

Vasily Kandinsky, Berlin, January 1922
Centre Pompidou, Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Paris.



◀ ABOUT THE ARTIST ▶

Born in Moscow to a wealthy family, Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944) spent his early childhood in Odessa, Russia (now Ukraine). His parents instilled in him an early love of music that later influenced his work. Though he studied law and economics at the University of Moscow and his life seemed destined to follow a conventional path, at age 30 he abruptly decided to abandon his legal career and devote himself to art.

His decision was prompted by two important experiences. In 1895 he attended an Impressionist exhibition, where he saw a *Haystack* painting by French artist Claude Monet (1840–1926). Stirred by the encounter, Kandinsky later realized that the paintings' color and composition, not their subject matter, caused his response. At a concert in 1896, he noticed that music can elicit an emotional response without a connection to a recognizable subject. This experience led him to believe that painting should aspire to be as abstract as music.

In 1896 Kandinsky left Russia for Munich, where he studied art and began to pursue his new career. In 1908, while in his early 40s, he began developing a range of artistic tools, gradually stripping away recognizable imagery from his work. Kandinsky participated in several of the 20th century's most influential and controversial art movements, among them the group *Der Blaue Reiter* (The Blue Rider), which he founded in 1911 with German artist Franz Marc (1880–1916). As Kandinsky stated: "We thought up the name while

sitting at a café table. . . . Both of us were fond of blue things, Marc of blue horses and I of blue riders. So the title suggested itself."¹ In 1912 Kandinsky's book *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (*On the Spiritual in Art*), the first theoretical treatise on abstraction, was published. It examined the capacity of color to communicate the artist's innermost psychological and spiritual concerns.

Kandinsky's life was strongly affected by the wars and politics that raged in Europe during the early 20th century. With the outbreak of World War I in 1914, Kandinsky left Germany and moved back to Moscow. Following the Russian Revolution in 1917, he remained in Russia and in 1921 returned to Germany. In 1929 he became a German citizen—one of the three nationalities he held during his life, along with Russian and French—but the Nazis' rise to power and their closure in 1933 of the "degenerate" Bauhaus, where he taught, forced him to move to France. Despite the war and German occupation of France, his works were shown in small exhibitions. In 1939 he became a French citizen and died in Neuilly-sur-Seine outside Paris in 1944. His reputation had been firmly established in the United States through numerous shows and his introduction to American collectors, including Solomon R. Guggenheim, who became one of his most enthusiastic supporters.

"In [my picture] *Colorful Life*, where the task that charmed me most was that of creating a confusion of masses, patches, lines, I used a 'bird's eye view' to place the figures one above the other."²

◀ FORMATIVE YEARS AND TRAVELS, 1900–07 ▶

In the first years of the 20th century, Kandinsky gradually defined his artistic focus. After a year as a student at the Munich Academy of Fine Arts, Kandinsky looked for a more experimental environment and formed the progressive artists' association in Munich known as Phalanx. Here he met the young German painter Gabriele Münter (1877–1962), who would become his companion. He enriched his experiences with almost constant travel, taking extended trips through Austria, Germany, Holland, Italy, Switzerland, and Tunisia.

Beginning in 1905, Kandinsky became involved with the most revolutionary practitioners and styles in the Parisian art world, finding inspiration in the expressive qualities of Post-Impressionism and the jarring and luminous colors of the Fauves. He saw paintings by French artists Paul Gauguin (1848–1903) and Henri Matisse (1869–1954) as well as Dutch artist Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890). Their dramatic use of color had an impact on Kandinsky, and gradually the color in his paintings became more brilliant.

In these initial years of artistic orientation, Kandinsky borrowed many motifs from myths

and legends, including references to medieval Russia, folklore, and nostalgic images of his homeland. Creating these fantastic pictorial worlds allowed him to deal with colors and forms more freely and break away from naturalistic rendering.

In *Colorful Life* (*Motley Life*) (*Das bunte Leben*, 1907), Kandinsky positions the viewer slightly above the action, gliding over a multifigure panorama of humanity from a freely imagined time in ancient Russian history, composed of dazzling colored spots against a dark background. Pleasant moments contrast with more somber events. The figures, such as the rider, the loving couple, and the rower on the peaceful river in the background, as well as the Kremlin with its colorful towers and domes on the massive hill all appear again in later pictures. More than once in his writings, Kandinsky refers to this painting as crucial to his artistic development.



