

JOURNEY TO ENLIGHTENMENT

A Study of Wassily Kandinsky
And His Influence on My Artistic Vision

by

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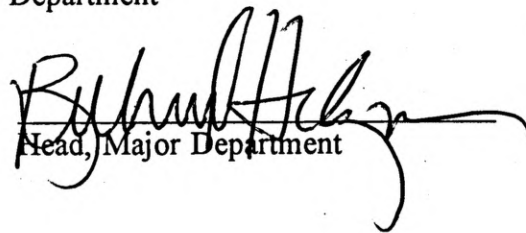


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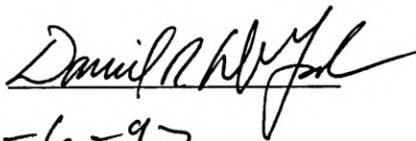
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ABSTRACT

This paper explores Wassily Kandinsky's innovative accomplishments in visual art. A study of his monumental publications and prolific painting provides the basis for the information presented in this biography.

This study focuses on Kandinsky's life from 1886-1944 and his two major publications, *On the Spiritual in Art* and *Point and Line to Plane*. These works have been used as a basis for understanding my own sense of aesthetics as they relate to who I am as an artist.

This exploration led to an in-depth understanding not only of the artist's painting and literature but also how they have influenced my growth as an artist.

INTRODUCTION

Wassily Kandinsky, a Russian of Baltic and Asiatic descent, was born in Moscow in 1866. From his earliest moments, Kandinsky longed to be a painter. "Up to my thirteenth year I wanted to be a painter, since I love painting above all else and it was not easy to fight against this longing. It appeared to me at that time that art was an unallowable extravagance for a Russian.¹ This unquenchable desire to create finally forced him to "throw overboard the results of many years work."² He finally abandoned his career in law and economics and became a painter in 1896 at the age of thirty. In the years that followed, Kandinsky became the father of abstraction and the first person to create a non-objective painting. His ability to transcend political, social, and geographic barriers and even death enabled him to lead the avant-garde of the early twentieth century. He founded artist groups such as the Phalanx School,³ the

¹A quote from an untitled essay, *Autobiographical Note/Postscript*, by Wassily Kandinsky.

²Ibid.

³The Phalanx School and artist association was started by Kandinsky in 1901. He was a painting instructor as well as the President.

New Artist Association,⁴ and Der Blaue Reiter.⁵ These collaborations brought abstraction and non-objective art to the forefront of the collective aesthetic consciousness of his time.

Kandinsky believed that art produced emotions too subtle to be expressed in words and that art must be liberated from the literary regime. According to Kandinsky, the volumes produced about art by this regime "would astonish many an author of the works in question," and he also states, "Art cannot be exhaustively explained either in absolute or in relative terms."⁶ Ironically he wrote prolifically and professionally about art and his work, including two books: *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* and *Point and Line to Plane*, not to mention countless manifestos, essays, and letters. These voluminous writings guide artists seeking their roots in history. I intend to use these publications to follow Kandinsky's creative trek across Europe in order to understand his innovative accomplishments in non-objective painting. Using this experience as a guide, I will explain my attraction to non objective painting and also define the ideas, feelings, and innovations within my own work.

⁴The New Artist Association of Munich was established in 1900 by Kandinsky to organize and promote new art exhibits.

⁵Der Blaue Reiter (The Blue Rider) was the name given to an artist association by Franz Marc and Wassily Kandinsky. The association was established to promote the spiritual in art.

⁶*Autobiographical Note/Postscript*, 1912-1913, an untitled essay by Wassily Kandinsky.

CHAPTER I

Wassily Kandinsky, the son of a wealthy tea merchant, showed his gift in art as a student in Odessa, Russia. He excelled in drawing and painting as well as music. His father realized the young artist's gift and encouraged him by sending his son to private drawing classes. In 1876, Wassily entered secondary school and began to learn German. He traveled extensively with his family and spent the summers in Moscow. Moscow held a special appeal for Kandinsky, and he used the city as the subject for many of his early paintings. At the age of twelve, he purchased his first box of oils. Although he longed to be an artist, the reality of life in Russia pulled him toward a practical career in Law and Economics. By 1886, Wassily was starting to work on his law degree at Moscow University. In spite of his studies, he managed to stay in touch with the art world. He visited the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg and also explored local arts in Moscow. In 1892, he finished law school and married Anya Chirnyakin. He also continued to travel, especially to Paris, France, which seemed to fuel his fire to become an artist.

In 1895, Kandinsky discovered a French Impressionist show in Moscow. Upon seeing Monet's "Haystack,"⁷ Kandinsky reflected, "I had the impression that here painting itself comes into the foreground; I wondered if it would not be possible to go further in this direction."⁸ Kandinsky's experiences with this painting motivated him to seek out the answers to the questions inspired by Monet's work. Soon after this experience, the young artist made his first break from traditional opportunities in Law and Economics and accepted a position as artistic director of a printing firm in Moscow. Kandinsky worked at the position for a year, and, at the age of thirty, had this revelation: "My gradual inner development of which until now I had been unconscious had progressed so far that I could sense my artistic powers with complete clarity, while inwardly I was sufficiently mature to realize with equal clarity that I had every right to be a painter."⁹ Then, in 1896, Kandinsky made his final break from his appointed field of study. He refused a professorship at the University of Dorport in Estonia and left Moscow for Germany to attend art school in Munich. His desire to paint finally overcame any other concern. He must have known from his travels and his experiences with other Russian artists that Germany was the center of experimental art in Europe and that it was a major center for art education. He also must have

⁷One of the most significant events of Kandinsky's life was seeing the painting, "Haystack," by Claude Monet at a French Impressionist show in Moscow in 1895.

⁸A quote from the Preface to the Dover Edition by M.T.H. Sadler of *On the Spiritual in Art* by Wassily Kandinsky, Dover Publication, 1977, Translated by M.T.H. Sadler.

⁹A quote from an untitled essay, *Autobiographical Note/Postscript*, by Wassily Kandinsky.

realized he could receive the traditional training he needed and participate in avant-garde art circles in Munich.

CHAPTER II

Kandinsky enrolled in the Anton Azbe School of Art after arriving in Germany. Perhaps it was his maturity that made him intolerant of the traditional art education at the Azbe school. He was a well-educated and well-traveled lawyer and an innovative thinker. He stated, "I often succumbed to the temptation to cut school and capture Schwabing, the English garden, or the Isor Parks after my fashion with my paint box. Or I stayed at home and tried to do a picture from memory, from study or by imagination."¹⁰

Kandinsky was a poor art apprentice, but he was involved in the avant-garde in Germany and Russia. He wrote his first essay on art in 1901, "Critique on Critics," panning Russian critics' inability to understand and appreciate modern art. Kandinsky was a staunch supporter of modern art and defended the contemporary movement from attacks by the art establishment. Losing interest in Azbe's teaching, he enrolled in the Munich Royal Academy and became a pupil of Franz Von Stuck, who was the leading draftsman in Germany. However, the art apprentice was still not finding the answers

¹⁰A quote from *Kandinsky*, Crown Publishers Inc., 1979, by Michel Conil Lacoste, p. 29.

he sought in traditional art training, and, after a period of time at the Academy, he started his own association in 1901 called the Phalanx Group. Along with teaching in this artists' association, Kandinsky was also responsible for organizing exhibitions. He brought several contemporary artists to Munich, including paintings by Claude Monet in 1903. Also during this time, he created his first woodcuts and began writing poetry, and he was showing his work for the first time with the Phalanx group. In the early 1900s, Kandinsky's painting was narrative and colorful, depicting Russian life in medieval times (see Figure 1).

By 1904, Kandinsky was confidently moving forward in the art world with regular exhibits and publications. Kandinsky's work was heavily influenced by Jugendstil, a German art nouveau movement named after the periodical, *Jugend*.¹¹ This decorative movement, recognized as the modern style, was a radical departure from representational art. Its aim was to free painting from the industrial world with simplified abstraction and bright color (see Figure 2).

When the Phalanx school broke up in 1904, Kandinsky embarked on a four-year trek around Europe. He worked in Holland, Russia, Paris, and Switzerland, setting up art exhibits and completing a series of 12 woodcuts called "Poems Without

¹¹This Munich periodical promoted new attitudes toward art that inspired the Jugendstil movement. *Kandinsky in Munich, the Formative Jugendstil Years*, Princeton University Press, 1979, by Peg Weiss.



Figure 1.

