

VASILY KANDINSKY

## *Painting with White Border, 1913*



Although Kandinsky writes that he was inspired by “powerful impressions I had experienced in Moscow – or more correctly, of Moscow itself”, *Painting with White Border* is considered wholly abstract. In addition to what the artist writes in this short text, he had outlined the abstract elements of *Composition 4* (1911) in 1913 as: “1. Masses (Weights) in the centres and in upper and lower left and right; 2. Contrasts between mass and line, precise and blurred, entangled line and colour, and principal contrast: between angular, sharp movement and light-cold-sweet colours; 3. Running over of colour beyond outlines”, with other aspects mentioned specific to that painting. “Abstract”, then, refers to qualities experienced as sensations and the law of contrast. Photograph: Kandinsky at the age of 47 in his house in Munich, 1913.

For this picture I made numerous designs, sketches and drawings. I made the first design immediately after my return from Moscow in December 1912. It was the outcome of those recent, as always extremely powerful, impressions I had experienced in Moscow – or, more correctly, of Moscow itself. The first design was very concise and restricted. But already in the second design I succeeded in “dissolving” the colours and forms of the actions taking place in the lower right-hand corner. In the upper left remained the troika motif<sup>2</sup> which I had long since harboured within me and which I had already employed in various drawings. This left-hand corner had to be extremely simple, i.e., its impression had to be directly conveyed, untrammelled by the form. Right in the corner are white zigzag forms expressing a feeling I am unable to convey in words. It awakens the feeling, perhaps, of an obstacle, which is, however, ultimately unable to deter the progress of the troika. Described in this way, this combination of forms takes on a wooden quality that I find distasteful. For instance, the colour green often (or sometimes) awakens in the soul (unconsciously) overtones of summer. And this dimly perceived vibration, combined with a cool purity and clarity, can in this case be exactly right. But how distasteful it would be if these overtones were so clear and pronounced that they made one think of the “joys” of summer, e.g., how nice it is in summer to be able to leave off one’s coat without danger of catching cold.

Thus, *clarity* and *simplicity* in the upper left-hand corner, blurred *dissolution*, with smaller dissolved forms vaguely seen in the lower right. And, as often with me, *two centres* (which are, however, less independent than in, e.g., *Composition 6* [November 1913], where one could make two pictures out of the one, pictures with their own independent life, but which have grown together).

The other centre on the right: broad, curving brushstrokes (which cost me a great deal of effort). This second centre has, both towards the outside and on the inside, incandescent (almost white) zigzag forms which bestow upon the rather melancholy character of this curved shape the overtones of an energetic “inner boiling”. Which is extinguished (in a sense, putting it over-explicitly) by the dull blue tones which only occasionally attain a more strident pitch and which, taken together, enclose the upper part of the picture with a more or less egg-shaped background. It is like a small, autonomous realm – not a foreign body that has merely been tacked onto the whole, but more like a flower springing out of the soil. At its edges I have treated this more or less egg-shaped form so that it lies clearly revealed but does not produce too conspicuous or strident an effect. I have, for example, made the edges clearer towards the top, less distinct at the bottom. Following this edge with one’s eye, one experiences an inner sensation like a succession of waves.



1 • *Painting with White Border*, 1913, Oil on canvas, 140.3 x 200.3 cm. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum of Art, New York



2 • *Study II for Painting with White Border*, 1913, Oil on canvas, 70 x 106 cm. State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg

These two centres are separated and at the same time linked by numerous more or less distinct forms which are in part simple patches and areas of green. It was quite unconsciously – and, as I see now, purposefully – that I used so much green. I had no desire to introduce into this admittedly stormy picture too great an unrest. Rather, I wanted, as I noticed later, to use turmoil to express repose. I even used too much green and especially too much Paris blue (a dully sonorous, cold colour), with the result that it was only with exertion and difficulty that I was later able to balance and correct the excess of these colours.

Between the simplicity of the upper part of the picture and the two centres my inner voice insisted upon the application of a technique I like to call *Quetschtechnik* [literally, squashing technique]: I squashed the brush against the canvas in such a way that little points and mounds were produced. I used this technique quite correctly and, once again, with a clear sense of purpose. How necessary this technical disruption was, occurring as it did between the three above-mentioned regions.

At the bottom left there is a battle in black and white which is divorced from the dramatic clarity of the upper left-hand corner by Naples yellow. The way in which black smudges rotate within the white I call “*inner boiling within a diffuse form*”.

The opposite corner, upper right, is also similar but that is itself part of the white border.

I made slow progress with the white border. My sketches did little to help, that is, the individual forms became clear within me – and yet, I could still not bring myself to paint the picture. It tormented me. After several weeks I would bring out the sketches again and still I felt unprepared. It is only over the years that I have learned to exercise patience in such moments and not smash the picture over my knee.

Thus it was not until after nearly five months that I was sitting looking in the twilight at the second large-scale study when it suddenly dawned on me what was missing – the white border.

I scarcely dared believe it. Nonetheless, I went straight-away to my supplier and ordered the canvas. My doubts as to the size of the canvas lasted at most half an hour (Length: 160? 180? 200? [centimetres]).

I treated this white border itself in the same capricious way it had treated me. In the lower left a chasm out of which rises a white wave that suddenly subsides, only to flow around the right-hand side of the picture in lazy coils forming in the upper right a lake (where the black bubbling comes about), disappearing towards the upper left-hand corner where it makes its last, definitive appearance in the picture in the form of a white zigzag.

Since this white border proved the solution to the picture, I named the whole picture after it.

May 1913

Translated from the German in Kandinsky, *Complete Writings on Art* Volume 1 (1901-1921), Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo, Editors. London: Faber and Faber, 1982, 389-391

## Bibliography

*Kandinsky and the Harmony of Silence: Painting with White Border*, Elsa Smithgall, Editor, The Phillips Collection, Washington, D. C., 2011.

## Footnotes

- [1] [In Kandinsky, *Complete Writings on Art* Volume 1 (1901-1921). London: Faber and Faber, 1982, 383-384.]
- [2] [Troika] = three-horse sled. This is what I call the three lines curved at the top which, with different variations, run parallel to one another. The lines of the backs of the three horses in a Russian troika led me to adopt this form.