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THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

SPIRITUAL ABSTRACTION  
- KANDINSKY 1910 - 1921

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BY

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*Spiritual Abstraction*  
*Kandinsky 1910-1921.*



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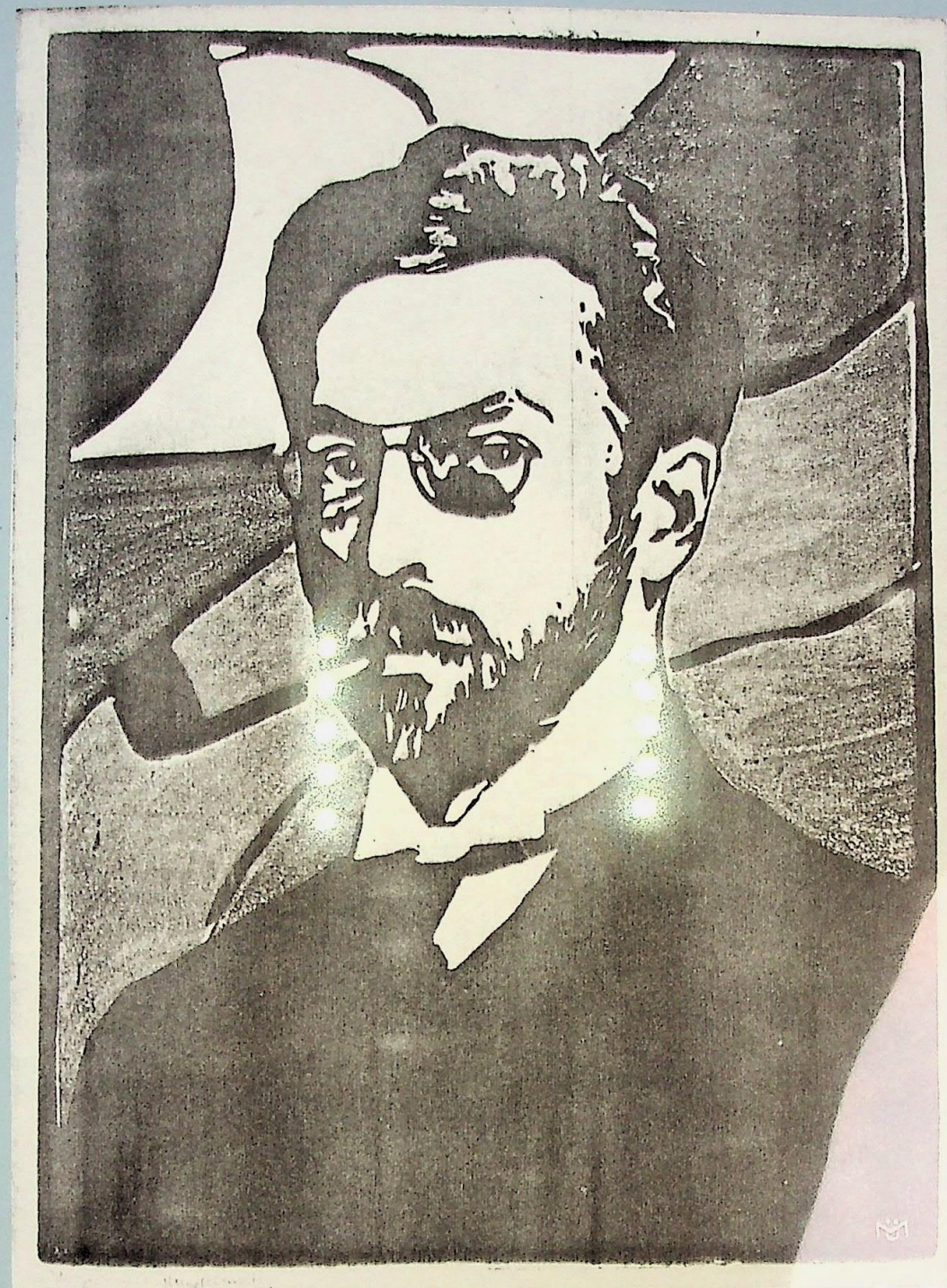
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GABRIELE MÜNTER.-

Portrait of KANDINSKY - 1906.



## FORWARD

Initially, I wish to explain my reasons for studying Kandinsky. First, I would like to give my own personal conclusion as to what a work of art is and what it should do, brought about over the years during the course of my own work. Primarily, a work of art is a mode of communication, no matter what its form, shape and size, it has a certain amount of information to relate about itself, its own subject matter and about the artist and his interests, and so on. Like everything else it is an object with its own existence and purpose, with its own life force and energy, be it peculiar or not.

For the artist, it is a process of investigation, discovery and then creation, it is, or should be, a continually evolving process. It is a function of one of man's most basic instincts; his curiosity, and in art as in other disciplines, it has found its finest and elevated expression. For the artist, it is the end result, the product of a particular train of thought. In other words, basically the work of art is concerned with enriching the spirit of man as a whole. My own work is mainly concerned with the inner feeling it gives me rather than anything else. It took a long time for me to see this, because what I am doing could hardly be regarded as representational.

I propose to study Kandinsky's paintings from 1908 to 1920, first, for the single reason that I prefer his work of this era to that of the 1920's or afterwards. Secondly, in 1912 he published a book Concerning the Spiritual in Art. In this he sets out much of the basic theory behind his art, plus what he thought art was and how it functioned. The work done between 1908 and the war in itself, provides ample material to study.



## INTRODUCTION

"One of the first steps away from representation and towards abstraction was, in the pictorial sense, the exclusion of the third - dimension, i.e. the tendency to keep the picture on a single plane. Modelling was abandoned. In this way the concrete object was made more abstract, and an important step forward was achieved - this step forward has however, had the effect of limiting the possibilities of painting to the actual surface of the canvas and thus painting acquired another material limit". 1

Abstract Art is the most dramatic manifestation of the attempt by 20th century painters to overturn the assumption that art must represent appearances. By 1900 photography had already begun to supersede realistic painting. The developing use of photography coupled with new ideas about the expressive potential of painting and sculpture resulted in the genesis of abstraction. Between 1910 and 1918 abstract art evolved in several places. In Munich Wassily Kandinsky (1866 - 1944) achieved almost total non-representational painting in 1912. He possessed a first hand knowledge of the work of Gauguin, Van Gogh and the Neo-Impressionists in his time in Paris between 1906 - 7, as well as a profound admiration of 'primitive' Bavarian glass painting and Russian icons.

It was in Amsterdam and Moscow that artists made works that were composed of 'pure' forms without being consciously abstracted from nature. In Moscow Kasimir Malevich's (1878 - 1935) 'Suprematist' compositions of 1915 - 1919 were the product of an attempt to define an 'alphabet' of simple geometric shapes which, set on a white background seem to be imbued with movement in infinite space. Suprematist Painting - Malevich - 1915, page 5,

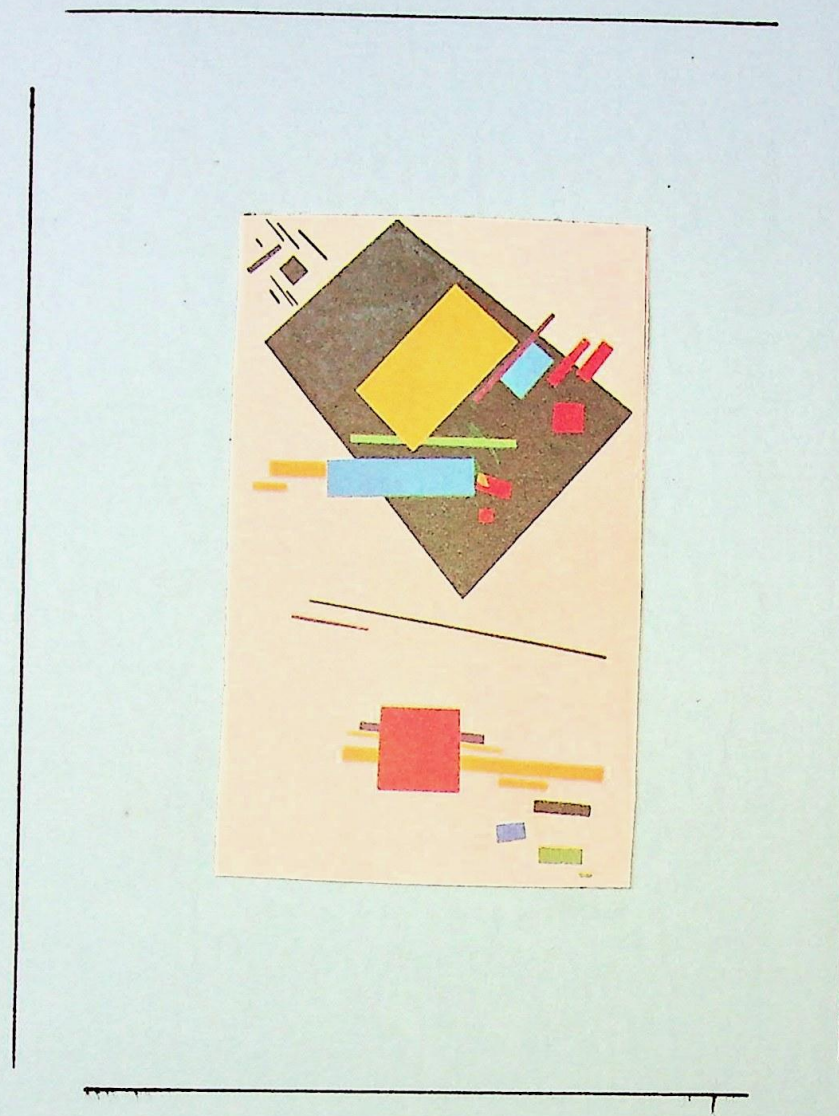
Kandinsky arrived at a complete dissolution of the object in his work by a combination of Expressionist distortion and an emphasis on the picture surface by methods similar to those already used by Matisse, (1869 - 1954), who produced compositions dominated by areas of flat, unbroken colour of equal intensity, so emphasising the picture surface in its own right rather than treating it as a kind of window through which the viewer looks, eg. Harmony In Red (1908 - 9) Matisse, page 6.



The term Expressionism in Art History describes the movement which deliberately turned away from the representation of nature as a primary purpose of Art, since the Renaissance. Expressionists proclaimed the direct rendering of emotions and feelings as the only true goal of all art; line, form and colour were to be used entirely for their expressive possibilities. Distortion became an important means of emphasis. This term Expressionism was first used by German critics in 1911, to describe the Fauves, and early Cubists, and other painters who were consciously opposed to Impressionism and the imitation of nature. Before the end of the 19th century there had never been a complete break with convention even when beauty of form and harmony of composition were less prominent, but any emotional message was not yet portrayed fully. Movements such as Symbolism, Art Nouveau and Jugendstil can be considered to have provided the foundations of such modern 20th century movements as Expressionism, Fauvism and Abstract Art.