Colorful Life (Motley Life) (Das bunte Leben), 1907. Tempera on canvas, 130 x 162.5 cm. Bayerische Landesbank, on permanent loan to the Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich

VIEW + DISCUSS

Show: *Colorful Life*, 1907

- ▶ This painting's title, *Colorful Life*, suggests that Kandinsky was interested in showing us not only a canvas filled with colors, but also one including a heterogeneous, often incongruous mixture of activities and events, worldly and spiritual, past and present. Ask students how many elements they can identify and have them create a list of all the things they notice.
- ▶ Kandinsky places the viewer slightly above the action, like a hovering bird or insect. Encourage students to imagine that they could fly into and across the expanse of this painting. Which areas would they like to explore more fully? What about those areas intrigues them?
- ▶ In this work Kandinsky combined light-hearted moments with more somber events. Ask students the following questions: Can you find examples of both in this painting? How would you describe the overall mood of this work?
- ▶ Kandinsky confides that his main challenge in this painting was to depict "a confusion of masses, patches, [and] lines." How has the use of a bird's-eye view helped him do this? Do your students think he successfully accomplished his task?

FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

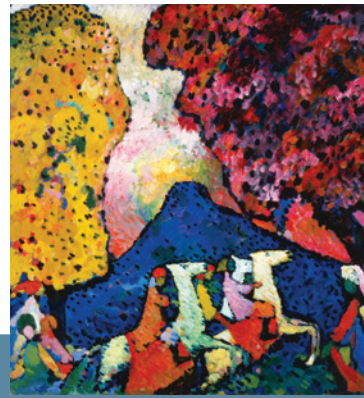
- In *Colorful Life*, Kandinsky combines numerous objects and occurrences into a single work. We see people eating, laughing, and praying; a mother and child; a Russian Orthodox priest; a group of elders; an archer aiming at a squirrel; a knight in medieval armor on horseback; a bearded old man; a musician; someone in a rowboat; and a man running after a woman. By using aerial perspective, overlapping images, and his imagination, Kandinsky unified this mass of activities. As part of his drawing classes, artist and teacher Robert Kaupelis assigned his students a similar task.³ The project was to create a drawing that includes an astounding number of elements and still appears cohesive. A typical list might include the following:

3 mountains	1 bike
1 sidewalk	1 open window
1 hill	1 path
1 car	1 clothesline
1 forest	1 cat
1 road	1 mosquito
4 trees (all different)	2 birds
1 fire hydrant	1 worm
1 house	1 satellite dish
1 dog	3 clouds
1 adult	1 airplane
1 bush	1 small crowd of people
2 children	1 flower garden
3 telephone poles and wires	1 fence

Ask students to try this challenging exercise and share the drawings that result.

- Art historians have asked, "How is one to explain Kandinsky's fondness for dark or even black backgrounds?"⁴ In order to consider how the background can affect a work's impact, students can use Sharpie markers to create a color design on a piece of clear acetate. When the drawing is complete, they will place a white piece of paper under the design and then a black piece of paper. Encourage them to describe how the same work is transformed as the background changes from light to dark.
- Throughout his career Kandinsky worked in various mediums, including woodcuts; drawings; tempera, oil, and watercolor paintings; and Bavarian glass painting, a folk technique that Kandinsky admired for its direct, expressive qualities and the luminosity of color that could be achieved by painting on glass. On the Internet, the class can research these mediums and create works that explore at least one of them.

"We thought up the name while sitting at a café table. . . . Both of us were fond of blue things, [Franz] Marc of blue horses, and I of blue riders. So the title suggested itself."⁵



Blue Mountain (Der blaue Berg), 1908–09. Oil on canvas, 106 x 96.6 cm. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection, By gift 41.505

◀ THE BLAUE REITER ▶

For Kandinsky, the years 1908–14 were a crucial period of transition and experimentation. After traveling through Europe and North Africa, he returned to Germany and became a leading proponent of avant-garde painting. His approach changed from an almost academic style to one that used bold brushstrokes and strong, vibrant colors.

Kandinsky's paintings of 1908–09 seem to strike out in several directions as though aiming to assimilate many influences. Although he continued to evoke images from Russian folklore and memories of his homeland, his colors, perhaps inspired by the Fauves, are bolder and brighter, and his forms have become more simplified.

In 1909, the year he completed *Blue Mountain (Der blaue Berg)*, 1908–09), his style was becoming increasingly abstract and expressionistic, and the subjects of his paintings changed from the portrayal of natural events to apocalyptic narratives. By 1910 many of his canvases shared a common literary source, the book of Revelation with its visionary descriptions of the conflicts between good and evil and of the end of the world. The rider came to signify the Horsemen of the Apocalypse, who will bring epic destruction after which the world will be redeemed.

Kandinsky's use of the horse-and-rider motif symbolized his crusade against conventional

aesthetic values and his dream of a better, more spiritual future through the transformative powers of art. For Kandinsky, "the horse carries the rider quickly and sturdily. The rider, however, guides the horse. The artist's talent carries him to great heights quickly and sturdily. The artist, however, guides his talent."⁶ The rider is featured in many woodcuts, temperas, and oils, from its first appearance in the artist's folk-inspired paintings, executed in his native Russia at the turn of the century, to his abstracted landscapes made in Munich during the early 1910s.

