JOHN E. BOWLT

"Down with Kandinsky! Down with him." Punin's remarks emphasized certain truths which tend to be forgotten nowadays. Firstly, that the complex of movements and personalities that we identify by the term, Russian avant-garde, did not really include Kandinsky. That is to say, that the leading members of Russia's avant-garde -- Larionov, Malevich, Tatlin, Rodchenko, Popova -- had very little to do with Kandinsky, were really not influenced by him, and did not regard him as a fellow fighter in their search for a new pictorial expression. They tended to agree with Punin, to the effect that Kandinsky was an astute thinker, a philosopher, but not a painter. That is, not the kind of artist, who thinks almost exclusively in terms of paint, texture, [00:01:00] weight, minimal forms, like, for example, Malevich did. I'd like to show the first two slides, please.

Just take two works of the same period, two Russian works, on your left, Kandinsky's *Horseman* of 1916, and on your right, Malevich's *Red Square* in the Russian Museum in Leningrad of 1915, also. And I think you can see immediately, that the two painters were following very different paths. Even though, today, we like to reunite them by our use of the term, Russian avant-garde.

The question of Kandinsky's position within the Russian avant-garde is not a simple one. Certainly, Kandinsky, while living in Germany in the late '90s and early 1900s, [00:02:00] was in constant creative contact with artistic life in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and other Russian cities. He contributed to exhibitions, published articles in the Russian press, was represented at cultural conferences, and maintained a lively correspondence with experimental artists and writers such as Larionov, Kulbin, and David Burliuk.

However, even when Kandinsky returned from Germany to Russia, to the time of the first World War, and lived in Moscow until 1921, when he went to the Bauhaus, he was never really part of the Russian modern movement, as defined, let's say, by Malevich or Kliun, Rodchenko, Popova, and Tatlin. Kandinsky was not as radical or as iconoclastic as they were. He was too respectful of artistic tradition to be able to reject all conventions. And was too serious to be able to [00:03:00] treat art as a joke.

For example, Kandinsky, as you see here, would hardly have ventured to paint his face or to shock the Bourgeoise in the way David Burliuk did in 1912, on your right. And, also, I think, it's difficult to imagine Kandinsky, on the left, and his rather respectable milieu, having his photograph taken sitting on an upside-down grand piano, as you can see on the right or just about, as Malevich, Filonov, and others did, in 1913. Kandinsky was much more serious and academic than they were. And we can understand why the young and very proper Nina Kandinsky, recalling the antics of the extreme members of the Russian avant-garde just after the revolution, later declared most emphatically, "We took no part in that."

Before concentrating on some of the artistic and ideological elements that did connect [00:04:00] Kandinsky to the Russian avant-garde, or more precisely, to Russian modernism, we might mention just a few of the concrete instances of Kandinsky's participation in Russian artistic life before the revolution, that is, while he was living in Germany. We should remember, for

example, that Kandinsky developed as an artist during the *Fin de siècle*. And his art of the late '90s and early 1900s contains many references to Russian art nouveau, or as it was called in Russia, the stil modern.

These avocations of fairytale kingdoms with castles and maidens remind us of the contemporary works of Russia's greatest fairytale illustrator, Ivan Bilibin, as I hope we can see from a comparison here. On the left, I show you a Kandinsky of the early 1900s which you perhaps haven't seen before. And we can compare this, I think, very favorably with a piece by Bilibin, on your right. It's a design by Bilibin for the *Golden Cockerel* [00:05:00] of 1909. Both artists are showing the same kind of milieu.

Kandinsky also picked up the typical symbolist harmonies of mauve, violet, green, and grey, expressed clearly in his beauty in a landscape of 1904, on your left, which I'm sure you've all seen before, which I think is almost a kind of positivization of the haunting canvas on the right, called *Lilacs* of 1900 by Russia's greatest symbolist painter, Mikhail Vrubel. Kandinsky's fascination with the theme of Versailles, with the epoch of the *Fetes Galantes*, also brings him close to other Russian enthusiasts for the Rococo revival, especially Somov, as we can see from another comparison, I think. You can look at the Kandinsky on your left, the *Ladies in Crinolines* of 1909, and you can compare this very favorably, again, with a piece by Somov on your right, called *Evening* of 1902.