Symbolist explorations of colour as expression originated by Gauguin, Van Gogh, Delville and Seurat open the way for the Expressionists and the Fauves. The Jugendstil stylizations that were of importance in the early work of Kandinsky bore influence on the development of Expressionism. In its evolution, Expressionism was also informed by the emotional and formal elements found in the work of Van Gogh and Munch.

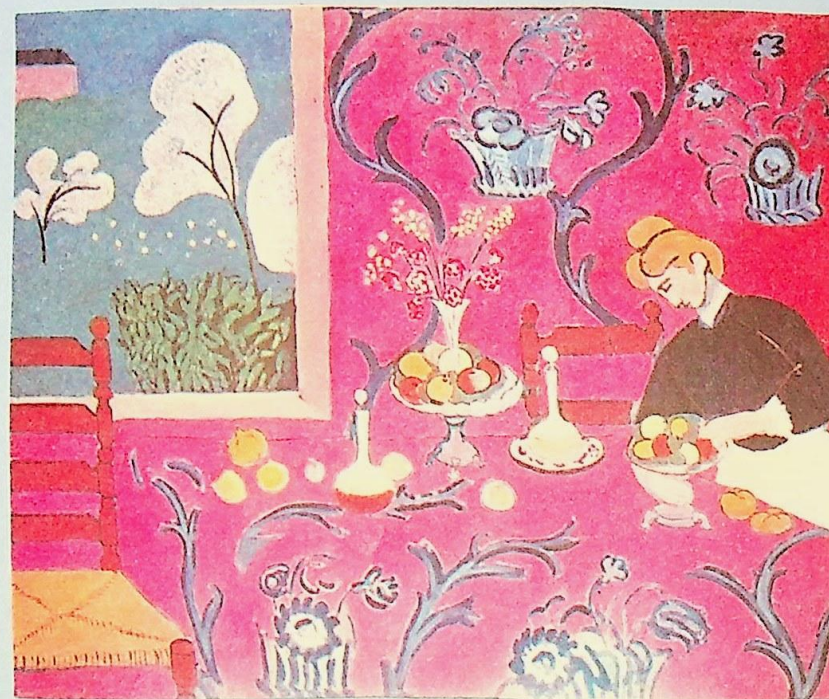




Kasimir Malevich -

SUPREMATIST Painting - 1915.





Henri Matisse -

HARMONY IN RED - 1908-9.



Kandinsky's early development.

Kandinsky did not begin painting seriously until he was thirty. He had a complete legal training and taught Law in the University of Moscow. In 1896 he was offered a professorship in the University of Dorpat. He refused this and moved to Munich with his wife Ania Chuinikan to study Art. This was the considered decision of a mature man who had finally been convinced. Kandinsky had reached a stage where he wanted to explore certain visual and spiritual phenomena, which had effected him since he was a child. From a very early age colour had a distinct and powerful impression on him. His imagination was excited by the particular light of his native Moscow on a sunny day, and in his spare time made a number of unsuccessful attempts to capture this. He was deeply impressed by Rembrandt's chiaroscuro and the music of Wagner which he studied and gave rise to many visual impressions in his mind. He said of Lohrengren, when he saw it for the first time -

"I could see all my colours as  
they come to life before my eyes.  
In wild disorder and profusion they  
drew themselves in my mind". 2

As an amateur ethnographer he travelled widely in Russia, seeing and feeling a world that was many times removed from his own. It was<sup>a</sup> world full of unchanging customs, hard-living peasants in close and constant contact with nature, and with their own past. Colour seemed to be everywhere in these remote regions, houses were brightly painted both inside and outside and with a type of energy and spirit with which Kandinsky had a deep affinity. Here he felt was a world that was expressive of some basic feeling in man; a world that, possibly even as an extension of its own, had a soul, despite the hard-living and terrible physical circumstances.

In 1888 he visited Paris and saw the French Impressionists exhibition and in particular one painting Haystack by Monet. This was what probably finally influenced his decision to break with his legal career and devote his life to painting.

Page 10.



"Before this I only knew realistic painting and indeed mainly the Russians. And, then, suddenly for the first time I saw a real picture. I did not realise it represented a Haystack until I read it in the catalogue. The fact that I failed to recognise the subject made me ponder; it seemed to me that a painter had no right to paint it in an obscure fashion. I felt in a puzzled way that the painting had no subject and was both surprised and bewildered to note not only that the work had 'great fascination' but that it remained fixed indelibly in my memory down to the smallest detail. But all this was still very confused in my mind and I was unable to draw the logical conclusions from it. The one thing that was clear to me was the intensity of the colour, an intensity which I never even thought possible which was a complete revelation to me. Painting seemed to me to be endowed with a marvellous power; and without I being aware of this, even the subject; regarded as being an indispensable part of painting had begun to lose its importance for me". 3

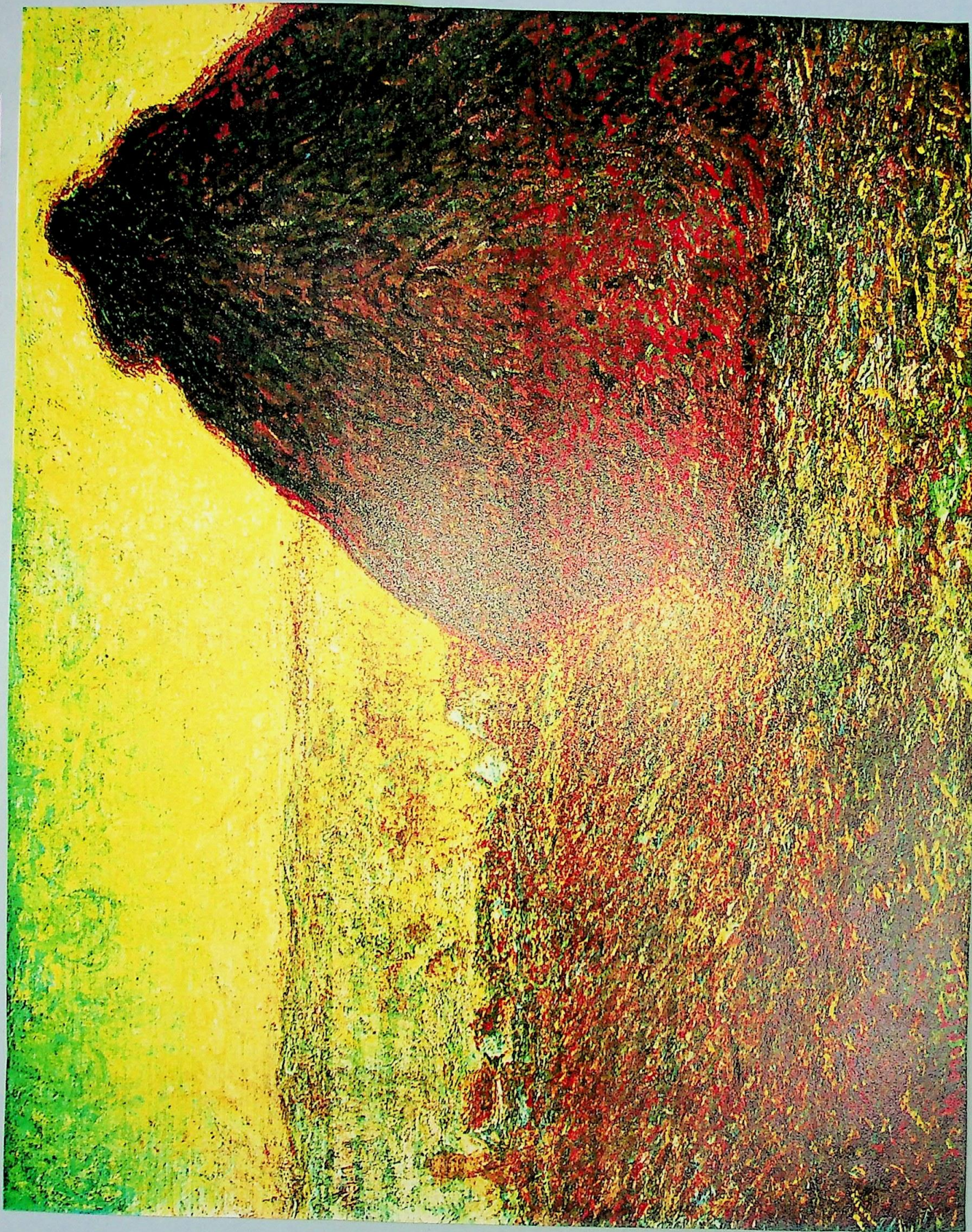
After the French Impressionists exhibition in Moscow, Kandinsky went to Munich and here again the colours struck; bright street cars, mail boxes of canary yellow, facades of apricot yellow and cupolas of burnished gold. As far as Kandinsky was concerned this was absolutely as it should be, again, from his childhood, he had retained the need to see certain places at certain times of the day as Monet did. This may seem unnecessary to us, but I think this illustrates his total fascination with colour and his expressive powers.



In Munich he attended the School of Anton and later the Academy under Franz van Stuck. He spent his time painting from the model, exercising his eye and hand. Although the time spent studying provided him with a valuable understanding of the physical processes of 'making art', he found that much of what he was learning bore little relation to his own ideals. In 1901 he formed a progressive Art School, the Phalomx but he soon left this as well and began travelling. During the next few years he visited France, Italy and Holland. In the course of his journeys he picked up many different ideas on both Art and nature. By being in contact with the many different Schools of Art, existant at that time, his education broadened in a more specific artistic sense. Of the landscapes painted during this period he says his aim was to capture the essential spirit of nature. Later in that first decade of the Century he had seen enough of the Fauves to 'let himself go' before nature. He wrote "not worrying about horses or trees, I spread strips and dots of paint with my palette knife and let them sing out as loudly as I could". 4

In 1908 he settled in Bavaria with the painter Gabrielle Munter and there began the first solid realisation of his ideas.

