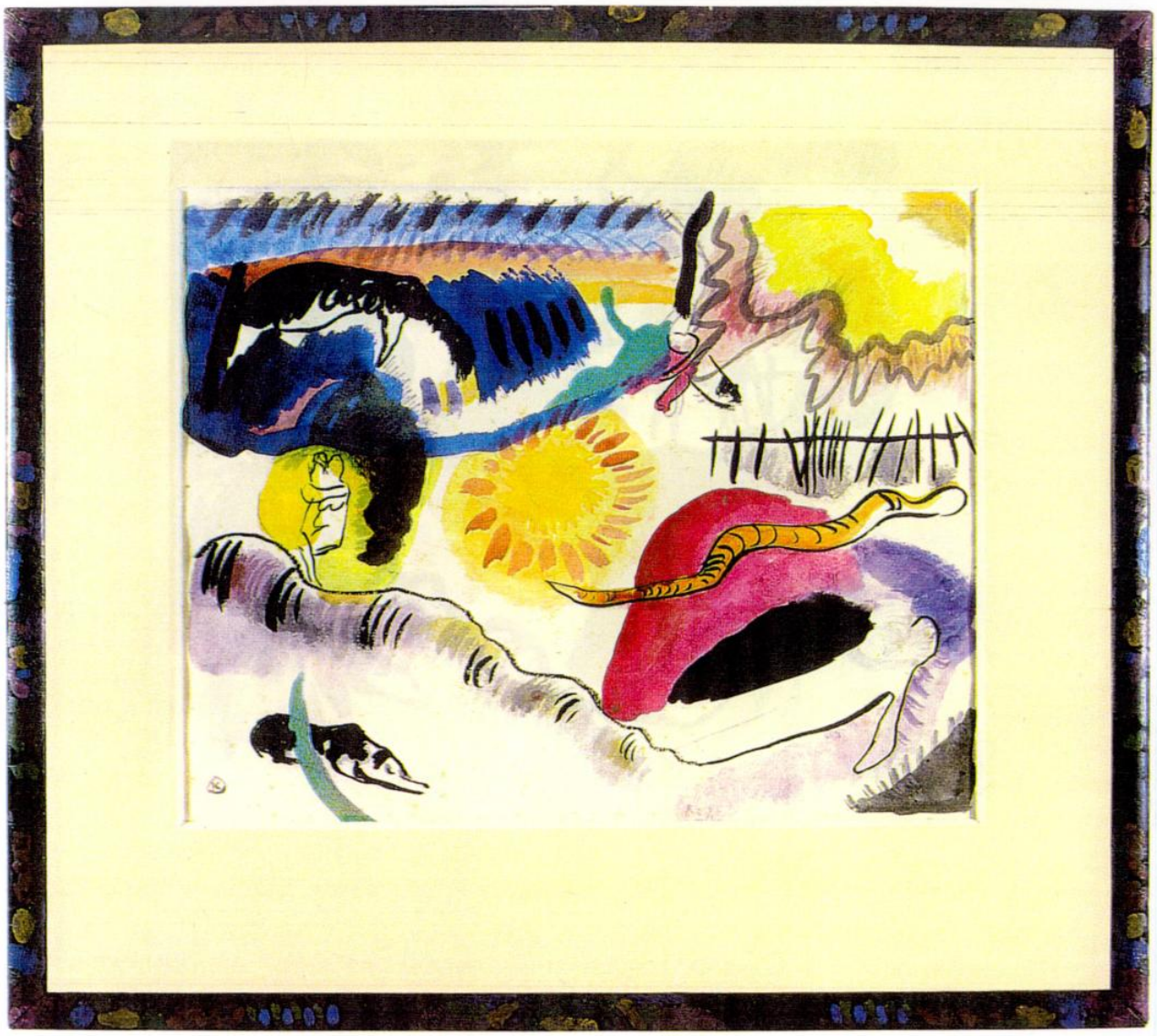
2. Improvisation Deluge, 1913
Oil on canvas.



