

Guggenheim Museum Archives Reel-to-Reel collection
Kandinsky's Formative Years with Rose Carol Washton Long, 1964

ROSE CAROL WASHTON LONG

-- in 1909, and the next few years proved to be the most productive of his life. At this time he lived just outside of Munich in a peasant village called Murnau with his mistress Gabriele Münter and two other friends, the painter Jawlensky and his wife Marianne von Werefkin. It was during this time that Kandinsky wrote his famous essay *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, an essay which is now read in most courses on twentieth century painting.

On the screen on the right we have a painting called *Romantic Landscape*, which was done in 1911. And if we contrast it with an earlier painting on the left called the *Sluice*, done in 1902, we see just how far Kandinsky has travelled away from the road of naturalism and realism. In this earlier [00:01:00] slide here from 1902 we see that Kandinsky is still concerned with the visible world, with reproducing, with capturing an impression of the physical, exterior world. Here he uses traditional ideas of perspective in which the largest and widest elements are in the foreground, and to show distance you make them smaller, and it recedes progressively in proportion to this triangular in the background.

Although the paint is applied thickly, the colors still are determined by their local color, that is, by what the eye would see looking out the window, seeing the grass green. The colors are not imagined. They are taken from the natural world. The scene is also probably painted directly out of doors from a scene that was there. The figures can be picked out fairly clearly and so can all the items, the trees in the background. [00:02:00] However, in this picture on the right, done really nine years later, we see that Kandinsky has destroyed all ideas of natural perspective or rational perspective. The space is even hard to find out exactly what this space is. There's no rational showing of distance, as in this earlier slide, because here Kandinsky is concerned with a scene from the past called *Romantic Landscape*. It's a remembrance.

So he's not trying to make it exact because he is not painting a scene from visual reality or a scene of the physical, outside world, but he's painting a scene from the imagination; thus both the foreground and the background are painted in similar colors. He wants to tie and unify the thing because it is one memory. The colors here are from the imagination, blue horses and yellow horses, maroon people, rather than from natural or local [00:03:00] color, again, all to emphasize that this is something from the imagination, from psychological reality rather than a visual or physical reality.

Now, in the last lecture I discussed what really led to this style that Kandinsky develops in 1909 and 1911. And I mentioned that much of this came from the developments of the French, specifically the developments of French symbolism and of the French fauvism painters. And I'd like to briefly go over this because it's important to understand what Kandinsky did in these years 1909 to '11. Now, on the screen is a painting by Redon which was done in the 1890s. Redon is often considered to be a symbolist painter. Symbolism, as you may remember, was a literary movement which began in 1896 and reacted also against naturalism [00:04:00] in books and in poems.

It said that things should be suggest and evoke. We are concerned with the emotions, with conveying the ideas, with conveying the feelings rather than a descriptive account of the world.

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We want to suggest what the world is and to suggest the emotions of man rather than to state them. And Redon wrote many statements. One of the things he said was, quote, “Some people insist upon the restriction of the painter’s work to the reproduction of what he sees. Those who remain within those narrow limits commit themselves to an inferior goal. The artist is free to borrow his subject from history, from the poets, from his imagination.”

And thus, in this particular instance where he’s painting a portrait of his poet friend Roussel, instead of describing Roussel accurately with all the features of this man’s face portrayed and detailed [00:05:00] he gives you the idea of the man. He wants to suggest qualities about him, that he has a poetic nature. He uses pastel colors, that he is also concerned with the psychological problems, these emotional problems, and so again, the whole man is vague. His face also becomes part of the flowers in the background. Again, the idea of a logical, rational space is not created. This man seems to be floating in a space of infinity. There’s no foreground really. You don’t know what he’s standing on.

Again, this idea of moving away from a realistic scene is something that Kandinsky grows out of. Now, Gauguin also contributed to this evolution for Gauguin was the first one to say we can distort color. We can distort perspective. We can use all the means we have at our disposal to convey the [00:06:00] emotion, the feeling of a scene. So in this yellow Christ, painted in 1888, Gauguin makes his Christ yellow, an unheard of color to paint Christ at that time. He does this because he wants to show the agony, to express the agony, the sickening quality of the crucifixion, and thus he also distorts the hands, makes them larger than they would be in life, again, for expressive purposes.

He also, again, distorts the perspective, makes the whole background, though it recedes somewhat, flat. Again, the emphasis on horizontal strips destroys the idea of a logical recession of background. Gauguin said that one can distort color and form for subjective reasons, that is, for the emotive ideas, or one could even distort color and form for decorative reasons. That is, if one wants to make a pleasing pattern, one can just rule out all rational ideas of perspective or color just to [00:07:00] make a pattern. And as you see in the background here, there’s the pattern of the orange tress against the gold grass, and he has distorted the shapes of the trees and the color much more for the pattern, the decorative quality involved, than the emotional qualities. With the Christ, with these large hands and yellow color, the distortions have taken place for the emotive qualities.

Now, this is a painting by Maurice Denis. He wrote many articles on Gauguin’s theories and also on his own. These articles were very popular in Germany, and there is no question that Kandinsky did read some of them. He is the one that actually publicized Gauguin’s ideas on emotive distortion and objective distortion, that is, distortion for the emotive reasons or the decorative reasons. He also developed his own theories in which he said that carrying on from Redon that things should be suggestive, that the best way to convey an emotion [00:08:00] is to say thing indirectly rather than directly. And often in his paintings he championed the idea of the hidden, the illusory.