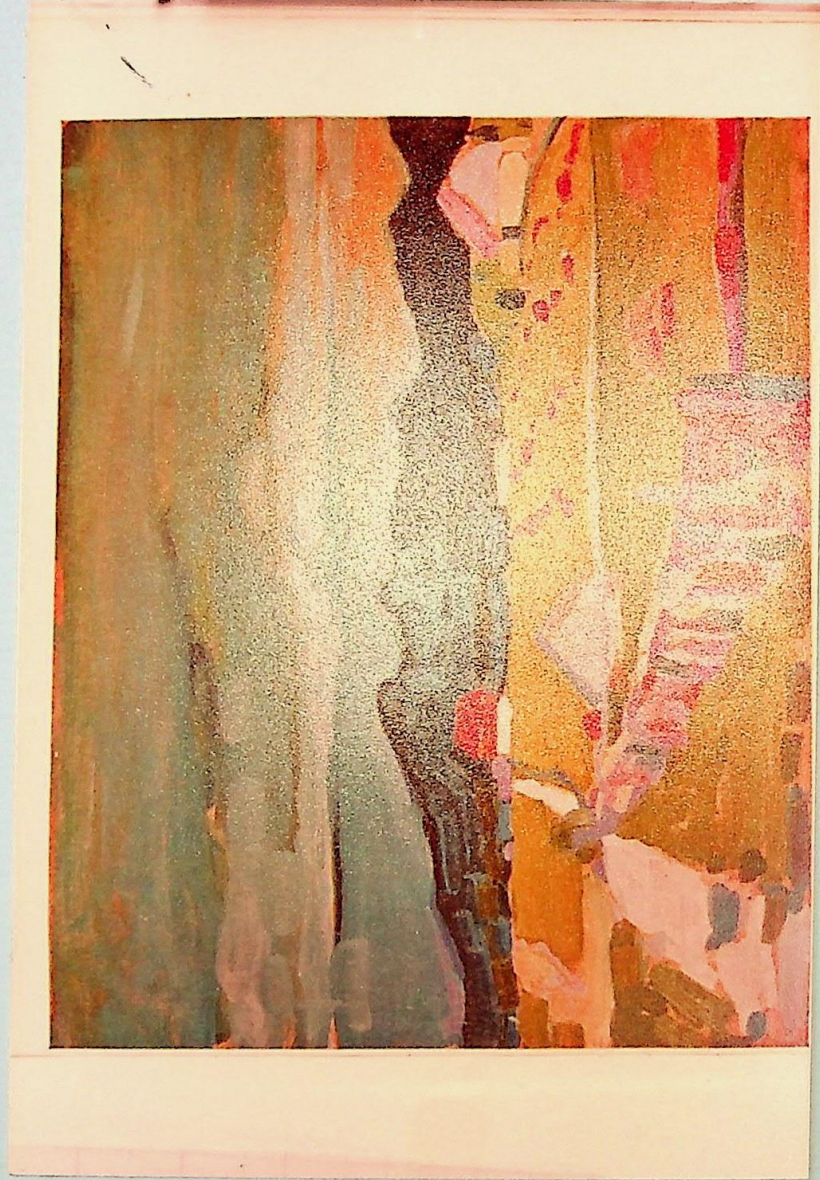




Turner -

Haystack - 1891





KANDINSKY -

LANDSCAPE, MURNAU - 1908.

(ONE OF KANDINSKY'S EARLY LANDSCAPES.)



FOOTNOTES (Introduction)

1. Kandinsky (Translated by M. T. H. Sadler).  
Kandinsky - Concerning The Spiritual in Art.  
Part 11, Page 44. Bib. No. 4.  
(Quoted by Kandinsky).
2. Overy, Paul.  
Kandinsky - Language of the Eye.  
Chapter 1, page 46. Bib. No. 11.  
(Quoted by Kandinsky).
3. Overy, Paul.  
Kandinsky - Language of the Eye.  
Chapter 1, page 48. Bib. No. 11.  
(Quoted by Kandinsky).  
(Quoted also in Concerning the Spiritual in Art  
by Kandinsky).
4. Overy, Paul.  
Kandinsky - Language of the Eye  
Chapter 3, page 61. Bib. No. 11.  
(Quoted by Kandinsky).



## CHAPTER 1

### THE ALLEGORICAL ELEMENT

When Kandinsky settled down in Bavaria and began to paint, everything began to slot into place. His work was dynamically reorganised with colour and form, now taking on a new quality, his landscapes left the area of space and light and instead began to show movement. It was not however, until 1911 that he painted his first semi-abstract work and it was 1913 - 14 that this side of his work finally broke free into explosive, almost formless, masses of lines and colours. However, it is the semi-abstract paintings done before this time that I wish to discuss and in particular the allegorical element.

There are familiar symbols which appear again and again, the most recurrent of which is the leaping horse-man. This eventually was gradually abstracted into a configuration of black lines. Also from Improvisation 19 of 1911, there is a group of black robed elders and who appear again as the two reclining figures on the right-hand side of Composition 4 of 1911. Other symbols which seem to turn up continuously are long oared-boats, hilltop castles, spear wielding soldiers, horse-drawn sledges and mountains. As his painting developed these images increasingly were simplified into black lines; anonymous elements which had to be looked at as part of the compositional whole.

In Composition 2 of 1910, the leaping horseman seemed to be a lyrical image of joy and energetic release, man and horse are one, in a kind of triumphant expression of the unification of the human and the natural. The group of elders seem to stand for traditional order and wisdom. The castle on the hill is a kind of heavenly mansion on earth, while the hill itself can represent the obstacles over which the leaping horse-man must jump in order to attain his heavenly castle. Human resistance is alluded to by the presence of the many oared-boats.

Pages 17, 18, 16.



Although his Russian background would have made him familiar with religious and folk mythology and symbolism, as it did with Malevich and Scagall, Kandinsky's use of mythology is intensely personal. He considered Blue to be the heavenly spiritual colour and so the rider himself here seems to be the good element. Before the heavenly mansion is reached the horse-man must engage in single combat with his own energy. The fight takes place on the bridge or a hill and the whole image is symbolic of the struggle between the material and spiritual ways of life; maybe in this case, the spiritual worlds of life. In these paintings 'the spiritual' is contained with the excitement and vitality that is evidence for me of his belief that the 'life of the mind' could be as tangible and energetic as the 'life of the body'.

The Allegorical Element still remains quite evident in Composition 4 (1911) as discussed earlier, but I feel that the various elements, have become a good deal more difficult to 'read'. I think it is necessary here to compare A Study from 1910 of this work with the finished article. The entire picture is meant to be light with many colours often absorbing each other. He drew attention to the vague, knotted lines and coloured dots. In the final picture (Comp. 4), there seems to be a considerable shift side-ways in composition so that it becomes almost symmetrical. The two trees have shifted to the middle, the hill to the right has also been placed there and made more compact. On top of this sits the castle flanked on the right by the two long slanted figures and to the left the rider seems to be soaring up over the somewhat rainbow-like bridge. The horse has become more streamline, more forward moving, while the figures to the right of the Study break into three separate parts; one set to the right over the hill, the second set adorn richly upon the central blue in various light shades of blue, pink and white. The third set lies in the right foreground of the finished work of Composition 4 and these forms for me are the dynamic trigger of the entire picture.

Page 18 & Page 19.



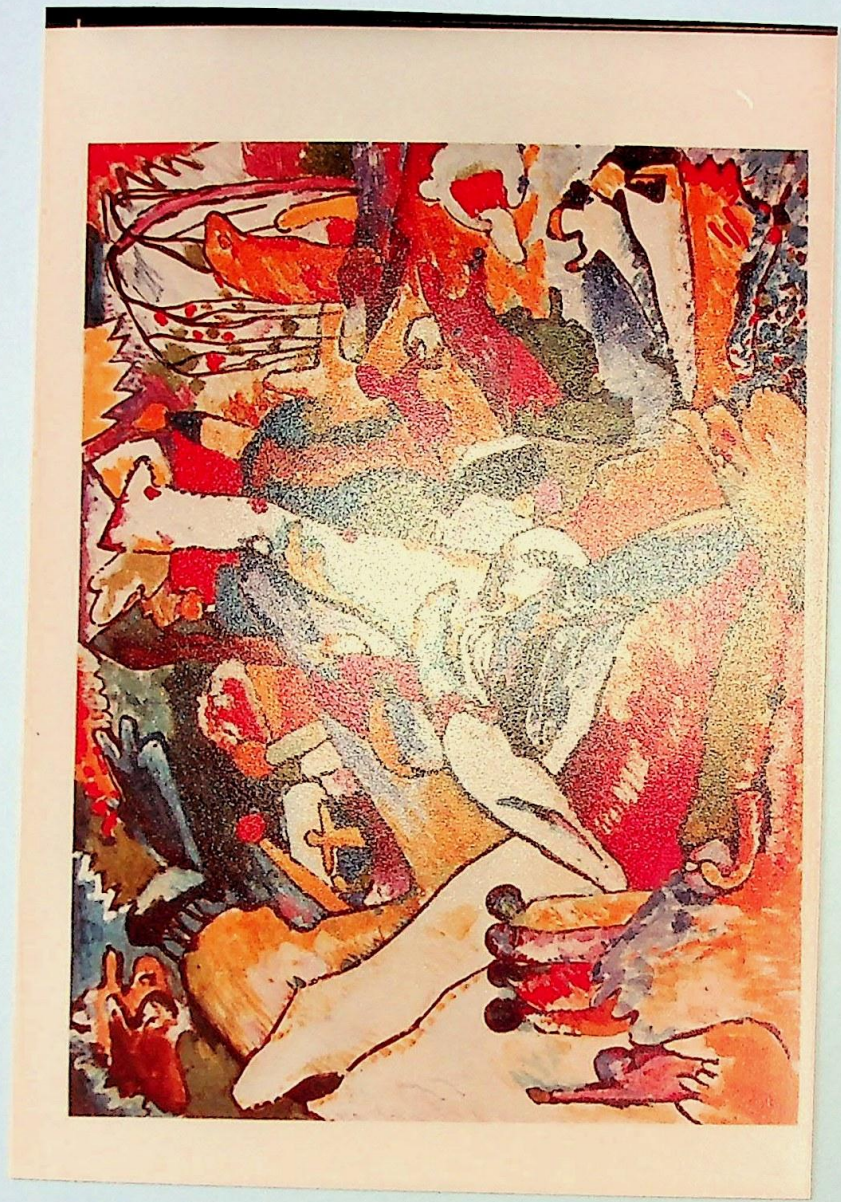
However, there seems to be a feeling perhaps of unsteadiness about it, possibly brought about by the slant of the figure and again by the heaviness of the treatment of the line along the back and soldiers. In this painting 'line' takes on an increasing importance, it is the abstract significance along with that of colour and form in relation to the poetic significance of the allegory that gives it its impulse. The effect is to swing the eye into the picture where it is then swept all over.

Kandinsky did not believe that Abstract Painting would completely supplant objective painting but the two could exist together, within the same painting. In Improvisation 30 (1913), however, there are very little remains of objectivity. The images which resemble cannons on the right are the identifiable elements that the viewer would latch on to. The large flat shapes of colour express the apparent confusion. Here again we see forms overflow and houses seem to topple. In the bottom of the painting there is a burst like an enormous sunflower. Shapes like deflated balloons hang from the canvas. There seems to be an emphasis on the development towards greater abstraction in this painting and in the others. The allegorical elements suggest not only the meaning but the visual tensions set up by the patches of irregular colour and force-line.

There seems to be a deliberate clash between the elements of colour, line and form in many of the paintings. He makes use of a 'rather bold' expressionist type of colour, in order, perhaps, to try and avoid the usual response to the fiary tale content.

Page 20.





KANDINSKY - COMPOSITION II - 1910.





Kazudinsky -

ImPROvisation 19 - 1911.





KANDINSKY -

Composition 4. - 1911.





KANDINSKY-

A Study from 1910.





