

Kandinsky and the development of a visual language

Kandinsky—Watercolours and other works on paper: An exhibition at the Royal Academy, London until July 4

Paul Bond
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Vassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) stands as one of the dominant figures of twentieth century art. A pioneer of abstract painting, who systematically attempted to convey emotion and feeling outside of direct representation, he was hailed by the leading Surrealist André Breton as having led (with Picasso) the insurrection against imitation in art.

Alongside his better known oils, Kandinsky produced watercolours, gouaches and prints throughout his life. It is this body of work that has been assembled at the Royal Academy and it offers a chance to view Kandinsky's artistic development over the course of his life.

Born in Moscow, Kandinsky turned to art relatively late in life. He was 29 when he decided to leave his promising career as a university law lecturer to study art in Munich. He was to remain there until 1914. This period, the subject of the first gallery of the exhibition, saw him move from figurative and representational work towards a more symbolic use of colour and shape.

The earliest paintings shown here, from the period 1902-08, bear the imprint of the Impressionists and the Decadents. There are representations of figures in fairy tales; there are woodcuts almost reminiscent of Munch in their flowing outlines of figures. The figures in his colour woodcuts of this period are mythic and mythologised. There is an endearingly attractive imagination at work (at this time he was either working from life in the open, or in the studio entirely from imagination) and the use of colour can already be seen to be acquiring the more structured framework he was to give it later. Despite their self-assurance, however, these are the works of an artist struggling to formulate a pictorial language of his own.

In the period 1908-10, Kandinsky further developed that pictorial language. This went along with an expansion of his subject matter. His interest in Russian iconography and German peasant votive work told in his tackling of large-scale religious subjects in a more stylised way (for example, in "Resurrection" or "All Saints"). The paintings leading up to his first pure abstracts are marked by their wild, almost uncontrolled bursts of colour, while still retaining many figurative and representational elements (elements which do continue in his work even beyond his establishment of a pure abstraction).

Perhaps the pivotal piece in this early phase of his work is "Riders on the Beach". Although a descriptive piece (the riders' forms are seen in rearing sweeps of pink) it demonstrates a more controlled use of blocks of colour. His delineation of the ideas he is conveying is becoming more pronounced here, after some of the less representational pieces of this period.

It seems to be an arrival at a similar point of view to that of Paul Klee, whom Kandinsky knew in Munich, and with whom he was later to teach at the Bauhaus. Warning against imitative art, Klee was to write, "Had I

wished to present the man 'as he is', then I should have had to use such a bewildering confusion of line that pure elementary representation would have been out of the question. The result would have been vagueness beyond recognition" (*On Modern Art*, tr. Paul Findlay, 1966, p 53, originally published 1924). For Kandinsky this meant pushing further into abstractions, whilst acquiring a greater control over their emotional content. He said himself that the role of the artist was to speak "of the hidden by means of the hidden".

That this journey towards a control over his abstract language was not a straightforward one becomes clear from the second gallery of the exhibition. After the outbreak of the First World War, Kandinsky returned to Moscow from Germany. The trip back to Russia was one that several other significant artists were to make—witness the Royal Academy's recent exhibit of Chagall's Russian work from the same period—but he seems to have brought ambivalence with him. From the strikingly assured abstracts he had produced in Munich, he turned towards a more figurative style when he first arrived in Moscow. It is true that the paintings retained a sense of exploration in their use of colour and backgrounds, but they marry this with a return to the mythic iconography of his earlier work.

"View of Moscow" (1915) features a skyline that could have come from a Blake etching, while being otherwise an unremarkable figurative representation. "Untitled", from 1916, featured a romanticised dandy on a horse and women in flounced skirts. The figures of several of these pictures, peasant women mythologised and merged with Eastern god figures, seem to have more in common with the romantic late-impressionist images he was producing before his turn towards abstraction.

Frank Whitford, in the catalogue for the exhibition, reads into this the implication that he "entertained doubts about the radical path he had chosen to take". This is perhaps so, although his subsequent wholesale return to abstracts after the 1917 Revolution suggests that this is not the whole story. Certainly he could not, as could Chagall, draw comfortably on a local peasant life to fuel his art in its chosen direction. Because he was attempting exclusively to portray an inner life, the relation of that life to the external world became for him a problem.

Nowhere, throughout the exhibition, do we see a painting that is directly referable to the political situation existing outside it. That is not a requirement of art, but in a period of political turmoil, confusion and demoralisation, that connection may turn out to be important for the artist. Other artists associated with non-figurative work continued to work throughout the war years in their chosen fields. Kandinsky returned to the fully abstract sphere only after the revolution, and after a younger generation of Russian artists had espoused abstract work as the

embodiment of the new art. Particularly under the influence of Kasimir Malevich and Aleksandr Rodchenko, he produced abstracts again. His colours were organised on a much more geometric basis, although he still retained wild organic elements in his paintings.

In 1921, the same year that Rodchenko abandoned his own formal exploration of line, colour and texture for the Constructivist movement, Kandinsky left Russia to return to Germany. He taught at the Bauhaus, first in Weimar, then Dessau and finally in Berlin, until his flight to Paris in December 1933 to evade the Nazis. It is this period that forms the main body of the collection.