And in this painting, which is called *King Arthur Battling with a Dragon*, at first glance you can find the dragon, but if you look at this detail over here you’ll see the tail of the dragon down

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here, and then you might see the spear of this large figure, which is killing the dragon. Again, the figures and the dragon are somewhat out of proportion. They're not rational, but then neither is the whole story rational. Also, these little figures can be found here in the rocks. You can see them right here in the rocks. Now, these ideas we shall see to be effective in Kandinsky's work in 1909 to '11.

Now, so there's this one trend in France, this symbolist trend, which emphasizes the suggestive, the indirect, the hidden, and distorting colors and form for expressive purposes. Another development in France, which occurs about 10 [00:09:00] years later, which was just beginning in 1906 when Kandinsky went to Paris, so he was exposed to it during that year, was the fauvist movement. And this is a painting by Vlaminck done in 1906 in which Vlaminck is carrying on Gauguin's idea of distort color for expressive reasons, that is, few trees are this bright color red, but he uses it mainly for the expressive purposes to convey this to the observer.

Also, the fauvists were revolutionary in their use of paint, using it very thickly and very freely, very, very aggressively. In this painting of 1909 by Kandinsky, getting now into the period that we are concerned with, we can see, if we look at this quickly, how Kandinsky actually did combine these two trends. First we notice the bright colors coming from Vlaminck and the fauves that we saw before, the loose brush stroke [00:10:00] thickly applied quite freely. Then also we might notice some of these hidden forms coming more from the other French movement, the symbolist movement, as typified by Gauguin, Denis, and Redon. We see this figure probably fairly clearly here, almost an inanimate like form, curved, this is red with the head.

But these figures over here, until we look at the sketch, do not become very clear. It is looking at the sketch that we do see people in the street and clearly the houses in the background. We see this figure humped over, another figure here, and a tree behind it. And if we can compare we can see that here is the figure in this right-hand corner almost in black, and here is another figure here, and there is the tree. Now this combining of the hidden and the bright colors with something that Kandinsky certainly transferred from [00:11:00] the fauvists and the symbolists.

Now, if we look at this painting, another painting of a year later, 1910, if we look at this closely we must ask, if Kandinsky did synthesize the bright colors from the fauvist painters and the idea of the hidden, the ambiguous, and the indirect from the symbolist painters, what did he add? What did he do that was different from Gauguin's theory? If Gauguin said, just distort color and distort perspective and distort form for emotive reasons, what did Kandinsky add to this theory which makes him considered to be one of the most original painters of the twentieth century? The whole tradition of the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century is concerned, as I said before, with this breakdown of the realistic and naturalistic tradition and is concerned with much more of the expressive turn of mind than the descriptive.

Now, [00:12:00] first I'd like to point out some of the objects in this picture. At first glance I'm sure this picture appears quite chaotic to the observer, but if you look closely you might see here the trunk of a tree in green and this triangle to form the tree itself, almost like a fir tree. The foreground is not very clear, but if you examine this red shape here you might notice a horse's head, ears turn toward this object in the center, which if you slowly bring into focus, the gold and

the green, in this oval here with this long black hat, you actually will find a person on the back of a horse. Here's the end of the horse's body, this whole red area here.

If you look to the left, this yellow area, again, is a horse, and the head is again turned to the rider, this time in white. There's his body sitting, trunk, and also the long, tall hat. [00:13:00] All this is carrying on from the ideas, as I said before, of Denis, of making things ambiguous. And Kandinsky, in this picture, is trying to suggest, again, a memory. This is a reverie of a trip he took to Tunisia. And again, if you were going to suggest a reverie, you cannot do this through the terms or techniques of naturalism or realism, which were mainly concerned with expressing the real world, the visible world.

Since Kandinsky is concerned with the world of memory, he had to find other techniques, so he borrowed this idea of the hidden from Denis. But in color he uses color and forms in a new way that had not been used before for here we find color applied both to the body of the horse and to the background. Or here, this triangular sort of very pastel pink of the face, it's very hard, at one glance, to connect this with a [00:14:00] person's body or not. And we'll look at this large blue area. It certainly isn't very much part of the sky. It's hard to define exactly what it is, but all these large areas, undefined, unknown, contribute to the feeling of a past, a past which when one tries himself to recall the past, is not very clear. It's often fuzzy, our memories of the past.

And through this use of color and form without recognizable objects attached to them, Kandinsky added another vocabulary, another technique to this whole area of expression and expressionism. And I'd like to read you a quote of Kandinsky's. He said that "Colors are not used because they are true to nature but because they are necessary to the particular picture. The artist is not only justified in using but is under a moral [00:15:00] obligation to use only those forms which fulfill his own need. Absolute freedom from anatomy or anything else of the kind must be given to the artist in his choice of means."

And this idea of using color for its emotive value, the fact that red can arouse the feelings of fire in you without any suggestion of fire, this is something Kandinsky explored in his paintings; however, much of what Kandinsky did, this idea of using color and form without an identifiable object along with it. This was taken as Kandinsky's sole contribution for a long time. And I'd like to read also some typical comments on Kandinsky's work at this time. One of the critics writes "In 1910 Kandinsky painted his first work [entirely?] detached from an object. With this, a new epoch in art started, [00:16:00] the epoch of nonobjective art."