KANDINSKY -  
IMPROVISATION 30. - 1913.



In Concerning the Spiritual in Art (1912) Kandinsky wrote:

"The spectator is put in an atmosphere which does not disturb him because he accepts it as fabulous, and in which he tries to trace the story and undergoes more or less the various appeals of colour. But the pure inner working of colour is impossible; the outward idea has the mastery skill. For the spectator has only exchanged a blind reality for a blind dreamland where the truth of inner feeling cannot be felt. We must, therefore, find a form of expression which excludes the fable and yet does not restrict the free working of colour in any way the forms, movement, and colours which we borrow from nature must produce no outward effect, nor be associated with external objects. The more obvious is the separation from nature, the more likely is the inner meaning to be pure and unhampered". 1

Kandinsky seems to be saying here that the spectator (in allegorical narrative painting) is in an 'atmosphere' which does not disturb him because he accepts it as imagery; he tries to follow the 'story' remaining relatively indifferent to the various effects of colour, in any event the pure internal working of colour is no longer possible, the external idea is dominant. Besides, when the spectator imagines he is in fairyland, he becomes automatically immune to strong internal vibration, so the artist's efforts miscarry. He goes on to say, I feel, that we must find, therefore, a form which excludes a fairytale effect and which does not hinder pure colour action. To this end, form, movement, colour, natural imagery objects, must be divorced from any narrative content. Then movement though seemingly unmotivated becomes pure and essential.

It is very difficult to explain exactly what Kandinsky meant here, no one person's interpretation can be universal. As Steiner said in his book Theosophie "one cannot read this book as one is accustomed ordinarily to read books in our era. In certain respects every page and even many a sentence will have to be 'worked out' by the reader. This has been intentionally aimed at. For only in this way can the book become to the reader what it ought to become". 2



The allegorical element in his painting of 1912, Painting with Black Arch has virtually disappeared. It is true, however, that some elements can still be recognised, the central black arch (hill) itself and the area of red paint to the right with its form torn away by the sandy colour, similar to that of the central blue shape in Composition 4, but now stand alone as individual and independent marks. The coloured form seems to dominate this painting. The composition tends towards the centre, the large forms dancing and swinging around each other. In front of these float a variety of black lines in beautifully counter-balanced movement.

By 1913, we can see all references to objectivity had been abstracted and the paintings now depend upon the power of form and colour alone. Kandinsky was endeavouring to create a visual 'language' by reducing these naturalistic forms to their bare minimum, in the process, and beyond it. He was, perhaps, trying to make a language of line and colour that would be both free from representational concerns as music, and as readily accepted as it as well. In so doing he quickly developed his painting to a stage where there was no distracting presence of reality. The viewer's part was to go before the painting and let it work on him and not to take the traditional view, and start looking for perspective and carefully-observed anatomy, example, arms, legs, landscape and so on.

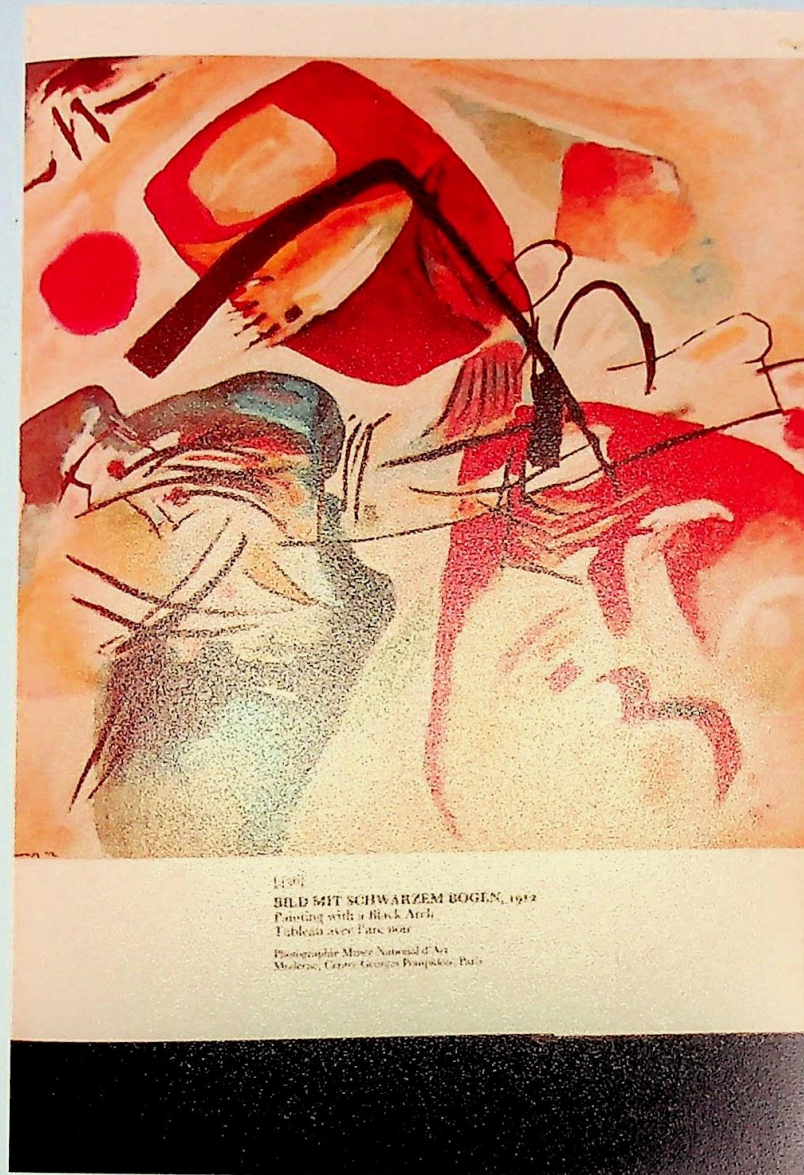
Kandinsky himself said that "painting without subject matter can degenerate into mere aesthetic superficiality". 3 The same applies to his line of thinking and applied to his development of the marks on canvas. The marks that had been processed by his mind and then subordinated to his ideas of communicating both with and through the spirit. These marks were not picked up out of thin air, but had their origins firmly based in reality. However, these marks that have been processed in Kandinsky's mind might not have been entirely original. It is hard to say who really was the first artist to make an 'abstract painting'. Because of this, similar marks may have been processed and simply, unconsciously of course, picked up by Kandinsky. But, I do feel that Kandinsky was one of the first to divorce objects from his work in order to reach a higher intensity of feeling.

Pages 24 AND 18.



Kandinsky had no interest in Abstraction for its own sake and so, although the images in his paintings of 1910 - 13 are hidden by the play of rose, yellow and deep violet - the forms almost swallowed up in colour - they can still be deciphered, and were meant to be. But of course, what they signify is an other matter!





KANDINSKY -

Painting with a Black Arch - 1912.



## FOOTNOTES

(Chapter 1. The Allegorical Element).

1. Kandinsky (Translated by M. T. H. Sadler).  
Kandinsky - Concerning the Spiritual in Art.  
Part 11. Pages 49 - 50. Bib. No. 4.  
(Quoted by Kandinsky).
2. Long, Washton.  
Kandinsky - The Development of an Abstract Style.  
Chapter 11. Page 15. Bib. No. 8.  
(Quoted by Steiner).
3. Kandinsky (Translated by M. T. H. Sadler).  
Kandinsky - Concerning the Spiritual in Art.  
Part 11. Page 48. Bib. No. 4.  
(Quoted by Kandinsky).



## CHAPTER 2

### SPIRITUAL EXPRESSION

#### Background

In 1889 the Theosophical Society was formed by the Russian-born Madame H. P. Blavatsky, and two Americans, a Colonel Olcott and a lawyer named William Judge. During this time of great technological and materialistic development, Science provided serious challenges to Christianity. Moreover, there was much dissatisfaction among many people with what Science or/and Christianity offered. Christianity seemed to have become a huge bureaucracy, resistant to almost any kind of change. Science on the other hand rejected anything that could not be segmented or proved cooly, as it were, one Scientist justified his godlessness with strange words:-

"I have dissected many corpses, but never yet discovered a soul in any of them" (Virchow). 1

The spiritual essence in Christianity many felt, had become lost in its rigidity, traditions, superstitions, etc. The time was ripe for a change and it was Theosophy which offered the first major alternative to orthodoxy. For some, Art Mysticism became an alternative to orthodox religion. This movement was concerned with a religious focus on the soul and life of man, and expressed itself through the perspective of Orientalist and Supermalist myth. According to Blavatsky the 'pupil receives definite answers to his questions from the Theosophical point of view. The Society approached the problem of the spirit by way of the 'inner' knowledge'. 2

All political and social power would be subsumed in spiritual contemplation, and universal enlightenment would reign. This was Madame Blavatsky's version of a fantasy as old, perhaps, as Christianity itself. This was called the 'Millennium', where Christ would come to earth for a second time and win a final victory over Satan! This would make for perfect earthly justice which would last for one thousand years. I would think, in a somewhat hopeless way, Kandinsky's Theosophical faith presupposed the end of history as well.



Kandinsky felt that in painting, the main use was to prepare people to think and see in terms of immaterial form, rather than preconceived objects like apples or nudes. Many other artists at the same time also responded to spiritual instincts. Mondrian, for example, (1872 - 1944) in the Netherlands arrived at an abstract art that was not abstracted from natural objects. Mondrian's Neo-Plasticists works composed of straight black lines and colour patches during the years 1917 - 18. Mondrian dabbled in Theosophy, but behind his rigorously ordered paintings lay a more rational idea of life. His philosophy of life became so fixed that the style he arrived at in the 1920's remained unchanged for nearly twenty years, example, Composition 1 with red, yellow and blue. This divided field of intersections became Mondrian's sign for all substance, every significant formal relationship could be examined and, eventually, the basis of what he took to be a universal grammar of form. He had a perfectly reduced style by the 1920's - no colours but red, yellow, blue, black and white, no directions but the horizontal and vertical axis, sometimes held within a diagonally hung square canvas, and no shapes but the Platonic square and rectangle.

Another artist at the same time, Malevich, as I mentioned in the introduction, with his 'Suprematist' composition of 1915 - 19, was the result of an attempt to define an 'alphabet' of simple geometric shapes. Malevich, some might say, evoked Christianity exclusively as his art was mystical in intention. His writings show that it was rooted in a fusion of religious and philosophical thought. The reality he wished to endow with visible form was immaterial - 'the sensation of non-objectivity' - and this distinction became more pressing to him as the new society created by the Russian Revolution based itself more firmly on materialist principles.

Pages 31 and 5.



