



## QUICK VIEW:

### Synopsis

Wassily Kandinsky, a Russian-born painter, printmaker and theorist, was one of the pioneers of Abstract art. Kandinsky lectured and wrote extensively in support of non-objective art, believing that total abstraction offered the possibility for profound spiritual expression. His paintings of 1913 are considered to be among the first completely abstract compositions in modern art history, as they made no reference to the natural world and were inspired by (and took their titles from) pieces of music. His nonrepresentational paintings paved the way for the development of the Abstract Expressionist movement that dominated American painting after World War II.

### Key Ideas / Information

- For Kandinsky, painting was above all deeply spiritual ("*geistig*"). He was highly influenced by the sensorial properties of color and sound, and sought to visualize these properties through increasingly abstract compositions.
- As a painter, Kandinsky saw himself as a prophetic figure, whose mission was to translate the most profound human emotions into universally comprehensible symbols and visual sensations. He saw music as the most transcendent form of non-objective art, and strove to produce similarly object-free, spiritually rich paintings.
- During his tenure at the Bauhaus School in Weimar, Kandinsky refined his earlier, romantic philosophies of intuitive painting toward a more reasoned construction of composition through geometrical elements.

## DETAILED VIEW:

### Childhood

Wassily Wassilyevich Kandinsky, also referred to as Vasily, was born in 1866 in Moscow to well educated, upper-class parents of mixed ethnic origins. His father was born close to Mongolia, while his mother a Muscovite, and his grandmother a German-speaking Baltic. The bulk of Kandinsky's childhood was spent in Odessa, a thriving, cosmopolitan city populated by Western Europeans, Mediterraneans, and large Jewish and foreign colonies. At an early age, Kandinsky exhibited an extraordinary sensitivity toward the stimuli of sounds, words, and colors. His unique and precocious gift for articulating sensual experience was encouraged by his father who enrolled him in private drawing lessons, as well as lessons in piano and cello. Despite this, Kandinsky did not turn to painting until he reached the age of thirty. Instead, he entered the University of Moscow to study law and economics, and was offered a professorship in Roman law.

### Early Training



Kandinsky's interest in color symbolism and its effect on the human psyche grew throughout his time in Moscow and was stimulated by an ethnographic research trip to the northern regions of Vologda in 1889. He abandoned his promising career in academic law to attend art school in Munich in 1896, despite being rejected by the Munich Academy of Fine Arts. Investigating art on his own, he was particularly moved by the work of Monet. Kandinsky's earliest efforts at painting were executed in a similar, late Impressionist style, while also experimenting with pointillism and Fauvist imagery. In 1901, Kandinsky became director of the Munich avant-garde group, the Phalanx School. There, in 1902, he met and began a relationship with Gabriele Münter, a German Expressionist painter and Phalanx School student. Kandinsky's breakthrough work, *Der Blaue Reiter* (1903), revealed his interest in disjointed figure-ground relationships and the use of color to express emotional experience rather than as a reflection of nature. Traveling throughout Europe, most often to Paris, Kandinsky familiarized himself with the growing Expressionist movement and began to develop his own style based on folk art, much like he had seen in Vologda, and children's art.

### Mature Period

In 1911, he organized "Der Blaue Reiter" (The Blue Rider), a group of nine artists including Paul Klee, August Macke, and Franz Marc. Though their aims and approaches varied from artist to artist, the group in general believed in the promotion of modern art

and the possibilities of spiritual experience through symbolic associations of sound and color. The group released an almanac (*The Blue Rider Almanac*) and held two exhibitions. As well, Kandinsky published *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1911), the first theoretical treatise on abstraction that articulated his view of the artist as a spiritual being who is affected by and communicates through line, color, and composition. He produced both abstract and figurative works at this time, in compositions of complex patterns and brilliant colors such as *Composition VII* (1913).



The outbreak of World War I in 1914 led to the dissolution of *Der Blaue Reiter* as well as Kandinsky's relationship with Münter. Kandinsky returned to Russia, where he married Nina Andreevskaya, the young daughter of a Czarist colonel. While there, he devoted much of his time to painting and teaching color analysis.

In 1921, architect Walter Gropius invited Kandinsky to Germany to attend the Weimar Bauhaus. As a member of the innovative architecture school, Kandinsky's artistic philosophy turned toward the significance of geometric elements, specifically circles, half-circles, straight lines, angles, and curves. In 1926, his second major theoretical work, *On Point and Line to Plane*, was published. In both his work and theory, there was a shift from the romantic, intuitive expression of his pre-war canvases to an emphasis on reasoned construction. The looser, intensely colored, free forms of his *Blaue Reiter* phase gave way to sharply clarified colors and overt structures characteristic of the Bauhaus aesthetic.

### **Late Period and Death**

When Nazis closed the Bauhaus school in 1933, Kandinsky moved to France, where he remained for the rest of his life. While in Paris he experimented with biomorphic forms that appear more organic than those of his Bauhaus paintings. Kandinsky revisited many

of his previous themes and styles during this period, synthesizing elements of his past work into vast, complex compositions.



While he was unable to sell his work in Germany after his inclusion in the Nazi-organized "Degenerate Art" show, American patrons, most notably Solomon R. Guggenheim, collected his abstract cavases. Thus Kandinsky became the "patron saint of the Guggenheim."

Kandinsky died in December of 1944 in relative, but serene, isolation.