Or another critic writes about Kandinsky in this time, "In the year 1911 Kandinsky was making improvisations in which dependence on the immediate visual image, even as a point of departure, had been abandoned. He learned to trust the unaided imagination, but he no longer found it necessary to hand his image from a representation of an object." Now, as we've seen in this picture, there are objects in here. There are two men riding on two horses, and as I said before, they are vague. They are very hard to see because, of course, color is applied both to the horse and to the background, because there are unidentifiable objects. But the objects are part of Kandinsky's style, and this is something that has been entirely overlooked. In much of the pictures that you shall see in this lecture I shall be trying to point out the motifs that Kandinsky

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was concerned with at this time [00:17:00] and at the end of the lecture the themes and the meaning behind some of these motifs

Now, it's difficult to decide why this idea of Kandinsky being the first nonobjective painter, that is, the first painter to paint completely without objects, arose, for Kandinsky himself says in this essay *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, which is his major essay, he said about the painting, "If we being at once to break the bonds that bind us to nature and to devote ourselves purely to the combination of prior color and independent form, we shall reproduce works which are mere geometric decoration resembling something like a necktie of a carpet."

And he added, "In general nowadays we are still by and large bound to external nature and must find our forms in her. The only question is, how are we to do it? In other words, how far may we go in altering her forms and colors?" You see, this evolution [00:18:00] away from naturalism and realism was not an easy one for the artist. Today, as we look around us and see so many nonobjective paintings, that is, paintings which have no recognizable objects, no identifiable images, it seems to us quite easy for a painter to do this.

In fact, one of the complaints that people will often make, "Well, there's no object in it. There's no image in it. Anyone could do it. A child could do it." No, this is not necessarily true, but I think we tend to forget what a struggle it was for artists at that time, at the turn of the century to, say, 1912, to free themselves completely from the idea of naturalism or realism. And so Kandinsky added to this, not only to the distortion of color and the human form for expressive reasons, but he also added, as I said, these unidentifiable objects and areas, also, to suggest the past, this idea of the chaotic and hidden also to be used for expressive purposes. [00:19:00]

Now Kandinsky said there were mainly three elements in a painting which were important. He said the action of the color, its form, and then the object per se independent of either color or form. And since, as I said before, Kandinsky's use of color and form without identifiable objects has been discussed in great detail, I should like to now concentrate on the objects, the objects that could be found in Kandinsky's paintings. This slide, I should have shown this earlier, this is just to point out how more chaotic, much more suggestive Kandinsky is than Redon. Redon, as we said, was the first to use this vague floating space, but here you see the figure is still clearly detailed, whereas in Kandinsky the figures, these people on the horses, have become very much part of the background. They are at once there and not there, adding more to the mystery of the paintings. [00:20:00]

Now, in these two paintings there are two winter scenes. One was done in 1908, this one on the left, and this was done in 1911. We see how far Kandinsky has evolved in freeing himself, for we see the houses here still are based upon the design of a house, rectangular at the bottom, triangular at the top, whereas here, Kandinsky is concerned with just the essence of the landscape. It's just the roofs and the whiteness and the grayness that he's concerned with, and so he will leave out any of the definite ideas of house there just so he can give you this impression, the psychological feeling of the winter scene.

Now, one of the other motifs that are found in Kandinsky's paintings at this time, 1909, and we find them all the way through 1913, is the horse. The painting on the left was produced in 1911.

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[00:21:00] We see how this horse has been evolved into what we might call a pictograph or a sign. There's very little of three dimensionality left. There's very little of the physical body or any literal idea of the horse, but rather just, the whole horse has been simplified into a few black lines. Note that the rider is simplified by two strokes, a semi-oval for a head and here an arch to indicate the body.

Now I'd just like to take you back a little bit through Kandinsky's career to see how this particular horse has evolved stylistically from the earlier ones. The painting on the right is from 1905 to 1906. Although it's done in a very stylized, decorative, and patterned manner, still the horse can be clearly picked out with a couple on its back. The painting is quite tight and quite detailed. But two years later in 1908 we see that the colors have become much brighter. The horse is even more flat, much more flat, much less [00:22:00] naturalistic, but still a horse, quite identifiable. The rider on his back is quite identifiable and separate from the background and filled in.

Or here we see a further evolution, 1909. As I said, the beginning of this pattern, of this period when Kandinsky becomes so original, we find the front part of the horse can be picked out. Here it's in green, but the back has become part of the background. It's very hard to tell where the back of the horse ends and the sky begins. The rider, again, the head is emphasized by this red oval shape and the cloak in orange. It's still becoming more and more simplified, but the total outline of rider and horse are primarily there. But here in another slide of 1911, done about the same time as this horse, we see again Kandinsky's contribution.

Here the horse again is done in staccato means, a few quite black lines. Here's the top of the horse, the [00:23:00] back and then the tail, the bottom leg, its body, and this black area is the rider. Again, very, very vague. Here's the front of the first horse and his leg. And then you see a second horse emerging here, just a line for the back, and a line here and a line here to indicate the head and one leg. Kandinsky has taken such liberties with the form of a horse that he's only put in perhaps one leg instead of two or half of the outline of the head. He doesn't even use a complete outline anymore.