[00:06:00] Kandinsky returned to similar retrospectives as late as 1917, as in his other *Ladies in Crinolines* on your left from the Kastarkis collection in 1917, which again we might compare with another Somov painting on your right, such as *Walk After the Rain* of 1896. This rapid sequence of parallels that I have just shown you indicates clearly that Kandinsky shared many of the stylistic and thematic concerns of his Russian colleagues, even though he was living outside Russia. Furthermore, just as Russian evolved, rapidly replacing the stil modern with neo-primitivism, and then with the first investigations into abstraction, so, Kandinsky also changed accordingly.

And his landscapes of Murnau of around 1908-09, with their vivid colors, their rude outlines, and reduced forms, also bring to mind the neo-primitivist canvases of his Moscow contemporaries such as Larionov. [00:07:00] Both parties on the right, on your right, you'll see a Larionov painting called *Sunset After the Rain*, and on the left is a Kandinsky piece called *Winter 1* of 1909. Both artists, among other things, transferred methods from folk art. In Larionov's case, on the right, from tin trays and store balls, or in Kandinsky's case, on your left, from Bavarian glass painting. Both artists acted in such a way so as to arrive at their colorful reduction, reliant less upon anecdotal narrative than upon the primacy of color, already removed from its traditional symbolic or semantic associations.

When we take account of these pictorial similarities, we should not be surprised that Larionov invited Kandinsky to take part in his first standless exhibition in Moscow 1910, that is, [00:08:00] the Jack of Diamonds, side-by-side with Goncharova, Malevich, David Burliuk, and others. It was also reasonable that Kandinsky, in turn, invited Larionov and other avant-gardists to contribute to his and Franz Marc's Blue Rider Almanac, published in Munich in 1911.

But it was at this point around 1911, that there occurred a dramatic change in Kandinsky's position vis-à-vis the Russian avant-garde. For both parties suddenly realized that while their visual results looked similar, their motives, their attitudes towards art were very different. Kandinsky was becoming increasingly concerned with the religious meaning of art, while Larionov and the Burliuks were intent on desecrating art. Kandinsky imbued art with more and more occult meaning, while Larionov and his friends did all they could [00:09:00] to turn art into a joke.

But Kandinsky's divergence with the early avant-garde was emphatic, was demonstrated by his angry reaction to the publication of four of his pose poems in the Cubo-Futurist Manifesto called, "A Slap in the Face of Public Taste," an edition orchestrated by David Burliuk in December 1912 that published Kandinsky's poems without his -- Kandinsky's -- permission. Kandinsky must have been rather indignant to see his latter-day symbolist poems next to the famous manifesto that declared "throw Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, etc. overboard from a steamship of modernity."

In a letter to a Moscow newspaper, Kandinsky condemned the act, adding condescendingly, that he was prepared to forgive "a certain rashness and immaturity of the young authors," but not the general [00:10:00] tone of the booklet, which he found absolutely reprehensible.

What, then, was the real reason for this falling out, for Kandinsky's sudden alienation from the real Russian avant-garde? It lay in Kandinsky's spiritual rebirth. His rediscovery of art as an ecstatic messianic experience, a symbolist fantasia attitude that Larionov, Malevich, Rodchenko, etc., rejected and despised. Of course, there were other elements that separated Kandinsky from these angry young men. For example, his age. He was older than most by 10 or 20 years, his financial solvency and middle-class status, his humanistic education and knowledge of several languages, and the rather pompous earnestness with which he viewed his own art.

But it was Kandinsky propagation of the spiritual in art that drew him from the camp of the avant-garde, [00:11:00] and defined his subsequent evolution, a deeply philosophical concern, that became the keystone of his artistic structure. Of course, we should not use exclusive categories here because Kandinsky himself was also deeply concerned with the science of art and aesthetical reduction, while such sober artists as Rodchenko and Tatlin could certainly be lyrical or cosmic at times.

