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From Object to Abstract in Kandinsky's Painting, 1913



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Kandinsky, challenging the “literariness” of the old painting, wanted to bring art closer to music. Just as sounds sometimes give birth in the consciousness to unclear, hazy images, so his paintings were to awaken in the viewer that which languished there indistinct, unsaid and unperceived. Taking on similar associations in their work, the Surrealists saw Kandinsky as one of their “own”.

In 1914, reminiscing about the creation of *Composition II* (1910), the artist said that it was “painting without a theme” and that at the time he “had not dared take a theme as a starting point”.¹ Yet there were definite themes at the heart of his quests, moreover, they could be “glimpsed”, occasionally even intentionally, in the final result. Kandinsky’s contemporaries noted the allegorical nature of his paintings in which could be traced the themes of the Apocalypse, heaven, war, the Flood, etc.. On the eve of the world wars and revolutions they were seen as visions, as prophecy, which fit with the view of life adopted by the European artistic intelligentsia. Suffice it to recall here Alexander Blok’s “listening to the age”.

The American collector, Arthur Jerome Eddy, asked the artist whether it was possible to see cannons and people in his paintings and Kandinsky answered:

“The viewer sees a reminder of reality, sometimes more insistent, sometimes less. This is a secondary resonance evoked by things in all those who feel.”²

In *Improvisation 30 Cannons* (1913, Art Institute of Chicago, 1•), we really can see the barrels of cannons. But Kandinsky said of this that,

“cannons in themselves are not the content of the painting. Perhaps this is more a sign that takes the place of a particular thing, a particular phenomenon.”³



1 • *Improvisation 30 Cannons*, 1913, Oil on canvas, 110 x 110 cm. Arthur Jerome Eddy Collection, Chicago Art Institute of Chicago

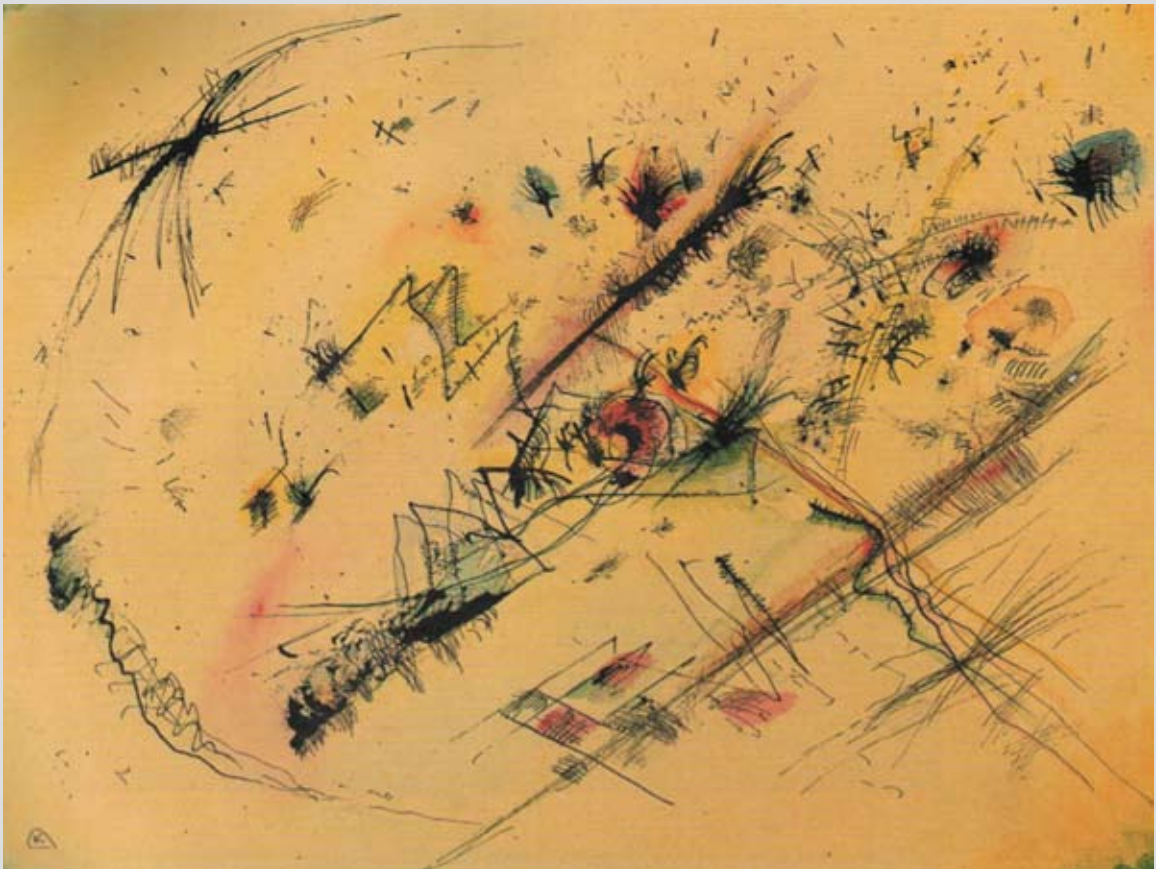
So it was possible to find a “relation” to reality. In an article about Kandinsky Christian Zervos wrote that, “Kandinsky’s art is never abstract”.⁴ But the matter is more complex than that. And Kandinsky was inconsistent in his explications.



2 • *Black Lines I*, 1913, Oil on canvas, 129.4 x 131.1 cm. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum of Art, New York



3 • *Study for Painting with White Border*, 1913, Watercolour, India ink, crayon on paper, 30.3 x 24.1 cm. Staatliche Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich



4 • *Study for Bright Painting*, 1913, Watercolour and India ink on paper, 28 x 35 cm. Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg

In his *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* the artist himself contemplated the combination of real and abstract forms. For example, he wrote that,

“The word is an inner sound. Part of that inner sound (or perhaps most of it) is engendered by an object for which the word is a name. But when the object itself is not before the eyes of the listener, only the name, then the listener begins to form an abstract image in his head, an image of the dematerialized object that immediately calls up in the ‘heart’ a kind of vibration.”⁵

He saw the possibility of combining the “veiled with the exposed” and the possibility of,

“to a greater or lesser degree getting along without the figurative and replacing it with either purely abstract or with figurative forms, but these should be totally reworked as abstract forms”⁶.

But,

“artists today are unable to limit themselves to purely abstract forms. These forms are still too imprecise for them. Limiting oneself to the imprecise means robbing oneself of the possibility to turn off the purely human and thus deplete all of one’s means of expression.”⁷

And,

“now we are faced with the question: should we not do away with the object all together, let it loose, cast it out of our reserves and take only the purely abstract fully exposed? This question arises naturally.”⁸

Kandinsky’s entire art was a search for possible solutions. Over time the leaning towards the abstract grew more noticeable especially in 1913.

The painting, *Black Lines I* (Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum of Art, New York) is one good example. (2 •) Although many of the painting’s mysteries show traces of Demeter, Venus and Pan, the path of mutual semantization of forms in which some would become more abstract while others became more real was too successful. The forms complemented each other, turning abstract signs into allusions and meaningful elements into abstractions. This was how the special iconography of motifs came about.

Painting with White Border (1913, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum of Art, New York, in, V. Kandinsky, “Painting with White Border”, herein) is a move towards the abstract. There were about fifteen preparatory works, including drawings, watercolours and

oil paintings in which it can be seen that originally there were motifs of mountains, riders and “philosophers”. Later those “real” objects disappeared. The title itself indicates that there is no connection with reality or Biblical texts, as had recently been the case. Even at the preparatory stages the forms lost their tangibility and took on an abstract appearance. The centre gets “lost” in the painting and all parts become equally important. If in one of his *Compositions* Kandinsky painted a frame, here the shadow of the frame – the “border” – enters the structure of the image, making it even more conditional. From this “border” evolve elements of the background juxtaposed with large forms lying as if “on top of” the background (this can be seen in a number of watercolours and in one of them, just as in the Art Nouveau, bronze paint appears).

The *Black Lines I* and *Bright Painting* (both 1913, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum of Art, New York) are purely abstract. (4 •) Close to them are *Fugue* painted in 1914 (Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York) and *Woodcut V* (Lenbachhaus, Munich) which were intended to evoke musical associations. The *Sixteen Watercolour and Pencil Sketches* (Lenbachhaus, Munich) were created without any link to reality. In the spirit of his new experiments, Kandinsky designed his album, *Sounds* (38 prose poems, 12 colour and 44 black and white woodcuts, Munich, 1912). (5 •)



5 • “... Deeper grow the deep blue wavelets. Scarlet cloth sinks down for good.” From “Hymn”, *Sounds*, Munich, 1912, 88-89

Spots, coloured clouds and mist are soft forms that seem biomorphous and are often given contours reminiscent of the Art Nouveau. They create complex combinations. Lines crisscross them like multicoloured lightning creating an effect of “going to the depths”, trying to “tempt” the viewer into them. These spots “converge” and separate, they grow larger or smaller which, by the way, is not an indication of their real size or distance.

Such painting is spatial and chronologically heterogeneous like the cosmos. We see flashes of distant “perspective spots



6 • Study for *Composition VII*, 1913, Oil on canvas, 78 x 100 cm. Private Collection, Bern

falling into an abyss, as well as those floating out of the abyss to greet them. In Kandinsky's words, this is a "choir of colours... that stormed into my soul from nature".⁹

It is as if, instead of the harmonious tones of the crystal spheres of the Pythagoreans, the music of Wagner sounded in a cosmos disintegrating, self-originating and in motion. In his text, *Reminiscences / Rückblicke* (1913) an analogy was drawn between works of art and the universe: "Painting is the thunderous clash of different worlds.... Technically, each work emerges as the cosmos" and came into existence.¹⁰

As Kazimir Malevich was a portraitist for faceless beings, the knights of the future, showing where they would live in geometrically precise homes, Vasily Kandinsky remained a landscape painter. His paintings are, again, "windows through which we see the cosmos". His pictures are cosmic landscapes and his easel stands in a studio called Earth. Kandinsky visually displayed the cosmic spirit that had enraptured many at the turn of the century.

For this reason, when Kandinsky is figurative, the shadows of people and the silhouettes of real objects are shot through with sparkling radiation and seem to glow. Their scale is free, as are all other kinds of combination. They

are governed by new laws. You need to live in the painting and not look at it from different angles, to rotate inside of it and disappear, forgetting yourself. As he wrote, "It took me several years to find a means of bringing the viewer into the picture so that he would revolve inside it, abandon and dissolve there."¹¹

The forms are born and die. To the artist they are a subjective substance in an objective shell. The work itself is free in spirit and arises, like a living being. In the struggle with the white canvas, the forms appear as people and worlds.¹² Their consciousness is dominated by colour, drawing, construction and number. Kandinsky often thought and wrote of this. In 1910 he began to use the concept of "structure", at that time not widely used. He wrote in the journal, *Apollon*: "It is necessary that... no matter how 'figural' it is there should be a clear or hidden, unchanging and therefore eternal structure underlying it."¹³

He understood structure not only in the spirit of Gestalt¹⁴ but, if we may say so, as a "structuralist", as a connection of parts where the parts and the relationships between them are both important. Here Kandinsky demonstrated his ability to look far into the future and perceive much.