This is how free he has become. And again note how he uses this color, blue here and the rust here, not connected to any recognizable object. That is free color and free form to give the suggestion of this riding through the park. Here he's using color, free color and free form, to suggest movement. Before, as one would ride through a park, you would get this impression where everything would be slightly blurred. [00:24:00] This is different than the impression that developed in France in the 1880s, and these two terms should not be confused. One if concerned with just capturing the physical world, the visible world, and the other one, Kandinsky, is concerned with capturing an impression that incurs in the mind, the impression of movement, which is an abstract idea in itself.

Here again getting even vaguer, even harder to define but still again with the suggestion of movement. Again, two horses, here's the forehead of the first one, with the mane, the tails, both tails meeting here in the back, the legs of the second. Here's this black line is another leg of a horse. There's his head, and here the rider is just indicated by this red area. The whole background and foreground become totally one, and without studying, actually, some of the

earlier horses and seeing the evolution it would indeed [00:25:00] be difficult to pick out the horses.

Or here we see further Kandinsky's stylizations or his abstracting to the idea of horse. This is a woodcut for this book, *Concerning the Spiritual*, and it's for the second chapter, which translates to be movement. And the horse becomes one symbol for Kandinsky for movement. So here the whole horse, in reverse from this one on the left, moving towards the reverse, is abstracted from the natural image of horse. It just becomes a long vertical silhouette, but you could see the legs curved in the front and this angular line here to indicate the rider. Again, this is not something you would pick out just at first glance. You would have to be familiar with his works or to know this particular painting to understand that Kandinsky does use the motif of horse in its very abstracted [00:26:00] manner to suggest this idea of movement.

Or here again, still another one, this is from the cover of *The Blue Rider, Der Blaue Reiter*, which was an exhibition group that Kandinsky belonged to. This was a cover that was done in 1911. And again, here you can see a mountain here, this triangular form, a mountain turned on its side, and the horse, again, jumping across the mountain. The idea itself is not very realistic, and so again, the means are not also. You can see, if you compare the head here and the arch for the back, you can see this used in this particular scheme, the oval for the head, again, the arch for the back. You can see the horse's head here and the hooves flying upward and these two lines indicating the back. Again, all very abstracted but still from the motif of horse.

Now, other images that appear in these paintings from 1909 to 1913 [00:27:00] are not only horses but people and castles, castles which often remind us of the Russian type of church with its onion-type dome. First, if we look at the people, this is a people called *Painting with Archer* done in 1909 which is in the Museum of Modern Art, and it's often on display. We see, of course, immediately you will pick out the horse here with a rider also in this sketch. For the painting here I think this is very clear, but if you look at the left-hand corner here, I think you might find two forms, two women, done again in very free colors, painted very freely.

If you look at the sketch you might see the people clearer because you'll see the forms that he's used. They're just long rectangles with ovals for heads, no details. No faces are indicated at all. And if you look down here in the corner you might see the left arm, light blue, the waist being white, [00:28:00] and the bottom part of the skirt maroon. Here you can see the hand of the second person, the blue coat, the purple blouse, again a blue waist and a reddish skirt. Or in the print made after this painting I think that the couple in the left-hand corner become even clearer. You can see the hand here. The colors have become all one now. They're sort of light pink.

The castle also can be picked out or the church, the Kremlin-like church can be picked out here in white with the onion skin Russian domes. It's much harder to pick it out in this oil. And this is even just 1909, and it's still difficult to pick out the castle with its onion dome. Here's a tree at the left. Notice how things are completely taken out of a logical framework. The tree is in the background, and yet it is larger than any of the people in the foreground. As I said before, Kandinsky does this to suggest that these are fantasies, that these are not scenes from visible world. Here the tree [00:29:00] becomes very easily identifiable in this print.

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This is a very early painting of Kandinsky's. It's a tempera, and it was done in 1902. And it's called *A Russian Scene*. And we see really how these churches with the onion domes really are derived from Kandinsky's painting when he painted very much in a Russian style with Russian motifs, for there in the background is the Kremlin-type church with these gold onion domes, also the elongated towers with the onion dome. Here's the whole idea of a fortress and a city, all things tied in it, battles, religion, and this is all synthesized into one element. Here's the tower from the fortress and then the dome from the church.

Kandinsky uses this in many paintings. Here's a painting called *Orientalisches*, which was done in 1909 also. And we can see [00:30:00] how stylized and abstracted, again, the whole idea of this city on a mountain has become. Here it's very clear, very detailed, very precise, whereas in this painting of 1909, seven years later, the whole idea of city on a mountain has become a red cylinder with just a few colorful circles and ovals to indicate the domes, the idea of the church. Here are the domes. And again, here the tower has become a major element in this picture with its gold onion dome. Notice how the people are again either at once there and not there, at once part of the foreground and also part of the background.

This is another painting done in 1910 in which we can see the castle and the city on the mountain and again how it has become again very ambiguous. Here is this tower with the gold dome on it. Notice the people in the foreground, again, [00:31:00] ambiguous forms, almost inanimate in shape. I mentioned in last week's lecture that this again is something, these inanimate forms, that do come out of the French symbolists. This is a woodcut by Denis in which these are human figures bent over, just the suggestion that these are human figures. And Kandinsky does follow this and take up from Denis on this.

