

On Painting Techniques



Vasily Kandinsky was always concerned with the craft of painting. In his review of the Munich Session exhibition of 1899 he discusses the technique of tempera painting on canvas, while in several letters of 1900 to a young painter in Odessa, Andrei Andreievich Pappé, Kandinsky describes how to prepare a canvas and suggests what a basic palette should be. Pappé was also working in sculpture and references to it have been deleted. The letters are in a private collection in Switzerland and were first published in Valery Turchin, *Kandinsky in Russia*, 2005. The paintings are from this book. Photograph of Kandinsky in Odessa, 1904.

Extracts from V. Kandinsky, “From Our Correspondent in Munich”, on the Munich Secession, *Novosti dnya*, Moscow, 15 January 1899, No. 5615, p. 4.

... And now artists are reacting [to all that Scottish fog]. Pure, bold colour, clarity and brightness of paints are beginning to crop up here and there like bright spots among the paintings enveloped in a dull haze. I can't say with certainty that faint tints will leave the scene soon, but it is possible to foretell a new movement. Here and there shines a bright sun and those twilight areas with their particular mood that until recently were the primary motifs are now being treated differently. Purity and force of colour are beginning to break through the cloudy weather. The Munich exhibition of innovative art, the Secession of this year, paints a good picture of these two movements in modern art....

But from out of this international fog shines a new light, if faintly. This new light is nothing extraordinary or unique but, still, it is taking its first trembling, hesitant steps. Of the founders of that movement we are always happy to see here Claude Monet and the just as great Arnold Böcklin who manages to paint at the same time colourless oleographic paintings and the masterpieces of a great colourist. They are followed by the tempera and oil paintings of other artists seeking purity of tone and the force of the spot. None of those attempting to solve this task in oil paints has managed to express the purity of a strong tone throughout a single piece. Professor L. Herterich of the Munich Academy in

his *Ulrich Guttens* has united strong and pure tones with dirty and boring colours on the armour of an enormous Crucifix....

Colours mixed not with oils but with other binding media, so-called tempera [egg yolk – or egg white, glair – on paper but casein or size on canvas], are a more thankful tool in this quest. We know that when Van Dyck decided to mix his colours with oil, the old tempera paints were soon cast off and their recipes were forgotten. Oil paints, which do not change tone when they dry, attracted artists with its comparative ease of technique. Most artists until recently did not even know of the existence of other paints and the rediscovered recipes for tempera are today not very popular, although their popularity is growing. Now that it is time for a special trend that could be called colourist, brightness, power and, most important, the guaranteed invariability of tempera [these paints are made by factories and by the artists themselves using ancient recipes and modern experiments and trials] should attract more attention. But the novelty and extreme difficulty of using the tempera technique frighten newcomers. This technique requires many years of special training with still no guarantee of success. Sometimes an artist who has painted with tempera for years is forced to return to oils since he does not know a satisfactory recipe to prepare or paint with those tempting and enigmatic pigments....

In addition to being a difficult technique, tempera also frequently has a dangerous way of attracting the artist with an extreme range of colour which only the most talented and knowledgeable artists are able to unite....

Four Letters to Andrei Andreievich Pappé

February 22, 1900, Munich

Dear Andrei Andreievich,

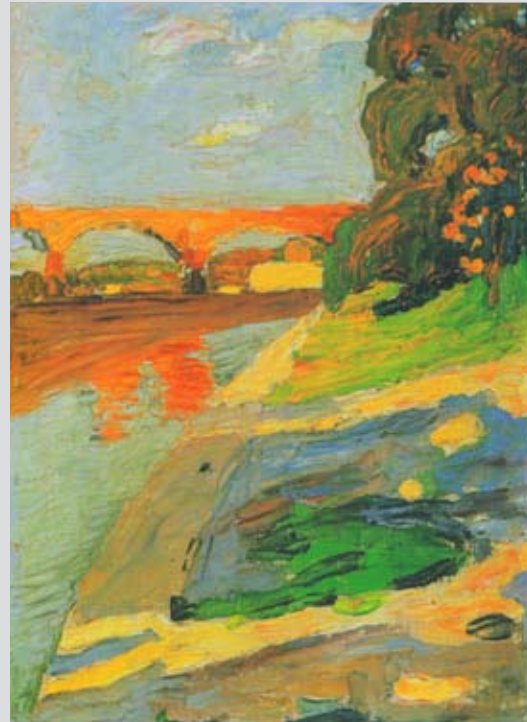
... Here is my favourite canvas recipe: 1) Stretch a rough canvas on a frame. They sell special tongs for stretching. Before stretching, push in the wedges and hammer the frame soundly on the corners. 2) Cover the stretched canvas with a solution of (best) joiner's glue. To make the solution (for a small canvas), take, for example, 200 centilitres of water and drop in 12 grams of finely mixed glue. Let stand for one day and one night or thereabouts until the glue expands and becomes soft. Then heat it slightly until the glue completely dissolves (but do not boil). Allow the solution to cool and then use it to cover the canvas on both sides so that it is soaked through (use a wide painter's brush). Allow the canvas to dry. 3) Add the best quality chalk to the solution, mix well and use the same brush to cover the canvas, making an even layer. Allow to dry. If the layer is thin apply another. The chalk solution should look like thin sour cream and drip from the brush. Before painting you may cover the canvas in oil (poppy or nut) with an equal part of turpentine. Before painting remove the wedges. Change the proportions according to your taste and purposes. On such canvases the paints stay wet for a long time so you can work the canvas over well before they dry. The main thing to remember is that the more glue you use and the less oil, the less it fades. I have had a lot of trouble with my canvases this winter in particular. I know many ways but think that the one I have described here is the most convenient for a beginning painter, if only because it is easy to prepare....

Your V. K.

March 25, 1900, Munich

Dear Andrei Andreievich,

...If you are able, send a painting. Here the beginning is also important. Worry less about failure because too often a brilliant beginning results in a soap bubble. In my experience, precocious geniuses (I am not referring only to talented people) turn out to be dependent, a kind of "parasitic" plant. One who has his own soul and his own eyes may, of course, never achieve anything but when he does, he creates something whole and important. It is easier to take ready-forms found in the hands of others and then come to something finished. On the other hand, I think it is better to achieve nothing but use one's own means. Try to find some decorator's paints



1 • V. Kandinsky, *Munich near River*, 1901
Oil on cardboard, 12 x 9 cm
Stadlische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich

in Odessa. They are much less expensive and will do at the beginning. They do lack some colours (cobalt, for example). You can complement them with some good artist's paints. I wish you success with all my heart....

Your V. K.

April 21, 1900, Munich

Dear Andrei Andreievich,

... Still lifes are very popular here with beginners. On occasional visits to the Azbe School, I have seen how this helps students to understand colour. You should take a bright background of a particular colour and place objects of bright and definite colours in the foreground (here people prefer oranges, lemons, radishes and other brightly coloured vegetables; stuffed birds with bright feathers, clay jugs, blue pots, etc.). Draw these things first as definite areas, conveying only the general tone of each. This way it is much easier to understand the purity, individuality and definition of tones that nature presents to our eyes. I have long been attracted to such a technique, but how difficult it was for me to rid myself of the murky lenses of Serov, Korovin and Levitan! These days, brightness and strength of tone are chasing away

the fog across Europe. To tell the truth, many have seen an old friend beyond the mists, oleography. Achieving harmony of gray tones and half-tones is not an easy task, but harmony of purity and strength is even harder.

I wish you success and patience. I congratulate you with all my heart on your one-and-a-half-month vacation. Draw small things with defined light and shade. Bright spots of sunlight and shadows. If you like, I will send you a list of the most necessary and lasting pigments....

Your V. K.