In 1911, Kandinsky and Marc founded the Blaue Reiter, the highly influential group of artists from the worlds of visual and folk art, music, and theater, united by a desire to express spiritual values in their work.

On January 2, 1911, Kandinsky attended a concert of works by the Viennese composer Arnold Schönberg (1874–1951), whose own break with tonal and harmonic conventions paralleled Kandinsky's challenge to figurative art. Kandinsky instantly sensed an affinity between the music and his own move toward abstraction. The two artists began a long-standing friendship and correspondence, drawing inspiration from one another in their search to create new modes of expression.

VIEW + DISCUSS

Blue Mountain, 1908–09

- ▶ Before showing *Blue Mountain* to the class, divide students into pairs. Ask one student to face away from the screen, so that he/she cannot see the image, while the other looks at the work and describes it in as much detail as possible. The student who is listening should draw the image using the information from the partner's verbal description only. After ten minutes, display the results and discuss the experience.
- ▶ What seems to be happening here? Let students imagine this scene as a single snapshot of a longer story. What might have happened just before this moment? What will happen afterward? They can write or draw their ideas.
- ▶ At this point in his artistic development, Kandinsky was moving away from depicting real-life scenes and toward a more abstract and imagined way of painting. Discuss which parts of this work might have been observed and which seem to have been imagined.

FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

- Kandinsky used the image of the rider on horseback in many of his works. For him it symbolized an artistic and spiritual force that could vanquish materialistic thinking and battle the traditional limits of artistic expression. The rider appears in many different guises, as a romantic fairy-tale figure; a medieval knight; and Saint George, saving humankind from evil. Encourage students to think about an ideal that they see as threatened in today's world and invent a symbol that embodies triumph over that danger.
- Kandinsky and Schönberg established a strong friendship partially based on their shared their artistic aspirations. Listen to music composed by Schönberg. Discuss which qualities in his music might have appealed to Kandinsky. What about his music might have seemed as daring and experimental as the paintings Kandinsky was creating?
- In 1912 *Klänge (Sounds)*, Kandinsky's book of poems and woodcuts, was published. His poem "Bassoon" begins with the following lines:

Very large houses suddenly collapsed. Small houses remained standing.
A fat hard egg-shaped orange-cloud suddenly hung over the town. It
seemed to hang on to the pointed point of the steep spindly town hall tower
and radiated violet.⁷

Another poem, "Seeing," opens with the following lines:

Blue, Blue got up, got up and fell.
Sharp, Thin whistled and shoved, but didn't get through.
From every corner came a humming.
FatBrown got stuck—it seemed for all eternity.
It seemed. It seemed.
You must open your arms wider.
Wider. Wider.⁸

The subjects of Kandinsky's poems are wide-ranging and include unlikely transformations in an illogical universe. Have students write their own poems. Like Kandinsky, they should allow their imaginations to invent unusual events and settings. Then they can create an image to accompany their writings.

*"It is only over the years that I have learned to exercise patience in such moments and not smash the picture over my knee. Thus, it was not until after nearly five months that . . . it suddenly dawned on me what was missing—the white edge. . . . Since the white edge proved the solution to the picture, I named the whole picture after it."*⁹

◀ TOWARD ABSTRACTION, 1910–14 ▶

In 1896, just as he was embarking on his career as an artist, Kandinsky attended a performance of *Lohengrin* (1850), an opera by the German composer Richard Wagner (1813–1883), at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow. While listening to the music, he began to see colors and images. This experience influenced Kandinsky's theories on the relationship between music and painting, by which he equated the sounds of the orchestra's instruments with colors in the artist's palette.

Another milestone occurred in 1910 when he accidentally discovered nonrepresentational art. As he returned home at sunset, he entered his studio and was struck by an "indescribably beautiful picture, pervaded by an inner glow."¹⁰ He could distinguish forms and colors only and no meaning. He soon realized that it was one of his paintings turned on its side. Soon after he began working on paintings that came to be considered the first totally abstract works in modern art.

By 1913 Kandinsky's aesthetic theories and aspirations were well developed. He had mastered the abstract style of expression and honed his technical skills. By carefully choosing colors, shapes, and lines, he sought to elicit specific emotional responses from viewers. He believed that the inner vision of an artist could be translated into universal visual statements.

