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Abstraction: Kandinsky's Vision of Utopia with Rose Carol Washton Long, 1982

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to welcome you this evening to the Guggenheim Museum for the first of a group of four scholarly lectures related to the exhibition upstairs of Kandinsky in Munich. These scholars are all published and are very well-known in the scholarly field, and I am privileged tonight in introducing to you Dr. ROSE CAROL Washton Long, who is in real life an associate professor since 1979 at both the graduate center at CUNY and associate professor at Queens College, also CUNY. [00:01:00] I know Dr. Long as Ricky Washton, as some of us of my generation do. When she first came down from Yale, having completed the studies for her PhD and was hard at work for her first graduate PhD thesis of Kandinsky. She was our research fellow for two years until she went on into college teaching, where she has risen very highly both in the teaching profession but also in the scholarly world.

Her first book, published in 1980, is of course, on Kandinsky -- *Kandinsky: The Development of an Abstract Style*. And in the same year, how she managed to do this I don't know, with John Bowlit, *The Life of Vasilii Kandinsky in Russian Art: A Study of on* [00:02:00] *the Spiritual in Art*. She has, of course, written many, many papers, scholarly articles, reviews, taken part in seminars, and is one of the very up-and-coming scholars in Kandinsky world. So it is with great pleasure that I present to you tonight Dr. ROSE CAROL Washton Long, who will speak on Abstraction: Kandinsky's Vision of Utopia. Thank you.

ROSE CAROL WASHTON LONG

Good evening ladies and gentlemen, and thank you, Dr. Svendsen for your gracious introduction. It's a pleasure to be back at the Guggenheim and to talk with you tonight about Kandinsky's vision of utopia and how it affected the development of his abstract style.

Kandinsky's [00:03:00] idealistic and utopian nature is perhaps first indicated by his decision to leave a promising legal career in Russia at the age of 30, and in 1896 to begin a new career as an artist in a foreign city, Munich, the city many Russian's thought the gateway to the West. Although Kandinsky never lost contact with the artistic and cultural avant-garde of his native country, Munich, the capital of Bavaria, became the base for his major artistic activities until the outbreak of the First World War when he was first to return to Russia.

If we could have the first slide, please -- It was in Munich, particularly during the years 1909 to 1914, shortly after this photograph of Kandinsky was taken that Kandinsky evolved the abstract style of painting which brought him [00:04:00] international acclaim. And it was in Munich that the publishing company of our paper printed in 1911 his famous essay "On the Spiritual in Art" where he pointed out that because abstraction was untainted by the materialism of his age, it could have great potential for the forceful expression of transcendental ideas.

In this essay he synthesized ideas from symbolism from occult movements such as theosophy, from the arts and craft revivals such as the Jugendstil in Germany, from avant-garde painters such as the Fauves in France, and from Russian and German folk art. Kandinsky attempted to explain, in *On the Spiritual in Art*, how, if the artist moves slowly, step by step, into the abstract realm, he could create a painting which had meaning, paintings which did not resemble something like, quote, "a necktie or a carpet." Meaning [00:05:00] was important to Kandinsky

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since he viewed the role of the artist as similar to that of a prophet. Indeed, he called the artist a Moses leading his children to the promised land.

Because of his fear of ornamentation, Kandinsky chose around 1909, beginning in 1909, to dissolve images which related to his cosmic utopian views and to retain the residual remnants of these images in his paintings to give the spectator a clue to their meaning. This process was slow, deliberate, and sometimes torturous. The influence of the Jugendstil upon Kandinsky's early works is well-documented in this exhibition. Consequently, I will tend to concentrate on some of the other influences which allowed him to solve the problem of giving meaning to predominantly abstract works, especially [00:06:00] in those done towards the end of his Munich period.

My discussion will include some additional large-scaled oils and some watercolors which could not be in this exhibition. Decoding some of the images which appear in these works not only will allow us to see Kandinsky's process towards abstraction but by asking why he chose certain images, we may gain more insight into the utopian views that led him to eventually evolve an abstract style.

Now, during Kandinsky's early years in Munich the anti-naturalist aesthetic of the symbolist movement had been merging with the arts and crafts revivals in countries across Europe to create a new style in the decorative arts in art nouveau. If we could have the next two slides, please -- You will see on your left a tapestry by a Russian artist called Golovin from [00:07:00] about 1898, and the one on your right, the slide on your right, is Hermann Obrist's famous *Whiplash* tapestry, which was exhibited in Munich in 1897. These give some indication of the flat, stylized patterning typical of this revival, which in Germany, as we know, was called the Jugendstil.