Kandinsky loved interlocking parts, examples of which he found in the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch and the Persian miniatures. Bosch's agglomeration of naturalist elements and fantastic objects becomes, in Kandinsky's works, a combination and "layering" of motifs one on another (the figures of people "on the hill", the riders on a rainbow, etc.). He saw Eastern painting as a combination of that which cannot be combined, a "teeming abundance of details", "thousands of after-sounds, refrains, thousands of echoes, one over the other", of an almost "vertiginous complexity".¹⁵ For him this was a "dream that I carried in my unconsciousness".¹⁶

Kandinsky used a similar principle in his own works. Like the Eastern miniatures, his painting may be "read" in different ways: there is no top or bottom in the traditional sense. As the artist himself wrote, when he saw one of his paintings turned upside down, "I understood once and for all that figural depiction is bad for my paintings".¹⁷

Kandinsky's paintings should be viewed from above, as if floating over them, as Chinese or Japanese art should be contemplated, or as a geographic map is taken in. This principle applied not only to the abstract compositions but to some of the figurative works as well. The watercolour, *The Picnic* (1916, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York) is intended to be viewed from above: a couple depicted in the Rococo-Biedermeier style is seen feasting on an island. Around them "opens wide" the space the couple would have viewed: a lady with a lorgnette, bushes, a river, towers, etc..

All of these objects lean in towards the centre of the picture. The view from above is also assumed in the picture, *Moscow: Red Square* (1916, State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow). In the "glass painting", *Ladies in Crinoline Skirts* (c. 1918, State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow), other spatial coordinates flank the main figurative motif in the form of "borders": miniature houses, fountains. But it is the abstract works that are most appropriately viewed from above (*Black Spot*, 1912, State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow; *Composition V*, Private Collection, Switzerland; *Composition VI*, 1913, State Hermitage, St. Petersburg; *Composition VII*, 1913, State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow; *Painting with White Border*, 1913, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; *Improvisation of Cold Forms*, 1914, State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow; *Black Lines*, 1913, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York). This principle continued to play a role later. In the composition itself, where individual elements seem to soar, they interact based on a principle of mutual balance. We can observe here a device that Kandinsky would use often: identifying a compositional diagonal axis from the upper right hand corner of the painting to the lower left.

Kandinsky did not create forms for the sake of forms because that would be an act of "art for art's sake" which, in contrast to the

Realists, he did not allow. Kandinsky postulated that "beauty of colour and form... is not a sufficient goal for art".¹⁸

According to his aesthetic system, Kandinsky, following a specific tradition that preceded him, considered that form consisted of colour and line. It is the special colour alchemy that is an important aspect of his pictures' effect on the viewer.

Footnotes

- [1] V. Kandinsky, *Kelnskaya lektsiya*, Vol. 1, 325.
- [2] W. Kandinsky, *Complete Writings on Art*, Vol. 1. London: Faber and Faber, 1982, 402-3.
- [3] *Ibid.*, 403.
- [4] C. Zervos, "Note sur Kandinsky", *Cahiers d'art*, Paris, 1934, No. 5-8, 150.
- [5] V. Kandinsky, *O dukhovnom v iskusstve*, 168.
- [6] *Ibid.*, 117.
- [7] *Ibid.*, 115.
- [8] *Ibid.*, 118.
- [9] V. Kandinsky, *Stupen, Tekst khudozhnika*, 271.
- [10] *Ibid.*, 285.
- [11] *Ibid.*, 280.
- [12] *Ibid.*, 285.
- [13] V. Kandinsky, *Pisma iz Myunkhena*, 81.
- [14] See in more detail the chapter, Kandinsky's Theoretical and Critical Writings, in, V. Turchin, *Kandinsky – Theories and Experiments from Various Years*. London and Moscow, 2008, 245-272.
- [15] V. Kandinsky, *Pisma iz Myunkhena*, 74.
- [16] *Ibid.*, 73-74.
- [17] V. Kandinsky, *Stupen, Tekst khudozhnika*, 280.
- [18] V. Kandinsky, *O dukhovnom v iskusstve*, 139.