Kandinsky realized that in order to foster public acceptance, he would need to develop his style slowly. Critics panned several of his early exhibitions, and even some fellow artists frowned on his more abstract works. Therefore, in most of his work from this period, he retained fragments of recognizable imagery. *Painting with White Border (Moscow)* (*Bild mit weißem Rand [Moskau]*, May 1913), for instance, was Kandinsky's response to "those . . . extremely powerful impressions [he] had experienced in Moscow—or more correctly, of Moscow itself."¹¹ To illustrate the city's spirit, he included an extremely abbreviated image of a troika driven by a trio of horses (the three diagonal black lines in the upper-left portion of the canvas).

Over the course of just a few years, Kandinsky had transformed his work from small-scale interpretations of nature to large invented and expressive personal statements, but this creative period that began in 1908 ended abruptly in 1914 with the outbreak of World War I.



Painting with White Border (Moscow) (*Bild mit weißem Rand [Moskau]*), May 1913. Oil on canvas, 140.3 x 200.3 cm. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection, By gift 37.245

VIEW + DISCUSS

Show: *Painting with White Border (Moscow)*, May 1913

- ▶ What do your students notice about this painting? Ask them to describe the forms, colors, and lines.
- ▶ Kandinsky believed that colors, shapes, and lines could convey the artist's inner vision to the viewer. This work was created in response to a visit to Moscow. What do your students surmise about his experience of the city from looking closely at his painting?
- ▶ The years 1908–14 are viewed as Kandinsky's most creative. Compare *Blue Mountain* with *Painting with White Border (Moscow)*. How has his approach changed? Can your students also see similarities? Are there clues contained in *Blue Mountain* that suggest how his work would evolve over the next several years?
- ▶ We know from Kandinsky's writings that, for him, the three curved shapes in the upper-left portion of this painting represent a troika, a Russian carriage, wagon, or sleigh drawn by a team of three horses abreast. Compare a photo of a troika to Kandinsky's forms. What similarities do students see?



Troika

FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

- Kandinsky wrote about the process of completing this painting. From these writings we know that he imbedded personal symbols in this work. "I made the first design immediately after my return from Moscow in December 1912. . . . In the upper left remained the troika motif (troika = three-horse sled. This is what I call the three lines, curved at the top, which, with different variations, run parallel to one another. The lines of the backs of the three horses in a Russian troika led me to adopt this form), which I had long since harbored within me."¹² Although the viewer might see these forms as pure abstraction, to Kandinsky they held meaning and memory. Have students select an object that has personal meaning for them and then reduce that object to its most abstract essence. Discuss which aspects of the objects they retained in their symbols and why they consider them essential.
- Kandinsky worked on *Painting with White Border (Moscow)* from December 1912 until May 1913. At least 16 drawings, watercolors, and oil sketches preceded the final canvas. The artist wrote about how, after months of work, the resolution suddenly occurred to him. The sudden recognition of how to solve a long-standing problem is sometimes called an "aha moment." Ask students if they have ever had such an experience. Let them describe the moment(s) and the issues that they solved.
- Kandinsky is believed to have experienced synesthesia, a condition in which sounds are perceived, not only audibly, but also with the visualization of colors. He developed elaborate theories about how colors could evoke emotions as well as conjure the sounds of musical instruments. For instance, Kandinsky believed that the color red would elicit strength, energy, and joy. He also equated red with the sound of a trumpet. Your class can learn more about Kandinsky's theories on colors, emotions, and sounds at the Arnold Schönberg Center Web site at schoenberg.at/4_exhibits/asc/Kandinsky/Farbe_e.htm and then complete the table below, adding personal associations with various colors.¹³

COLOR	EMOTION	SOUND
Yellow		
Blue		
Green		
White		
Black		
Gray		
Red		
Brown		
Orange		
Violet		



Moscow I (Mockba I), 1916 Oil on canvas, 51.5 x 49.5 cm.
The State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

*"I am working again on my painting 'Moscow.' It is slowly taking shape in my imagination. And what was in the realm of wishing is now assuming real forms. What I have been lacking with this idea was depth and richness of sound, very earnest, complex, and easy at the same time."*¹⁴

< MOSCOW, 1914–21 >

In 1914 Germany declared war on Russia, and Kandinsky was forced to leave Munich and return to Moscow. He lamented: "Of the 16 years that I have been living in Germany, I have given myself entirely to the German art world. How am I now suddenly supposed to feel myself a foreigner?"¹⁵ At 50 years old, he was starting a new life.