Crusader, 1903

Oil on Cardboard - 29 x 41.5 cm

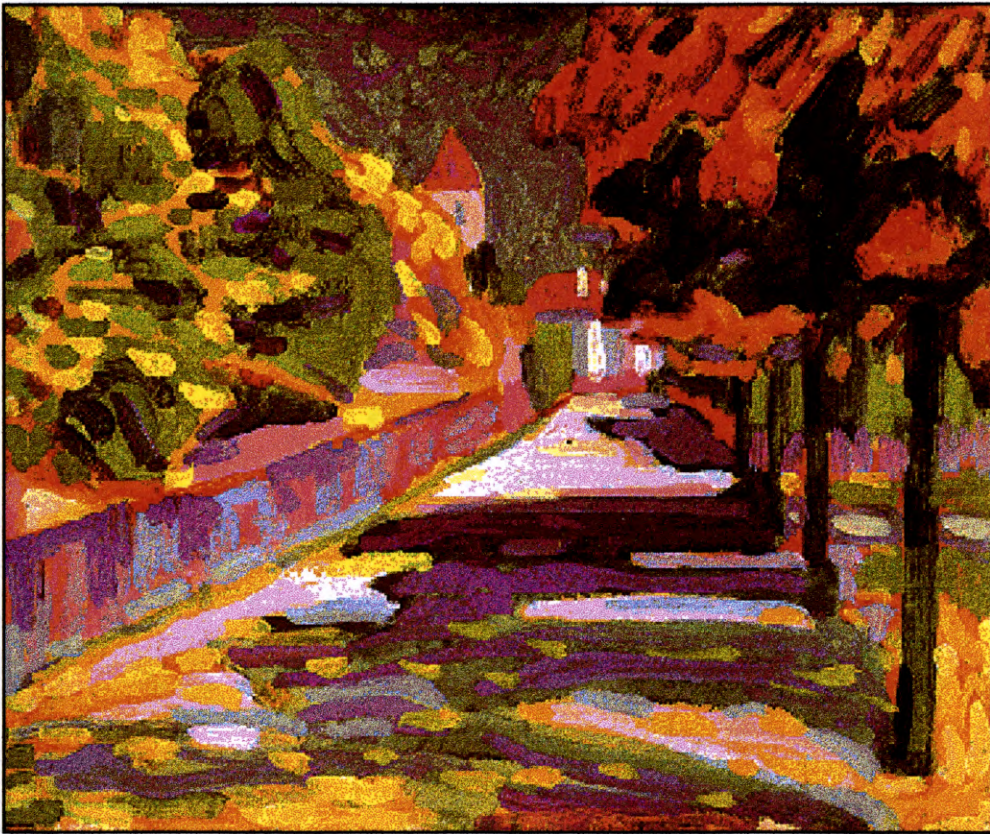


Figure 2.

Autumn in Bavaria, 1908

Oil on Board - 33 x 44.7 cm

Words."¹² In 1908, Kandinsky decided to return to Germany and settle in Upper Bavaria in a village called Murnau. Kandinsky wasted little time in organizing a new association called The New Artists Association, or NKV. The aim of this organization was to promote exhibitions in Germany and abroad and to organize lectures and publications. The first exhibit of the NKV was controversial and solicited negative reviews from the critics and the public. Kandinsky wrote about the incident in the essay, "Letters from Munich," in 1909-1910.

"Indeed the public—that is, those who do look as a matter of disposition—in various forms and various degrees give vent to their expressions of disgust, mockery, and offense. They jab the picture with their figures, they employ the most forceful and impolite expressions; some even, so to speak . . . spit. The kind and courageous owner of the exhibition gallery has heard no shortage of such "words" even semi-official remarks from the "big shots." But he has not lost heart yet and asks philosophically: 'Who would have expected anything different? Wasn't it exactly the same at the first exhibit of Van Gogh?' But that same Herr Thannhauser has also succeeded in overhearing isolated, but extremely warm expressions of goodwill and congratulation at this serious and powerful exhibition. He has received similar words of praise from people but, of course, even among the general public one finds a certain body of people who look long and attentively, making a real intellectual effort, coming back several times to look again. And let me emphasize again, this body of people is that same elegant stratum of the public, i.e., the non-indigenous element. Nor am I alone in this impression. 'Just look! So many foreigners are settling in Munich; its whole physiognomy is changing, although only gradually. But, suddenly, Munich is showing signs of waking up!'"¹³

¹²These were lyrical, visual images that Kandinsky substituted for verse and published as "Poems Without Words" in 1904.

¹³A quote from *Letters from Munich*, Kandinsky Collective Works On Art, Da Capo Press, 1994, p. 60.

In Murnau, Kandinsky started his voyage to innovative new art; non-objective painting. "Autumn in Bavaria," of 1908 (see Figure 2), shows Kandinsky's extreme simplification and use of intense color to create a bold treatment of the landscape. In each subsequent painting, Kandinsky de-emphasizes form and emphasizes color to create a highly-disciplined abstraction. His subjects were the surrounds of Murnau, his themes leaned toward fantasy.

In 1910, Kandinsky showed his innovative and creative genius with a synthesis of line, color, and shape in a spontaneous and free non-objective sketch (see Figure 3). In this watercolor, Kandinsky abandons representational objects, but not without a struggle. He reflected: "A terrible abyss, a flood of questions of all kinds welled up in me, concerning my responsibilities. The most important being what is to replace the missing object?"¹⁴ The date of this painting has caused some controversy because it doesn't seem to fit into the gradual elimination of the object that is clearly seen in the Murnau series (see Figures 1, 2, and 4), causing some historians to believe the painting was created later than 1910. Whatever the date, Kandinsky was clearly working to create his own unique and new painting aesthetic.

After the breakup of the NKV, Kandinsky found himself in league with his friend and NKV associate, Franz Marc. Working together to defend their art, they formed an organization known as Der Blaue Reiter (The Blue Rider) in 1911. "We

¹⁴A quote from *Kandinsky, The Masterworks*, Crown Publishers Inc., 1988, by Ramon Tio Bellido, p. 20.



Figure 3.

Untitled, 1910

Pencil, Watercolor, and India Ink - 49.6 x 64.8 cm

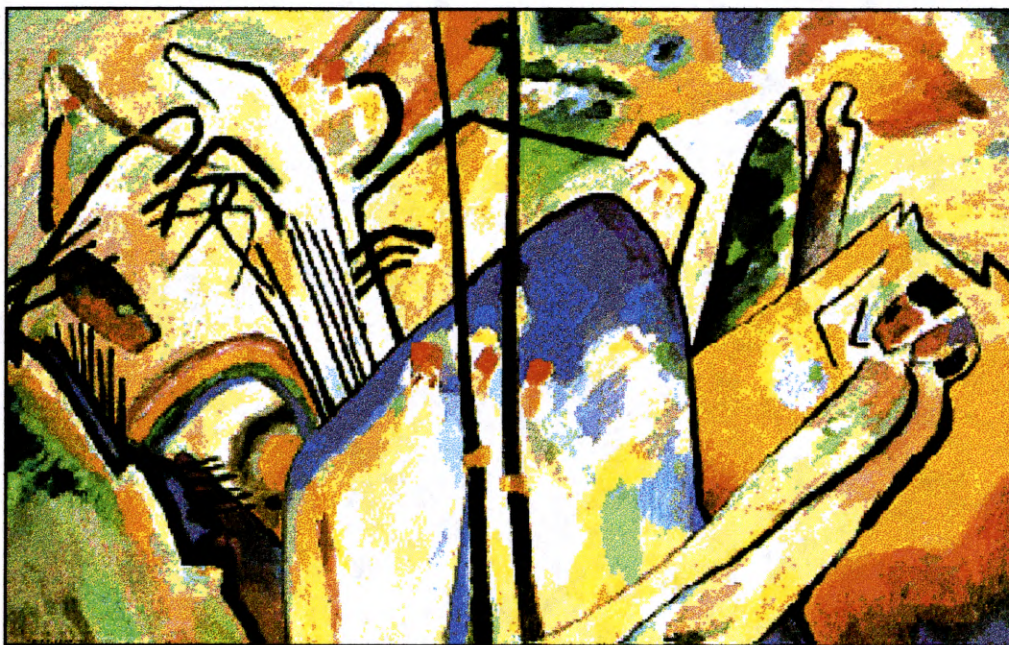


Figure 4.

Composition IV, 1911

Oil on Canvas - 159.5 x 250.5 cm

both liked blue, Marc liked horses, I liked riders . . ."¹⁵ From this collaboration, Kandinsky and Marc created the *Blaue Reiter Almanac* and held two exhibitions. The Almanac was a compilation of 14 major articles and 14 reproductions. Kandinsky contributed three texts: "On the Question of Form," "On Stage Composition," and the play, "Yellow Sound." The Almanac represented the leading members of the avant-garde and helped make Munich a stronghold for artists in Europe. From its members, Der Blaue Reiter demanded the artists' personal expression rather than conformity. Kandinsky stated, "I value only those artists who really are artists, that is, who consciously or unconsciously, in entirely original form, embody the expression of their inner life; who work only for this end and cannot work otherwise."¹⁶

Around 1910, Kandinsky started work on his first full-length book, *On the Spiritual in Art*, which examines his early artistic experiences. The first edition of this exploration was published in 1912; however, the manuscript appeared in 1911 at the first Blaue Reiter exhibition. The book was a success, with two other editions printed in the same year, 1912. In the second edition, Kandinsky added two passages, and this was the edition that is widely published.