Kandinsky was quite attracted to the utopian goals of improving society by changing the designs of everyday objects, and in the exhibit we see numerous examples of his early designs for jewelry, locks, dresses. These flat, curvilinear designs, of which these two slides are representative, were seen as alternatives to naturalistic representationalism that existed in much of academic painting at that time. And could we have the next slide, please, on the left? This is just but one example [00:08:00] of that type of academic traditional painting. Kandinsky would have considered this work on your left too rooted in a specific time and place to have any universal an impact on spectators.

For Kandinsky, the style represented in the work on the left only reinforced the evils of materialism, the evils, which he felt, were responsible for much of the disharmony of his time. In his paintings done in his early years in Munich, he looked much more to those examples, which seemed to represent the symbolist ideal of turning away from the mundane, everyday world the way the designs on the tapestries had turned away from direct representationalism. Could we have the next two slides, please?

In the painting on the left by the Finish artist Gallen-Kallela, [00:09:00] we see a work which deals in a stylized fashion with a national legend and in the work on the right an illustration by the Russian artist Bilibin for a children's book which dealt with a fairytale world. Both of these

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are more direct models for Kandinsky's temperas and graphic works at this time when he was first in Munich. For in the works he was able to take from these works ideas for his very own. He was not yet ready to apply the designs of the applied arts to his paintings, to his temperas, to his graphic works. He was not yet ready to give up imagery.

And if we can have the slide, please, on the left, we can see in this work from 1902 [00:10:00] called *Walled Russian City in a Landscape*, the influence of the desire to leave the mundane, everyday world and looking to works that dealt with a fairytale atmosphere. We can see the influence particularly in the looking toward the Russian artist in the bright colors in the flat patterning and particularly using a border in the foreground. Now, in other paintings of the period -- and if we can have the next two slides -- we see Kandinsky turning to -- next two slides, the other one on the right, please.

On the left you have a typical example of a German symbolist painter, which is in the exhibition, a painter by the name of [Shmuel von Eisenberg?]. This is a graphic work called *Knight in a Forest* from about 1904, and I'm comparing it [00:11:00] with a Kandinsky of about the same time called *In the Forest*, and both of these are examples of Kandinsky and other German artists of the time depicting medieval knights in a mysterious wood to express other worldly yearnings. Now, by 1904 the Jugendstil movement was beginning to lose its impact, and Kandinsky was beginning to have reservations about the power of fairytale-like imagery, medieval knights, to affect the spectator. He began to turn in other directions. He travelled. In 1906 he went to Paris, and he stayed there for an entire year. Now, this trip to Paris affected his work tremendously. And if we can have the next slide, please --

If you could [00:12:00] hold the slide on the right, that's it, and have the next slide on the left, please, yes. This is a work in the exhibition. It's by Kandinsky, and it's called *Blue Mountain*, and it was done late in 1908, early 1909, about a year and a half after he had returned from Paris. In this particular work you can see a number of evidences of a great change in his style, particularly when comparing it to the work by Kandinsky on the right, the *Knight in the Forest*. Now, one of the most outstanding differences, and you will be able to see this in the exhibition, is the difference in scale because the Kandinsky from 1903 is small. It's about, oh, eleven by eight inches. And the *Blue Mountain* on your left is an enormously scaled painting. It's almost four by three feet.

Another amazing difference [00:13:00] that resulted from Kandinsky's trip to Paris was the fact that he started to work much more in oil. The painting on the left in contrast to the work on the right is an oil painting. In addition to the scale in the oil you can also see a tremendous difference in the color. The color in the work on the left is very bright, and you also notice a loose brush stroke, and if we can have the next work on the right -- you can see an example of the advanced painting in France that Kandinsky was looking at, that is, fauvist painting. And you have a work on the right by the French artist Duran. And Kandinsky learned from these French artists to use bright primary colors and to use a loose brush stroke.

But as you look at *Blue Mountain* you can see that Kandinsky, despite [00:14:00] the change in his style toward brighter colors, larger oils, and working in many more of his works -- dealing with oils, you can see that he still retains some of the fairytale-like ambience of his early works.

And we can see this even more clearly if we look at some of the sources for Blue Mountain. If we could have the next slide on the right, please - you will see -- and if you could focus that a little bit -- this is an example of a Russian symbolist work, again, dealing with a sort of fairytale. It's by the artist Saryan, and it dates from 1907. And you can see Kandinsky following Saryan's example in stylizing the tress, also using a mountain in the center of the painting, and also the flat simplifications of the horse. In other words, Kandinsky's composition and some of his patterning is still coming from the early fairytale-like paintings.

In fact, we can see -- [00:15:00] if we have the next slide on the right -- how indeed the horse in Blue Mountain still resembles the fairytale-like ambience that you see in the graphic works, and that's *The Trumpeter* from 1907, a linocut that you can see also in the exhibition. Now, when Kandinsky came back from Paris to Munich he spent a year in which you could say it was a crisis, determining which direction to go in. Blue Mountain is the result coming at the end of that year. And during this time, Kandinsky also felt determined to find a form which he said, and I quote, "excluded the effect of the fairytale," unquote.

Although fairytale forms were not naturalistic, Kandinsky felt they were still too literal to be taken seriously by the spectator. Now, [00:16:00] as we shall see, Kandinsky began around 1909 to use folk art, particularly folk art of religious subjects, as an alternative to fairytale images. Kandinsky wanted his work to be taken more seriously at this time because he had become even more involved with alternatives to establish religion, such as theosophy, and he was impressed by their prophecies that a new utopian age would soon come to Earth.

After Paris, back in Munich, several of Kandinsky's associates, such as Jawlensky and Marianne von Werefkin, became involved the Christian theosophical group of Rudolf Steiner. Steiner's ideals that the artist played a key role in educating the spectator, while an echo of symbolist ideas, seemed to have had some effect on Kandinsky. He made notations in his books on Steiner's ideas. And we find Kandinsky between 1909 [00:17:00] and 1914 becoming once again involved with forming artist groups, writing essays. His crisis was over. We find him writing about how art could aid in the reconstruction of a new era, of a new spiritual realm.

It was also during this period that he created the Blaue Reiter yearbook and the exhibition group, which he formed with a German Painter Franz Marc in 1911. And it's interesting what he had to say about this particular exhibition, that it had as its purpose to awaken the spiritual in mankind. Now, in the cover for the yearbook, which we'll see in a few minutes, and in a number of the major paintings done around the time of the formation of the Blaue Reiter, we'll see how Kandinsky used religious motifs based on folk sources but dematerialized by veils of color to avoid the materialism of representational art, the literalness of [00:18:00] fairytale but still involve the spectator through familiar key motifs.

If we could have the next slide, please, on your left -- what you see on your left is the cover for the Blaue Reiter almanac, designed by Kandinsky. And this reveals how Kandinsky transposed the elements borrow from folk art into a new style, which could be called proto abstract. For this cover, Kandinsky chose a motif derived primarily from German and Russian folk renditions of Saint George. And if we can have the next slide -- on your right, yes, this next slide is a glass painting of Saint George by Kandinsky done in the folk tradition that is painting directly on

glass, and you will be able to see both of these upstairs and see how small the work in glass [00:19:00] is.

Now, Kandinsky probably along with Marc chose a Christian knight whose great fame was that he vanquished the dragon of materialism to symbolize themselves because both Kandinsky and Marc spoke of themselves as being like the early Christians in their prophetic attitudes. If we compare the two works, or if we compared the glass painting to a Bavarian glass painting -- and if we can have the next slide on the left -- this is a painting done by a folk artist in Bavaria, and we're comparing it to the work Kandinsky did. You can see certain similarities. You can see what Kandinsky borrowed from the folk tradition, the heavy black outlines, the elimination of modeling, the placement of Saint George in the center. But at the same time you can see some differences because folk art, like the fairytales, they were going to only [00:20:00] be a starting point for Kandinsky.

If we can have the next slide on the left please -- we're looking at the watercolor study for the almanac cover. We can see that in keeping with his concept that representationalism had to be minimized if the work was to suggest spirituality, we can see how the watercolor study for the cover is less distinct. It's less clear than the image in the glass painting of Saint George. We can notice that the clear black outlines around each of the forms have been eliminated and you notice the blue wash, which extends past the outline so that the outline is not clear. In addition, features commonly associated with Saint George, such as his lance, have been eliminated from the final work, [00:21:00] and the reason for this is that Kandinsky had a belief that a mysterious and suggestive art would be more likely to involve the spectator.

If a painting were too easily understood, Kandinsky explained in 1911, he said, they would not be suitable equivalents for the struggle involved in understanding the truth, in the struggle involved on the part of the artist but also on the part of the people he was trying to reach in bringing about a new utopian age. Now, in addition to the Christian motif on the cover of the almanac suggesting Marc and Kandinsky's attempt to find an equivalent for their prophetic goals, you find in other paintings beginning from 1910 on, a number of religious themes, particularly [00:22:00] apocalyptic ones.