But the fact remains that Kandinsky's extra-pictorial reference to a higher plane of consciousness, his religiosity, is vital to the understanding of his art of all periods. This demonstrates, in turn, that Kandinsky's attitude toward art was a rather traditional one: narrative, philosophical, metaphysical. Not quite the concept shared by Larionov, Malevich, Tatlin, and other more abrasive members of the Russian avant-garde during the 1910s.

[00:12:00] Following on from Kandinsky's spiritual comprehension of art, I would like now to concentrate on two sources, largely Russian, that enlightened Kandinsky's art taste and development, and further defined his position within the Russian avant-garde as a whole. Both derived from or are related to Kandinsky's intense interest in the theosophical universe that he seems to use as a metaphor for accommodating his own particular spiritual inclinations,

interweaving it with references to landscape, Russian Orthodoxy, the Revolution, and so on.

The first of the two major themes or sources that I'd like to discuss in detail is the role of something that I call the transcendental landscape in Kandinsky's art. That his depth, direct or inferred, to a particular [00:12:00] movement in later nineteenth century Russian painting that falls outside the more familiar canon of realism, which in any case, Kandinsky did not like, and yet, does not quite enter the perimeter of symbolism, at least is preferentially to the Russian symbolist landscapes of the early 1900s.

The leader of this pictorial transcendentalism was a man called Arkhpi Kuindzhi. And two examples of Kuindzhi's painting are before you of the 1880s-1890s. Kuindzhi was a renegade from the Imperial St. Petersburg Academy, who held views furiously similar to those of the painters from the Hudson River School. He viewed nature as a permanent, perpetual force, a source of immutable values that dwarfed man and defied any attempt to discipline and civilize her. Kuindzhi listened [00:14:00] to nature and heard its silence, or rather, heard its harmony, inexpressible in words. In his luminous works of the '80s and '90s, two of which you can see here, Kuindzhi evoked this grandeur, this enormous incommunicability, describing a cosmos familiar perhaps to Emerson -- whom he had read, by the way -- and also to the German Romantic painters. But quite foreign to the contemporaneous topographical Realists of St. Petersburg and Dresden.

Kuindzhi rejected particularity, precise location, concentrating on the effects of natural light, approximating or abstracting the point of departure. Kuindzhi's cosmic evocations were repeated or paraphrased by an entire group of Russian and Polish painters in the 1890s and early 1900s.

[00:15:00] Such as on your right, a Russian artist called Levitan, who painted this painting called *The River* of 1898, whom Kandinsky esteemed very highly. And perhaps, we can see a transference of interest into his painting on the left, Kandinsky painting on the left called *River in Summer* of 1901. But perhaps more important for our comparison in this immediate context, is a painting on the left called *Cloud* of 1902, by one of Kuindzhi's pupils, a Pole called Ferdynand Ruszczyc.

If you look at this painting, this a marveling painting on the left of 1902 by the Pole, Ruszczyc, I think you'll agree that it's one of those visions that elicit both fear of and perplexity at nature. This abstract, meteoric, apocalyptic form hurtling across the firmament [00:16:00] on the left cannot but bring to mind the theosophist thought-poems of Leadbeater and Besant, published in color reproduction in their treatise on theosophical meaning of colors in the early 1900s. And, of course, much discussed by artists and philosophers, alike, including Kandinsky.

And here, on your right, is an example which according to their tabulation symbolizes murderous rage and substantial anger, which we all feel from time to time.

It really isn't so very far from the gaseous substances in Kuindzhi's or Ruszczyc's natural landscapes to these cyclical landscapes charted by Madame Blavatsky in the late nineteenth century. You can see a theosophical chart on your left. And delineated as a source of the

humors by [00:17:00] Besant and Leadbeater. And we should add immediately, propagated by the St. Petersburg Theosophists Society.

Now, I really don't think that Kandinsky took these tabulations such as the piece on the left very seriously, or at least not for very long. But it seems to me that nurtured on the transcendental vision that I mentioned just now, Kandinsky was quite prepared to incorporate parts of the theosophical landscape into his own vistas, a combination that appears particularly sharply in around 1912, both in the figurative and the less figurative works.

Thought forms soar as clouds of black, gray, red, or surround figures in the auras of psychical vibrations. For example, take this extraordinary painting by Kandinsky on your left, *Poor Woman in Moscow*, of 1912, [00:18:00] which I think is surely one of Kandinsky's most unworldly paintings, in spite of its worldly title that is *Woman in Moscow*. Look at it very closely. You can see very strange things going on. The lady has her left hand cut off. You see the Chagall-like carriage in the background. And of course, this black funereal form hovering on the top, right. One can't help thinking that the black form, in particular, was perhaps inspired by or stimulated to some extent by these thought forms which I was just talking about.

Still, it seems to me, also, that Kandinsky may have seen these themes and was interested in these thought forms, but he probably just applied their function and not their actual theosophical meanings. Because all these thought forms, which I'm [00:19:00] showing on the right, stood for certain states of mind. But I don't think Kandinsky was actually applying the states of mind, he was just rather enthralled by the visual power of these particular symbols.

Kandinsky continued to do this kind of operation right up to the 1910s and 1920s. You can again see an interest in comparison here between the Kandinsky on the left, the *Improvisation 218*, of 1919. This is on your left. And you can probably see the thought form, again, which is in the top-right, which is very similar to one of the actual thought forms on your right.

Again, however, I would like to repeat the Kandinsky is merely applying the idea of emotional color equivalents and not necessarily the theosophical denotation. The same seems true of this painting here by Kandinsky on your left called *Cow in Moscow*, also of 1912, [00:20:00] where the cow stands in a thought form of yellow, while the man on the left projects his psychic aura, exactly as the theosophists argued he should.

If we take this extra dimension into consideration in the Kandinsky, we can see immediately just how much he differed from the Moscow neo-primitivists such as Larionov, on the right, a painting called *Walk in Provincial Town*. It's a bad slide -- and I apologize, but you can perhaps see what's going on -- which, superficially, has resemblance to Kandinsky, but it doesn't have the inner impulse which I've been talking about. In other words, it really is rather quite devoid of the esoteric invocations that the Kandinsky had.

Once again, in other words, the outer similarities belie a deep divergence of intentions. But then we return to the landscape, per se. Remember, [00:21:00] just now, I showed you a picture on the left called The Cloud by this Polish artist called Ruszczyc? Well, Ruszczyc was a pupil of Kuindzhi, as I mentioned. And in Warsaw, was also a contemporary of a Lithuanian painter and

musician called Ciurlionis, whose works some critics argue, impressed Kandinsky deeply and prompted his investigation of pictorial abstraction.

Ciurlionis was one of those rare artists -- Ciurlionis is represented on your right. Ciurlionis was one of those rare artists who, like Rambeau and Rimsky-Korsakov, could hear colors and see sounds. And many of his visionary landscapes bear musical titles, such as *Fugue*, or on your right, *Spring Sonata Allegro*, of 1907, again bringing to mind Kandinsky's use of the term, musical term, in fact, improvisation or composition. [00:22:00] As for example, the Kandinsky, *Improvisation 11*, of 1910, on your left.

Although Ciurlionis was Lithuanian by birth, and relied substantially on the traditional imagery of his Baltic homeland, he trained in Warsaw, and then set up home in St. Petersburg in 1908. I don't wish to enter the well-developed polemic concerning the problem as to whether Kandinsky actually saw works by Ciurlionis. But suffice it to say that they contributed to the same exhibitions in Russia and that reproductions of Ciurlionis's work were being published in the press as early as 1908.

In any case, Ciurlionis seems to have impressed one of Kandinsky's staunchest supports in St. Petersburg, a man called Nikolai Kulbin, on your left, whose book illustration here of 1909, on your left, seems to paraphrase the Ciurlionis paradise [00:23:00] on your right of 1908. In is worth remembering that Kulbin, the artist of the picture on the left, also contributed to Kandinsky's and Marc's Blue Rider Almanac in Munich in 1911, that he read Kandinsky's Russian version of "On the Spiritual In Art" on Kandinsky's behalf in St. Petersburg in 1911, that Kulbin, like Kandinsky, took a particular interest in theosophy using the theosophical pyramid or triangle as the name of one of the exhibits he organized in St. Petersburg in 1909. On your left, you can see the catalogue cover designed by Kulbin for a 1909 exhibition. And that like Ciurlionis and the theosophists, Kulbin interested himself in the parallels between sound and color, between natural sounds like the wind and artificial scales, harmonic and inharmonic.