### Legacy

Wassily Kandinsky was one of the major innovators of Modern art. His work, particularly from his *Blaue Reiter* phase, played a large role in forming the philosophic foundation for Abstract Expressionist artists. Radically reorienting the concept of vision, Kandinsky developed a pictorial language that only loosely related to his subject matter, seeking to depict the tones, rhythms, and spiritual resonance of nature as opposed to the outward appearance of objects. His emphasis on spontaneous activity and the subconscious had great effect on action painters like Jackson Pollock, and his analysis of the sensorial properties of color was influential on the Color Field painters.

## ARTISTIC INFLUENCES

Below are Wassily Kandinsky's major influences, and the people and ideas that he influenced in turn.

ARTISTS	CRITICS/FRIENDS	MOVEMENTS
 <p><b>Paul Cézanne</b></p>	 <p><b>Walter Gropius</b></p>	 <p><b>Expressionism</b></p>



**Claude Monet**



**Arnold Schoenberg**



**Surrealism**

**INFLUENCES ON ARTIST**



**Wassily Kandinsky**  
Years Worked: 1900 – 1944

**INFLUENCED BY ARTIST**

**ARTISTS**



**William Bazotes**



**Arshile Gorky**



**Hans Hartung**

**CRITICS/FRIENDS**



**Solomon R. Guggenheim**

**MOVEMENTS**



**Action Painting**



**Color Field Painting**

	<b>Hans Hofmann</b>		
	<b>Alexej von Jawlensky</b>		

**Quotes**

"Objects damage pictures."

"Colour is the key. The eye is the hammer. The soul is the piano with its many chords. The artist is the hand that, by touching this or that key, sets the soul vibrating automatically."

"The contact between the acute angle of a triangle and a circle has no less effect than that of God's finger touching Adam's in Michelangelo."

"Of all the arts, abstract painting is the most difficult. It demands that you know how to draw well, that you have a heightened sensitivity for composition and for colors, and that you be a true poet. This last is essential."

"The true work of art is born from the 'artist': a mysterious, enigmatic, and mystical creation. It detaches itself from him, it acquires an autonomous life, becomes a personality, an independent subject, animated with a spiritual breath, the living subject of a real existence of being."



**Content written by:**

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**Major Works:**



**Title:** Der Blaue Reiter

**Description:** This breakthrough canvas is a deceptively simple image- a lone rider

racing across a landscape- yet it represents a decisive moment in Kandinsky's developing pictorial language. Here, the sun-dappled hillside reveals a keen interest in contrasts of light and dark as well as movement and stillness. Constituting a link between post-Impressionism and the burgeoning Expressionist movements, Kandinsky's canvas became the emblem of the Munich avant-garde.

**Year:** 1903

**Materials:** Oil on canvas

**Collection:** Private collection



**Title:** Der blaue Berg (The Blue Mountain)

**Description:** Kandinsky often used the horse and rider motif as a symbol of his resistance to conventional aesthetic values and the possibilities for a purer, more spiritual life through art. The horse and rider appeared in Kandinsky's drawings, paintings and woodcuts from his early years in Moscow to the more abstracted landscapes he created in Munich. Here, the brilliant colors of the canvas recall his love of the folk art observed in the northern regions of Russia in Vologda.

**Year:** 1908-09

**Materials:** Oil on canvas

**Collection:** The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum of Art



**Title:** Composition IV

**Description:** In *Composition IV*, Kandinsky moves toward abstraction while retaining some adherence to the natural world. The canvas, divided by two dark central lines, depicts a multitude of Cossacks (the dividing lines reveal themselves to be the Cossack's weapons), boats, reclining figures, and hilltops. Here Kandinsky imagines an apocalyptic battle that will lead to eternal peace. He has reduced objects to pictographic symbols to express his vision in a more universal, cosmic manner.

**Year:** 1911

**Materials:** Oil on canvas

**Collection:** Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Dusseldorf



**Title:** Composition VII

**Description:** Critic Magdalena Dabrowski cites *Composition VII* as the pinnacle of Kandinsky's pre- World War I achievement. Here, nearly all pictorial representation has been obliterated, instead there is a swirling hurricane of color and shape. Kandinsky maintains a central motif of an oval intersected by a rectangle in this painting that references themes of the Last Judgment, the Deluge and the Garden of Eden in one exuberant eruption.

**Year:** 1913

**Materials:** Oil on canvas

**Collection:** Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow



**Title:** Composition VIII

**Description:** The geometric order of *Composition VIII* seems to be a complete about face from the operatic composition of *Composition VII*. Painted ten years later, *Composition VIII* represents Kandinsky's interest in the Suprematism and Constructivism he observed in Russia prior to his tenure at the Weimar Bauhaus. Form, as opposed to color, structures this work, and the precise lines and shapes create a dynamic balance that pulses throughout the canvas.

**Year:** 1923

**Materials:** Oil on canvas

**Collection:** Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum



**Title:** Several Circles

**Description:** When Kandinsky returned to Russia after the dissolution of *Der Blaue Reiter*, he was exposed to the work of the Russian avant-garde, including Kazimir Malevich, Alexandr Rodchenko and Liubov Popova. While he borrowed their pictographic vocabulary, *Several Circles* maintains a reference to landscape in its resemblance to clouds, mountains, sun, and rainbow. Critic Nancy Spector points out, "his belief in the expressive content of abstract forms alienated him from the majority of his Russian colleagues, who championed more rational, systematizing principles." This led to his return to Germany and the Weimar Bauhaus, where he found a more receptive audience to his expressive painting.

**Year:** 1926

**Materials:** Oil on canvas

**Collection:** Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum