

Study for Improvisation V
Wassily Kandinsky, Russian, 1866-1944
Submitted by Jean London
Date: 20th century
Classification: Paintings-Oil on Pulp Board
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Social/Historical Context:

The beginning of the 20th century by scientific, technological advancements such as the first aircraft flight in 1903 by Orville and Wilbur Wright in North Carolina, the formulation of the theory of relativity by Albert Einstein in 1905. In 1909, Robert Peary reaches the North Pole and in 1912, Robert Scott reached the South Pole (discovered by Norwegian, Roald Amundsen, 1911).

In 1912, the British ocean liner, the Titanic sank and 1914 saw the outbreak of WW I. The United States entered the war in 1917. 1916, the Easter Rebellion in Ireland attempts to gain independence from British rule but fails. 1917, the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia under Lenin inaugurates the first Communist. Also in 1917, the British government in control of much of the Middle East after WW I supports the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine.

Artist's Biography:

Kandinsky was born in Moscow in 1866 and was a traveler between different worlds. He spent the majority of his years in Germany and Paris and yet he was Russian through and through. He originally obtained a law degree at the age of 26 lacking the confidence to embark on an artistic career.

In 1892, during a visit to the Hermitage in Moscow, he became fascinated by the division of Rembrandt's paintings into areas of light and dark and discovered a mighty chord in the contrasts between their colors. At a Wagner performance, the sounds of the orchestra conjured up before his eyes the colors of a Moscow evening. He had a particular capacity for "synaesthesia". He did not perceive colors in terms of objects but associated them with sounds that ranged in varying intensities from high to low and shrill to muted.

A very striking incident happened early in Kandinsky's life and occurred when he viewed Monet's *Haystacks* series and failed to recognize the object of the paintings. He realized that the presence of color rendered the object of the painting superfluous for him. He ventured to Munich in 1896 to begin his studies realizing the importance of art in his life. He became known by his fellow students as a colorist and it was here that he met and befriended Alexej Jawlensky, a fellow Russian as well as Paul Klee, Franz Marc and Gabriele Munter.

He became aware of the work of the Post-Impressionists particularly Van Gogh, Gauguin, Cezanne, and the expressive coloring of Matisse, de Vlaminck and Derain. 1910 was a pivotal year in Kandinsky's life. It was the year that Manet's 1867 painting, Execution of Emperor Maximilian was exhibited in Berlin. It was the year of early cubism and the year of Arthur Dove's first abstractions. Kandinsky was moving further and further away from the representational in art. He painted his

first totally abstract watercolor and wrote his book, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. But most important, it was the year he created **Study for Improvisation V**. In December 1911, the Blue Rider founded by Marc and Kandinsky exhibited in Munich featuring 14 very diverse artists. Both founders loved blue with Marc using blue for horses and Kandinsky for riders. It is typically a heavenly color and points towards spiritualism and transcendent spheres. The rider a recurring motif in Kandinsky's works symbolizes a seeker and a fighter. The Blue Rider stood for the spirit's fight against materialism and for the victory of the avant-garde over tradition.

Since 1909, Kandinsky entitled his works Impression, Improvisation or Composition. Impression was the result of a direct impression of external nature, while improvisation was inspired by impression of internal nature and composition was a conscious and deliberate work often preceded by numerous studies. With the outbreak of WW I, Kandinsky's Russian passport identified him as an enemy alien. He decided to leave Germany and live in Switzerland assuming that the war would be short lived. However, when it became clear that there was no end to hostilities in sight, Kandinsky returned to Russia. He was independently wealthy as the son of a prosperous tea merchant owning numerous properties in Moscow. He married a much younger woman, Nina Andreevsky and envisioned a bright future for them both. He planned to build a home with a large studio but his dreams were suddenly disrupted by the October Revolution in 1917. He lost all of his property and was forced to sell his paintings to supplement his income. He eventually became involved in the development of cultural affairs in post-revolution Russia creating 22 museums between 1919 and 1921. This workload took up much of his time and he was able to produce far fewer paintings. What work he was able to produce took on significant geometrical elements. In 1921, artists were under pressure to place their art in the service of Marxist-Leninist ideology. The Communist party expected its new economic policy to employ art, literature, film and theater for its propaganda purposes.

Kandinsky who preferred to ignore politics made plans to leave Russia for the second time returning to Germany in 1922. He joined the staff of the Bauhaus in 1925 and became one of its most gifted and respected instructors. With the rise of Hitler, however, Kandinsky was suddenly seen as embodying all that was undesirable. He was a Russian, an abstract painter and a Bauhaus teacher. Kandinsky and his wife became exiles yet again. He was the last instructor to admit that the days of the Bauhaus were drawing to a close.

Kandinsky moved with his wife to Paris in 1933 where he met Mondrian, Chagall, Miro, Brancusi, Ernst. He formed no close relationships and his art changed again revealing a striking trend towards natural forms. He met with little success in Paris and wished to return to Germany but in 1937 all his art was removed as part of a museum "cleansing" program ordered by the state. That same year, three of his oil paintings were shown in the "Degenerate Art" exhibition in Munich.

Friends encouraged him to move to the United States but Kandinsky preferred to apply for French citizenship that was granted in 1939. He continued to paint everyday up until the end of July 1944. He died on Dec. 13, 1944 at the age of 78.

About the Artist:

Kandinsky believed that a painting should grow out of what he considered to be an “internal necessity” - the impulse felt by the artist for spiritual expression. Around 1909, 1910 Kandinsky and his friend, composer Arnold Schoenberg, shared this concept. Schoenberg negated the need for a tonal center much as Kandinsky was eliminating the need for representation in his art and tending towards abstraction. He stated, “Schoenberg’s music leads us into a new realm, where musical experiences are no longer acoustic, but purely spiritual. Here begins the music of the future.”

Kandinsky’s work would no longer depend upon an external model such as nature but should in fact depend upon the inner voice of the artist. Kandinsky viewed the power of the “spiritual”, the inner voice as the ultimate authority. He acknowledged that he was unable before 1914 to completely renounce the object in his pictures. These objects arose in him out of complete emotion. They formed in his imagination out of color and line.

Kandinsky believed that people were too involved with the material world. And that art could protect the soul from the coarsening effect of this preoccupation. He attributed to sensitive souls an intense and deeply moving response to color that corresponded to a spiritual vibration. It could be a direct reaction to a specific color or a reaction based on association. Red could for instance, cause a reaction similar to that caused by a flame, while a warm red may cause a sense of excitement while still another red may remind the viewer of blood causing a physical sensation akin to disgust.

Kandinsky experienced reality in terms of color and color in terms of emotions. He believed that color rather than form had the greatest ability to reach the observer. Form in the narrow sense is nothing but the separating line between surfaces of color. That is its outer meaning. “Color is the most powerful medium in the hands of the painter. It has a psychic as well as a physical effect upon the observer.”
(Kandinsky)

Kandinsky’s definition of an “Improvisation”: “Chiefly unconscious for the most part suddenly arising expression of events of an inner character, hence impressions of ‘internal nature’”. (Kandinsky in *The Spiritual in Art*, 1912)

Kandinsky explained the musical analogy (Stokstad, Vol. 6, p1075) “Color directly influences the soul. Color is the keyboard, the eyes are the hammers, the soul is the piano with many strings. The artist is the hand that plays, touching one key or another purposively, to cause vibration in the soul.”

Object Analysis:

This painting is basically a landscape that evokes the Biblical story of the Apocalypse. This picture should, however, be seen in the context of its time. It was a complete innovation and not only conveys to us where Kandinsky has been but where he is going with his art. On first appearance, it is a conglomeration of colors and forms that makes no direct statement about reality. This must have been

especially true in 1910 when it was created. Upon closer inspection, however, it is still tied to this world of reality.

In the foreground right hand side, is a woman in blue who is looking at or working in the garden. She is standing before a tall figure with flowing blond hair, possibly Christ. The garden appears to be in full bloom, placing the time of year as late spring or summer. The colors are exuberant, varied, bright and totally expressive of joy.

In the background, two horsemen are seen vaulting a fence, a motif commonly used by Kandinsky. The rider accompanies his work from its earliest beginnings right up to its dissolution into abstraction. The rider appears in numerous woodcuts, drawings and paintings, and in 1912 inspired the cover and title for *The Blue Rider Almanac* (*Blaue Reiter Almanac*), one of the most important compilations of writings by artists in this century. The rider appears in many different guises: a romantic fairytale figure, as a medieval knight embodying many virtues, as a secret messenger, as a trumpet blowing herald, or as St. George saving mankind from evil. The rider is always a symbol for search and encounter, battle and as a figure embarking upon new challenges.

This painting recalls his days in Murnau, a Bavarian market town in which he moved after many years of traveling and living a fairly unsettled urban life. Murnau and Munich marked the beginning of a phase of undisturbed creative activity. Here, he became an enthusiastic gardener and took long walks in seclusion. He designed furniture with Russian folklore elements as well as the blue rider for the banisters for his home.

Resources:

Artsconnected.org

Concerning the Spiritual in Art by Wassily Kandinsky, Dover Books

Wassily Kandinsky, The Journey to abstraction. Taschen

Marilyn Stokstad, Volume 6