3. Untitled (Study for Composition I), 1910
Pencil on paper.

4. Study for Composition I, 1910
Pencil on paper.

5. Composition II, 1910.
Oil on canvas.



6. Improvisation 27 (Garden of Love), 1912.
Oil on canvas.

7. Sketch for Improvisation XV (Study for Composition III), 1910.
Oil on canvas.

8. Composition III, 1910.
Oil on canvas.

9. Composition IV, 1911.
Oil on canvas.

10. Improvisation 31, 1911.
Oil on canvas.

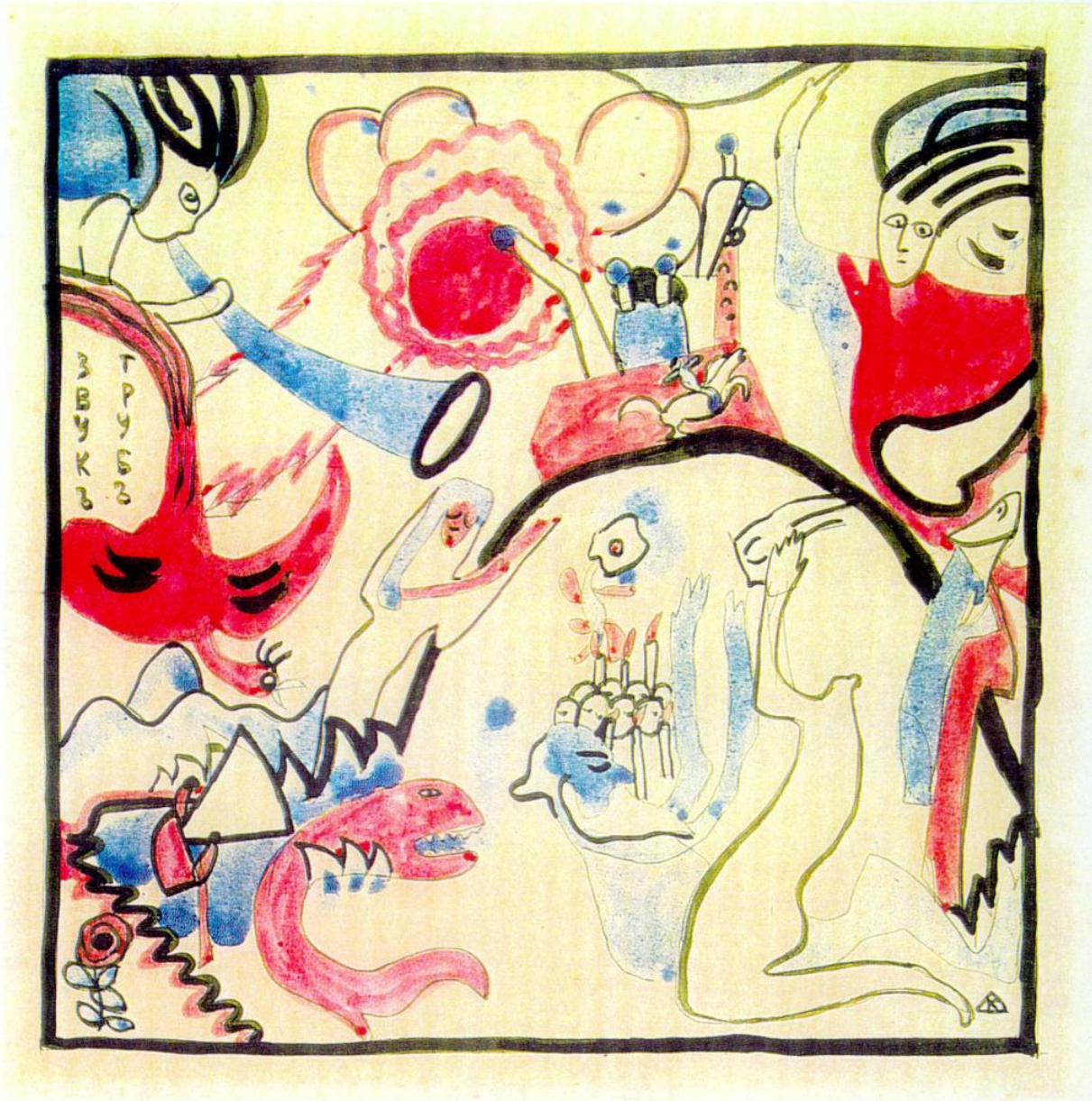
11. Composition V, 1911.
Oil on canvas.