And if we could have the next two slides please, both left and right -- we see depictions of the last judgment. In fact, in the work on the left, it's an oil, a large-scale oil, done in 1910, and it was called *Last Judgment* by Kandinsky. The work on the right is much smaller. It's a painting on glass, again, painting on glass from that Bavarian folk tradition. But we can see that the motifs that belong to the last judgment are much clearer, as they usually are in the glass paintings and also in the studies that Kandinsky does for his oils. But if you look at both works you can see that Kandinsky has closely read the book of Revelations. In addition to a walled city on top of a mountain [00:23:00] you can see a trumpet in the center, and in the upper left corner, and I'm particularly looking at the glass painting because the motifs are clearer there, you can see an angel in your upper left blowing an enormous trumpet over a kneeling figure in the lower center.

Now, for the development of these motifs, Kandinsky turned to folk art, and particularly to Russian popular broadsheets called luboks. He also turned to illustrations from German bibles of the fifteenth century. Now, we use the glass painting as an example to see where Kandinsky

found the source for his motifs. If we can have the next slide on the left -- this is a detail from the earlier tempera of 1902. And we can see that Kandinsky's particular [00:24:00] stylization at the top of the oil and the glass painting of the Walled City and the onion-shaped domes can really be traced back to the earliest tempera.

But Kandinsky, wanting to capture the spirit of the last judgment, when great storm and chaos announced the end of the world, introduces a bent tower to the motif, which you can see, as I pointed out before, in the right. Now, this idea of the bent tower is found in most depictions of the apocalypse, and if we can have the next slide, on your left you can see a fifteenth century German woodcut of a scene from the Revelations. And this woodcut, quite interestingly was reproduced in the Blaue Reiter yearbook. Now, in this woodcut you can see the broken tower over in the left, and that's just very frequently used to remind you of the [00:25:00] chaos of the last judgment.

In his last judgment paintings he often uses the city on top of a mountain because this is his way of suggesting a metaphor for humanity. In fact, in one of his books in *On the Spiritual in Art* he wrote, and I'm quoting now, "Humanity actually lives in a spiritual city where suddenly such powers are at work, where the architects and the mathematicians of the spiritual did not expect. Here is a piece of the thick wall which has fallen as a house of cards. There a colossal tower lies in ruins which once reached out to the skies." And it is that verbal depiction of mankind that he is attempting to find visual equivalence for with these scenes from the last judgment. [00:26:00]

Now the enlargement of the angel's trumpet in Kandinsky's glass painting and that curious figure in the lower right, whose head actually seems separated from its body, was probably suggested by still another Russian broadsheet. And if we can have the next slide on the left -- we will see that this example of an eighteenth century popular Russian print depicts three enlarged trumpets above figures rising from the grave. Kandinsky's kneeling figure seems related in general position to two of the figures in the lubok, who upon rising from their grave, kneel with uplifted arms. Kandinsky's figure, in that bottom of the painting, is more elongated and simplified, and the figure's upraised arms holding its head bring to mind the words from Revelation in which the beheaded come to life.

And I quote, "I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus [00:27:00] and for the word of god. They came to life again and reigned with Christ a thousand years." In a way the last judgment paintings are meant in the one hand to symbolize the destruction that Kandinsky thinks is going to come to the Earth but on the other hand they hold out hope because after the destruction, after the judgment, some will be elected to go to heaven.

Now the angels in the upper hand corner and the curving shape of the trumpet found in Kandinsky's glass painting and that were also in the oil are of course familiar devices in other Russian broadsheets and in German bible illustrations. And if we can have the next slide, please, on the left -- we'll see that the simplifications in this hand colored Russian broadsheet are very similar to Kandinsky's use of them. For example, you might notice the outlining of the angel's [00:28:00] head in the emphasis on the corner and then the long elongated trumpet. And again, in the Kandinsky the outlining of the eye, the profile face.

Kandinsky had a fascination with this particular combination of motifs. And in the next slide, if we could have the work on the right -- a watercolor called *Sound of Trumpets*, again, another reference to the last judgment, we see him using some of the same motifs that we have just talked about. That is, we notice angels, now two angels in corners instead of one, blowing trumpets. You might see the blue one very noticeably over on your left, and then we notice in the center of the painting the black outline of a mountain, pink walled city, and then towers, one bent, and then in [00:29:00] front of the tower a horse leaping in white, which you can barely see.