Like Kuindzhi, Ruszczyc, Ciurlionis, Kandinsky, [00:24:00] Kulbin sensed the elemental power of nature, its primordial chords disguised beneath its illusory serenity. Like Kandinsky, he sensed the inner sound beneath the outer form. And asked why natural forms such as a seashell, the wind, the crystal, should not be considered as artifacts in the same way that the artists' coalescence of colors and forms on the canvas are also considered beautiful.

Kulbin knew all the Russian Cubo-Futurists and was at the very axis of the Russian avant-garde, even though he was viewed with tolerant disdain, even as a symbolist fuddy-duddy, whose artistic endeavors were dilettantish and derivative. Still, we might recall that among his brief converts in 1908-1909 was a [00:25:00] lady artist, on your right, Elena Guro, who was a poet and a painter, whose abstract *Contours* of around 1909, this is on your right, which is perhaps a delineation of some imaginary seashore or boughs in a tree, anticipated Kandinsky's drawings by more than a decade. The Kandinsky on the left, Drawing IX, of 1925. We should also remember that her husband, Guro's husband, Mikhail Matyushin, the painter and musician, was also a member of Kulbin's triangle group. And his famous painting called *Crystal* of 1919, on your left, might almost illustrate Kulbin's argument that, "In the *Crystal*, there is a maximum of symmetry and precision of relationships, a crystal of salt, the cube, is an example of maximum

harmony in which each surface, [00:26:00] each angle, each side is equal. All the relationships are equal."

Matyushin, of course, went on to develop this theory of Zeno or extended viewing, according to which the new twentieth century man would be able to reawaken and develop dormant optical nerves on the back of the neck, on the soles of the feet, so as to obtain an optical range of 360 degrees, which is something I think, totally Russian. According to this fabulous theory, Matyushin produced landscapes from all points of view such as these two works in front of you of the 1920s.

Such circumvision was surely far from Kandinsky. Or was it? Isn't there something parabolic, fisheye, about some of the Kandinsky's paintings? [00:27:00] Why the repetition of the pronounced *Oval Composition*, in works such as this, the *White Oval* of 1919. These are surely synthetic impressions, totalities, almost as if we, the viewer, were standing either below them or in the middle of them looking up, down, left, right.

The images seem to float, to deny the terrestrial pull, just like, say, Lissitzky's *Proun*, of around 1920, on your right. While one is indeed as if some of Kandinsky's paintings should not be seen from below, indeed, especially when we remember that one of them of 1916 was actually called *Plafond*, or ceiling. And in the ceiling context, you might think of his work called *Picnic*, also of 1916, which also really looked like looking up at a ceiling.

[00:28:00] Well, all this brings me to the second point of derivation that I want to touch upon relating to Kandinsky's spirituality, his abstraction, and to his colleagues in Moscow and St. Petersburg, that is, St. Basil's Cathedral, Moscow, or at least the kind of structure and style represented by that famous church on Red Square, seen on your right. There is no question that the occult symmetry of St. Basil's, its loud colors of red, orange, yellow, colors that Kandinsky loved, its structural form, its symbolic function, its synthesis of painting and architecture -- remember, that the interior is encovered with frescoes -- its position at the very center of downtown Moscow. These things ingrained themselves indelibly on Kandinsky's mind. And consciously or unconsciously, [00:29:00] he returned to St. Basil's in part or in whole again and again, whether in the early Jugendstil pieces of around 1900, or in his post-Revolutionary descriptions of Moscow, such as this piece called *Red Square of 1917*.

How can we explain this strange fixation? Firstly, born in Moscow, Kandinsky always remember the city with great affection. Referring to it in his autobiography as "the departure point of my searches." Secondly, as a son of a wealthy Moscow tea merchant, Kandinsky belonged to the commercial Russian Orthodox class, for whom St. Basil's Cathedral with its Byzantine colors, symbolized the oriental extravagance of old mercantile Muscovy. Thirdly, the remarkable harmony between external and internal elements in this and other [00:30:00] contemporaneous examples of old Russian church architecture served as an important prototype in Kandinsky's search for a truly monumental or synthetic art, something that he discussed at length in his program for the Moscow Institute of Artistic Culture in 1920, and then at the Bauhaus.