Or we see in another painting of 1910, which really summarizes this development of the ambiguity of the people and the castle, we see at first glance it would be impossible to pick out this form, perhaps, as city on top of a mountain. But if -- remember to the mountain in the oriental picture or compare it to this, we see that these are domes, and they do come from this Russian motif and are to indicate this city on the mountain. Or if we look in the corner here, recalling that Denis, the woodcut, the ambiguous human form, we can pick this out, [00:32:00] this oval for the head, yellow oval, and this white dress. We can pick this out as a human form, and it becomes very similar to this form kneeling down here.

This is also the trunk of a tree here, and again, a branch. The whole thing, of course, is taken out of its logical perspective. One would never expect to find a tree that large, a human form this small. But again, this is to give the suggestion of fantasy.

Another motif that was quite common during this period were that of boats on a lake, and I think that the three boats with their, each, six red oars and three men in them in blue, can be picked out. So the castle on the other side of the shore and mountains in the background, I think this is quite clear, and it's especially clear for work by Kandinsky done in 1910. If you look at these two paintings of rowing, both done at the end of 1911, we again see how Kandinsky was continually evolving and working out [00:33:00] this problem of just how to synthesize the whole problem of objects and loose, floating forms and colors.

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Here, in this painting on glass, we see, again, three figures in a row boat. The figures are outlined. The color is orange. They're outlined in black. I think the bottom of the rowboat can be seen here mostly in black, and again, the oars have become the important feature because Kandinsky is trying to convey the quality of rowing. So the most important thing are to emphasize the oars. Again, this isn't logical by naturalistic standards but certainly by psychological standards it is. So the oars become the predominant part of the picture, and there are three oars here. But notice what Kandinsky has done in a picture of about six months later.

The whole thing has become even more abstracted, even more vague. Kandinsky has become less literal. We can hardly find the boat at all, nor can we find the features. Again, as I said, since this is to convey the impression of rowing, [00:34:00] and since the idea of rowing is floating in water, Kandinsky has merged this bottom of the boat with the water. Here color, unidentified with any object, covers over part of the boat. This pink outline dug deep into the water is crossed over by the two different color, again, to suggest this idea of floating and submerges and water.

The human forms can barely be picked out. Here, just by the outline, is the head, this black outline, or here is another black outline. Any of the colors of the body, that belong to the body, are not individualized. They're both part of the background and the foreground at the same time. The oars, again, are not directly connected to the boat, and they're certainly not filled in. They become at first glance just six black lines on the paper, but if we study it for a while you can see that this is oars and the whole idea of rowing. Again, it's this use of the floating color in [00:35:00] these free forms in addition with some idea of the objects, something recognizable. These oars and the human figures in there in the boat, all these three elements, Kandinsky felt, must work together.

Now one reason why Kandinsky so emphasized the object, and he emphasizes this over and over again in his writings, that we cannot be abstract yet because we would be too decorative. We would just make a necktie -- was because Kandinsky felt the painting has a moral goal. He felt that painting could have a regenerative force in the world, and he writes, quote, "Painting is an art, and art is not vague production, transitory and isolated, but a power which must be directed to the development and refinement of the human soul to raising the triangle of the spirit."

Now, if Kandinsky is going to improve humanity's values, he must affect as many observers as possible. And this is why in his writings [00:36:00] when he says we are not ready for completely nonobjective painting he is thinking a great deal in terms of the spectator because he does not want to lose the spectator. He felt that if paintings were just pure color and pure form unconnected to any object, to any human form or tree or house, the spectator would be so completely lost that Kandinsky's message would also be lost. And since it was so important to him to convince the spectator, he worked very hard with abstracting the object, making the human figures less literal than Redon had done but still somewhat identifiable.

Now, why, one may ask, was Kandinsky interested in regenerating mankind or in transforming his values? Kandinsky, as I said before, around 1909, became very interested in a religious philosophical movement called theosophy. Now, theosophy was a type of [00:37:00] movement which was very popular among intellectuals of that time. It had great currents among the

symbolist painters and among the symbolist writers. Many of them were theosophists. Denis, who I mentioned earlier, played with theosophy. Now, theosophy was, as I said before, a type of religion or philosophy which saw all religions as part of one truth. And it thought that this idea could be conveyed to people by various means.

Now, one of the theosophical writers stressed that books about theosophy and about enlightenment and about the transformation of values must not be too clear because if they were too clear the spectator would not get involved, and thus he would never really feel the message. And this is something that Kandinsky also takes up, for he says over and over in his writings that what at first appears chaotic will then have much greater power and impact.

Now, [00:38:00] the theosophists also, at that time, saw the world engaged in a battle, a battle between those who were materialists and those who wanted to have a more spiritual emphasis in the world. And by materialists the theosophists at that time meant those who only believed in what could be proven by the five senses. Those in painting, again, would be naturalists, and those in literature, again, would be realists because the naturalists in painting, of course, painted what they saw with their eyes. They weren't painting what they imagined.