This watercolor on your right was used very frequently by Kandinsky as the basis for a number of important works from 1911 through 1913, and it's interesting to compare that watercolor on the right to a few of these works to just get some idea of Kandinsky's process toward abstraction. If we could have the next work on the left -- we see the cover of Kandinsky's famous essay "On the Spiritual in Art" there in the German edition. And in this particular cover you see a motif in black and white, which at first glance does indeed look quite abstract, but Kandinsky wanted that motif to have some sense of meaning, some resonance of the meaning of his prophetic purpose. And if [00:30:00] you look and compare that motif to the center of *Sound of Trumpets* you can see that he has taken and enlarged the hill and then the horse and then the black sort of triangular area is the wall, and then this bent area is really taken from the tower that was much more clearly depicted in the watercolor.

But for Kandinsky, the purpose was not to give a literal representation of the last judgment but to veil it, to make it more ambiguous, to make you struggle to understand his message. If we can have the next work on the left -- we'll see even another indication of Kandinsky's process of veiling apocalyptic folk images. This work on the left is a glass painting, but it was titled by Kandinsky *Last Judgment*, [00:31:00] and indeed the *Sound of Trumpets* is actually the basis for the structure of this work. But as you can see, at first glance it's hard to see anything but bright color, amorphous shapes, floating forms. But as you look closer you might begin to see the keys to the meaning which Kandinsky gives you, particularly, even without looking at the *Sound of Trumpets* you might see the golden trumpet in the upper right outlined in black, and as you keep looking closer you might even see how so many of the forms, for example, this outlined black area, this outlined black area, this bent, curving form, is indeed derived from the central motif in the *Sound of Trumpets*, which somehow the light does not pick up.

But this became Kandinsky's process. That is, he very carefully and clearly [00:32:00] in studies and very specific motifs, which he then veiled and hid. We can see this still in another work on the left, a work to which Kandinsky, as he gave many other paintings, the name *Compositions* and *Improvisations*. He chose the name *Compositions* and *Improvisations* because he wanted to suggest his goal of having paintings suggest purity, spirituality. And music he thought of as the highest of the arts, the least representational, and that's why beginning in 1910 he started to use the term composition and improvisation for a number of his works. But even in these works you can see his process.

And if we can have the next work on the left -- we have here a study, a large oil study, which Kandinsky actually exhibited as a major work. But it [00:33:00] is a large oil study for a work called *Composition VII*. It was done in 1913, but again, if you look at it, at first glance, bright

colors, amorphous forms, a sense of swirling, a sense of chaos. Kandinsky is capturing the disharmony of his times, certainly that is one of his aims, but the other part of his aim is to make his art not only pick up a sense of the present but lead to the future. And hence, in these works from 1909 to 1913 he still gives you some clues to his meaning so that if you look over on the right you may be able to see the trumpet very clearly. Here it's in yellow outlined in blue, and then you can start seeing how he constructed the entire painting, still from the Sound of Trumpets. That is, the central outline in red is the mountain, and the square on top of the mountain is the [00:34:00] walled city, and these long elongated tubal forms were originally taken from the tumbling towers of the last judgment.

Now, in addition to using last judgment motifs in his paintings, Kandinsky during this period also suggested scenes of battle in his work, and in a number of works, which he called improvisation, again, he clearly used motifs to give keys to his meanings despite the nonrepresentational title. If we could have the first work on the left -- we have here a painting from 1910, an oil called *Improvisation 11*, and we can see in this particular work, even without a title, some of the motifs [00:35:00] are easily recognizable. That is, you can see certainly a boat in the lower left, a long oar. You can see a simplified triangular sail, an inverted triangle in yellow. You can see waves. You can see over in the right-hand side a canon in the lower right, and you can see long forms in green with grey guns, and Kandinsky's simplifying the idea of smoke, white, with a sort of gray-black outline.

You can again see how he's used color, bright color, how he's used it loosely. There are even areas of white to suggest the white of the canvas underneath. Now, we can see that in this painting, Kandinsky, in some ways, was once again, with a scene of battle, [00:36:00] trying to a visual metaphor to his verbal descriptions of his age. For example, in "On the Spiritual in Art," in order to describe the anxiety, the confusion, and fear of his contemporaries of his age, he described their state of mind as comparable, and I quote, "to that of passengers on a large boat on the high seas when the continent left behind in the mist, black clouds gather, and the winds raise the water in black mountains."