In *On the Spiritual in Art*, the author expounds on his spiritual, philosophical, and aesthetic ideas. Part A is a discussion of the spiritual foundations of art. His focus in this complex study is an attempt to legitimize the dematerialization of art.

¹⁵A quote from *Kandinsky*, Crown Publishers Inc., 1979, by Michel Conil Lacoste, p. 32.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

Kandinsky cites examples of other artists who were working toward the same end: non-naturalistic expression of the artists' inner nature or "abstraction." He uses the example of the symbolist hero, poet M. Maeterlink, who dematerializes the object by using repeated words to create an inner sound. Kandinsky also uses music associations to help explain his ideas about abstractions and that abstraction is possible in painting:

"An artist who sees that the imitation of natural appearances, however artistic, is not for him—the kind of creative artist who wants to, and has 'to, express his own inner world—sees with envy how naturally and easily such goals can be attained in music, the least material of the arts today."¹⁷

As an example, Kandinsky cites the composer, Claude Debussy, who created a spiritual picture in music that Kandinsky relates to the Impressionists. He also worked to develop the inner content of his music.

Finally, Kandinsky explains that the visual artists, Matisse (the gifted colorist) and Picasso (the genius of form), produced work that has great inner feeling. He explains that together they point the way to the "great goal,"¹⁸ non-objective art.

In Part B in *On the Spiritual in Art*, Kandinsky applies his spiritual foundations as he analyzes the fundamental nature of color. His discussion on color theory concentrates on the metaphorical and metaphysical values of color, basing his theory on the polar opposites blue and yellow. Kandinsky describes yellow as a metaphor for

¹⁷A quote from *On the Spiritual in Art*, by Wassily Kandinsky, translated in *Kandinsky, Complete Writings on Art*, by Lindsay and Vergo, 1994, p. 154.

¹⁸Ibid. p. 152.

the earth and blue for heaven. Yellow is warm; blue is cold. Yellow expands; blue contracts. Kandinsky relates this theory to his spiritual exploration:

"The deeper the blue becomes, the more strongly it calls man to the infinite, awakening in him a desire for the pure, and finally, for the supernatural. It is the color of the heavens, the same color we picture to our selves when we hear the sound of the word 'heaven.'"¹⁹

He also explains that yellow is volatile, active, and aggressive, while blue is shy and passive. Yellow is trumpets, and blue is organs. Kandinsky explains that yellow and blue are the greatest in contrast, and, when mixed together, the harmonious and self-sufficient green is created. He also feels that absolute green is the bourgeoisie of the color world and that it is content with itself. Red bridges the gap between yellow and blue and is vital, restless, and powerful. He explains that orange and violet are similar in sensation and vibration to yellow and blue.

Kandinsky concludes *On the Spiritual in Art* with an interesting explanation of his painting (see Figures 5, 6, and 7). Figure 5 is an example of an "Impression," a painting based on the direct impression of "external nature." Figure 6, "Improvisation," is an expression of events of an inner nature which are spontaneous. And Figure 7, "Compositions," is indicative of purposeful and planned expressions of feelings.

¹⁹Ibid. p. 218.



Figure 5.

Impression 5, 1991

Oil on Canvas - 106 x 157.5 cm



Figure 6.

Improvisation XIV, 1910

Oil on Canvas - 74 x 125.5 cm

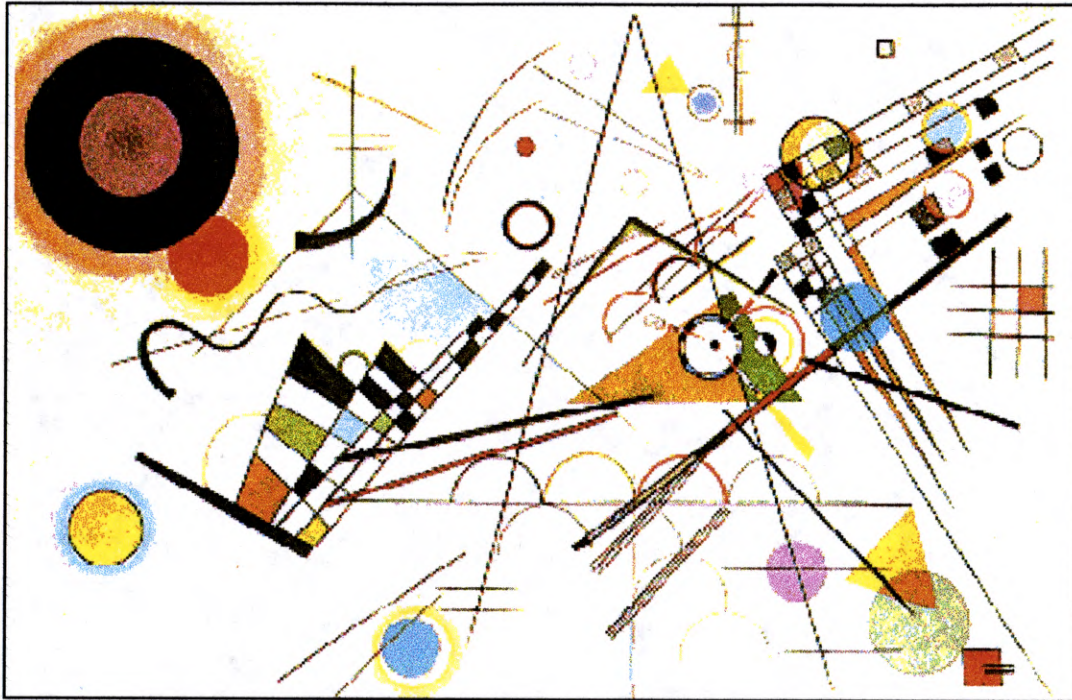


Figure 7.

Composition VIII, 1923

Oil on Canvas - 105 x 98 cm

CHAPTER III

When war was declared between Germany and Russia in 1914, Kandinsky was given 24 hours to leave Germany. He left behind the four most productive years of his career, 1910-1914. He reached Moscow in December 1914. The years that followed marked a slowdown in the artist's output. Russia was undergoing violent changes. World War I and the Revolution had an emotional effect that forced him to focus on political matters rather than his painting. He did not paint a single oil between 1917 and 1919, due, in part, to a shortage of canvas. When he did work, it was in watercolor, and his images became denser, with a chaotic concentration of color and line in the center of the paper (see Figure 8). The artist found himself in transition. He suffered a divorce and the loss of his friend, Franz Marc, who was killed on the battlefield at Verdun. His country was in chaos. Kandinsky was opposed to total revolution and cultural upheaval. He was not actively involved in the revolution, nor was he a reactionary aristocrat. Kandinsky maintained a low profile

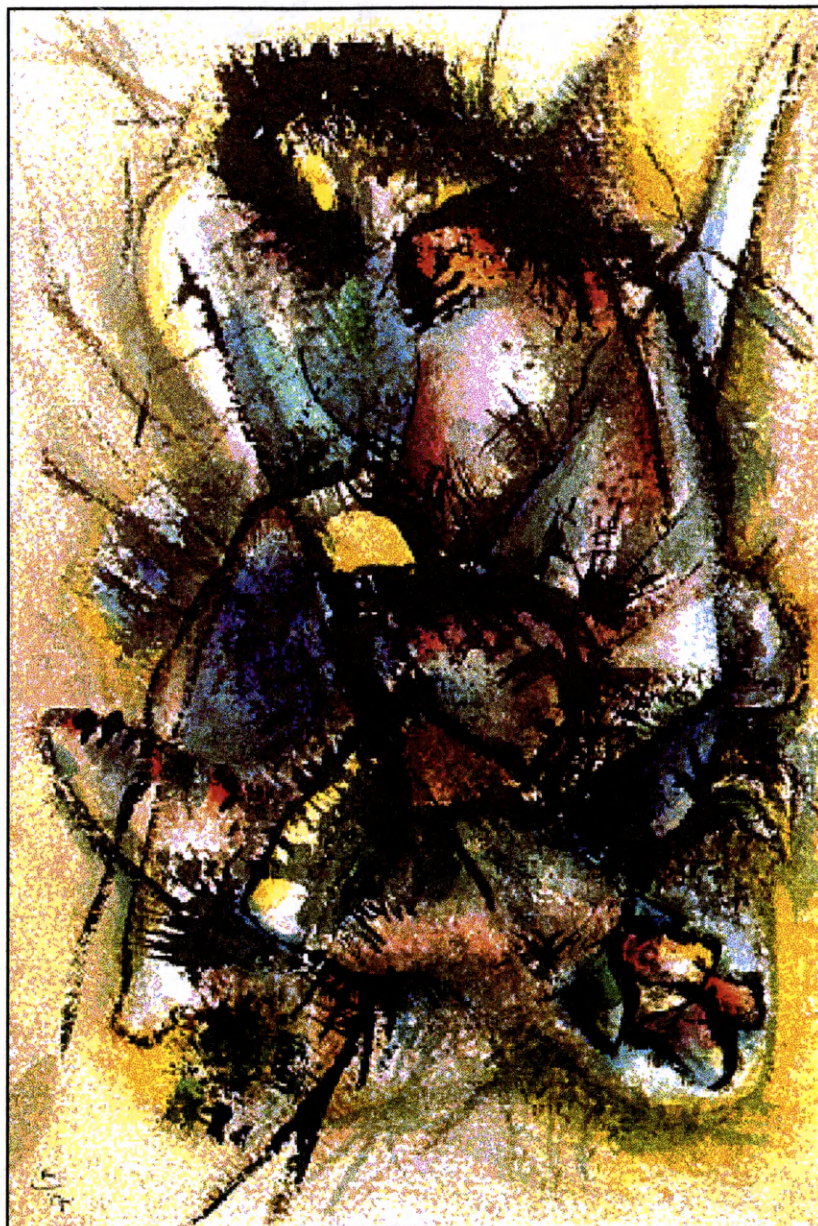


Figure 8.