Paul Klee, was yet another, who valued the 'primitive' and especially the art of children. He was also a close associate of Kandinsky. Klee's career was in a search for symbols and metaphors that would make this belief visible:-

"Formerly we used to represent things visible on earth, he wrote in 1920, things we either like to look at or would have liked to see. Today we reveal the reality that is behind visible things, thus expressing the belief that the visible world is merely an isolated case in relation to the universe and that there are many other, latent realities...." 3

Klee's interest lay in dreams, in primitive art, in mythology. He refused to draw hard distinctions between art and writing. Indeed, many of his paintings are a form of writing or calligraphy, they are full of signs, arrows, floating letters, misplaced directions, commas, and clefts: their code for any object. Like a miniaturist, he wanted to render nature permeable, in the most precise way, to the language of style - and this meant not only close but ecstatic observation of the natural world, as in Botanical Garden of 1926. His picture of 1922 Senecio is based on a kind of humanized geometry. Klee methodically investigated form. Klee wrote in 1920 that 'Art does not render the visible; rather it makes visible'. PAGES. 32 AND 33.

It is noticeable that many of these artists developed at the same time (1910 - 20's) towards abstraction. In the late 19th Century many artists and writers (example, W. B. Yeats) had reacted <sup>against</sup> the industrial world, the increasingly hostile urban environment and growing materialism. The Symbolists rejected Naturalism in Art. Many, disillusioned with traditional Christianity, turned to alternative religions, example, Theosophy, etc. As Yeats said in 1903:-

"The close of the past Century was full of a strange desire to get out of form... I now feel an impulse to create form".

Another quotation which is apt here, and I feel is very important to the understanding of that time, is Hermann Bahr's 1916 publication of a book Expressionism and which gives an impressive portrait of that age:-

"Never was there time shaken by so much terror, such a fear of death. Never was the world so deadly silent. Never was man so small. Never had he been so alarmed. Never was joy so far away and liberty so dead. Now necessity cries out; man cries after his soul, and a whole age becomes a single cry of need. Art too cries with it, into the depths of darkness; it cries for help, it cries after the spiritual, that is Expressionism". 4



Among the people who supported the movement was Kandinsky. His contacts with Theosophy strengthened his ideas to which he had been exposed in Russia and Germany, particularly by those associated with Symbolism. I would like to mention here that Symbolism was not a specific formal style, as were perhaps Impressionism and Neo-Impressionism, both of which continued to exist during this period, but/ rather a series of attitudes towards form and content, characteristic of the artistic outlook of the final years of the Century, when a mood of subjectivism permeated much of the Art.

The Symbolist mode embraced a number of diverse trends and individual efforts, which shared essentially the will to transcend the phenomenal world of the spiritual. It represented a search for a new form, new content based on emotion and new synthesis. The work of Art was to be the consequence of emotion and inner-spirit of the Artist, and not of his observation of nature, the visible reality, as it were. Although the subject matter was often the same as that in realistic painting, it was transformed by formal means, from an individual sense into the subject broader in meaning - philosophical, with a wider frame of reference.

As we can see from his book Concerning the Spiritual in Art, much of what it contained in it, particularly the first section, coincided with the ideas of the Theosophists. However, I feel that the Theosophical principles had little influence on Kandinsky's development because I believe that any parallels are too general in nature to justify a search for influences. It could be said that, Kandinsky may have had a general interest in Theosophy, but that it had little influence on his paintings.

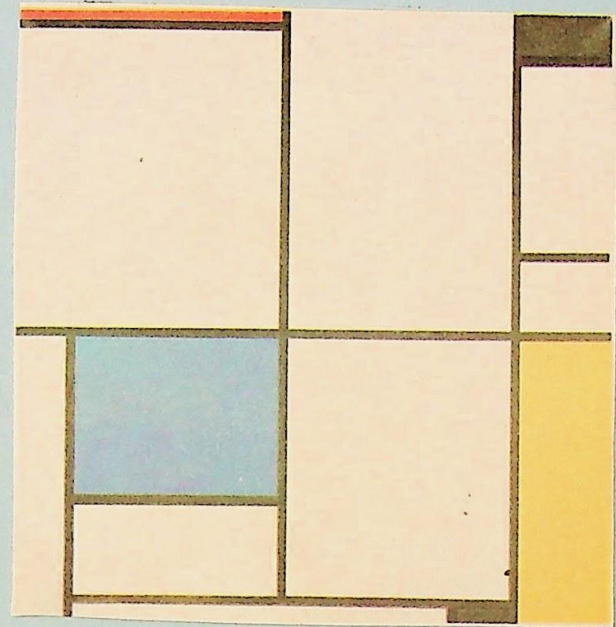
On the other hand, it could be argued that the Theosophical influences had a major impact, not only on Kandinsky's colour theories, but even on his choice of forms and that the Theosophical ideas influenced his vision and exposed him to Eastern religious concepts. Blavatsky herself claims in her book Key to Theosophy that:-

"Kandinsky welcomes the Theosophical movement because its popularity promised him a future public that would be disposed to accept, even understand, his own efforts to reveal a significant and profound content in abstract painting. He saw it as only one of the many evidences of an eventual triumph of man's spiritual over his materialistic nature". 5



Kandinsky as an ethnographer was very much concerned with the artistic expression of the country people of his homeland. In Munich too and in Bavaria in general he was delighted to find that certain ancient crafts, glass painting in particular, were still going strong. When Kandinsky met Madame Blavatsky he saluted her as the first person to see a connection between the 'savages' and the Europeans and how these 'savages' could have valuable lessons for Europeans. Kandinsky along with another Theosophist called Rudolph Steiner, seemed to share the same belief in the Revelation of Saint John - this concerned the prophesying of a time of great upheaval and great disaster which would be followed by the 'spiritual' rebirth of mankind. The tense political atmosphere of Europe at the start of the second decade of the Century, obviously, had an effect on Kandinsky. Finally the war came along in 1914, its scale and destructive force must have seemed to him to have been of that great disaster.

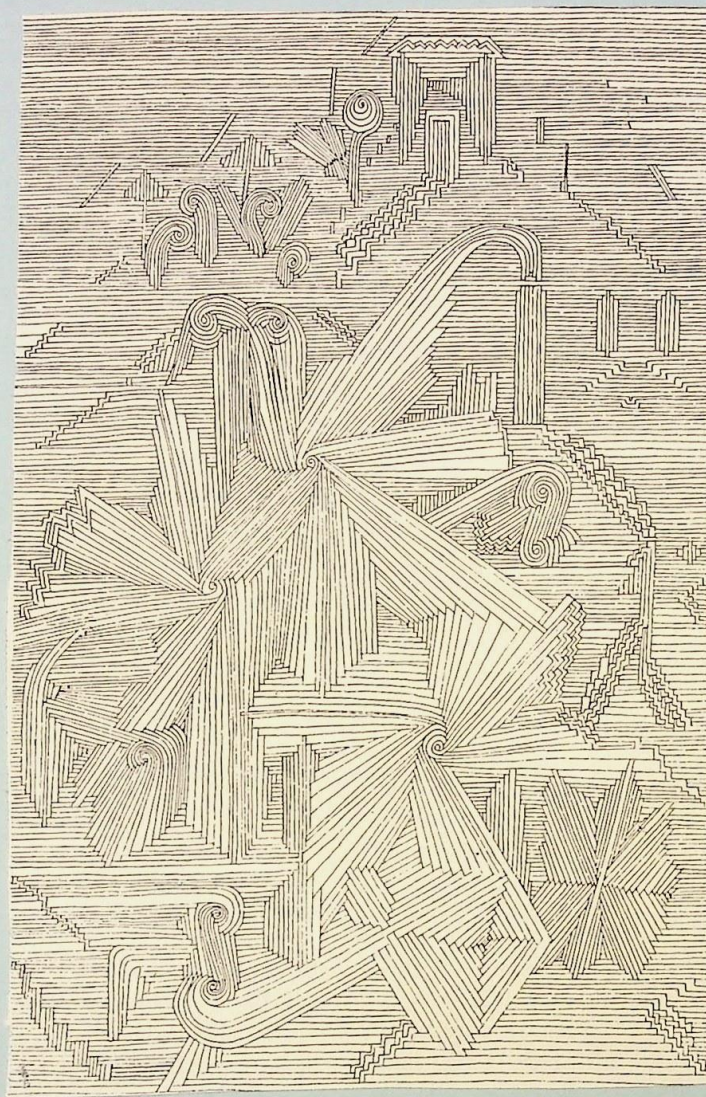




Piet Mondrian -

Composition I with Red, yellow and Blue - 1921.

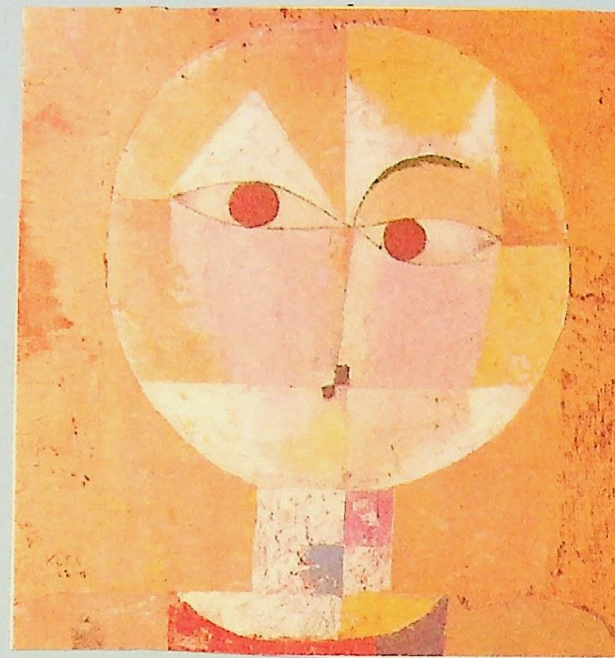




Paul Klee -

Botanical GARDEN - 1926.





PAUL KLEE -

SENECIO - 1922.



### Kandinsky's Paintings

Many of his paintings of this period reflect this pre-occupation, which contain numerous warface motifs. Improvisation 30 of 1913, with its cannons, toppling buildings and barbed wire. In this, and in many of those preceding it, the various formal elements are still recognisable. Kandinsky seems to have felt here that in order to get the 'vibration' across to as many people as possible, some form of representationalism had to remain in order to give the viewer a starting point. Because of this, I feel that Improvisation 30 is a highly successful one and many of his earlier paintings do not get this across quite so well.

Improvisation 11 of 1910 shows this lack of 'vibration'. The scene contains all the same elements of war. The image of the cannon is found in the lower right as it was in Improvisation 30. On the right-hand side, a group of figures, soldiers with guns, cannons and swords are clearly visible. The soldiers are simplified into green and white rectangular bodies, with white oval faces, flat brown patches of hair, and hold at right angles to their bodies. Smoke from the firing guns indicates that the soldiers are aiming at the occupants of the fleeing boat to the centre, their guns, olive green in colour, and in the form of long rectangles, outlined in black. The boat has an inverted triangle, yellow, white sail and a white hull outlined in blue. The boat seems to be thrown about on storm-tossed waves, which behind it turn into flat splayed explosions. Three soldiers in green and white oval faces huddle before the sail and the fourth in red, rows with a pale brown oar, again, outlined in black. In the background a cannon erupts, while in the right front corner, another one points, as I have mentioned, silently to the centre. The blue columns at the top of the hill and an olive-green lintel suggest a temple facade. But if one looks closely at these columns one can see that from these beams, six figures hang dead. At the very bottom of the picture a small dog-like figure appears next to the cannon and directly across from this we can see a figure in a green hooded robe, who stands isolated from the turmoil. This figure might represent the old men of wisdom and knowledge, as I have referred to earlier. There is extensive usage of dull colouring: dark greyish greens and heavy browns with small areas of blue, red, orange and pink, here and there, particularly around the sea. Visually, the predominant colour is yellow, (which Kandinsky considered to be aggressive), occurring on the triangular sail of the boat.