Now, if we have the next slide on the right -- you can see how Kandinsky is still looking back, not always at folk art. Here he's looking at a Russian symbolist's work from 1907 by the artist Nicholas Roerich, and it's called *A Battle Scene*. And you can see how Kandinsky actually took the idea of the inverted triangle sail for his boat, but you can also see the tremendous difference from the [00:37:00] Russian symbolists that Kandinsky has involved too, that is particularly his use of a very loose brush stroke in bright colors. And the large scale painting has made him into a much more effective expressive painter.

We can see another improvisation, and if we can have the next work on the right -- it's one called *Improvisation 30*, and this is done in 1913. And we can see where Kandinsky's attempt to make his paintings be less representational, be more like music, had led him.

At first, in the work on the right, which he gave that musical title, *Improvisation*, we're aware of a much freer, much looser color than even in the work of 1910. We're aware of a much looser brush stroke and a more confusing ambiguous spatial sense. But we notice, we can [00:38:00] still find, an image. That is, we can find a motif in this work. And the image of canon in the

lower right may indeed be very clear. Kandinsky sometimes even referred to the brown areas in the lower right and referred to this painting by the title of *Canon*. We can see, however, how he's tried to hide the idea of smoke. And he's taken those simple white shapes outlined in black and enlarged them. And it's the red outline that suggests the smoke, but what he's done to hide that motif is he's used colors inside and outside of the line so that the color goes over the line and blurs the motif.

Now, Kandinsky was depicting these scenes of battle, as I said, certainly gives some idea [00:39:00] of the struggle of his time and the struggles that he felt it would take the spectator to understand the coming utopian age. He felt that the spectator not only would learn by struggling in front of his paintings and meditating upon them, but that struggle and meditation would also bring him toward some steps towards enlightenment. Now, he used these last judgment themes in his paintings, and he used these particular battle scenes also because of some of the contacts he had with these theosophical groups, which suggested that there was a battle coming, a [cataclysmic?] upheaval coming in the near future in which the forces of good and evil would battle with each other.

Steiner, who you remember some of Kandinsky's [00:40:00] friends studied with, said that the book of Revelation would actually predict the future. It gave the key to the universe. So it's no wonder that Kandinsky, for this period, turned to battle scenes, to apocalyptic motifs to give resonating meaning to his paintings, because they were some equivalent, some metaphor of his message. Now, in addition to depicting struggle and upheaval, Kandinsky also attempted to present a vision of the utopian paradise that he felt would come after the great destruction because even in the last judgment paintings the idea, as I said before, is that after the chaos of judgment day the good will triumph.

Now, in paintings where he was representing a vision of utopian paradise, [00:41:00] couples, often in pastel colors, are generally the central features of these paintings. And if we can have the next slide on the left -- we see a watercolor called *Paradise*, of 1911, which is in the exhibition, and we see a nude couple standing in the center beneath a yellow sun-like shape. Now, Kandinsky had used the entwined couple astride a leaping horse in earlier works. And if we can have the next slide on the right -- he used this couple as a symbol of good. Next slide on the right, please -- and if you can focus that --

In this particular work, it's a woodcut, a membership card, which he did in 1909 for an artist's association, [00:42:00], the *Neue Kunstlervereinigung*, which he founded in Munich in 1909. And there he's using the -- focus it still a little bit better, please -- he's using the couple with entwined arms on a horse leaping away from a tower-like form. Now, the theme of the couple on horseback had been frequently depicted in Russian illustrations, particularly those illustrations of fairytale and myths that Kandinsky had liked so much at the turn of the century. And if we can have the next slide on the left -- we can see an illustration of Bilibin for a children's book, done about 1901, where you can see Kandinsky finding this particular motif and then using it over and over again as the symbol of good in his works.

But, as with the themes [00:43:00] of death and destruction, Kandinsky moved in his depiction of utopia to hide the images and to increase the veils of color, which he felt would minimize

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the remnants of the physical world and intensify the purity of his message. And if we can have the next slide on the left -- this is a painting, which is in the Metropolitan Museum, called *Improvisation 28*. It's done in 1912, and Kandinsky gave this a subtitle, calling it Garden of Love, and in this work Kandinsky relied on color, brush stroke, but also hidden motifs, hidden images to suggest the mood of paradise. Now, you may be able to make out the image of a couple here in the left. It's in gray, outlined in black, set in a kind of yellow oriole. You may be able to see a second couple, a reclining one in gray with a [00:44:00] raised arm. And you may barely be able to see the third down in the lower right. But in the center you will see a yellow sun-like shape.