The move to Moscow marked a profound break. The year 1915 was a time of depression and self-doubt, during which he did not paint a single picture.¹⁶ In a June 1916 letter to his companion Münter, he wrote: "I felt that my old dream was closer to coming true. You know that I dreamt of painting a big picture expressing joy, the happiness of life and the universe. Suddenly I feel the harmony of colors and forms that come from this world of joy."¹⁷ During this period Kandinsky painted *Moscow I* (*Mockba I*, 1916). He wrote, "I would love to paint a large landscape of Moscow—taking elements from everywhere and combining them into a single picture—weak and strong parts, mixing everything together in the same way as the world is mixed of different elements. It must be like an orchestra."¹⁸ *Moscow I* contains some of the same romantic fairy-tale qualities of his

early paintings, fused with dramatic forms and colors. "The sun dissolves the whole of Moscow into a single spot, which, like a wild tuba, sets all one's soul vibrating."¹⁹

The October Revolution changed everything. The son of a tea merchant, Kandinsky had been independently wealthy, but after the Russian Revolution, during which a Communist system replaced Czarist rule, he lost his property during a land redistribution. Consequently, his plans to build a large studio took second place to financial concerns such as selling work and finding employment. World War I and then the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 slowed his artistic production, partly due to a lack of funds, but also to his work helping organize art institutions for the newly formed government. In Russia, Kandinsky came into contact with younger avant-garde artists, including Kazimir Malevich (1878–1935) and Alexander Rodchenko (1891–1956), who practiced a more pared-down, reductive form of abstraction. In Russia, Kandinsky's spiritual approach was out of step with the dominant principles of rationalism and pure geometry. Because of his artistic isolation and wartime privations, Kandinsky left Russia in 1921, never to return again.

VIEW + DISCUSS

Show: *Moscow I*, 1916

- ▶ This painting is filled with Kandinsky's exuberant vision of Moscow. Ask your class to create a list of all the objects that he has packed into this painting.
- ▶ Have students create a list of adjectives that describe this work, from which they can then write a poem titled "Kandinsky's Moscow" that incorporates many of the words from the list. Encourage them to share the poems with the rest of the class. Are they similar or different in tone?
- ▶ Ask students how they think Kandinsky felt about Moscow? How was he able to convey those feelings in this painting? Consider the various elements in this work—including the lines, shapes, and colors—and the way they are placed on the canvas.
- ▶ Kandinsky wrote, "I feel the general idea, but the broad composition is not yet clear. At 8 in the evening I went to the Kremlin in order to see the churches from the viewpoint which I need for the picture. And new riches opened up before my eyes."²⁰ In books or on the Internet, look for pictures of the Kremlin, a fortress in the center of Moscow that contains government offices and historical architecture. What similarities does the class find between the photographs and the images in Kandinsky's painting? What are the differences?
- ▶ After seeing Kandinsky's vision, ask students if they want to visit Moscow and why or why not.

FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

- The cityscape of Moscow, Kandinsky's beloved hometown, provided inspiration for more than one of his paintings. Although *Moscow I* looks quite different from *Painting with White Border (Moscow)*, both works were inspired by Kandinsky's experience of the city. Compare and contrast these paintings. Students will likely find many differences. Can they find any similarities?
- Discuss places that hold strong memories and personal associations for your students. Ask each student to recall an experience of such a location and create a work of art, written or visual, that expresses one's relationship with that site.
- Many artists have used their affinities with a specific place as a motivation for their work. Research another artist who has used his/her relationship, experiences, or memories of a site to spark creativity. The class can write short essays about the artist and his/her work. Together you can then compile a compendium of artists who have been inspired by places.

"The circle . . . is the synthesis of the greatest oppositions. [It] combines the concentric and the excentric in a single form, and in equilibrium. Of the three primary forms [triangle, square, circle], it points most clearly to the fourth dimension."²¹

◀ THE BAUHAUS, 1922–33 ▶

In 1922 Kandinsky was offered a teaching post at the Bauhaus School of Design. The school had been formed in reaction to many centuries of ornate decoration in Western art and adhered to revolutionary and unadorned styles such as Constructivism that used modern industrial techniques and materials. Kandinsky's belief in art's ability to transform self and society made him an ideal candidate for the post. There he discovered a more sympathetic environment in which to pursue his art. Even though his abstract painting sometimes put him at odds with the styles that took an increasingly industrial approach to art, teaching at the Bauhaus enabled him to pursue his work.

At the Bauhaus, Kandinsky continued to investigate color, form, and their psychological and spiritual effects and developed a theory of form based on geometry. He believed that the triangle embodied active and aggressive feelings, and the square represented peace and calm. The circle suggested the spiritual realm.