The elements of death and destruction are obvious in this work, the whole image is quite explosive. However, I still feel that it does not work as completely as it could or should. Because of his use of outlining almost everything in black and the smooth dividing lines, everything, despite its explosive elements is confined and calmed down, the image seems to be in perfect control. The overall content may be violent but I feel that the treatment is not. Amongst all this confusion, organisation still predominates, but the red oarsman, with his brown oar, is distracting. The various elements are too completely formed and too separate from each other. The group of green men, extending their rifles, through the smoke until it reaches the boat, are very stylish and a type of design seems to control here. Another distracting element, I find, is the actual boat split in two, one part takes the shape of the sail, and the other part, the boat.

Perhaps, this was Kandinsky's purpose to draw our attention to the main action, but I am still distracted by these elements regardless.

Such works represent Kandinsky at his best, and their conviction as painting arises above the eager fatuities of Kandinsky's own philosophizing! The work of this period reached its highest point in 1914, with such great stormy paintings as Improvisation, Deluge. In these works representationalism has completely disappeared, to be replaced instead by pure energy of form, line and colour. The feeling of chaos and destruction that characterized many of his earlier war pictures still exists in these, and in such paintings, as mentioned above, is the dominant feature. However, Kandinsky does not seem to rely on literal devices such as toppling buildings, etc. This feeling has been conveyed purely by the composing and arranging of the pictorial elements.

Pages 39, 40.



This Improvisation of 1914, is ideal in this context. My first reaction to this was one of destruction, violence and a sense of the viewer being dragged into it, because it is so powerful. The painting seems to be in a process of self-destruction. The vertical hole to the middle right is at its deepest part, black, which as it comes nearer the surface changes to a muddy brown. All around the edge, colours begin to merge with each other, losing both their individual identities and their purity. At the bottom, grey and yellowish - black flecked waves of paint heave over a blue lip and crash into the black hole, like a waterfall. Forms are all in the process of breaking up. To the left of the hole, the long diagonal 'bone' shape; although distinctly formed in a strong blue colour, it gradually, as it nears the hole, begins to fade and appears to be on the verge, also of falling too.

Above this, again, is the grand confusion of colours, dark greens and blues drag the eye back into the depths, while small areas of yellow start out in violent sharpness. The violet to the top right and the bluish white just below and to the left of it, seem to be in neither one area or the other, but to hang, floating between. Up in the top left-hand side the paint surface itself seems to be in the first stages of decay. Bright pure colours are kept to the bare minimum in this painting. Small areas (example yellows) dance around the surface of the picture in a kind of visual counterpoint to the large swathes of grey. Red is here too, but in an even smaller amount again. Situated in the upper middle of the picture, it forms the curve of the organic bone shape, already mentioned. It is, by virtue of its brightness, in sharp contrast with most of the other colours in that area, and indeed with the rest of the painting. As such, it is one of its most striking elements. The fact, though, that it only takes up a small area means that it can in no way overpower any of the colours. Over the whole of this, an array of lines which curve, twist and bend down from the top of the picture and drew everything including the eye, into the hole. Its purpose I do not know?



This Improvisation is certainly chaotic and violent, which may be a reflection of it being painted in 1914, the first year of first world war. However, that in itself can be read in two ways. It can be seen in terms of destruction or equally it can be seen in terms of re-birth, the former I have discussed. It is possible, that the symptoms of each are indistinguishable. The idea of death and re-birth is an ancient one, and the dividing line between the two is more often, than not, unclear - especially in Eastern philosophy, example, Hindu Gods, Shiva and Kalki.

As Kandinsky himself said:-

"Every work of Art starts technically in the same way as the cosmos - through catastrophies which finally, out of the thundering noise of instruments, create a symphony which is the music of the spheres; to create a work of Art is to create a world".

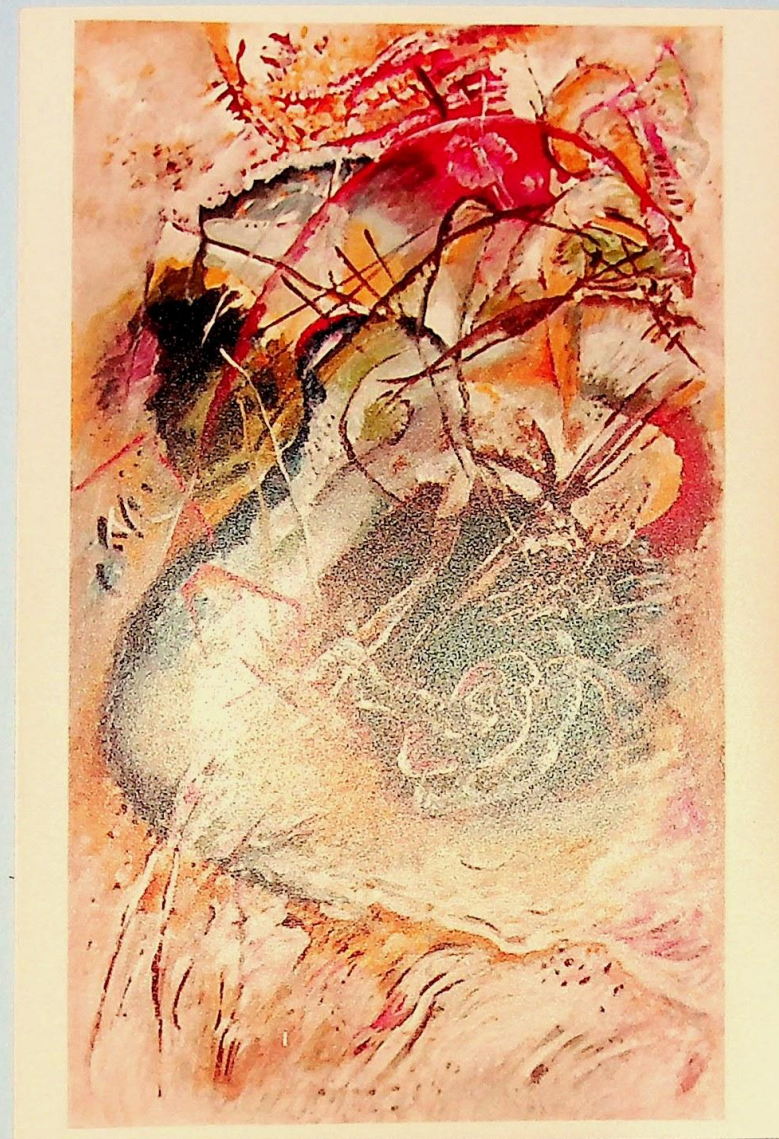
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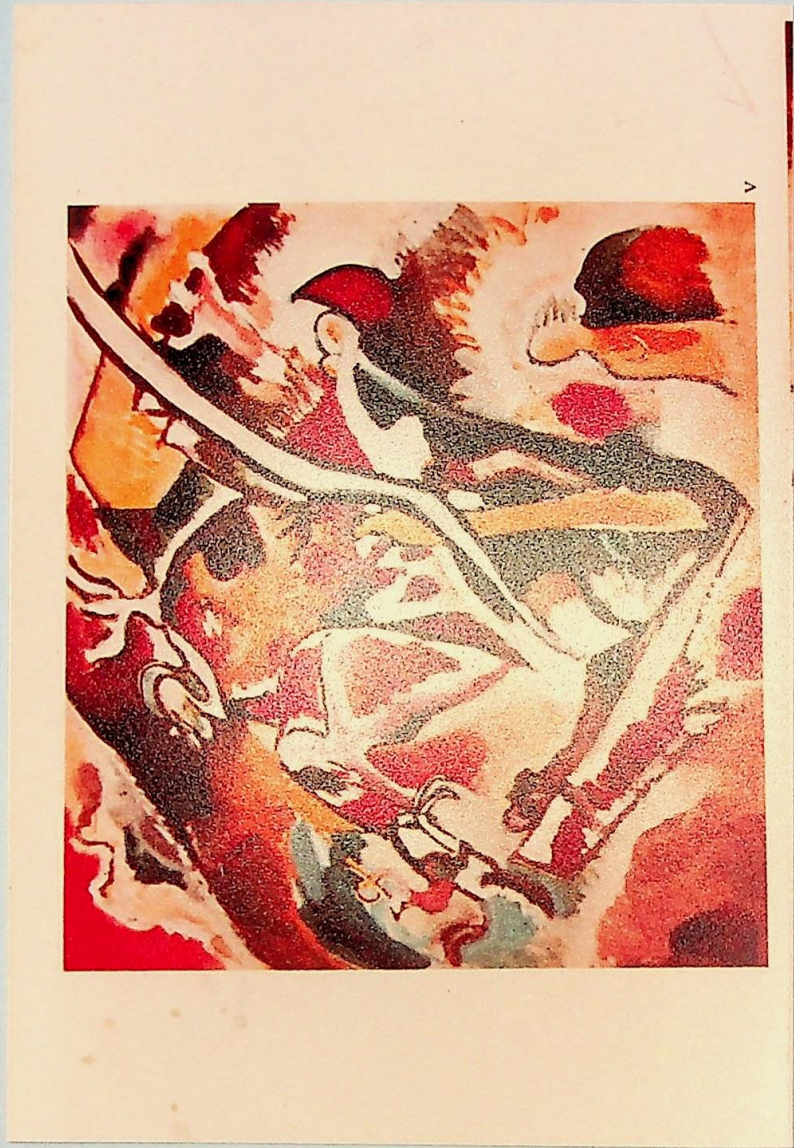
KANDINSKY -  
IMPROVISATION 11 - 1910.





KANDINSKY -  
IMPROVISATION 1914





KANDINSKY - DELUGE - 1914.



Black, according to Kandinsky, was the colour symbolising death. It was the deep, immovable, inward-looking colour, the end to which everything came. The end after which things could only begin again. So then can the painting be seen as an outward movement from black. This continual effect of inward and outward movement is something, perhaps, like a forward and reverse winding of a film reel. In the painting, elements appear which emphasise this point about re-emergence of life. Pictorially, because of the floating organic-type of form in front of the hole, prevents it from breaking up the painting too much. But because it is not an exact replica of anything in particular, it does have certain qualities of organic life in its primal stage. The swirl of the paint beneath it, only heightens this feeling. I feel that these pictures, except of course in general terms, are difficult to explain. Maybe, these are compositions to be taken visually and emotionally rather than verbally. They were made to create what Kandinsky called a 'spiritual atmosphere' and this was open to all who were willing to receive it. For Kandinsky the spirit of man was of vital importance. It was the primal essence of man, instrumental in making him what he was.