12. All Saints I, c.1911.
Painting on glass.

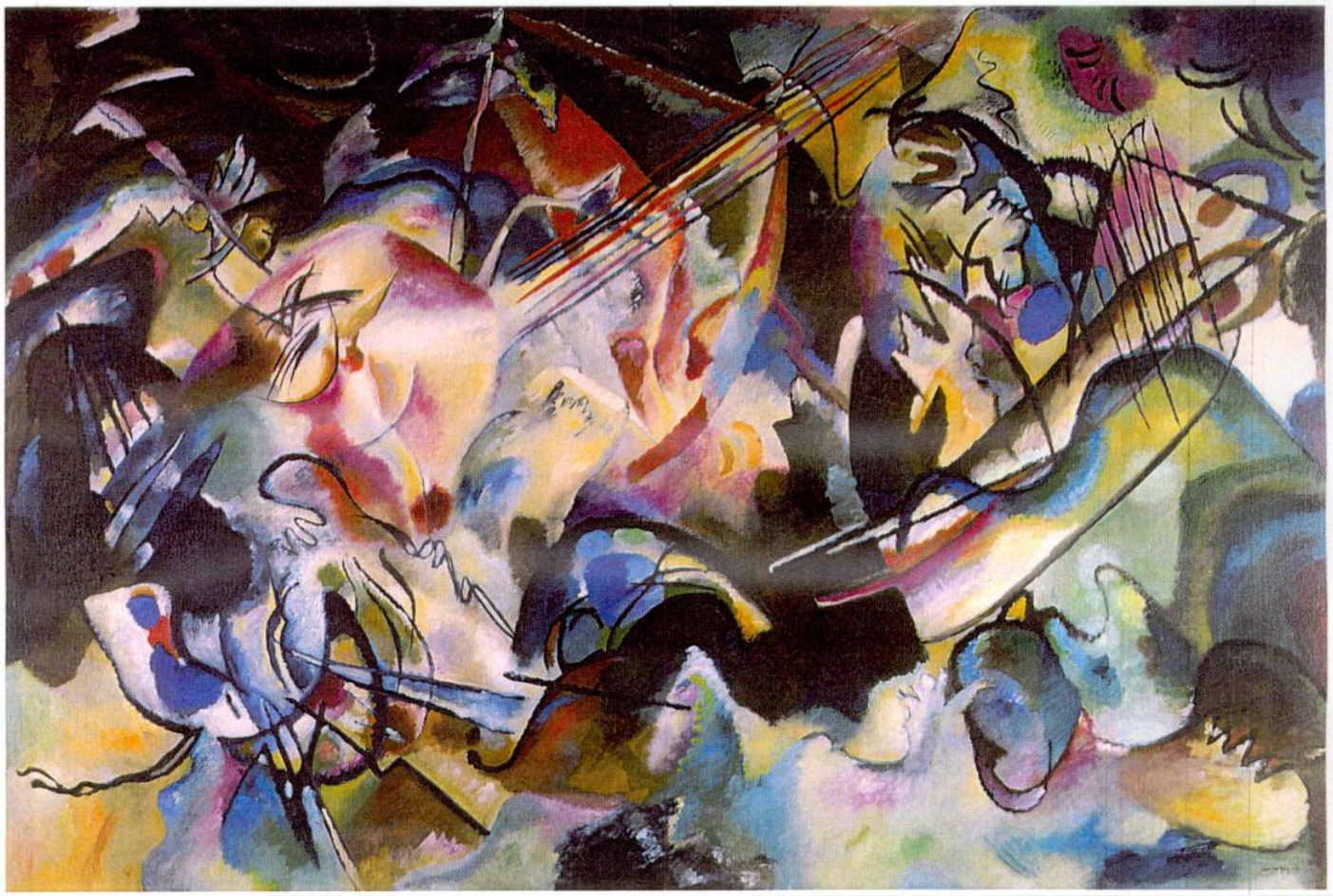
13. All Saints I, c.1911.
Oil on cardboard.

14. All Saints II, c.1911
Oil on canvas.

15. All Saints, 1911.
Painting on glass.



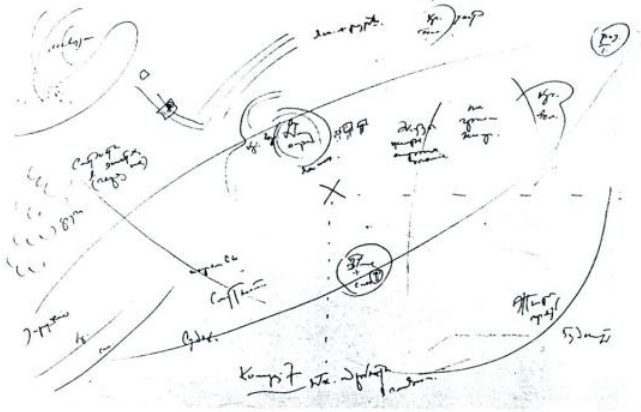
16. Resurrection (Large version), 1911.
Painting on glass.

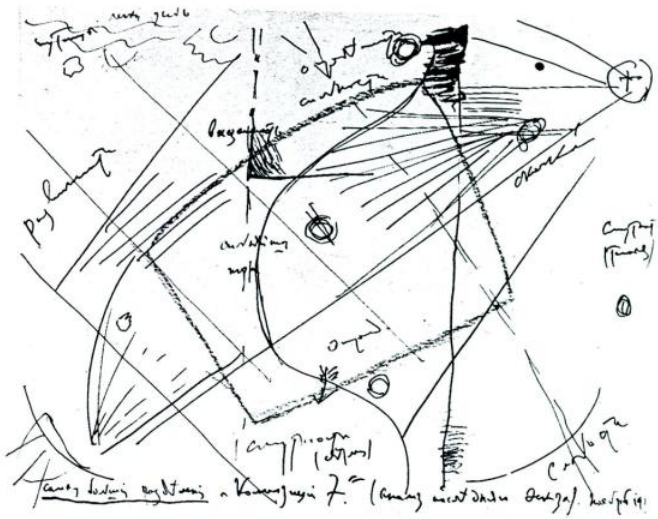


17. Composition VI, 1913.
Oil on canvas.

18. Study for Sketch I for Composition VII, 1913.
Water-colour and Indian Ink on paper.

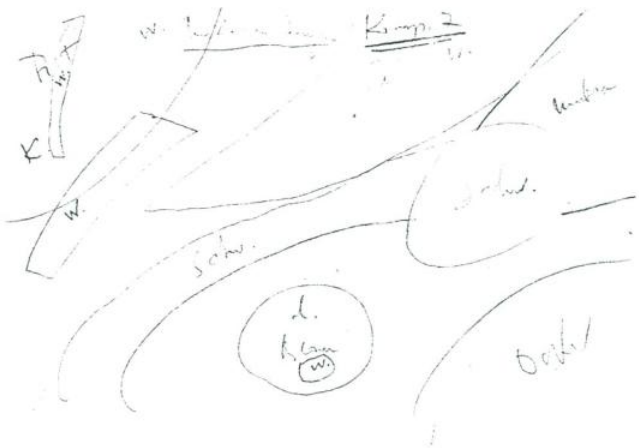
19. Sketch I for Composition VII, 1913.
Oil on canvas.





20. Drawing for Composition VII, 1913.
Pen and ink on paper.

21. Study for Composition VII, 1913
Pen and ink and red crayon on paper.

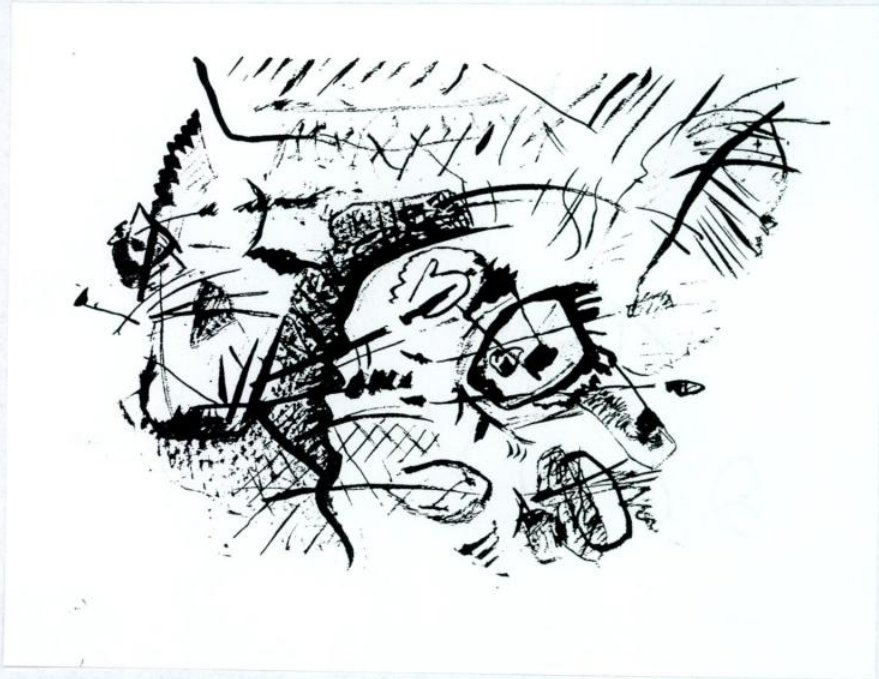


22. Study for Composition VII, 1913.
Pencil; on paper.

23. Study for Composition VII, 1913.
Pencil on paper.

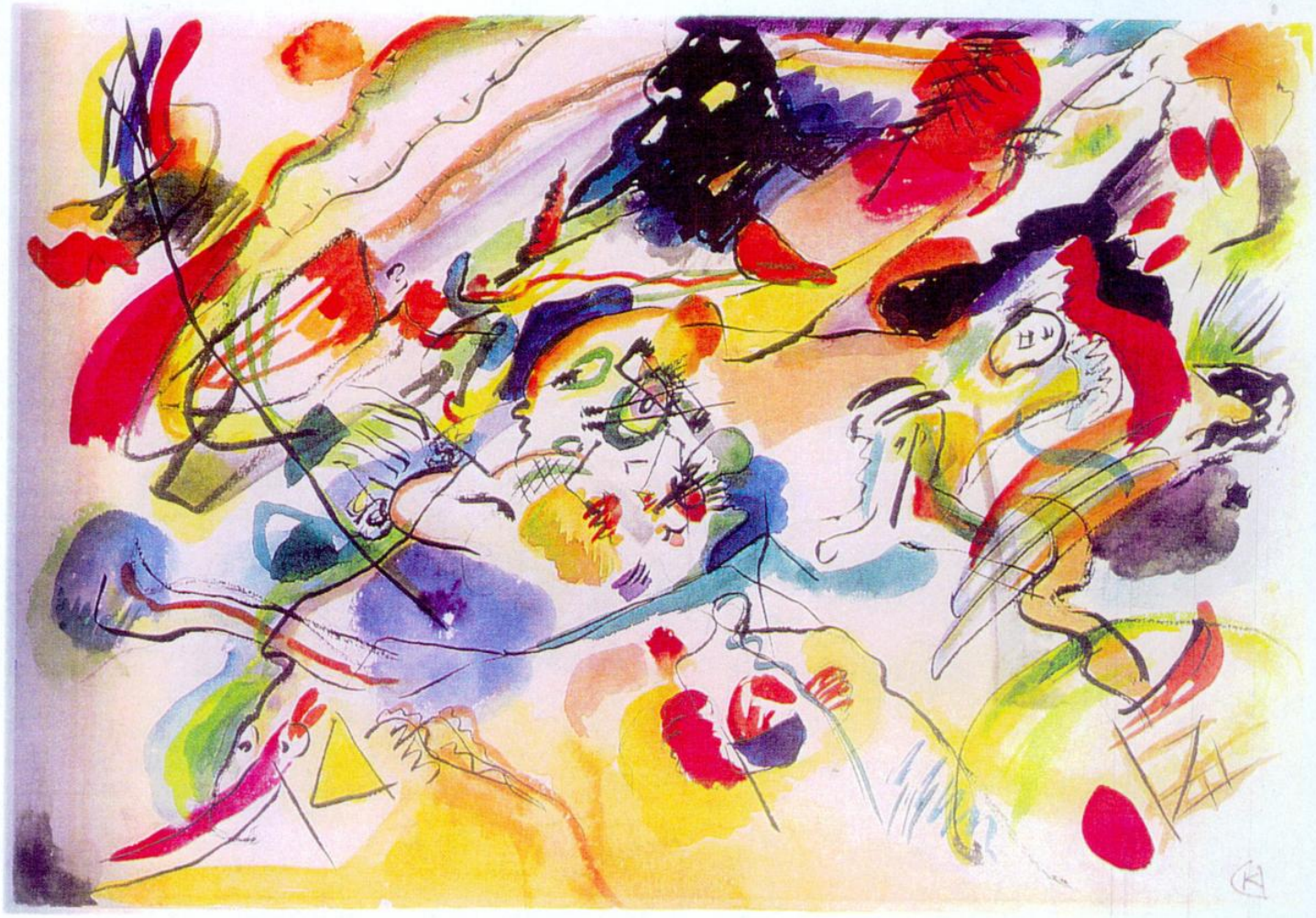
24. Study for Composition VII, 1913.
Ink on paper.