So these two developments really go hand in hand and had a great effect on Kandinsky. This tendency in painting away from naturalism and realism and this tendency of theosophy to see the world as a battle between two forces, the forces of materialism, the physical world, and the forces which wanted to emphasize the spirit of man, his essence, his important qualities, and his connection, which theosophists felt were the one universal spirit which ruled in the world at all time, which was always somewhat [00:39:00] moving forward. Now these were beliefs that Kandinsky expressed in his writing, *Concerning the Spiritual*. As you note, the title is just that, concerning the spiritual in art, not the material or the physical in art, concerning the essences, and in his paintings.

Now, many of the paintings that we shall look at right now are paintings which were done on glass. And in this painting on left is a Bavarian glass painting. And as I said, Kandinsky lived in the Bavarian hills in a peasant village called Murnau. And very popular were these religious scenes done by the peasants. They painted on glass because it was a very cheap form of painting, and the painting could be protected. It was painted and then turned over so the paint, of course, would not peel away. Also, by painting on glass the colors were very vivid and fresh.

And since Kandinsky considered himself a revolutionary, getting back to the essence of art, that is, its [00:40:00] spiritual quality, its inner qualities rather than the physical problems of painting, he connected himself with other primitives and was interested in folk art and in children's art, which he considered much more important, much more concerned with the essential quality of an idea than its reproductive quality.

So he painted very many things on glass, and most of these are religious subjects, as were the Bavarian glass painters. Both of these are Saint George's with a dragon. I think in the Bavarian Saint George here is very clear, the horse and the small dragon at the bottom. Here, Kandinsky's version of Saint George using the same flat, bright colors, is quite different, but I think we see, again, Kandinsky taking the most important item and exaggerating it, the spear, which is here

and green, and the lance becoming the largest element here in gold. The individual dragon is difficult to pick out, but I think you might see the scales here in gray, a little green [00:41:00] and the blue horse with yellow spots and Saint George here in gold.

Here is another Saint George. This is a painting on a mirror done in oil and silver. Here is the horse. You see its mouth and eyes, again, the legs emphasized. Here Saint George can hardly be seen at all, just his cape in maroon, and again, the spear done in silver. There's Saint George's leg, and you can just see down here the legs of the dragon in green, but there's very little dragon at all. It's just merely suggested. Here in another painting by Kandinsky, this an oil, and called *Saint George One*, done in 1911, again you see the evolution of the Saint George, which at first glance, again, would probably be very hard to pick out.

The legs here become important and are probably taken -- this is probably a study, perhaps for this painting. And again, the spear here on the left [00:42:00] killing a very red form, a dragon. The dragon is completely not clear at all, but I think the Saint George and the horse can be picked out as can the soldiers here in the background. And these huge shapes here just suggest mountains. Now Saint George, as some of you may know, is considered very important in Christian iconology because it was through his killing of the dragon and saving of the maiden of a town that he had come upon that he converted the whole town's people to Christianity.

Before when he had come through on his mission to convert them to Christianity they weren't interested, and they refused to believe. And it was only through such a miracle, as of killing this dragon which had always terrorized the town, was he able to then transform their values or regenerate these people to become Christians. Now, Kandinsky, in a sense, identified himself with Saint George. And this is one reason why you find so many paintings of Saint George in this period of 1909 to '11 and even through on till 1913 [00:43:00] because he saw himself as this type of prophet, killing off the materialistic atmosphere and bringing about a new value that is more interested in greater spirituality.

Here is another Saint George in which, again, primarily the spear is the only important thing. The dragon can be seen here at the bottom. Here's the eye of the dragon. This is the most detailed part, the mouth. And here's the indication of the maiden waiting for the dragon to be killed. There's Saint George's face, brown for hands. Again, since Kandinsky is concerned with conveying an idea, he wants to use the least materialistic or physical evidences as possible. And that's another reason why these pictures become more vague and more abstract.

Now, many of these paintings, these paintings on glass, are concerned with the apocalypse or the Day of Judgment. [00:44:00] Now, this is very much related, as I said, to the literature of theosophy, which saw the world divided into two forces, good and evil, that is, the spiritual versus the material. One of the glass paintings, for example, was called *Last Supper*, and another two are concerned with the Day of Judgment itself. Here you see Saint Gabriele coming out with a trumpet to announce that the Day of Judgment has come. The horse at the bottom frightened, running away, the leaves all in the great huge storm, in the great catastrophe that was to come on the Day of Judgment. The lightning again indicating the terror, here you see in the background the castle on top of the mountain.

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Or in another glass painting by Kandinsky, Gabriel has become much more abstracted, much more stylized. What has become important, again, is the trumpet because this is the symbol of Gabriel, and the symbol, again, of Judgment Day, the sinner bent cowering in the corner down at the bottom [00:45:00] and other elements of Kandinsky's paintings, the mountain and there fire in the background. We find also in these glass paintings many paintings of saints. This is a series called *All Saints*, and as you know, it is said in Saint John that on the Day of Judgment all the saints will gather together in heaven to be among those who judge. And so here is Gabriel again over here on the right with the long streaming hair and the golden trumpet announcing the Day of Judgment, and here are all the saints gathered together.