Painting was not formally part of the curriculum at the Bauhaus. Kandinsky, along with Paul Klee, taught courses aimed at giving their students a better grasp of form, colour and tone. He used techniques that resurfaced in his own work. His earliest work from the time of joining the Bauhaus is the series "Small Worlds". In these 12 pictures, executed in colour lithograph, woodcut and drypoint, we can see clearly the influence of the Russian artists. (Here is another step towards greater control over colour and line, as can be seen by a comparison of "Small Worlds IV" and the watercolour and ink study for it also shown here).

Over the course of these 12 years, Kandinsky's work acquired an ever-greater degree of discipline. The wildness of the earliest blocks of colour—at the time still to some extent influenced by his outdoor observation for representational work—is replaced by tighter, ink-drawn marks and shapes, including the use of stencils. His use of ink washes becomes more sustained, culminating in his use of atomisers to achieve a greater depth of wash.

The works from this period are some of the most stunning in the exhibition. From the experimental globes which cascade through the "Small Worlds" series, through the line-drawn semi-circles, evocative of ships' hulls, and the compasses of works like "Delicate Tension", through to the darker wash and shifting, Doppler-effect colours of "Start"—these are some of the most delicately executed abstracts this reviewer has ever seen.

If there is a pictorial preoccupation throughout the whole of his Bauhaus period, it would seem to be a sense of balance. In "Delicate Tension" compasses support the images within the picture. Wineglass shapes roll through the paintings. After 1924 Kandinsky became increasingly interested in the use of extensive washes. The paintings become darker, and the forms within them become less delineated. There is almost a 3-D shift of colour within a geometrical shape in a painting like "Evasive" (1929), yet a balance remains. In "Supporting Circle", the base of a circle is seen drawn in ink, but it is supported by a wash shadow.

Kandinsky had long believed in art's capacity to go beyond appearance. He had been drawn to abstracts by a belief in art's ability to affect the feelings directly without imitating nature. He recognised a similar effect in music and wrote a number of experimental plays to be performed with musical accompaniment. In 1928 he was invited to choreograph and design a dance production at the Friedrich Theatre, Dessau, based on Modest Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition". His set and costume designs are shown here. These beautiful small works, rarely seen together, convey sharply how Kandinsky saw his abstract art affecting the feelings and emotions of the viewer. In his design for "The Great Gate of Kiev:—the culmination of Mussorgsky's great work—Kandinsky allows figurative elements (a great tower and wall dominate one side of the set with a sun and moon above them) to point his abstracts towards the stirring apotheosis of the music.

It is clear that his teaching at the Bauhaus focussed Kandinsky on the technical questions of his art, but it is difficult not to be aware of the sharpening political situation that existed as the backdrop for much of this work. Political pressure had forced the school's removal from Weimar to Dessau in 1924. It was the domination of Dessau's city council by reactionary and nationalist forces which forced it to move again in 1931 to

Berlin. While he sought to influence the viewer's feelings directly through colour, and while he was experimenting more and more with dark washes, it is difficult not to see this as being in some way an inarticulate response to the growing sense of persecution the school was feeling.

Frank Whitford points to "Gloomy Situation", with its heavy brown wash, as being one of the few works to reflect directly outside events. It was produced after the Bauhaus was closed down in 1933, yet other works produced at the same time show a similar preoccupation with heaviness of colour and tone, for example "Round Poetry", with its dark blue wash. At the end of 1933, Kandinsky left his adopted Germany, where he was to be denounced by the Nazis as a "degenerate" artist. He moved to Paris, where he lived for the rest of his life.

After the intensity of the Bauhaus years, it would be easy to regard the final phase of the exhibition as something of a disappointment. Largely outside the Paris art world, isolated in the suburb of Neuilly-sur-Seine, Kandinsky again revised the balance between the geometric and the organic in his work, speaking increasingly of the synthesis of the two elements as a "concrete" style. Geometric shapes still feature in the paintings, but they are no longer used in the same way. In "Line with Accompaniment" (1937), a long unbroken line snakes around the picture, supported at various points by compass-drawn circles. The gouache "Fifteen" (1938) shows a checkerboard arrangement of 15 squares, each containing a different image, some are geometrical, most are not. Increasingly working on black paper, and on a small scale, these late pictures show a surprising array of organic shapes that have been compared to the microscopic images of organisms. After the outbreak of the Second World War and the occupation of Paris, Kandinsky was restricted in the materials available to him. With canvas unavailable, he painted on board, continuing to produce his synthetic images. He died in Paris in 1944.

In the catalogue Frank Whitford comments that even at the time of his death, at the age of 78, Kandinsky "believed that abstraction was the pictorial language of the future, that it communicated truths about the human spirit that were beyond the reach of traditional, figurative art." This much is true, but this exhibition offers viewers a chance to see how that works in concrete terms, how it can be developed and how it can struggle for expression. There is a telling film clip from 1929 (directed by Hans Curls) of Kandinsky's hand as he paints. There is a hesitancy, the hand hovers momentarily before boldly painting in the lines of the artist's vision. Over the course of this exhibition the viewer will see how Kandinsky's visual language developed and altered. The film clip brings home the fact that this is about communication, not just methods of communication.



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