Indeed, like other intellectuals of his time, including the composer Alexander Scriabin, and the

priest and mathematician, Pavel Florensky, Kandinsky regarded the Orthodox Church and its ecclesiastical service as perpetual totalities, combining artistic delights for the eye in the icons in the frescoes, the ear in the singing, and even for the nose in the incense, where one element is unthinkable without another.

It strikes me that many of Kandinsky's paintings evoke a similar sense of complete commitment, with their often parabolic scope, the centrifugal attraction. The viewer is [00:31:00] drawn into them. It's synthesized with them, just as if they were walk-through sculptures. In fact, the notion of moving into the work of art was certainly one of great fascination for the viewer. It recalls, for example, how in 1889, when visiting a peasant hut in a remote Russian village, he was dazzled by the total artistry of its interior. Every available space of the wooden hut, outside and in, was covered in painted decoration so that the visitor, as Kandinsky recalls, felt as if he were walking into a painting.

Perhaps we can gain some idea of this sensation from this illustration on your right of the interior of a sixteenth century *Boys House*. Kandinsky's intense, busy paintings such as this piece in *Grey* of 1919, on your left, do draw us inwards just as the *Boys House* and just [00:32:00] as an Orthodox church interior.

St. Basil's Cathedral and Red Square with the crenulated Kremlin were paraphrased in many fairytale works of Kandinsky's Jugendstil period such as the two pieces that I started with earlier on. But this architectural complex was much more than a nostalgic evocation for Kandinsky. It symbolized the heart of Moscow, the third robe, which for many Russian artists and writers, was the center of the artistic New Wave before and after 1917.

And it is not surprising to find it interpreted and reconstructed in many paintings of the time, as in this piece on your left -- it's a bad slide, slightly out of focus -- called *St. Basil's Cathedral* by Aristarkh Lentulov of 1913. Inspired perhaps at the same time by Delaunay's Simultanism, [00:33:00] to which Lentulov, the artist on the left, was exposed in Paris in 1912-1913. Delaunay, upon your right, of course.

Delaunay's descriptions of the Eiffel Tower, as here of 1912, become reprocessed, as it were, and Russianized, where instead of the Parisian symbol, we are now faced with a reinforcement of the Moscow symbol. The atheism of the Eiffel Tower is replaced by the spirituality of Old Moscow. This sequence of retakes deserves to be examined in great detail. But suffice it to trace the refraction of the Delaunay session through this work on your left, or through another Lentulov piece of 1915 called *Firmament*. If you look very carefully, you can make out a triangular form in the center of the painting which is very similar to the Eiffel Tower.

We might also recall Pavel Filonov's *Formula of the Petrograd Proletariat* of 1920s, again, with this pyramidal structure in the middle. [00:34:00] And we also come back to Kandinsky in this *Red Border* of 1919, where the ascending spires, I think, do remind us or perhaps are a stylized reference to St. Basil's Cathedral. Or, we might take *Painting on a Light Ground*, also by Kandinsky on your left of 1916. All these things recall the same kind of framework which we've been talking about in the context of St. Basil's Cathedral.

Incidentally, the work on the left, this piece called *Painting on a Light Ground* of 1916, might almost be read as an inversion of yet another theosophical symbol, that is, a thought form called *Wagner*, on your right, which was also published in the Leadbeater *Design Treatise*, where we can see sound clouds hovering above the cathedral at the base. And if you try and imagine the Kandinsky on the left upside down, it's very, very close coloristically, pictorially, to the thought [00:35:00] form on the right.

One perhaps also wonders whether that extraordinary painting by Nikritin of 1913 might also have been inspired, directly or indirectly, by this argument. And Nikritin on the left, of 1913.

Kandinsky's continual return to the subject of St. Basil's Cathedral before and after 1917 illustrates just how fascinated he was by the artifact. And probably his concern with particular images from the Christian lexicon, for example, archangels of St. George, derive as much from his early exposure to the frescoes and icons of Moscow churches as from his intellectual study of Revelations and the Apocalypse.