Composition, 1917

Ink and Watercolor - 30.5 x 21 cm

while attempting to define his position in the ever-changing social and political environment of his country.²⁰

Kandinsky was appointed a member of the fine arts section of the Peoples' Commissariat of Education, and he became a teacher at State art workshops. In 1920, he helped found the Institute of Artistic Culture but resigned when the Constructivists rejected his art education program. The constructivists, led by Vladimir Tatlin, objected to Kandinsky's emphasis on intuition in his approach to art. His belief in this spiritual aspect in art alienated him from the rest of Russia's avant-garde, since he was not a revolutionary. And he was out of step with trends to radicalize art. His last attempt to work with the new Russian establishment came when he was appointed vice-president of the Academy of Arts and Sciences. However, on an official visit to Berlin to study operations of the Bauhaus, Kandinsky considered the idea of leaving Russia. A period of creativity in Russia was ending when Kandinsky left his homeland for Berlin in December 1921.

After several months of adjustment to the rich life in Germany, Kandinsky was invited to teach at the Bauhaus in March 1922. His hope was that Weimar would offer him a place to concentrate on his painting. The Bauhaus (building house) was the most famous art and design school in Europe and around the world. It was founded by Walter Gropius in Weimar, Germany, in 1919. The Gropius manifesto

²⁰At age fifty, Kandinsky was one of the oldest members of the avant-garde, and after returning to Russia, he found himself immersed in a new radical artistic culture led by the constructivists. *Kandinsky*, Crown Publishers, Inc., 1979, by Michel Conil Lacoste, p. 55.

stated his philosophy: "a synthesis of fine arts and the minor arts and crafts with the intention of basing teaching not on imitation but on creativity."²¹

²¹A quote from "Manifesto of the Bauhaus," by Walter Gropius, Bauhaus, Thames and Hudson, 1984, by Frank Whitford, p. 202.

CHAPTER IV

In Weimar, Kandinsky's work started to move forward again, and he gave full rein to his power of invention. He found friends and like-minded thinkers in Paul Klee and Lionel Feininger, and he was able to establish his experimental ideas in art education.

In Moscow during 1919, Kandinsky had made a break from the flowing, irregular color fields and narrative black lines to a more geometric and solid composition (see Figures 9 and 10). This increase in complexity and geometric design continued in his exuberant output during the Bauhaus years. In fact, his work became increasingly decorative, with repeated pure geometric shape (see Figure 11).

In 1923, Kandinsky was elected the vice president of the Société Anonyme. Through this association, Kandinsky was able to show his work in the United States for the first time. Salomon Guggenheim became one of his most enthusiastic collectors. In 1924, Kandinsky formed an association with Klee, Feininger, and Jawlensky called Der Blaue Vier (The Blue Four), which enabled Kandinsky to continue to show his work in the United States. Kandinsky had become settled in

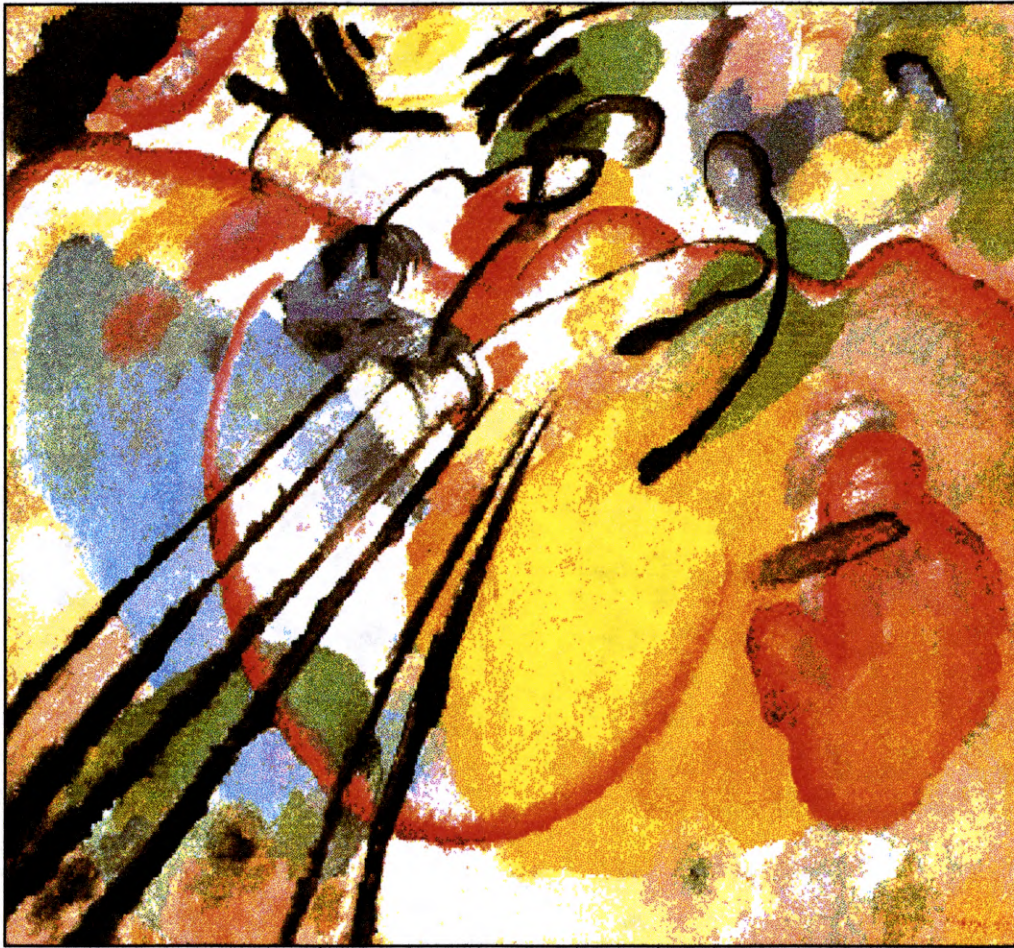


Figure 9.

Oars, 1910

Watercolor and India Ink on Wove Paper - 25 x 32 cm



Figure 10.

In Grey, 1919

Oil on Canvas - 129 x 176 cm



Figure 11.

Black Grid, 1922

Oil on Canvas - 96 x 106 cm

Weimar and found the creative structure and provocative collaborations of the Bauhaus a welcome change from the isolation and chaos of his last months in Russia.

During his Bauhaus years, Kandinsky was able to put his theories on color and form into practice. Kandinsky recorded his pedagogical endeavors in his second book, *Point and Line to Plane*. The work was started in 1914 while Kandinsky was taking refuge in Switzerland when he had been forced out of Germany at the onset of World War I as an enemy alien. The treatise was resumed in 1923 and finished in 1925. Kandinsky felt that *Point and Line to Plane* was also the logical development of the theories put forth in *On the Spiritual in Art* and *On the Question of Form*. The author concentrates on the theoretical applications of three elements in art: point, lines, and planes. In *Point*, he explains that the point is life and the image of expression. He analyzes the point in various applications such as the point of painting, where he suggests it occupies a space and is separate from its surroundings and that traditional art theorists disapprove of its use. He also relates the point to dance. Points are created when the dancers' toes touch the floor, as well as when the dancers jump, aiming toward a point when the leap is made (see Figure 12). He says, "So it is that the little black point comes to life—the primordial element of painting."²²

Kandinsky explains that a line is created when a point is placed in motion by the effects of external forces. These forces are independent and come from outside. Variations in the line, curved or zigzag, are dependent on the number of forces and

²²A quote from *Point and Line to Plane*, by Wassily Kandinsky, translated in *Kandinsky, Complete Writings on Art*, by Lindsay and Vergo, 1994, p. 565.

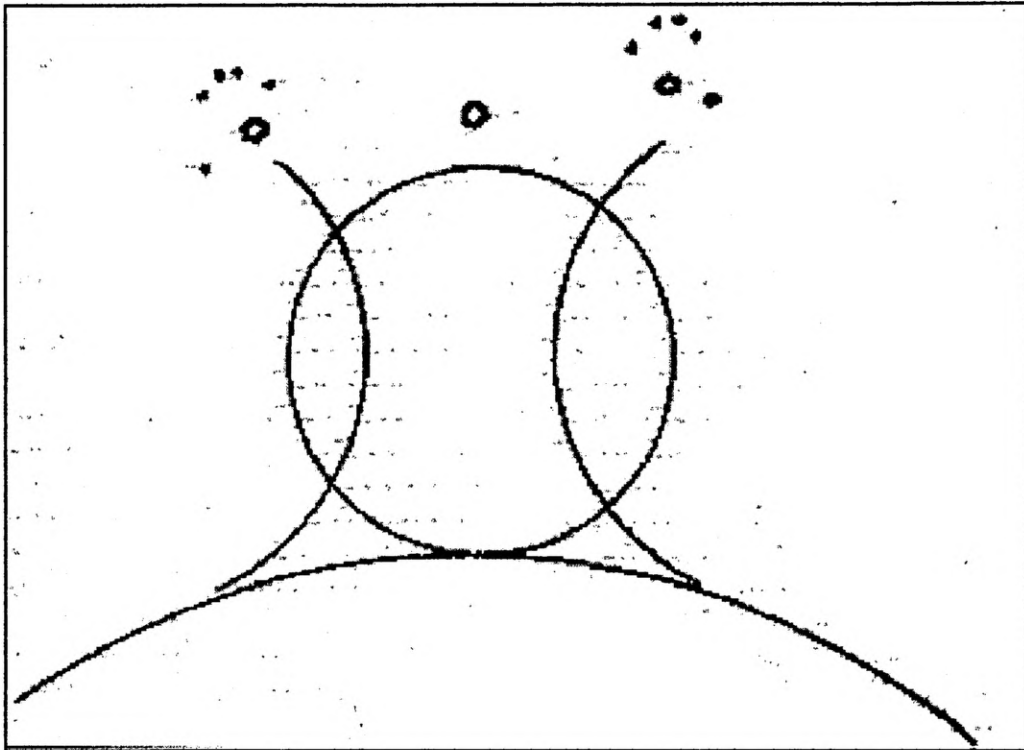


Figure 12.

Diagram of a Leap, 1926

Point and Line to Plane

the combination of forces exerted. He also explains that lines are associated with feelings and colors; the horizontal line is flat and cold, the vertical is tall and warm, while the diagonal has the tendencies of both horizontal and vertical. The diagonal also has a relation to color and stands out from the background. Horizontal and vertical recede into the background and relate to black and white.

Kandinsky explains that the picture plane accommodates the work of art and that harmony exists within the plane when all the elements of the composition are clearly calculated such as weight, content, tension, sound, form, and distance. *Point and Line to Plane* puts forth the dynamic relationship between points, lines, and planes, where no element is left in isolation, and all are integrated into countless possibilities.

As a teacher in the Bauhaus, Kandinsky offered his incredible and diverse knowledge and his tireless efforts. He taught Basic Design, Analytical Drawing, and he was the Master of Form in the mural painting workshop. His students found him cool and aloof; they challenged Kandinsky to legitimize his teachings on abstraction and inner representation. A student exclaimed, "Master Kandinsky, I have finally succeeded in painting an absolute picture of absolutely nothing."²³ Kandinsky dealt with these challenges and was able to compel students. One said, "He took a brush and paint, set down on the white plane a red, a yellow, and a blue spot and glazed on

²³A quote from *Bauhaus*, Thames and Hudson, 1984, by Frank Whitford, p. 98.

a bright green shadow by the side. Suddenly a picture was there, a proper picture, a magnificent picture."²⁴

²⁴Ibid.

CHAPTER V

In 1925, political pressure forced the Bauhaus out of Weimar to Dessau, as the liberal policies of the school aroused strong opposition. Kandinsky moved with the Bauhaus to Dessau and continued to teach and create paintings that represented the circle and triangle as the major motifs in his work. The disruption of moving to Dessau seems to have rekindled Kandinsky's fire to travel. By 1926, Kandinsky was making extensive trips throughout Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. His work was also traveling abroad, with up to fifteen exhibits per year in many different countries.

During the 1920s, Kandinsky was becoming increasingly interested in the circle as "a single tension that carries countless tensions within it."²⁵ The circle took the place of the horse in Kandinsky's early work (see Figure 13). "I find more inner potentialities in the circle, which is why it has taken the horse's place,"²⁶ Kandinsky said. Kandinsky also used the triangle, which he described as a "pyramid of

²⁵A quote from *Kandinsky*, Crown Publishers, Inc., 1979, by Michel Conil Lacoste, p. 77.

²⁶*Ibid.*

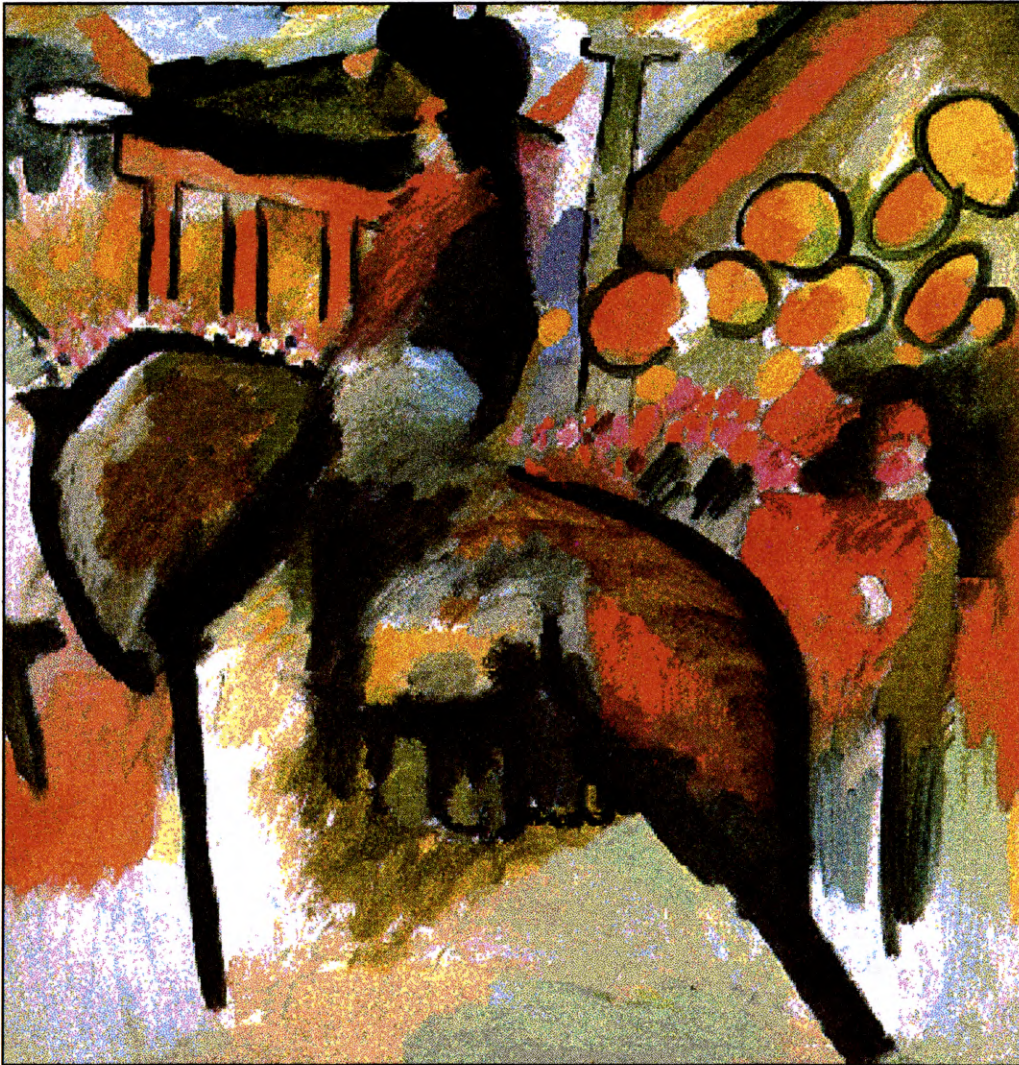


Figure 13.

Impression IV (Gendarme), 1911

Oil on Canvas - 95 x 107 cm

humanity."²⁷ The triangle was his metaphor for spiritual enlightenment, and the point of the triangle held those artists who attained it (see Figure 14). Kandinsky created a unique luminosity in his painting through his use of color. He was clearly versed in the rules of color established by scientists such as Goethe and Chevreul. He used their theories to create a sophistication of color unique to himself.