Between 1926 and 1929, Kandinsky produced a series of ten pictures in which the circle is the only form, culminating in his cosmic and harmonious image *Several Circles* (*Einige Kreise*, January–February 1926). During the Bauhaus years, the circle's mystical quality assumed the importance previously enjoyed by the rider motif during the Munich period: "I love circles today in the same way that previously I loved, e.g., horses—perhaps even more, since I find in circles more inner possibilities, which is the reason why the circle has replaced the horse."²²

Several Circles (*Einige Kreise*), January–February 1926. Oil on canvas, 140.3 x 140.7 cm. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection, By gift 41.283

In 1933 the Bauhaus came under pressure from the ruling Nazi party, and deprived of financial support, the school was forced to close. Kandinsky embodied everything that Adolf Hitler's Germany considered undesirable. He was Russian, an abstract painter, and a Bauhaus teacher. His work was termed "degenerate" by the Nazi regime, which objected to virtually all modern art. Artists working in such styles were subject to sanctions, including dismissal from teaching positions as well as a ban on exhibiting or selling art and in some cases on producing art entirely.

Kandinsky once more became an exile, this time in Paris where he continued to work as an artist. In 1937 several of his earlier works were included in the *Entartete Kunst* (*Degenerate Art*) exhibition in Germany, alongside other works of modern art that the Nazis removed from museums. The confiscated work was installed with defamatory slogans in order to present it as evidence of "cultural decline." Designed to inflame public opinion against modernism, the exhibition traveled to major cities throughout Germany and Austria and was viewed by more than two million people.



VIEW + DISCUSS

Show: *Several Circles*, January–February, 1926

- ▶ Ask students to write their responses to the following questions:
 - What do you see?
 - How do you react emotionally to the work?
 - What are some possible interpretations of the work?Discuss the students' writings. Is there agreement or disparity in their reflections?
- ▶ Ask students to imagine that this painting was animated. What sort of movement could be seen?
- ▶ If this painting was accompanied by music, what type of score would the class select for it?
- ▶ During this period, Kandinsky was fascinated with the circle's formal and expressive qualities. Do your students agree with Kandinsky's theory that this shape possesses special characteristics? How would the painting's impact change if another geometric form was used?
- ▶ To Kandinsky, the square represented peace and calm, and this painting includes a single, overarching square—the shape of the canvas itself. Encourage students to imagine *Several Circles* on a differently shaped canvas. How would its impact change? Explain.

FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

- Kandinsky was an influential teacher at the Bauhaus. For one of his drawing lessons, he would assemble a still life from planks and strips of wood. The students' objective was not to copy the still life, but rather to translate it into lines of tension or structure and record heavy or light characteristics. Another lesson asked students to place squares of different colors on black paper and then to repeat the task with white paper. Try one or both of these lessons. Discuss what these activities are intended to teach. Ask your students what they learned from doing them.
- Kandinsky believed that the triangle embodied active and aggressive feelings, the circle suggested the spiritual realm, and the square represented peace and calm. In this exercise students should write down all the words they associate with these shapes. Are their associations similar to or different from Kandinsky's? Discuss where they agree or disagree.
- During his years at the Bauhaus, Kandinsky produced a series of paintings that only featured circles. Have students select a single geometric form and use it as the primary focus for a work. When finished, reflect on whether this single form was overly restrictive or offered sufficient opportunity for experimentation.
- The Bauhaus school, which operated from 1919 to 1933, pioneered new approaches to design, photography, architecture, and art education, and its influence continues to be felt today. Some admire its forward-thinking views, while others blame the sterile architecture of many cities on Bauhaus ideals. Debate this question in class with one team arguing for the Bauhaus approach while the other team focuses on the ways that its emphasis on function has faltered.
- Viewed today, it is difficult to understand why *Several Circles* was one of the hundreds of works confiscated by the Nazi regime and labeled "degenerate." Research this time in history and in particular the 1937 *Degenerate Art* exhibition, which showcased work that the government found objectionable. What threats to their ideals did the Nazis see embodied in modern art? Explain.

"Paris with its wonderful (intense soft) light had relaxed my palette—there were other colors, other entirely new forms, and some that I had used years earlier. Naturally I did all this unconsciously."²³

◀ FINAL YEARS IN PARIS, 1933–44 ▶

In 1933 Kandinsky was forced to leave Germany due to political pressures; yet, despite the turmoil, his move to Paris ushered in a highly creative period. Freed from teaching and administrative responsibilities, he devoted himself entirely to his art. His late works are marked by a general lightening of his palette with the addition of pastel and acidic colors and the introduction of organic imagery. They also express the inventiveness, cheerfulness, and humor of an older artist working peacefully in his studio at home. Breaking away from the rigidity of Bauhaus geometry, he turned to softer, more malleable shapes that often display a whimsical, playful quality.

Although Cubism and Surrealism were fashionable in Paris, Kandinsky continued to paint abstractions and defend this style through his writings in art journals. He painted and drew prolifically, putting together an important body of work inspired by images from biology, creating forms that resembled embryos, larvae, and invertebrates, a world of minuscule living organisms.