I think, for example, Kandinsky's conscious wish in designing the interior of the Juryfreie exhibition in Berlin in 1922, on your left, these murals on the left, was to repeat the ambience of a church. Why else would he have paraphrased the frescoes of St. Basil's Cathedral [00:36:00] here while using an abstractive version of his 1916 drawing *Trumpeting Angels*, on your right, for the mural? And I think you can see the very close parallels between the two slides here.

Well, when we remember the Malevich in 1918 was one of the group of radical Moscow artists who wanted to blow up St. Basil's Cathedral, regarding it as a symbol of Russia's imperial civility, we can understand why Malevich and Kandinsky didn't get on all that well. But in spite of Kandinsky's estrangement from the more extreme movements in post-Revolutionary Moscow art, he was very active in the spheres of education and museum reform from 1918 through 1921. And during the short time of 1919-1920, he published six major articles, started editing one of the first issues [00:37:00] an unpublished encyclopedia of visual art, and taught briefly at the Moscow Free Studios, where he was a colleague of Rodchenko, Popova, and others.

Perhaps the most important activity that Kandinsky pursued just after the Revolution was his temporary directorship of the Moscow Institute of Artistic Culture that opened in May, 1920. The Institute was established as a laboratory for the investigation into artistic properties of media. And Kandinsky's program for it derived in part from on the spiritual in art, reflecting his traditional concerns with synthetic art and with the interaction of painting and music.

For example, he devoted much discussion to the need to codify and assess color combinations and sense associations "to search out parallels in the experience in color," not only through sight, but also through the other senses: touch, smell, [00:38:00] taste, and above all, hearing. To this end, Kandinsky invited musicians to play and artists to paint their music, or would ask artists to paint, say, the same still life while listening to various kinds of music, classical, dance, or jazz.

Unfortunately, most of Kandinsky's colleagues at the Institute, who included the leading members of the Russian avant-garde, were not in agreement with his approach, questioning his emphasis on the role of intuition, on the subject element of the occult sciences, and so on. They

regarded their own art, and here are two examples of the more extreme radical art of around 1920 or so. Popova on your left, which is a piece, a very tiny piece, about 1922, I suppose, or a Rodchenko piece of 1926 on the right. These kind of artists regarded their own art, geometric hard-edge, [00:39:00] as the legitimate formal expression of the New Revolutionary sense. Consequently, we shouldn't be surprised that they did not ratify Kandinsky's program. Kandinsky resigned and the Institute was redirected, along a path of precise analysis, organizational materials, and mechanical process.

One result of this was the advocacy of industrial and applied art, of Constructivism, in the fall of '21 after the exhibition, 5x5=25, at which Ekster, Popova, Rodchenko, Stepanova, and Alexander Vesnin, whose catalogue cover you can see here on your left, contributed five works each. The Moscow Institute, therefore, became closely identified with the industrial aesthetic, and with the many fruits of Constructivist design. But strangely enough, as a matter of fact, Kandinsky was not untouched by this impulse, and his occasional designs [00:40:00] for porcelain and jewelry at this time came to be regarded as his personal response to the constructivist debate. Here are porcelain designs of his.

True, his designs for cups and saucers, are really rather reminiscent of traditional pre-Revolutionary designs. Here are designs of Russian tea service of around 1910, rather traditional with their fairytale motifs of huts and castles, are really perhaps more reminiscent of this traditional kind of pottery than, say, of the more radical pottery designs by Malevich and his colleagues, as you can see here on your right.

And, also, in Kandinsky's exclusive concentration on the surface ornament without any creative interest in the actual shape of the cup, saucer, or teapot, he really is still thinking as a painter, not as an architect, that is, as a practitioner of two, not three-dimensions. True, to his own particular artistic vision.

[00:41:00] In spite of Kandinsky's uneasy relationship with his Moscow colleagues, he was able to propagate his art and his theory on an unprecedented scale. Not only did he teach, publish, and formulate institutional research plans, but also, he exhibited regularly, contributing to at least seven exhibitions in Moscow and the provinces between 1919 and '21. Kandinsky's work was also visible in many museums, both in the metropolitan areas and a result of the general move to enlighten the provinces in remote towns.