May 15, 1900, Munich

Dear Andrei Andreievich,

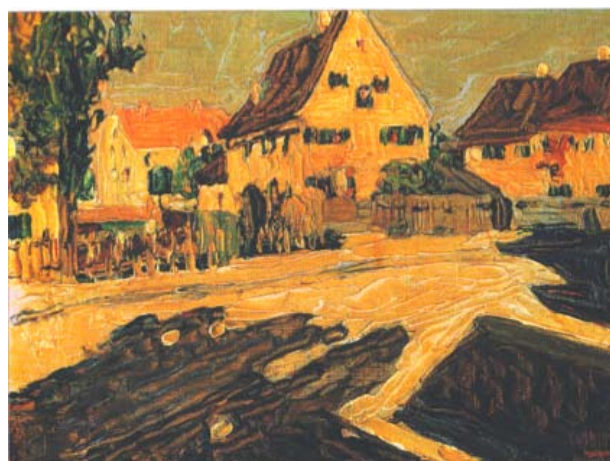
I have been unable to write to you about pigments, Andrei Andreievich, because I wanted to think at my leisure in order to give a better account. There are many ways of becoming acquainted with paints, and also many ways of working with them. I will attempt to describe to you what I think brings the best results (as far as my experience handling other work allows). There is the external aspect. Apply the pigments to the palette in a definite order decided upon once and for all (blue with blue, etc.) and in a particular sequence because you need to know the outward appearance of your palette like a musician knows his keyboard so that when you work you can look at the palette as little as possible. Here is a good but rather exaggerated saying of one artist: "You should look at Nature all the time, at your canvas some of the time, and never at your palette." This is an invaluable rule for making live studies. Of course, when you seek harmony, the rule changes slightly. Squeeze out plenty of paint so that you can have a rich, full brush. You need plenty of brushes to hand in order to avoid painting with dirty ones. In the beginning, clean the palette often to avoid being tempted by ready-mixed paints, but each time look for a new mixture. The palette can easily be cleaned using a wide metal palette knife and, if you like, clean the palette afterwards with turpentine or kerosene (this tastes bad). Wipe the brushes first with paper or a rag then wash them in laundry soap (French, I think) in warm or cold water. Wash the brushes every day otherwise they will go bad. If you forget to clean the palette or brushes and the paint dries, it is easy to remove the paint by soaking in turpentine or kerosene. I have already discussed part of the inner aspect while discussing the outer aspect here. Here is another important thing: 1) try to find tones on the palette as little as possible. Take pure pigment whenever possible and apply it to the canvas, then another colour just as pure, and so on. In no case should you spend a long time mixing colours on your palette; long mixing will lead to dirty colours and reduced

impact. If the tone is not successful, seek in the beginning, not in an unsuccessful tone, and do not settle for a compromise. If an unsuccessful tone has already made its way to the canvas, remove it with a palette knife and apply fresh paint. This is so difficult to explain in a letter, especially without seeing the works. If I were to come to Odessa in the summer I would work with you. Seek light, strength, colours. For nothing in Nature is bereft of colour, there is no white or black, colour is burning and shining everywhere and God save us from ignoring that. Nature is the best teacher in this respect. Understand Nature as you will but take what you can of her riches and revelations.

In my opinion, when studying pigments you need to go from the simple to the complex. Nowadays factories make hundreds of varieties, enough to make our heads spin (endless "permutations" and "combinations"!). At first the palette must be as simple as possible. With time your eye will become spoiled and you will need refined delicacies. The longer it is simple, the better. To start with buy - white: zinc white; greens: chromium oxide and permanent; blues: cobalt and ultramarine blue; reds: English [ochre], Turkish [ocre], dark madder lake and red lead; yellows: light ochre, natural terra di Siena, light and orange cadmium; probably Indian yellow as well; browns: burnt terra di Siena; you don't need any black mummy.* The next time I will write you about preparing the canvas. It is good that you are only able to make a study "at a distance"....

Your V. K.

[*English and Turkish reds are ochres from these countries. Indian yellow is a bright yellow pigment made from the urine of cows fed on mango leaves. Mummy was originally made from powdered mummies; it was often replaced with dark ochres, also called mummy. Editor]



2 • V. Kandinsky, *Sunlit Street*, c. 1900
Oil on canvas stretched on cardboard, 23 x 32 cm.
Odessa Art Museum

July 25, 1900, Munich

Dear Andrei Andreievich,

... Your painted studies do not have what was required. In painting we must above all seek contrast, i.e., apply the whole force of your palette to create an abyss between light and shade. Half-tones, half-shades, and all kinds of variations in light and shade, all of this comes later. Otherwise you will waste a lot of time on difficult studies. When studying nature (I mean becoming acquainted with her), the first thing is to convey her strength, as far as the palette allows. This is achieved through extreme contrasts between light and shade (especially in the sun). Don't think that the more white you use the more light there will be in the painting. On the contrary! White kills light. Try to convey it using other light colours and, most important, by contrast with shade. What would you say if I forced you to play a middle

octave on the piano? What can be stronger and more expansive than nature? Use the whole keyboard!

And don't paint whole scenes in the beginning, only small areas: the corner of a house, part of a wall, a fence, two or three stones, etc. But make sure you always have sun and shade. Paint still lifes in *plein aire* with light and shade. In a word, set yourself easier tasks....

Your V.K.

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