25. Study for Composition VII, 1913.
Ink on paper.



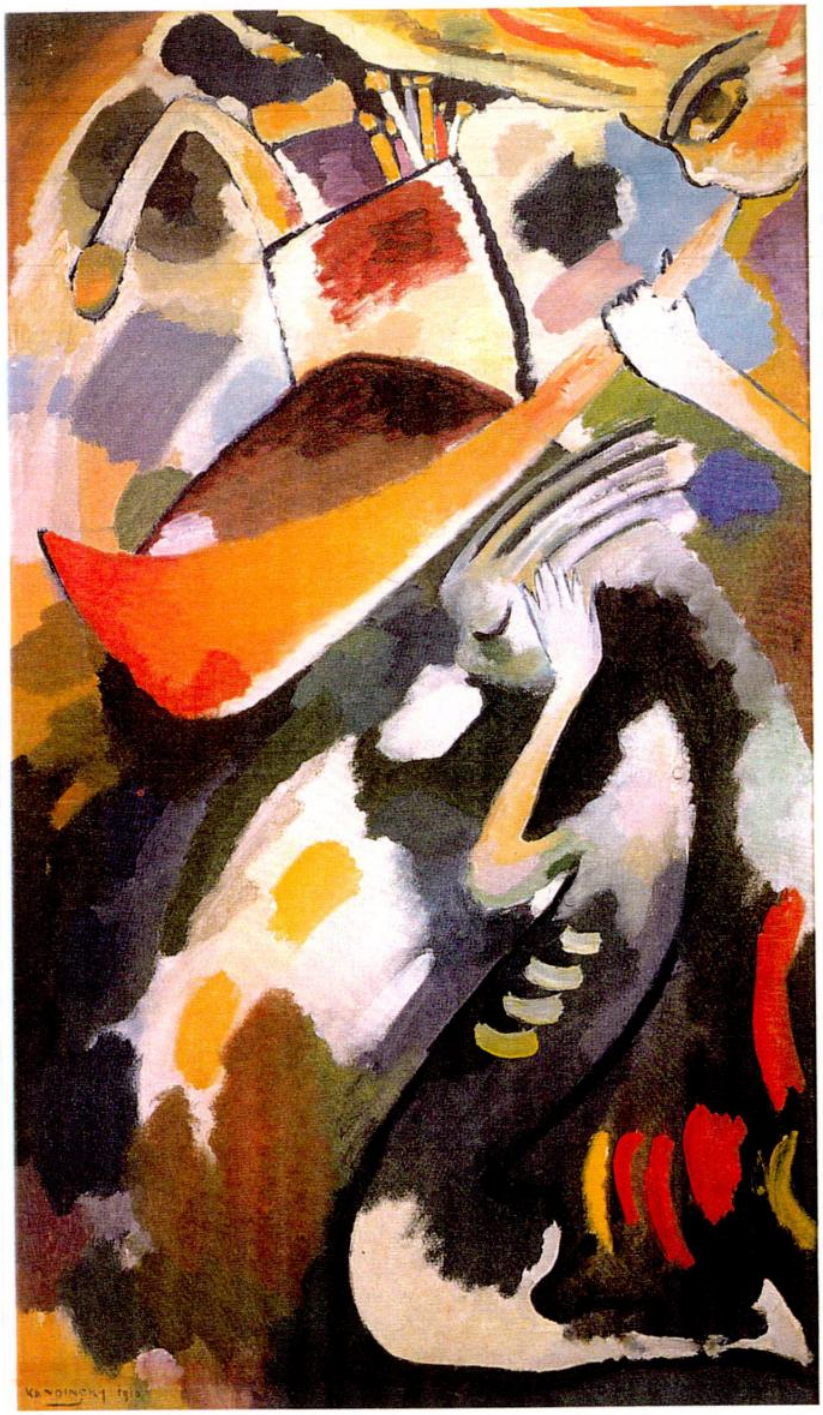
26. Study for centre of Composition VII, 1913.
Ink on paper.