There's the bird of paradise. Here is a much more free, much more colorful rendition of the same scene of *All Saints*. I won't take the time to pick out the individual saints in here, but you might recognize these two as two saints that were together in the other picture. And this on the right, this brown shape, is the trumpet, and you might even note the [00:46:00] hair here of the angel in the corners. It might be clearer in this oil on cardboard, again, of the *All Saints*. There are the two saints together, the angel with the trumpet. Here again is Gabriel with the trumpet here. Again the hair is blown out loosely.

And the whole thing has a great deal of movement, a lot of circular motion, again, to give the idea of the impending doom. Here is another painting on glass in which the whole thing has again become very much put in a sign language. This is titled by Kandinsky *Resurrection*. Again the angel is reduced to sign language, just the hair, black lines for hair -- suggests -- and the oval of the face. The trumpet emerges in the picture. There's the city, barely, barely [00:47:00] seen and the horse and rider in front of it. Or again in this corner is the angel and the trumpet, which, as I said, you could pick out in this picture.

Now, in many of the paintings that are not paintings on glass we can find an actual carrying out of this battle between the spiritual and the material. Most of Kandinsky's paintings in these years 1910 and '11 are often divided into two sides. Unfortunately, this painting -- the reproduction is quite dark. But I think you can notice that one side you see a sun, on the left, even though its blue and much gold, and the other side is a great deal of dark. Here's a dark black area, waves, turmoil, whereas on this side there are lighter colors.

Now, first I'd like to pick out the mountain with a [00:48:00] castle with the church-like onion domes in the center of the picture. You might also notice three riders on horses moving up to the top of the mountain. Now, Kandinsky wrote very much that the atmosphere of his times was very gloomy and that people were very depressed and lost because they were so covered in materialism. He wrote he sees people as, quote, "souls lost in a fog, threatened with asphyxiation, eternally menaced by some invisible, somber force." And he said that, "those who have not gone under, who have not become so depressed by all this materialism, who attack the material over and over again, they are self-sacrificing soldiers making a desperate attack."

So again, the Saint George or the horse and a rider becomes a symbol of those few who are making the attack against the [00:49:00] materialism. And this is indicated by the horses again in upward movement towards the lighter, which is always an indication of perhaps heaven or the spiritual. Here is the human, people. You might see this couple turned on its side. They move

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out from the left corner of the picture. The head of the man is here, the woman's head here is in blue with a yellow hat.

On the right side you might see a boat with the three black oars, and this really might not be clear because the slide's very bad, but often Kandinsky characterized what he called lost humanity, these people in a boat on a stormy sea. This was an image he uses in his writing to characterize the type of atmosphere that he was living in. Now, one might also ask why this city in the mountain on the center of the picture? Often in Russian church iconology the Kremlin is used, the Kremlin church is used as both the city [00:50:00] of god and the city of man. If we think back to Saint Augustine, we also might think of the way this image is used.

And for Kandinsky, this city on the mountain becomes the symbol of humanity. And he writes that, quote, "Humanity lives in a spiritual city, a spiritual city which is beset by many doubts." And this is the humanity which is threatened, and in one of his writings he says humanity is often threatened by a great, black spot, whereas in here, this side of the picture he has much darker, the waves and the storminess. Again, when one pulls the picture apart in this way it seems almost a very literally symbolical way of representing this problem or this religious group that Kandinsky was interested in.

Here we see him working out this a year later. This is in 1911. The boat might be clearer here on the right with the oars. The city on the mountain has become quite important. [00:51:00] You might see in this detail exactly how he has simplified the horse, made it a little less literal than this glass painting, for here the horse, very clearly indicated with the blue head and the maroon of the rider and the two curves -- here the horse is just in green, barely outlined, he rider hardly able to be seen. I think it's quite difficult probably for you to find the other two horses. One is here, and another one is over there. This one you might just be able to see the back leg. This is done in white.

Again, the storminess has become less obtrusive. It's less -- so clearly definable. And we might see, just looking at a picture, a painting of 1913, how really further Kandinsky has evolved this, how everything is even in much more sign language. You might again recognize this horse, ascending the top of the mountain here, by its tail and by the two black lines for the legs. And there's the rider in the middle. If you connect [00:52:00] it with this it's in the same position. Of course, the mountain with the city on top is identifiable as are here the men in the rowboat with the oars sticking out and the stormy waves.

Again, this is made more ambiguous because the picture is not so clearly defined into two parts, but still there is the sunnier element, the sky, the goals towards which the horses are striving or all those people who are striving to transform values, and here is the black area which is threatening the world. Here is another painting done in 1912 which is called *Black Spot* and which Kandinsky literally almost interprets this idea of this force threatening the world, this force of materialism. Here is the city on the mountain. You can see this on the sketch, I think, clearer, where you see right down here in the middle. The lower left-hand corner you see the [00:53:00] rectangle for the mountain and the two towers or the three towers with their domes.

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Here it's much blurred over and covered by this black area. You might notice couples in an oval. Here you see a man in gray and a woman in light yellow sort of sitting in clouds again giving this idea of humanity, just this idea of people and being threatened by these strange forces which Kandinsky felt were threatening the world. When he describes this he's always using the word night. For example, he will say, "The spiritual night falls deeper and deeper around such frightened souls, and their bear is tortured and weakened by doubt, and fear often prefer complete obliteration to the gradual darkening."