Kandinsky's use of biomorphic forms attests to his fascination with the organic sciences, particularly embryology, zoology, and botany. During his Bauhaus years, Kandinsky had clipped and saved illustrations of microscopic

organisms, insects, and embryos. He also owned several important scientific books and encyclopedias, from which he derived abstracted depictions of minute creatures. For instance, in *Dominant Curve* (*Courbe dominante*, April 1936), a schematized pink-toned embryo floats in the upper-right corner, while the forms contained in the green rectangle in the upper left resemble tiny marine animals.

He combined these science-derived forms with primary geometric shapes, energetic lines, a lively pastel palette, and a set of steps leading nowhere, resulting in free-associative meanings for the viewer. These buoyant, biomorphic images can be read as signs of an optimistic vision of a peaceful future and hope for social rebirth and regeneration. The artist considered this painting to be one of his most important works of this time.

Through both his paintings and written theories on art and abstraction, Kandinsky continued to proclaim that abstraction could communicate spiritual ideas. Kandinsky died in Paris, in 1944 at age 78.

Dominant Curve (*Courbe dominante*), April 1936. Oil on canvas, 129.4 x 194.2 cm. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection 45.989



VIEW + DISCUSS

Show: *Dominant Curve*, April 1936

- ▶ *Dominant Curve* combines scientific, geometric, abstract, and figurative forms. Ask the class to find evidence of all four of these types.
- ▶ Ask students to describe the way that Kandinsky has used color in this work. Does it convey a particular mood, feeling, sensation, or sense of place? Do your students have any personal associations with this palette or combination of colors?
- ▶ After Kandinsky moved to Paris, he changed the colors in his paintings to lighter, more pastel hues. As a group, compare the colors used in *Dominant Curve* to earlier works pictured in this unit. Describe how Kandinsky's palette changed over the decades.
- ▶ Kandinsky titled this work *Dominant Curve*. Discuss if this is an appropriate title for the work. Why or why not? Do students have alternative titles that they would suggest?

FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

- Many people have a favorite color, but fewer have a favorite palette. Experiment with assembling a palette of five or six colors that work harmoniously together. The class can mix these colors from paints or use color samples from a local paint store. Do students have any associations with the palette they chose? Does the selection suggest a particular environment or emotion? Now try this exercise again, with them choosing a palette of colors that they dislike. Discuss which palette was easier to formulate and why.
- Kandinsky collected books on biology, zoology, embryology, and botany as well as specimens including a fish embryo, a salamander embryo, insects, marine invertebrates, jellyfish, and amoeba. In addition to his interest in their structures, it is believed that Kandinsky also saw spiritual meaning in these specimens as manifestations of regeneration and the common origin of all life.

Use a biological specimen as the basis for a work of art. The motif can be as simple as a seed, pod, or leaf. In books, on the Internet, or using a microscope, the class can also look at cellular specimens. The Encyclopedia of Life Web site at eol.org provides an excellent resource for this project.

- Kandinsky's long life spanned great social, political, and technological changes; two world wars; and several dislocations and relocations. Although he was largely apolitical, the major world events listed below had a direct impact on his life. Research the following events and their influence on world history:
 - 1914: World War I begins.
 - 1917: The Bolshevik Revolution occurs.
 - 1933: The Nazis close the Bauhaus.
 - 1940: The Germans begin occupying France.

RESOURCES

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WEB SITES

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum Arts Curriculum
guggenheim.org/artscurriculum

Centre Pompidou Educational Dossier: Vassily Kandinsky
centrepompidou.fr/education/ressources/ENS-kandinsky-mono-EN/ENS-kandinsky-monographie-EN.html

Tate Learning Schools Online: Resources for Wassily Kandinsky
tate.org.uk/learning/schools/wassilykandinsky3917.shtm

ENDNOTES

¹ Vasily Kandinsky, quoted in Will Grohmann, *Wassily Kandinsky: Life and Work*, trans. Norbert Guterman (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1958), p. 78.

² Vasily Kandinsky, “Cologne Lecture” (1914), in Vasily Kandinsky, *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo (1982; repr., New York: Da Capo Press, 1994), p. 395.

³ Adapted from Robert Kaupelis, *Experimental Drawing* (New York: Watson-Guption Publications; London: Pitman House, 1980), p. 54.

⁴ Jelena Hahl-Koch, *Kandinsky* (New York: Rizzoli, 1993), p. 92.

⁵ Kandinsky, quoted in Grohmann, *Wassily Kandinsky: Life and Work*, p. 78.

⁶ Vasily Kandinsky, “Reminiscences” (1913), in Kandinsky, *Complete Writings on Art*, p. 370.

⁷ Wassily Kandinsky, *Sounds*, trans. and with introduction by Elizabeth R. Napier (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), p. 25.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁹ Kandinsky, “Reminiscences,” p. 391.

