

A Beginning at the End

Kandinsky lived and worked in the Paris suburb of Neuilly-sur-Seine in his last decade. While the artist's style shifted in his new setting, his final move to France also surfaced long-held concerns. He incorporated a soft palette of pastels and jewel tones conjuring his early depictions of Russian and fairy-tale subjects—and revealing little of the dejection surrounding his departure from Nazi Germany in late 1933. He continued his experimental approach to materials as well, testing the application of sand over pigment. Earlier, Kandinsky had collected organic specimens and scientific encyclopedias; this interest intensified as he embraced imagery related to the natural sciences, such as botany, embryology, and zoology. Contact with the art of Jean Arp and Joan Miro additionally impacted his intricate arrangements and biomorphic forms.

Many among the Parisian vanguard were familiar with alchemical, astrological, and occult practices, in part given the literary and artistic pursuits of the Surrealists, who aimed to unlock the unconscious and irrational mind. Against this backdrop Kandinsky's own memories of his youthful encounters with the mystical reemerged. As late as a 1937 interview, discussing influential precedents, the artist recalled his formative 1889 field work as an ethnographer in northern Russia: "There, I saw farmhouses completely covered with painting nonrepresentational-inside. Ornaments, furniture, crockery, everything painted. I had the impression I was stepping *into* painting that 'narrated' nothing." He likewise sustained a preoccupation with the literature and belief systems of several Russian or Siberian cultures, including those with shamanic narratives involving transformation and ascendance.

By mid-1942 wartime shortages in Nazi-occupied France led Kandinsky to cease painting on large canvases and instead make small-scale works on board. This final group of inventive compositions exemplifies the personal iconography that recurred at every stage of his production.

Cosmic Realms

Since 1896 Vasily Kandinsky had predominantly lived in Western Europe, where he experienced heightened cultural exchange, joining or founding artist groups in Munich that broke with convention by promoting radical new styles and techniques. The outbreak of World War I in 1914 compelled the artist, a Russian citizen, to leave Germany and suspend these fruitful relationships. Kandinsky described his sudden dislocation in a letter: “I feel as if torn from a dream. . . . I was living in a time when such things would be impossible. My illusion was taken from me. . . . [S]piritual culture wound back for an indefinite time.”

Returning to his native Moscow, the artist initially focused on watercolors and drawings as a means to explore his creative instinct and perhaps make sense of his new reality. The October Revolution of 1917 in Russia not only tempered his impulse to resume painting on canvas and at larger scales but also eliminated his financial security due to the Bolshevik expropriation of his real estate holdings. With his artistic output stalled, Kandinsky attempted to regain his footing through appointments to various political and cultural entities. In this context he closely observed the work of El Lissitzky, Kazimir Malevich, Liubov Popova, Alexander Rodchenko, Varvara Stepanova, Vladimir Tatlin, and other Russian and Ukrainian avant-gardists who emphasized the technical and scientific. While Kandinsky adopted their geometric vocabulary, he maintained his commitment to spiritual expression and to intuition.

The artist, who had married Nina Andreevskaya in Russia, returned to Germany in 1922 and began teaching at the Staatliches Bauhaus. Established by the architect Walter Gropius, this progressive school endeavored to bridge fine and applied art—and, later, art and technology. Bauhaus faculty comprised both established and future innovators, including Anni Albers, Josef Albers, Herbert Bayer, Marianne Brandt, Marcel Breuer, Paul Klee, László Moholy-Nagy, Oskar Schlemmer, and Gunta Stölzl. In this generative period Kandinsky further delved into the correspondence between colors and forms and their psychological and spiritual effects. He especially seized upon the circle as a signifier for the cosmic realm, and as evocative of balance and harmony. Nina and Vasily Kandinsky remained at the Bauhaus until 1933, when the school was definitively closed due to pressure from the Nazi government.

Transitions

Watercolors, drawings, and prints were central to Kandinsky's artistic production throughout his career, both as independent works and studies for oil paintings. However, when the artist returned to Russia in late 1914, following his sudden departure from Germany at the outbreak of World War I, he produced works on paper exclusively for a time, revisiting the canvas only briefly in 1916. He explained his intensive focus on the watercolor medium to the German artist Gabriele Münter: "They prepare me for the large paintings, which are slowly taking shape in my soul." The upheaval of the 1917 October Revolution in Russia, which led to Kandinsky's economic downturn, nonetheless stymied the artist's creative output and delayed his return to the canvas until mid-1919.