And this is the sort of imagery that he uses in his writings, black spot, spiritual night, all [00:54:00] to indicate this lack of values that he feels exists in the world. Here's another painting called *Composition II*. Kandinsky called his paintings composition, again, to move you away from the idea that the paintings have a literal narrative story. But the *Composition* series, and there were seven done in all, a rather religious number or mystical number, seven. The compositions were considered his most important works of these years for they embody, he said, all his ideas.

The *Composition I* is destroyed, and so in the next one we have available, which belongs to the Guggenheim Museum and which can be seen not at this moment but later in the spring, again, this is a picture which is primarily divided in two, divided by this long white area, which is really a tree trunk, and by these two men on horses battling. I think these horses are now probably quite easy to pick out compared to some [00:55:00] of the ones we've been looking at. Here's the horse in blue and the rider now in white with the head light gray. Here the rider is filled in all in white, separated from the orange background.

Or here is another horse in white with his legs not very clearly defined. Here are the fore legs right there. And the horse and the rider on him, even his maroon pants are somewhat indicated. And here's his back in light blue and the head in green. On this side of the painting you might notice figures, figure here, another figure there, two little ones in green, a woman here in black, perhaps a little child in mauve and yellow, here's a little girl, red, with a ball, a tree with flowers on it, a woman lying. You can see this better in this detail, this woman lying on the ground or this little child with a ball. Again, all figures and poses of relaxation, [00:56:00] and in playful attitudes. The colors are very gay, light, light blue, gold. Trees are living with blossoms on them.

But if we look at this other side of the picture, again, notice this lightning stroke here in white. The tree's bent over on the side, black clouds, this threatening idea. The tower's turned in, a man in a boat with his arms outstretched for help, a man in yellow on a purple boat. And if we look down here in the bottom, you might see one, two, three, four figures, all sort of as though they're about to be drowned by a wave, which is very literally illustrating Kandinsky's ideas of souls living in the world threatened and asphyxiated, drowned by the forces that beset them.

Here is another form at the bottom here in green with an arm here in yellow cowering, one might say beneath these forces. And here, if this can be seen, a man again with arm outstretched, again the idea [00:57:00] almost of shouting for help. Again, this goes along here with the man -- outstretched arms, the stormy sky, etc. But this is Kandinsky trying to explain his religious and

philosophical views in a new style which is expressive, which will convey it emotively rather than literally.

Here is a sketch which is called in parenthesis, (*Garden of Love*). He, at this time, did not like to title his pictures because he felt too much the narrative quality would be read. On the other hand, he always subtitled them. He never could get away from this idea of titling them because he also wanted to make sure that no one thought they were just nonobjective paintings, that is, paintings without content. And he said any painting without a meaning is worthless. So in this (*Garden of Love*) you see again figures in relaxed positions, again very curving, floating space, and this [00:58:00] can somewhat be related to this picture. So when one says that these figures are in playful attitude, here is actually a watercolor sketch title by Kandinsky *Garden of Love*.

Another glass painting, this is done in 1911. We also get this dichotomy. This is called by Kandinsky -- it's called *Heaven Bird and Hell Cat*. There's the bird of glory, the peacock, and again, using these two contrasting motifs in one painting, heaven and hell. Or in another famous painting, *Composition IV*, Kandinsky actually wrote about this painting. And he said the main contrast of the painting is the angled, sharp movement, the battle. And he says that the battle is taking place up here in the upper left-hand corner, and he even writes that these black lines are to indicate horses. He wrote this in an essay published in 1913, and that these black angles here at the horse's [00:59:00] legs. This, which looks like a dog's mouth almost, is the nozzle of the horse, and this line here is just to indicate the horse's back.

In the sketch I think you can see the legs intertwining in battle clearer, the two similar colors to indicate the rider, the yellow for the back, outlined by that black arch. Again the idea of a tall hat here in purple, here's the other's hat, the red face, again and the purple back. The first horse is just indicated by this one sweeping arch, by very quick staccato stroke. This certainly is sign language. Kandinsky identifies these long black lines splitting the picture in two as spheres. And he actually calls them so in his writing, and he says that these forms here on the right are people. These are the souls of the living watching this battle. I think the sun also can be identified here in the mountains.

And in this painting, which is the last of the *Composition* series, called *Composition VII*, [01:00:00] this painting he felt was the climax of his career, of his early career. And it was concerned with this apocalyptic idea Kandinsky had with this complete transformation of values. And so in this painting, which looks completely chaotic to you at first glance, it looks almost impossible to identify, Kandinsky wanted to give this impression first of chaos and of conflict, and so the colors are swirling, not at all related to objects. Objects can be found in this, objects which relate to the *All Saints* pictures which relate to the early apocalyptic last judgments. But this can only be done after a great deal of study with the 20 sketches and studies for this painting. But all this is to give the feeling of the final apocalypse, of the final catastrophe and struggle, out of which the third manifestation would emerge, the paradise.

And Kandinsky was asked later [01:01:00] about a painting similar to this one. And the person who asked him wrote, "It was an explosive and ballistic in its design. We gave it the title of *War* because it was done just before World War I. I wrote to Kandinsky later in Sweden," and this was in 1916, "to ask whether, when he painted the picture he had foreboded World War I."

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Kandinsky wrote, "Not this war. I had no premonition of that, but I knew that a terrible struggle was going on in the spiritual sphere, and that made me paint the picture I sent you." Thank you.

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