The rise of the Nazis and the Third Reich was unstoppable in the 1930s, and with it came intolerance and racism. In 1933, the Bauhaus was forced to close its doors as the results of repeated Nazi intervention. Most of the Bauhaus teachers emigrated to the United States, but Kandinsky refused to join them. Instead, he left Germany for Paris, where he hoped to find a creative atmosphere in which to work. Kandinsky settled in Neuilly on the banks of the Seine River. He felt his move to France was temporary and he would return to Germany as soon as an improvement in politics occurred. Despite the art exhibits, Kandinsky held in Paris in the early 1930s, he found that he was a relatively unknown artist in Paris. A further aggravation was his inability to interest any of the local dealers in his painting. Although his pride kept him in his studio in Neuilly, he was not without allies. Jeanne Butcher, a director of a small avant-garde gallery agreed to provide a regular show place for the artist's work. And despite the fact that he was misunderstood and rejected by the French art establishment, Kandinsky was very appealing to the young French artists who admired his use of floating figures and soft geometric shapes. Kandinsky's paintings in the Paris years were criticized because of his departure from the strict geometric

²⁷Ibid.

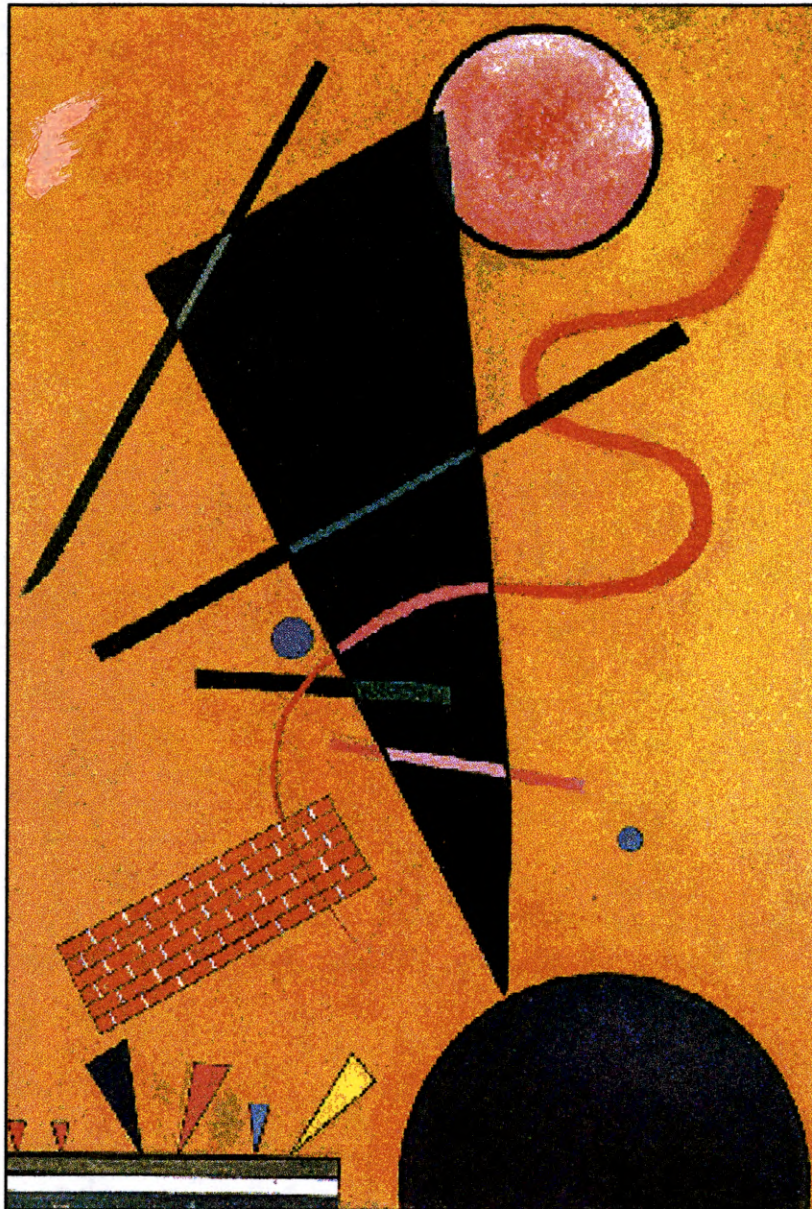


Figure 14.

Contact, 1924

Oil on Canvas - 79 x 54 cm

abstraction of the Bauhaus years to a more narrative approach with repeated decorative figures resembling animals and vegetables (see Figure 15). Kandinsky seemed to be ignoring the events taking place in occupied France. And he was heavily criticized because he seemed to be painting in a world of fantasy. Despite the alienation and the relentless criticism, he continued to produce. During his eleven years in France, he published 12 studies on abstract art and create some of his most interesting work. In 1938 study, "The Value of a Concrete Work," Kandinsky states:

"Lend your ears to music, open your eyes to painting and stop thinking!
Just ask yourself whether the work has enabled you to walk about in a
hitherto unknown world. If the answer is yes, what more to you want?"

Kandinsky, "a prophet of an art that deals directly with the soul"²⁸ died in France in December 1944, leaving us incredible visual and literary treasures.

²⁸A quote from *Kandinsky*, Crown Publishing Inc., 1979, by Michel Conil Lacoste, p. 91.



Figure 15.

Sky Blue, 1940

Oil on Canvas - 100 x 43 cm

CHAPTER VI

Kandinsky overcame the adversity of cultural upheaval, language barriers, and constant attacks on his achievements to rise above the clamoring din of society. He set abstract (non-objective) painting on an intellectual footing that could not be shaken by the most entrenched critics. Through scientific experimentation and exploration and literary documentation, this great artist gave painting a new structure that is the root of Modern Art.

An example of this new structure is seen in the painting, "Contact" (see Figure 14). Kandinsky has placed all of his innovations to work—his bold use of pure geometric shape and the synthesis of line and color—in creating this metaphor for spiritual enlightenment.²⁹ The effect of the triangle precariously balanced on the edge of a circle intrigued me aesthetically, but also metaphorically, as a representation of my inner nature. The point of the triangle and its contact with a surface create a focal point that reminds me of the precarious nature of a feeling, a composition, or a relationship. Another example of Kandinsky's new structure that had a major influence

²⁹"Concerning the Spiritual in Art," *Kandinsky, Complete Writings on Art*, Da Capo Press, 1994.

on my work is the hand-colored woodcut, "Small Worlds" (see Figure 16). Although this work seems simplistic when compared with earlier works, the print is incredibly imaginative and led to innovations in his later work, such as the integration of grids and checkerboard designs. I found coloring the white portions of the print an interesting technique. I also enjoyed the imagery of "Small Worlds" and "Composition VIII" which inspired me in the creation of my own complex patterns of lines, shape, and form (see Figure 7). "Composition VIII," like his other works created during the mid- to late-1920s, is joyful with a dynamic romanticism that I find an incredibly appealing visual experience. "Composition VIII" is intellectually composed, and form becomes the dominating element within an undulating plane. Color plays a lesser role than in his earlier works. However, color does energize the geometric construction of the composition.

Kandinsky has had an influence on my art and my creativity since I was a young artist seeking my Bachelor of Art in Art Education at Montana State University. I was drawn to Kandinsky through class readings in Harold Schlotzhauer's beginning painting class in 1981. Kandinsky's painting was a compelling force that inspired me to produce art using intuition and spontaneity. Through Mr. Schlotzhauer's tutelage, I also developed technical and analytical skills.

My connection with Kandinsky's work was renewed several years after graduation while preparing lecture notes for an art history series in the high school class I was teaching. During the last ten years, I have been working to define my own personal aesthetic in my painting and printmaking. Through ensuing discussions with



Figure 16.

Small Worlds VII, 1992

Colored Woodcut - 27.1 x 23.3 cm

and critiques by Jim Todd, an artist, historian, and educator at the University of Montana, I further clarified my aesthetic sense. There was no doubt my artistic sensibility was anchored in the Russian avant garde movement of the early twentieth century, in which Kandinsky played a major role. In considering the course I would take to complete my Masters program, the clear road led to the study of Kandinsky's literature and painting and its influence upon me.

During this study, Kandinsky's innovative compositions had a profound impact on me as an artist. His manuscripts and paintings have opened my eyes to the world that lies within myself. He has convinced me that color is necessary to express my inner nature. In fact, color has become so important that my woodcuts, with the 'addition of color, have become more like paintings (see Figure 17). I find that I agree with Kandinsky when he states, "That is beautiful which is produced by inner need, which springs from the soul."³⁰ Like Kandinsky, I also feel that my art is a power which must be directed to the improvement and refinement of my soul.³¹ Kandinsky's work has helped me find my way in the post modern era. Bombarded by every kind of visual image in the technological world, it was easy to lose the connection with my inner-self. The addicting ability to access any imagery in seconds through a computer or satellite link deafened my ability to hear my inner voice and led me away from spiritual awareness. Kandinsky's writings on the spiritual within art have helped me reconnect with my soul by calling me back to what is really important, the refinement

³⁰Kandinsky *On the Spiritual in Art*, Dover Edition, p. 55.