Now, it's interesting to see how Kandinsky really hid these couples. They're very simplified. Color seems to extend beyond their outline, and it is indeed very hard to decipher them. If we look at the next slide on the right, place, and if you could focus that -- it's a work done by Matisse in 1905, and it's a study for Matisse's famous painting of the *Joy of Life*. And this is a work that Kandinsky indeed saw when he was in Paris because his companion staid in the home of Gertrude Stein, who owned this particular study. And Kandinsky, when dealing with the idea of the utopian paradise, seems to have thought back [00:45:00] to Matisse's *Joy of Life*, particularly for the colors, the oranges and yellows which appear in his own garden of love.

Kandinsky, in choosing couples as the dominant motif to suggest his vision of paradise, was reflecting an attitude prevalent among intellectuals in both Germany and Russia before the First World War. Love was thought to be a way to communicate with cosmic forces. It was described as a symbol of salvation. In a few paintings, Kandinsky combined the motifs of death, destruction, last judgment, and love, Garden of Love, paradise, to evoke in one work his visions of oppression and his visions of utopia. If we could have the next two slides, please -- thank you. And if you can focus the work on the right [00:46:00] -- we're looking at the left of a large improvisation which belongs to the Guggenheim, which is called *Improvisation 28*. It's also known as number 160-B, and it was done in 1912.

Now in the work on the right you're looking at a watercolor study for it. It is much smaller, but the watercolor study, just like the glass paintings, can be used to help you get an understanding of how Kandinsky created the painting, the motifs he chose, and also, once again, help you to understand the purpose. Now, if you look primarily, I think, at the watercolor, you will get a clear depiction of the motifs he used to build his painting. On the left you will see the images, the motifs of war, of battle. You may recognize in the lower left the -- somehow [00:47:00] this won't focus down in the corner -- but in the lower left, a wave-like form. And now in the center of that painting you might be able to pick out a boat without the triangular sail, but long vertical arrows, which are like oars. Above it you may begin to see the image of another boat with the triangular sail, and on top of that, before a mountain shape, the canon, on the left, dark colors and images of battle.

Now, over on the right, in that watercolor study, you have more pastel colors, and you have very clearly, in the lower right, the couple, the man and the woman with the entwined arms. Behind the couple you have the mountain and the walled city, and in the upper right you have the sun, the heaven. Now, in the painting itself you see that these images of them have indeed been made more veiled. They had become more abstract, but they are still there to give [00:48:00]

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resonating images to his painting so that Kandinsky felt his works minimized representation and were thus more pure but still had some contact with the spectator so that he could convey his meaning.

The combining of two themes in one painting, you can think of in some way as having a theatrical quality. And in some way Kandinsky was absorbing devices, which he'd learned from his experiments with stage compositions. Now, Kandinsky growing out of the symbolist tradition that an artist can learn from the other arts did experiment with poetry and also with stage compositions, one of which will be performed next week. In the stage composition that will be performed, the Yellow Sound, Kandinsky deals with the theme of struggle and regeneration in one work. [00:49:00] And you see in the particular painting and in others of this particular time how he attempts, in one painting, to combine two themes the way he did in a stage composition.

If we can have the next two slides, please -- we see before us the painting called *Small Pleasures* from 1913, a large oil in the exhibition, and we see on the right -- and if you can focus the work on the right, please -- you see a glass painting, which, when you see it in the exhibition you'll be reminded again of how small the glass painting is, the glass painting from about a year early in 1912. Now, once again you notice how clear the motifs are in the glass painting or the study, and once again you notice how veiled they have become in the final work. None the less, let us look at the glass painting for a few moments to again see Kandinsky's process, [00:50:00] and then to think about why he chose this particular process.

In that glass painting you can see that the images of destruction now in battle are now in the right side. You can start in the upper right where you see dark colors, a cloud, and then move downward to wave-like forms, and here I think the boat is indeed visible in the right center. You can see two horizontal parallel oars against the blue sea, and the boat itself is maroon. Below the water over on the right side, moving towards the center of the painting, you can easily see the mountain and on top of that the walled city. On the left side of the glass work, you can see in the lower left the couple, very, very clearly outlined in black, and then on the left you can also see three horses ascending upwards, ascending upwards to [00:51:00] a blue sun-like shape.