27. Study for Composition VII, 1913.
Pen and ink on paper.

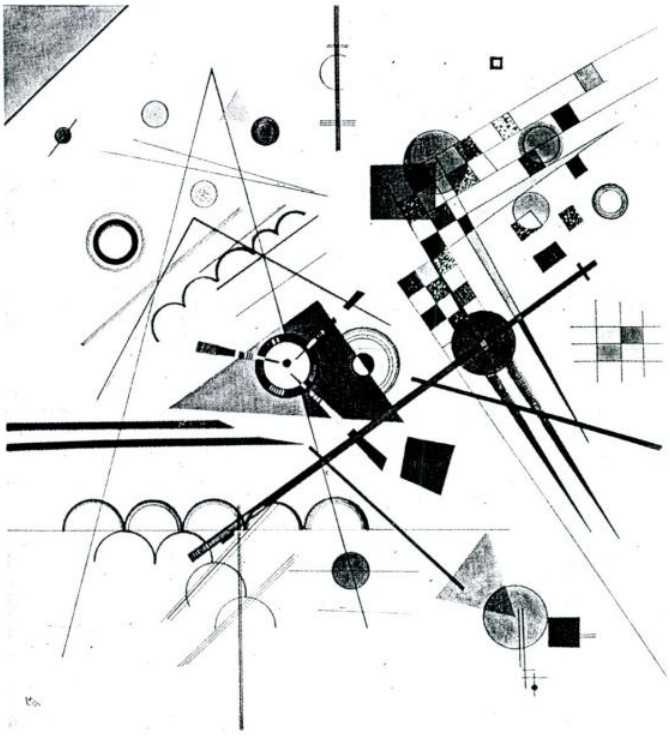


28. Study No.6 for Composition VII, 1913.
Water-colour.

29. Study for Composition VII, 1910.
Water-colour.

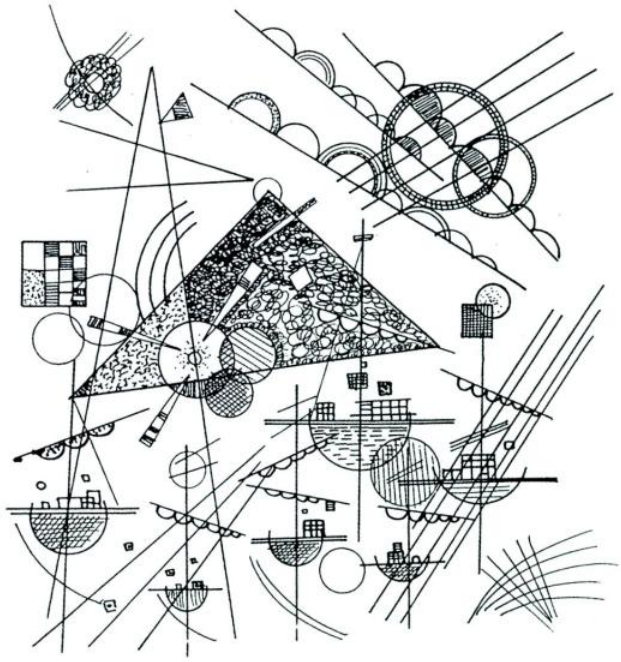


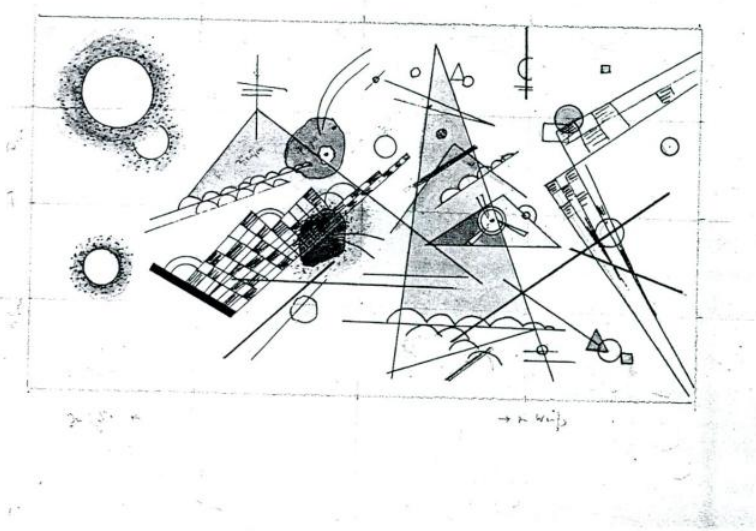
30. The Last Judgement, 1910.
Oil on canvas.