³¹Ibid. p.54.

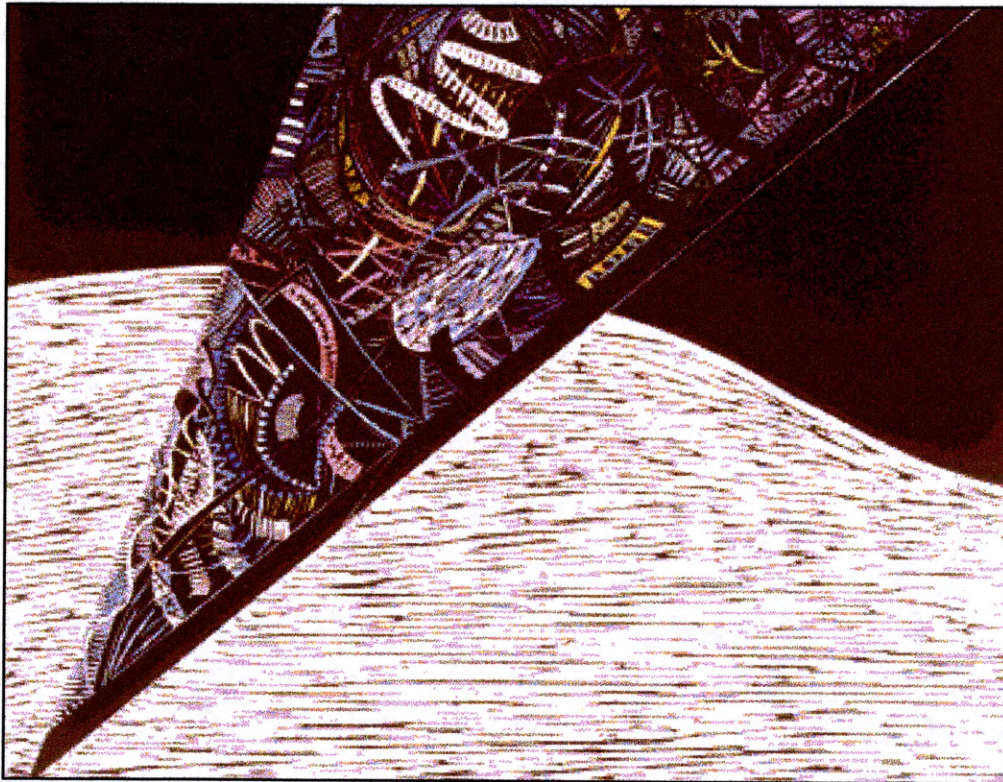


Figure 17.

Point of Sail, 1996

Colored Woodcut - 50 x 80 cm

of my art which is a response from the nature of my particular genius. His works have also enabled me to regain confidence that my creative ability will be good and strong if it is an expression from within myself and not determined by the provocative influence of a digitalized environment. Reestablishing a connection with my soul has led me back to my intuition which inspires my direction and the form I choose to express this inner vision. This vision has enabled me to abandon the limited material expression clouding my sight and has guided me toward "true art," art that is an expression of my feelings, deeds, and thoughts.

Kandinsky states,

"The inner need is built up of three mystical elements: (1) every artist, as a creator, has some thing in him which calls for expression (this is the element of personality.) (2) Every artist, as a child of his age, is impelled to express the spirit of his age (this is the element of style) - dictated by the period and particular country to which the artist belongs (it is doubtful how long the latter distinction will continue to exist.) (3) Every artist, as a servant of art, has to help the cause of art (this is the element of pure artistry, which is constant in all ages and among all nationalities)."³²

My paintings and woodcuts which focus on my inner nature and nature itself are the outcome of this renewed vision. My individual vision of nature and my experiences with nature are vitally important for me. In my watercolor, "External Forces" (see Figure 18), I am expressing the tension and confusion that exists between nature and society. As society moved from an agricultural base to an industrial base and from the industrial age to the information age, society's relationship with nature became muddled. Society is relying on the external view of the world and focusing on

³²Ibid. p. 33.



Figure 18.

External Forces, 1996

Watercolor on Paper - 55 x 90 cm

materialism. As I had lost my connection with my soul, I believe American society has lost its connection with the spirit of nature and its relationship to the earth. To illustrate this lost connection, I created the watercolor, "Forgotten Crops" (see Figure 19), in which materialism is flooding over the land, creating chaos. Kandinsky helped me realize that through the pursuit of materialism and focusing on external forces, harmony is lost.

My exploration of Kandinsky's painting and the art I have produced over the last two summers have fine-tuned my awareness and have enabled me to move forward confidently, leaving behind any apprehension about my ability to express myself through abstract composition. Through this heightened awareness, new and innovative ideas concerning my work seem to flow into my conscious state. This flow of ideas and my increased ability to focus internally have helped me find that place in concentration where time and space become nonexistent . . . where I am totally free from the external forces applied by the post modern world.

In this state, I created "Jibing the Spin" (see Figure 20), in which I elaborated on Kandinsky's exploration of the circle carrying tension. By stretching the circle into undulating ribbons that revolve around the composition, "Jibing the Spin" represents a place within myself where my feelings are intertwined with my thoughts. In "Tale of Fire" (see Figure 21), inner entanglements are expressed through arches and ribbons. Colors are intensified with yellow, representing the earth; red, symbolizing fire; and blue signifying the heavens as Kandinsky discussed in *On the Spiritual in Art*.

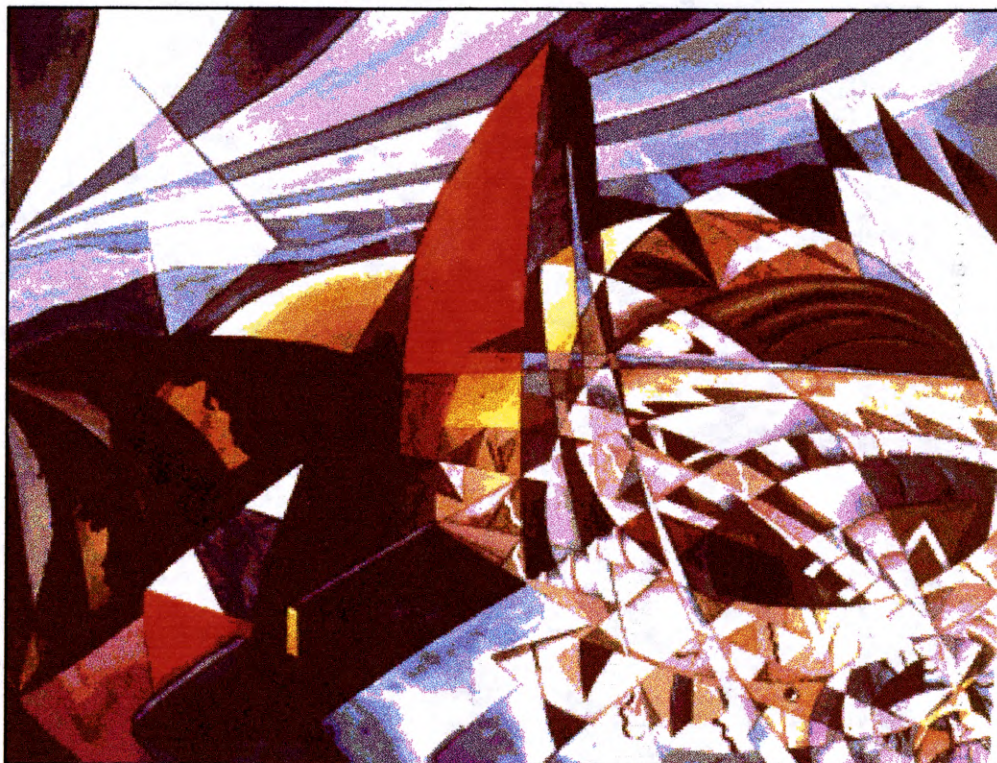


Figure 19.