His works on paper during this period of personal and professional transitions further demonstrate Kandinsky's alternation between representational forms and the experimental abstraction of his prewar canvases. His artistic development, like that of others in his milieu, was far from linear. Even after his plunge into total abstraction around 1913, allusions to land, sea, and sky reappear to varying degrees in subsequent works. In addition, boats or boat-like motifs occur with frequency, potentially suggesting an individual traversing the course of life. Around 1915–16 Kandinsky made a group of etchings and watercolors with mostly recognizable forms, as seen here in *Picnic* (*Picknick*, January 1916). He referred to such works as "*bagatelles*" (trifles), a name proposed by Münter for their small scale and affordability.

The “Hidden Power of the Palette”

The arts were ever present in Vasily Kandinsky’s upbringing, even if his decision to pursue such a profession was circuitous. He spent his youth in his birthplace of Moscow and in Odessa, Russia (now Odesa, Ukraine), studying law and economics at university before changing course in 1895 to become a manager in the Moscow printing house Kushnerev. A year later his encounter with one of Claude Monet’s Haystacks (Les meules, 1890 – 91) paintings, as well as a performance of Richard Wagner’s opera Lohengrin (1850), inspired, by his own recollection, his full commitment to the arts and his move to Munich, a nexus of vanguard activity. Memories of Russia, such as brightly decorated furniture and votive pictures from the homes of the communities he had visited as an ethnographer in northern Russia in 1889, would define Kandinsky’s early work and resurface throughout his career, as would Romantic historicism, lyric poetry, folklore, fantasy, and other subjects of his youth.

The years spent in or around Munich were tremendously fertile for the artist. He steered the city’s leading avant-garde groups, including Phalanx and Neue Künstlervereinigung München (New Artists’ Association of Munich), and his poetry as well as his groundbreaking treatise *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (*On the Spiritual in Art*) were published. He painted side by side in the Bavarian countryside with his partner Gabriele Münter, and the pair also engaged with the decorative arts and folk practices. Notably, in 1911 Kandinsky and Franz Marc formed Der Blaue Reiter (The Blue Rider), a loose, transnational confederation of artists, writers, and musicians united by an interest in the expressive potential of color and the symbolic—often spiritual—resonance of forms. This period of intensified collaboration across various artistic disciplines spurred Kandinsky’s creative growth.

By 1913 his recurrent motifs—among them the horse and rider, rolling hills, towers, and trees—had become subsidiary to line and color. As his calligraphic contours and rhythmic forms revealed scarcer traces of their representational origins, Kandinsky began to approach abstraction and elicit what he called the “hidden power of the palette.” Though he was not the first to experiment with abstraction, either among his modernist peers or within the context of its rich history in diverse world cultures, his intrepid work marked a broader shift toward nonrepresentational art, which proved to have an enduring impact.

Travels

Arriving in Munich from Moscow in 1896, at thirty years old, Kandinsky began his artistic studies. He soon abandoned classroom instruction to work *en plein air* (out of doors), painting on small-format, portable boards or canvases. His works from this developmental phase demonstrate a Neo-Impressionist style of dabbled brushwork.

From around 1904 to 1908 Kandinsky traveled more widely with his partner, the German artist Gabriele Muntér. They spent their time in the Netherlands, Italy, and other European locales, and sailed to North Africa for an extended stay in Tunisia, then a French protectorate. Kandinsky's independent wealth sustained the artist-couple's itinerant lifestyle, which was prompted in part by his desire for distance from his marriage with his first wife, Anja. He and Muntér followed well-trodden itineraries and typified the bourgeois fascination with what they perceived as "picturesque" or simpler ways of life in colonized lands, in contrast with their urban vantage point.

Kandinsky and Muntér spent a year in Paris, in 1906–07. The daring use of nonnaturalistic and vibrant colors in the paintings of the so-called Fauves ("wild beasts") further influenced Kandinsky's shift to magical fairy-tale pictures painted in a decorative Art Nouveau style. Russian folk costumes and themes also made their way into his work, and, attracted to the hand-hewn immediacy of the woodcut, he increasingly turned to printmaking as a primary medium. In June 1908 the pair rejoined the artistic community in Munich, armed with the visual acuity they had gained during their years abroad.