If we can have the next slide on the left, please -- we can see that Kandinsky has indeed used the horse. He used it on the cover of the Blaue Reiter, and here we see another study for the Blaue Reiter cover, a watercolor, where he uses a leaping horseman, not from Saint George, but a leaping horseman to suggest the upward movement. If we can have the next slide on the left, please -- next slide on the left, please -- which is again a picture, another reproduction of *Small Pleasures*, we can see that perhaps in some ways that title is an ironic one for Kandinsky in this painting is attempting to deal in one work with the themes of struggle, battle through the boat and through the dark colors and the mankind in the humanity in the walled city [00:52:00] is in the center, and on the other side are the ideals, the hopes, the utopian image, the couple, the horseman riding to a grand future and the sun representing paradise.

And you might notice in the final work, that is in that large oil, how on the right side the colors are darker and how on the left side, particularly in the upper left, they move to a more pastel color because it is that more pastel color that Kandinsky is trying to use to suggest a utopia

because he had grown and grew to believe that colors could certainly be effective carriers of a mood as well as the motifs. In a few paintings of 1913, such as the next slide on the right, the oil *Black Lines*, enormous and amorphous [00:53:00] floating shapes are reminiscent of the color and mood of the paradise paintings. We can compare, for example, that large oil, *Black Lines*, which is in the exhibition, to the watercolor study for *Improvisation 7* from the Garden of Love series.

And if we could have the next slide on the left -- you can see that *Black Lines* indeed has some of the sun-like shapes and the pastel colors of the paintings that meant to represent utopia. Now, the origins, that is, the motifs, are very difficult to decode in this oil. Even the studies for this particular oil contain almost no hint of an image. For Kandinsky, the colors, the arrangement of the abstract shapes in a circular pattern against a white ground, which he did in black lines, were strong enough to create feeling of openness, a sense of paradise, a cosmic space.

In *On the Spiritual*, Kandinsky [00:54:00] had compared the painter to a pianist who played the keyboard of color to awaken and excite the human soul and conscious to lead the way to heaven. At one point in this essay he quoted a few lines from Shakespeare, that one should beware of a man who had not music in himself. By late 1913 he felt more convinced that his style of abstraction would stir the music in man's soul so that all mankind could experience an abstraction, the purest reflection of the spiritual realm. From 1896 to 1914, while Kandinsky was based in Munich but traveling to France, back to Russia, trips he made several times, we have seen how he struggled through these years of experimentation to create works which would evolve the spectator with his utopian views.

One of his first steps away from what he believed to be materialistic depictions of the everyday world was to paint fairytales [00:55:00] in the anti-naturalistic flat pattern manner of the art nouveau or the Jugendstil. We have seen how Kandinsky rejected this approach after contact with the Fauves in Paris. He began to experiment with bright colors, which could blur images, decreasing their physical presence, but at the same time we saw that he carefully chose those images for cosmological resonance. The great number of paintings that he did between 1910 and '13 with religious titles or themes dealing with struggle in regeneration are indicative of Kandinsky's determination to find a motif and also a method by which he could express his view of the great upheaval between the forces of good and evil that he felt was nearing.

In a few paintings of 1913, like *Black Lines*, he felt he could suggest the boundless spaces of a heavenly paradise. He hoped the contrast of color, the thinness or thickness of line, the extension of [00:56:00] the picture space and depth would involve the spectator and suggest the enlightenment that came after the struggle. The colors of the painting, the space itself, could give abstraction the meaning that would prevent the spectator from finding his works trivial or decorative, like the design in a necktie. With the publication of *On the Spiritual in Art* in 1911, with the attention the yearbook and the exhibition that that Blaue Reiter began to receive in 1912, Kandinsky's paintings and theories became known across Europe. Critics began to view his works as an example of the most radical trends in contemporary art.

In 1912 a German reviewer called Kandinsky, quote, "the preacher of the newest art," unquote. In England, by 1914 he was described, and again, I quote, "as an artist to whom form and color

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are as much the vital and integral parts of the cosmic organization as they are his means of expression,” unquote. [00:57:00] Although Kandinsky’s vision of a spiritual transformation growing out of his style of painting did not come to fruition in the way he hoped, his paintings and theories did become a major catalyst for an explosion of experiments with abstraction, an explosion that dominated much of avant-garde painting for the next 50 years. Thank you.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

(inaudible)

ROSE CAROL WASHTON LONG

Oh, thank you. I hope I’m right on time.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Right on time, and if you would like to put this away in your pocket.

ROSE CAROL WASHTON LONG

Oh, thank you. I have to get the slides. [00:58:00]

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

It was really very good. I love to see people who are so organized and know what they’re saying. What you’re saying is true, with slides you can read, and turn out to be good and not those that you can never, never, never see what the speaker is trying to point out because they’re so bad.

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