¹⁰ Hahl-Koch, *Kandinsky*, p. 159.

¹¹ Kandinsky, “Reminiscences,” p. 389.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Adapted from the Arnold Schönberg Center Web site, schoenberg.at/4_exhibits/asc/Kandinsky/Farbe_e.htm.

¹⁴ Vasily Kandinsky to Gabriele Münter, September 4, 1916, quoted in Hans K. Rothel and Jean K. Benjamin, *Kandinsky: Catalogue Raisonné of the Oil Paintings, Volume Two, 1916–1944* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984), p. 580.

¹⁵ Vasily Kandinsky to Herwarth Walden, August 2, 1914, quoted in Irike Becks-Malorny, *Wassily Kandinsky, 1866–1944: The Journey to Abstraction* (Cologne: Taschen, 1999), p. 115.

¹⁶ Becks-Malorny, *Wassily Kandinsky, 1866–1944*, p. 115.

¹⁷ Vasily Kandinsky to Gabriele Münter, June 1916, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 118.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

¹⁹ Kandinsky, “Reminiscences,” p. 360.

²⁰ Vasily Kandinsky to Gabriele Münter, June 4, 1916, quoted in Rothel and Benjamin, *Kandinsky: Catalogue Raisonné of the Oil Paintings, Volume Two*, p. 580.

²¹ Vasily Kandinsky to Will Grohmann, October 12, 1930, quoted in Angelica Zander Rudenstine, *The Guggenheim Museum: Paintings 1880–1945*, vol. 1 (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1976), p. 310.

²² Vasily Kandinsky to Will Grohmann, 1930, quoted in Becks-Malorny, *Wassily Kandinsky, 1866–1944*, p. 157.

²³ Vasily Kandinsky to Alfred Barr, Jr., July 16, 1944, quoted in Vivian Endicott Barnett, et al., *Kandinsky*, exh. cat. (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2009), p. 70.

AVANT-GARDE A way to describe artists who operate outside of the mainstream and strive to push the boundaries of acceptable art. The term was originally used by the military to talk about the soldiers at the front of a battle formation.

BAUHAUS A highly influential state-sponsored school of art, architecture, and design founded in Weimar, Germany, in 1919. Its aims included raising the quality of everyday life through an aesthetic of modern and universal design. It operated until 1933, when in response to conditions imposed by the Nazis, the faculty closed the school.

BLAUE REITER, DER (BLUE RIDER, THE) An early modern artistic movement (1911–14), founded by Vasily Kandinsky (Russian, 1866–1944) and Franz Marc (German, 1880–1916). It is characterized by a move toward abstraction; vivid, expressive colors used to communicate symbolic meaning; a belief in the spiritual dimension of art; and a connection between visual art and music.

CONSTRUCTIVISM An early-20th-century Russian art movement that used utilitarian, rational, and often technologically based shapes and new materials. Its name derives from the “construction” of abstract sculptures from industrial materials.

CUBISM A style of painting, developed between 1907 and 1914 as a collaboration between Georges Braque (French, 1882–1963) and Pablo Picasso (Spanish, 1881–1973), in which objects are represented as deconstructed cubes and other geometric shapes.

DEGENERATE ART A term used by Nazi officials to describe art deemed unfit for society, usually applied to avant-garde styles. It is also the name of an exhibition, organized by the Nazis in 1937, of works that they had purged from German museums. The show traveled throughout Germany and Austria, attracting more than two million visitors, and featured many artists who are now considered masters of 20th-century art, including Marc Chagall (Russian, 1887–1985), Max Ernst (German, 1879–1976), Kandinsky, and Paul Klee (Swiss, 1879–1940), among others.

FAUVISM A painting style characterized by the often jarring use of color and broad brushstrokes. The Fauves (French for “wild beasts”) were bestowed the name by a French art critic after a 1905 exhibition.

IMPRESSIONISM A late-19th-century style that dealt with the effects of light and color to capture the immediacy or “impression” of a moment.

NONOBJECTIVE ART Art that uses abstract forms, shapes, and colors that are invented rather than observed, with no ties to the material world. This style aspires to spiritual and utopian goals.

POST-IMPRESSIONISM A movement that embraced the idea of art as a process of formal design with purely expressive aims and included Paul Cézanne (French, 1839–1906), Paul Gauguin (French, 1848–1903), Georges Seurat (French, 1859–1891), and Vincent van Gogh (Dutch, 1853–1890).

SURREALISM A 20th-century movement in art and literature that sought to express the subconscious mind by depicting objects and events as seen in dreams.

SYNESTHESIA A condition in which one type of stimulation evokes the sensation of another, as when the hearing of a sound produces the visualization of a color.