Kandinsky realised that man was intricately bound up with nature. However, no matter how much technology or his ego told him differently and had the ability, through the soul, to become one with nature. This was a plea to people to nurture in themselves, an awareness of themselves and of the world, in terms other than those of pure functionalism and materialism.

As Kandinsky saw it, people needed help in this respect, their 'inner spirit' through long disuse, had become wasted. This atrophication had, he felt, spread throughout the culture and the only way it could be combatted was through 'Art'. As Kandinsky put it himself:-

"The nightmare of materialism, which has turned the life of the Universe into an evil useless game, is not yet past; it holds the awakening soul still in its grip. Only a feeble light glimmers like a tiny star in a vast gulf of darkness".



The 'feeble light' is the soul, and the manifestation of the soul in man, is Art. Art can only be deserving of such a name when it is 'true art' and true art can only exist when it is a response to the inner need of the creator. This applies to any kind of art, be it abstract or realistic. The artist has the responsibility of developing and raising the spirit of man. So long as this is part of him, his methods are of no consequence. Kandinsky realised this and did not reject realism out of hand. What he objected to was the blinkering effect it had on people's perception and what he wished to develop was an art which was more direct in its effect. An art in which the viewer had no frame of reference other than what was in front of him. In order to do this Kandinsky needed a new 'language'.

"The Artist must have something to say,  
for mastery over form is not his goal  
but rather the adapting of form to its  
inner meaning". 8

Kandinsky's new language shall be discussed fully in the following chapter, Chapter 3.



Marc - Kandinsky

Kandinsky was not alone in this period of producing pictures with the theme of destruction and confusion flowing through them. Such scenes of destruction also appear in the works of Kandinsky's contemporaries in the Blue Rider Group. One such person was Franz Marc (1880 - 1916). Marc along with Kandinsky formed the Blue Rider in 1911, as mentioned earlier. The group's aim was not to represent a particular style, but, rather, to show through, variety of form, the many ways in which the artist can express his 'inner desire'. This inner spiritual motivation was the common ground of the artists within the group. The total devotion to this concept of 'inner necessity' united such different painters along with Kandinsky, Marc, Mache, Klee and French painters, Braque and Delaunay. Marc studied philosophy and theology and, when they formed the 'Der Blaue Reiter' group, Marc found people of his own mind whom he needed and had been looking for.

Marc loved animals, and because of this love, dogs, horses and other animals, take a high stand in his pictures. Marc wrote during the war that:-

"the impious people around me (about all the men), do not arouse my real feelings, while the animal's innocent attitude towards life evokes all that is good in me". 9

His pictures of the animals are like the celebration of a message full of hope. They are a kind of fairy-paradise, in which the animal, transfigured by its participation in the universe, becomes the expression of a religious feeling. His animals represented purity and goodness. Marc had a similar rejection of materialism and this motivated his pictures. He found more meaning and spirituality even in his animals to that of mankind. His pictures are revelations of his mystic feeling of oneness with the universe.

PAGE 46. (COVER FOR DER BLAUE REITER.)



In his painting of 1912 In The Rain, blue, red, yellow and white, in the shape of a dog, take the leading role here. Marc thought in terms of areas of colour, which are full of crystalline refraction and which overlap here and there - in accordance with the superimposed planes, as is quite evident here. Trees are enclosed within the colour structure, along with female nudes superimposed again, into the forest landscape scene. The colours in this picture are extremely varied, from light greens to muddy browns, and confused sharp-like images appear here and there. The only clear visible object is the dog in the bottom right-hand corner of this image. Like Kandinsky blue horse-rider representing the good element, we perhaps see the same good element in Marc's dog. One can see clearly the similarities between Kandinsky's and Marc's works, despite the obvious difference in subject-matter and application of colour, their conceptions of abstract painting seem to be the same.

These two artists were basically reached by a similar Expressionism, they were motivated by a similar rejection of materialism and pushed the distortion towards total abstraction. But despite their theory of total abstraction, we can see Marc's In The Rain has a frame of reference which, perhaps, as Kandinsky claims, the viewer would latch on to, that is the dog in the foreground. Because of the superimposed background - with its sharp confusion of colour, the viewer would obviously hang on to this realistic image of the dog, using this as the beginning of the spectators interpretation of the overall picture. However, we see in another painting called the Fate of the Animals (1913) a perhaps obvious forest scene. But this is harder to read, as this is not just a forest scene, but a comment on all the most threatening aspects of nature. To depict the particular was not enough for Marc or the other true Expressionists.

Pages 47.48.



This image of a world in the process of being torn asunder, in the midst of an apparently mythical forest, fires rain down from the heavens, the stumps of once standing trees jut out from the burning under brush, animals shriek in terror, as if they were running to escape the inescapable. This work is both powerful and pervasive because of the vision of destruction and doom presented here. Despite all the apparent confusion rendered in Fate of the Animals, the composition, nevertheless, remains one of strict order, even balance and overall unity, similar to Kandinsky's Improvisation 11 of 1910, depicting a war scene. The drama of Fate of the Animals, has its origin in the upper-hand corner of the painting. There, we notice three sharp, jagged, triangular forms moving, with what appeared to be an intense velocity, in a diagonal direction downward across the dark blue of the night sky. The rich, red, glowing presence of these forms give them the appearance of some type of cosmic or supernatural flame.

Again in the upper left-hand section of the painting, we see two green horses reacting to the terror, which is perhaps about to engulf them. The larger of the two horses, the one farther to the left, its long neck twisted to the right of the picture, its mane ablaze, shrieks in what must be its final moment of agony. This motif of the fleeing horse has a tradition in Marc's work, one that preoccupied him until his death.

We can see here that Marc, as with Kandinsky, painted scenes of cataclysm and destruction, 1913 - 14, as if prophetic of the first world war. Marc's career ended sadly, when he died in action during the war at an early age of 36, in March 1916.

Pages 48, 38.





KANDINSKY -

COVER OF THE BLAUE REITER almanach - 1911.





FRANZ MARC -

IN THE RAIN -





FRANZ MARC -

FATE OF THE ANIMALS -



## FOOTNOTES

(Chapter 11. Spiritual Expression).

1. Kandinsky (Translated by M. T. H. Sadler).  
Kandinsky - Concerning the Spiritual in Art.  
Part 1. Page 11. Bib. No. 4.  
(Quoted by Virchow).
2. Kandinsky (Translated by M. T. H. Sadler).  
Kandinsky - Concerning the Spiritual in Art.  
Part 1. Page 13. Bib. No. 4.  
(Quoted by E. P. Blavatsky).
3. Klee, Felix.  
The Diaries of Paul Klee. 1898 - 1918.  
Page 232. Bib. No. 5.  
(Quoted by Paul Klee).
4. Mitch, Erwin.  
The Art of Egon Schiele.  
Page 4. Bib. No. 9.  
(Quoted by Hermann Bahr, from his book Expressionism,  
Delphin, Munich. 1916. p.p. 43-43).
5. Long, Washton.  
Kandinsky - Development of an Abstract Style.  
Page 160 (under notes). Bib. No. 8.  
(Quoted by E. P. Blavatsky).
6. Kandinsky (Translated by M. T. H. Sadler).  
Kandinsky - Concerning the Spiritual in Art.  
Part 11. Page 47. Bib. No. 4.  
(Quoted by Kandinsky).



FOOTNOTES (Contd.)

7. Museum of Modern Art.  
Catalogue - The Symbolist Aesthetic, 1980.  
Page 17. Bib. No. 23.  
(Quoted by Kandinsky).
8. Kandinsky (Translated by M. T. H, Sadler).  
Kandinsky - Concerning the Spiritual in Art.  
Part 11. Page 54. Bib. No. 4.  
(Quoted by Kandinsky).
9. Levine, Frederick S.  
The Apocalypse Vision - The Art of Franz Marc,  
as German Expressionism.  
Page 81. Bib. No. 6.  
(Quoted by Franz Marc).



### CHAPTER 3

#### THE USE OF LANGUAGE

ALL Art no matter how representational it may seem, can also be said to be 'abstract' in some degree. All representational paintings, for example, are two-dimensional objects, and if the artist is not simply a photographic slave to what is in front of him, he is not going to be satisfied in acting like one.

As Emile Bernard's famous comment points out that 'every painting is an arrangement of line, mass and colour and these elements are at the disposal of the artist to compose in whatever way he finds necessary'. This factor has been a property of art down through the ages. During the Renaissance, which was concerned much with composition, that had more to do with balance, rhythm, perspective, anatomy, classical proportions and harmony, etc., than any other kind of naturalism. In Raphael's School of Athens the harmonic balancing of the whole composition is just as important as the treatment of the figures. Furthermore, again in the stylistic extravagances of the Mannerists, colour and form are exaggerated, often to the point of absurdity. John Constable, for example, the great exponent of naturalism in landscape painting in the last century, was not above adding a tree or two, when it suited his purpose. So it can be seen that the artists of history were often concerned with elements of 'picture-making', pattern, composition, etc., which had nothing to do with naturalism. They do were concerned with conveying a feeling or expression, and they realise that to do this a certain amount of juggling had to be done.

However, they were still limited in what they could achieve by the fact that everything had to be done within a realistic framework. Kandinsky on the other hand worked himself out of his confinement until he reached a stage where he was using the basic elements of painting, those of colour and form, to achieve his aim.

Everything in the world has something to say to us that is of itself. Whether we understand its message, whether we understand even part of it, is another matter.

Pages 54 & CONSTABLE'S FLATFORD MILL. Page 55.



Kandinsky believed that the 'pure elements' were capable of influencing our 'inner experiences' and that colour in particular was a means of direct impact on the soul. In Concerning the Spiritual In Art he formulates a list of the various properties of colour. Yellow, for example, is an aggressive colour which is best suited to a sharp-pointed form, like a triangle. Blue, on the other hand, is a strong, deep, reflective colour and finds its formal equal in a circle, while the mature glowing intensity of red corresponds with the steadiness of the square. As can be seen these associations of colour and form are not arrived at through the various process of comparison with heat and cold. The investigation goes deeper than that, to the point where they reveal something of their true natures. The physical associations of the yellow disc mean the sun, or the blue triangle meaning a sharp frosty morning, are not of use here.

This link is made through similarity of primal or original meaning and effect. However, that is not to say that the combinations cannot be varied, or at least do/so would cancel out the effect. The variations possible, first of all with the primary forms and colours then secondary colours, and further to that the merging or destruction of different forms, provide endless combinations over a wide area of imagery. Although Kandinsky did not go into pure form until he joined the Bauhaus, in the 1920's some of the more simplified paintings of the late 1900's and very early 20's show this mutation of form.

In Red Spot 2 (1921) yellow curved shape towards the bottom of the picture is a combination of the Arc and the triangle gives the effect of smooth movement, while the muted yellow is glowingly restrained but only just so. Compare this then with the harshness of the yellow triangle to the top of the picture. This, given even the fact of its small size, stands out as shrill and startling as a piercing whistle. Then the Red Spot itself, containing elements of both the square and the circle, is heavy, solid and quiet. Again this can only be a very pale and general explanation of the way they work, no amount of words could get the effect across as surely as could the picture itself.

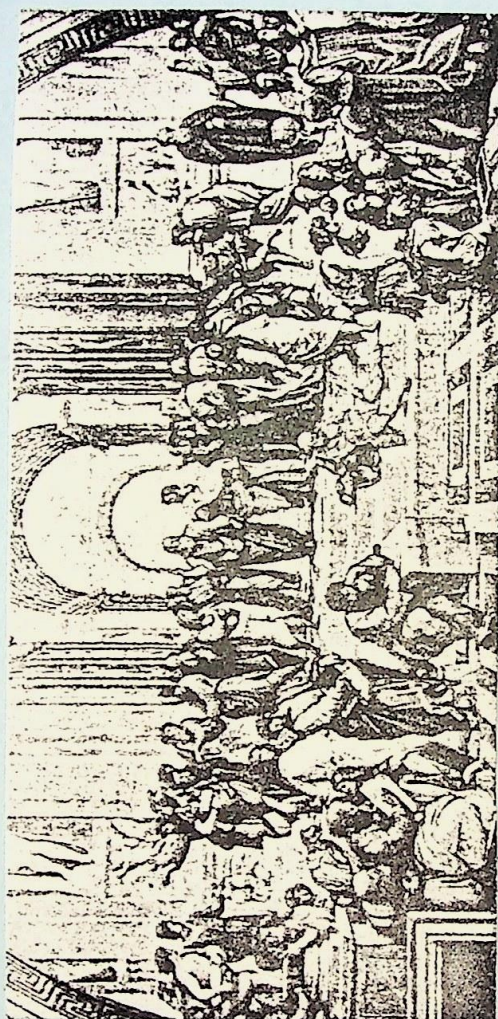


In each colour also, Kandinsky describes a particular movement. Yellow explodes out the way, coming at the viewer and spreading out over the picture plane, and Kandinsky considered it to be the visual equivalent of a blind human stubbornness which tries to conquer all obstacles, head on. Because it came at the viewer it was a bodily colour. Blue on the other hand was the most spiritual of all the colours, it moved in upon itself and back and away from the viewer. Green then was static colour when the two constituents, yellow and blue, were equally mixed. Any preponderance of one over the other though marked a corresponding movement away from neutrality in the green. So colours have their own properties of movement and when they are combined with the formal movement of lines and shapes, the possibilities of variation become endless.

The relative size of the various elements is also important in the composition of a work. A preponderance of green in a picture can be used either to drown out or to enhance certain other colours. In White Line of 1920 for example, the soft green background and the earthy brown corner pieces set the mood of the piece. However, this is not due simply to their colour. How different would the mood be for example, if the activity in the centre rested on a plain white background, or maybe if the two bottom corners were missing? Large does not necessary mean strong or dominating. The small yellow circle at the bottom of Black Spot (1921) is tougher, more self-assured, than the morphous black shape above it, that is collapsing in on itself.

Pages 51.58.





Raphael -

School of Athens.





John Constable-

FLATFORD MILL  $\approx$  1817





KANDINSKY -  
RED SPOT II - 1921.





KANDINSKY -

WHITE LINE - 1920.



ATALOGUE RAISONNÉ



KANDINSKY -

BLACK SPOT - 1921.



Kandinsky, it seems had a great gift for colour, one that came naturally to him, but it seems that line and form did not come so easily. For these he had to struggle and work harder with. He sought for complete awareness of the functions and the relationships of different graphic elements and their interaction on each other in a complex pictorial situation. His whole career, one could say, was a continual process of innovation and development. This investigation into, and the use of the nature of colours and forms was all very well, but in order to create anything that would have any kind of lasting artistic value, it was necessary to provide some kind of structural foundation to the whole. A clue to this, Kandinsky found in music. As we have seen before, Kandinsky had many years earlier become aware of the connection between colour and music when he heard Wagner's Lohrengrein. Wagner's use of native German myth was to create a flowing music drama in place of traditional opera. Kandinsky was also aware of the fact that line was the visual equivalent of the beat or rhythm. So it was on this basis that he began constructing pictures, getting to know first the various properties of the various elements available to him, and then in the same manner as a musical composer responding purely to his own 'inner need'. Again in this direction, connections between colours and particular musical sounds. Yellow is high, shrill and painful, while different shades of blue range from the lightness of flute to the depth of an organ. Red also varies with shade, from the harsh trumpet blasts of a light warm red to the middle tones of the cello which correspond to madder. Green is the placid, middle tones of the violin and while white marks the short stop or pause for harmonic effect in music, black marks its final ending.



Kandinsky seems to be painting music as he broke down the barrier between painting and music. He has given us visual impressions or interpretations of a rhythm in music. Kandinsky set up a harmony in painting, as it were, the image flowing with lyrical impressions. It can be only be presumed, however, that the lines and colours have the same effect as harmony and rhythm in music have on the truly musical. Because of his work being non-representational the spectator might find it difficult to associate his work with music, and the lack of such knowledge would probably make this almost impossible, unless of course one studied his writings first and then his paintings.

Music has been interpreted in colour before Kandinsky's colour-music theory, but these have been done with reference to music and compositions from representative associations. Kandinsky, along with Picasso, painted without any reference to music and with compositions wholly divorced from representative association to the spectators point of view. (It is difficult to know who exactly was the true-leader in this field, Kandinsky or Picasso to paint non-representative art). It is my belief that Kandinsky wanted to endow painting with the same properties as music - he was producing examples of the 'new symphonic composition', in which the simplistic element of melody was as far as possible missing. But it would be wrong to continually harp back to music in his paintings from the spectators point of view. Primarily they are visual material and just as a book could not hope to do justice to the description of a song, neither can music continually provide an explanation for painting.

In these paintings 'balance', 'rhythm', 'harmony', 'discord', 'movement' are all apparent and these terms are properties of the musical world and the same musical terms have come to be used in the language of visual art. These are properties which have a universal effect on all of us. They are not perhaps a property of one discipline. The methods by which we make use of them, i.e., singing, dancing, painting, etc. are simply that :- methods which cater to our various senses.



FOOTNOTES

(Chapter 111 - The Use of Language).

1. Long, Washton.

Kandinsky - The development of an abstract style.

Chapter 3. Page 50. Bib. No. 8.

(Quoted by Maurice Denis from his book Theories:  
1870 - 1910. Paris 1930. Page 3).



## CONCLUSION

By the outbreak of war in 1914, Kandinsky had established a reputation as one of the leading proponents of Abstraction. He created a new artistic language, which, when it was completely formulated bore no resemblance to anything, which had gone before. Certainly the idea of creating the spirit of an object by copying it directly is something which was widespread before Kandinsky, generally, it was found in cultures outside Europe, and in turn influenced many of the ideas of the early modern movement. However, a completely abstract art is something that had never happened before and is wholly a 20th Century phenomenon, but abstraction did exist in various forms in Eastern Art before this, eg. Persian 'Kilims'.

The 'craze' Kandinsky's paintings and essays caused at the time and the varying interpretations of the meaning of the work 'Abstract' led to much misunderstanding of his intentions and purpose. Certainly, during the course of this thesis, I found it extremely difficult to see connections between his writings on the 'spirit' and the 'spirit' in his paintings. Despite my admiration and respect for Kandinsky's work, I feel that his paintings do not express the 'spiritual' or manifest the same ideas as his writings. Possibly, as I have mentioned, the spirit of an object is not directly copied and one finds it extremely hard to associate it then with anything direct or concrete. The only way, I found understandable to relate the 'spirit' in his paintings was to read his writings prior to viewing and then refer this back to his work. It could be possible that a lot of what he wrote was simply theories and ideas which did not go further than his writing, and were not simply applied to his works - paintings. Although, he retained key-dash motifs to heighten, as they do, the spectators awareness of his content he dissolved much of his imagery.

One also has to remember, when studying his paintings, his interest in Folk Art and his experiments with theatrical productions which are placed in relation to his development of an Abstract Style. But of course, one can simply ignore all this and take the paintings as they are but they just become an image of meaningless colour and lines - the marks not telling us anything and the information not clear.



At the time Kandinsky was developing as an Artist, there was a great need to question everything and form one's own ideals on life and 'inner life'. Among the many writers and theosophists were Freud, Steiner, Hermann Bahr, Maurice Denis, Yeats and Madame Blavatsky. It seemed to be important to find individuality and self-spirituality at that time of ever growing materialistic values. Intellectual circles and esoteric groups were quite 'fashionable' and perhaps as Madame Blavatsky points out that movements such as the Theosophical Society and the Blue Rider Group promised popularity in a public future! I think Kandinsky was attempting to resolve the special dilemma presented by abstraction, and although he was attracted to the idea of abstraction as a powerful method for expressing anti-materialistic values, he did not eliminate all imagery from his paintings during 1909 and 1914. The same ideas apply to Franz Marc and his work already discussed in Chapter 2 (Spiritual Expression).

There was also a need for spiritual revolution in painting that would let artists express their own inner lives in abstract, non-material terms at that time, just as musicians do not depend upon the material world for their music, so artists should not have to depend upon the material world for their art.



In this thesis, I have tried to understand Kandinsky's main concerns. Generally, it can be said that his Art is a growth out of Fauvism and Folk Art, and that he was trying to communicate with the mental or spiritual essence of man. Specifically, that is in the case of individual paintings, it becomes more difficult. Obviously he is not going to say the same thing over and over again. Yet, how do we tell the difference? How can we know the difference in order for it to be useful to us? First of all a study can be made of the Section on Form and Colour in Concerning the Spiritual in Art. This provides the basis for the language he used and developed. (However, no language can possibly be absorbed and understood in a short space of time). To gain fluency in any language is a slow process. To gain it in a language that is so removed from our everyday 'rational' way of thinking is a further barrier that has to be overcome.

However, there is another 'path' open to us - that upon which all visual art depends for its existence - our eyes. In order to appreciate a sign or a book, we must first of all be able to read. Without understanding, the letters and words are just a mass of marks that bear no relation to their meaning. Because it is a visual thing it is more direct and because we 'see' with our bodies as much as our eyes, the effect is 'felt'.

What then is the precise meaning of each picture? It is the painting itself, a combination of its own means and elements, and the emotions, ideas and beliefs of the artist. Its character and appearance and therefore, its effect, change in direct proportion to a change in any of the above.

This might seem rather vague and imprecise to the reader, but as far as I understand them, the paintings are what they are and convey what they convey. As Kandinsky said himself "...let the picture speak for itself".

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