(Previous page.)
31. Composition VII, 1913.
Oil on canvas.

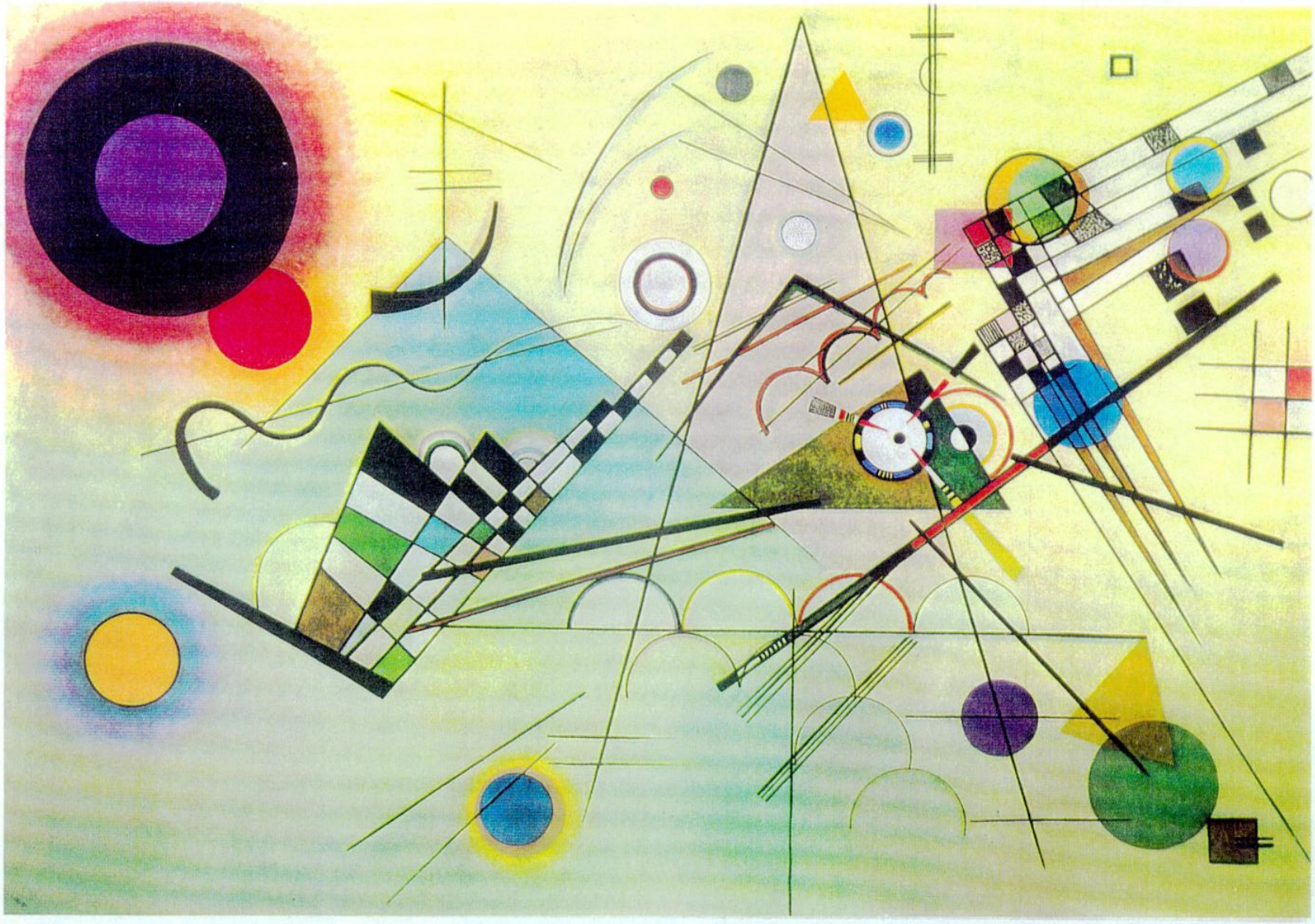
32. Study for Composition VIII, 1923.
Water-colour on paper.





33. Untitled (Related to Composition VIII), 1923.
Pencil and Indian Ink on paper.

34. Untitled (Study for Composition VIII), 1923.
Pencil, Indian Ink and water-colour on paper.



35. Composition VIII, 1923.
Oil on canvas.

36. Composition IX, 1936.
Oil on canvas.

37. Composition X, 1939.
Oil on canvas.

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