Forgotten Crops, 1996

Watercolor on Paper - 55 x 90 cm

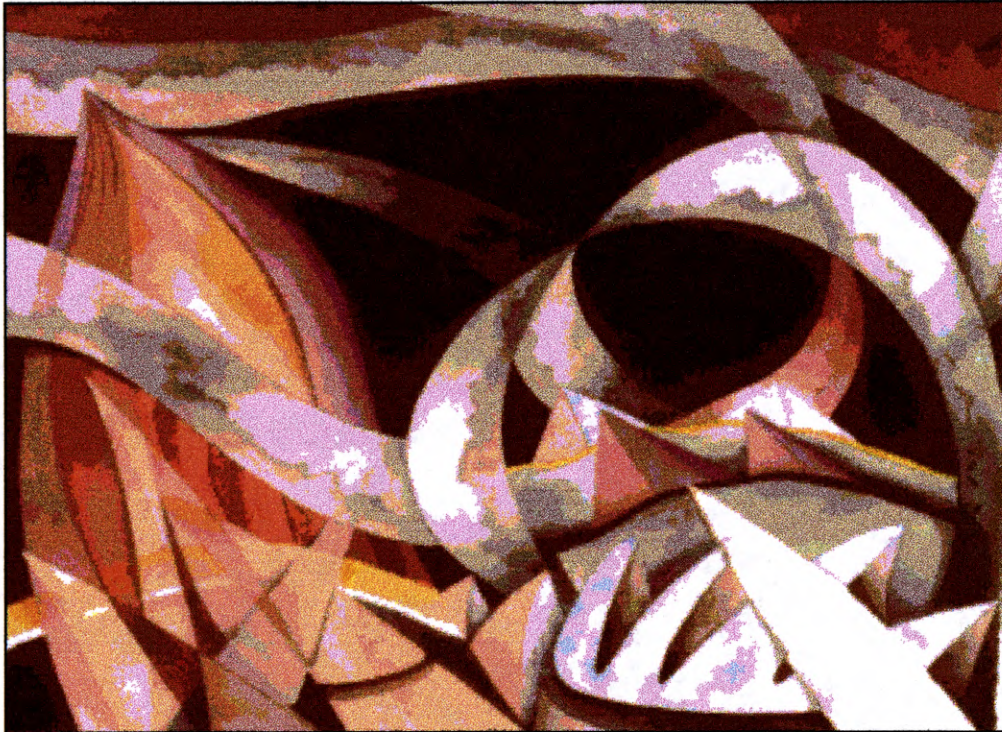


Figure 20.

Jibing the Spin, 1996

Watercolor on Paper - 55 x 90 cm



Figure 21.

Lake of Fire, 1996

Watercolor on Paper - 55 x 90 cm

In my hand-colored woodcut, "Point of Sail," I have juxtaposed a triangle over the undulating surface of a wave (see Figure 17). The triangle has been a part of my compositions for many years. However, it was only after the completion of my latest work and this study of Kandinsky that I was able to understand the dynamics of the shape. The triangle is a symbol of my relationship with nature. Beyond that, it represents the disjointed relationship between society and nature. The effect of the triangle in a composition can be chaotic if it is repeated and manipulated by changing its size and overlapping. But the triangle can also be a strong and forceful image when it stands alone, becoming the dominant element in the composition. Creating a complex interior within the triangle expresses my internal feelings of anxiety and the fear of unforeseen events. Color leads the viewer on a voyage through subconscious planes and energizes the triangle. "Point of Sail" is a synthesis of color and pattern that also expresses my deep respect for Kandinsky and his contribution to modern art.

Another woodcut inspired by my study of Kandinsky is my print, "Down Wind Run" (see Figure 22), which represents the calm when the wind is at my back. However, there is an underlying chaos that appears when I turn to face the wind. In this composition, I worked to synthesize the intuitive with the analytical. The free-flowing lines interact with the carefully planned placement of shape to create a visual vibration that can be perceived internally as well as externally.

This woodcut led to more experimentation in integrating line, shape, and form to create complex intuitive patterns that I use to define and excite shape, as seen in my watercolors, "In the Abyss" and "Three Identities" (see Figures 23 and 24). "In the



Figure 22.

Down Wind Run, 1996

Woodcut - 55 x 90 cm

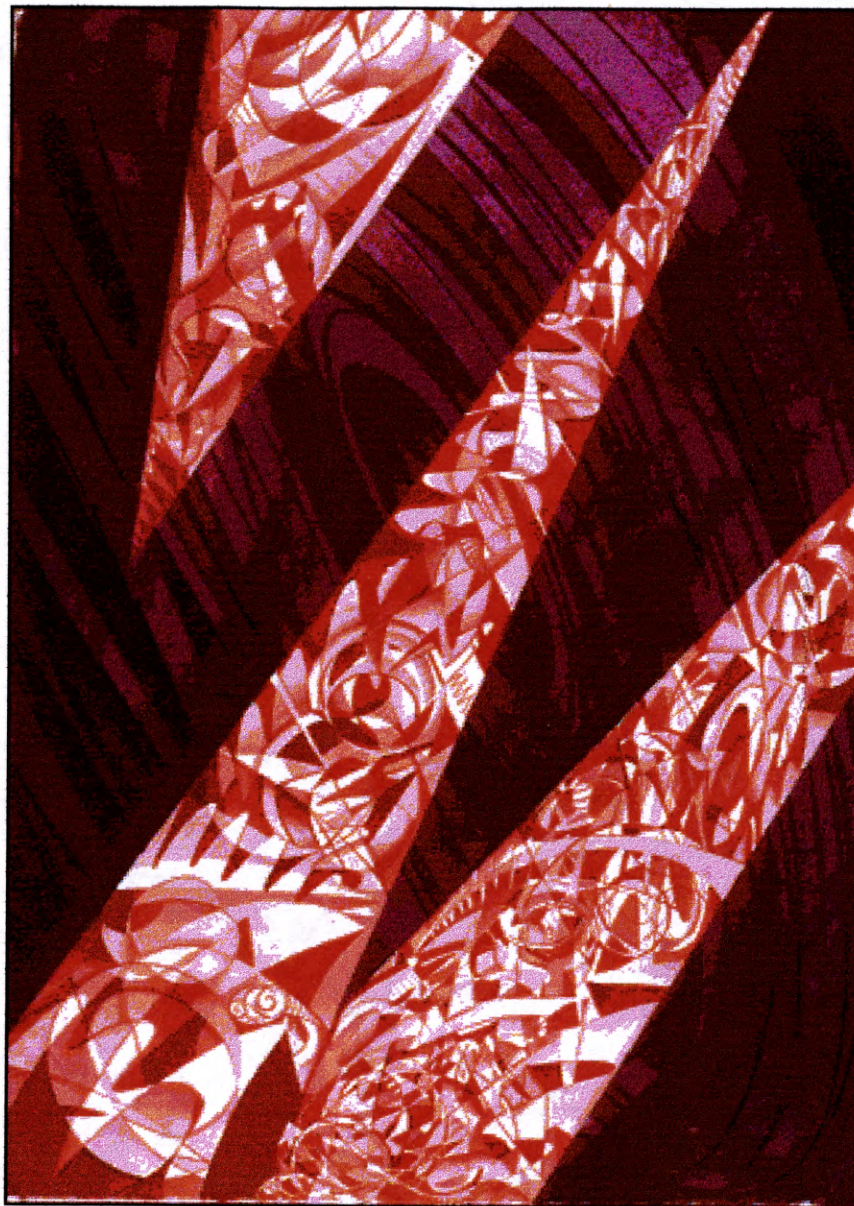


Figure 23.

In the Abyss, 1996

Watercolor on Paper - 55 x 90 cm



Figure 24.

Three Identities, 1996

Watercolor on Paper - 55 x 90 cm

"Abyss" was influenced by Kandinsky's "Small World" series. The artist used the spiral as a device to create movement through his compositions and the repetition of diverse shapes to create imaginative patterns. "In the Abyss" was inspired by a sailing accident in which I stepped on a sail just as a gust of wind hit the boat. I wound up overboard. Swirling water engulfed me, and that has become a recurrent dream. This theme is represented in these watercolors as the eerie, subdued inner plane.

"Three Identities" symbolizes deeds, thoughts, and feelings. These identities evolve from my soul and make up my spirit. Deeds are external and are responses to exterior conditions. Feelings are internal responses to stimuli, and thoughts are the synthesis of deeds and feelings. These identities are represented as triangles and stand as totems. These complex patterns tell the story of my inner struggle to come to terms with who I am.

With Kandinsky's work for guidance, during the past two years, I have discovered that I am an artist, a creator and inventor, free to express my individual truths. I realize I have an internal desire to create that can not be satisfied. In fact, I am a slave to my desire to express my deeds, feelings, and thoughts through the process of making art.

Kandinsky fought to legitimize abstraction in a world hostile to his new aesthetic. In today's post modern world, many artists fight to rise above the clamoring of rampant technology and millions of voices reverberating in a chaotic electronic nightmare. I have followed Kandinsky's clear and accessible path in order to find my way through the maze of electronic distractions and the diversity of the post modern

age to renewed self realization. As Wassily Kandinsky said: "And every artist who buries himself in the hidden inner treasures of art is a man to be envied, a co-worker upon the spiritual pyramid that will one day reach to heaven."³³

³³Ibid., Chapter 4.

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