And he also had some followers, such as this man on the left, Kakabadze, obviously inspired by Kandinsky in this decorative composition of the 1920s, and also a man, a Ukrainian called Victor Palmer, also, I think, reminiscent of Kandinsky, in this painting on the right, called *Japan*, of 1921.

Even so, Kandinsky never enjoyed the popularity that Malevich and Tatlin did. [00:42:00] Kandinsky also examined and assessed Moscow artistic life very carefully. And according to Stepanova, Rodchenko's wife, he was astute, even cunning, never afraid to incorporate other artists' ideas into his own system, if he felt them to be of value.

In other words, Kandinsky was open-minded, alert, assimilative, and we shouldn't be too

surprised to notice a few remarkable parallels and perhaps downright plagiarisms in Kandinsky's work of the 1920's. Oh, for example, on the left is a Kandinsky painting of 1920 called *Red Oval*. We might compare this to a work by David Shterenberg, a lesser light of the Russian avant-garde, a still life, of the same year.

Carrying on with our quick parallels, we might take this famous Kandinsky, the *Black Circle*, of 1924, [00:43:00] and perhaps read it as a kind of following on of Lissitzky's *Proun* of 1923, on your right. We might take Kandinsky's *Several Circles* of 1926, on your left, and see that it repeats the same basic composition of Rodchenko's *Cosmic Abstraction*, of around 1920, on your right.

A particularly fascinating correspondence occurs between this Kandinsky of 1927 called *Blue*, and a *Blue Circle* by Kliun of 1922, on your right.

Another very interesting parallel, of course, is to be made between this Kandinsky *Two Square* of 1930, on your left, which surely derives from Malevich's *Two Squares* of 1915, or perhaps from Lissitzky's *Two Squares* of 1920.

[00:44:00] Such pictorial comparisons are striking, but they do not belittle the creative power of Kandinsky. If he did copy Kliun, Malevich, Rodchenko, he did so more out of curiosity, than from ill-intention. And in any case, he had no need to make any fundamental departure from his own rich and ever-potential style. And no doubt, he regarded the geometric experiments of his colleagues as dry gestures, mere decorations, devoid of the most important element, that is, the spiritual in art.

After Kandinsky's departure from Moscow for the Bauhaus in December '21, his name rapidly fell into disrepute in Soviet art circles. And his paintings were taken down from museum walls and put into storage. Strangely enough, one such storage depot became a disused church in the [00:45:00] Siberian town of [Balnow?], which for reasons understandable only to the Soviet mentality, became one of the major recipients of avant-garde art during the Stalin years.

One observer, who was privileged to enter the facility, later recalled, "The spectacle began of the church porch. And the further you went in, the more extraordinary, the more astounding it became. Round the royal doors on the choirs and over the altar hung non-objective paintings, Kandinsky, Malevich, Rozanova. Leaning against the frescoed walls, more Kandinskys. Against the columns, even more. And on the floor, yet more. We didn't understand them at all, but they did give us the feeling of being inside a church."

[00:46:00] Kandinsky would have been very happy at such a sentiment. With this in mind, remembering the transcendental landscape, the concern with theosophy, St. Basil's Cathedral, the spiritual in art, we might place Kandinsky fairly and squarely in the tradition of the great religious painters. He was of a late renaissance. And perhaps if those magnificent paeons to the Christian faith of Tintoretto or Titian, in Venice, Tintoretto, on the right, were suddenly replaced by Kandinsky's paintings, the effect would be just as magical, as uplifting, and as spiritual.

But perhaps this beautiful subservience to a religious quest was also Kandinsky's tragic flaw.

For a while connecting him with the great traditions of Western art, it disconnected him from the real Russian avant-garde, iconoclastic [00:47:00] and atheistic. No doubt, if those radicals, more spirited than spiritual, had been given the chance to rewrite their Cubo-Futurist Manifesto of 1912, they would have declared, "Throw Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Kandinsky overboard from the steamship of modernity." Thank you. (applause)

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