

Background Story

Kandinsky

The Kandinsky collection at the Centre Pompidou would not have come into being without the generosity of the artist's widow. Nina Kandinsky donated major artworks during her lifetime and bequeathed the contents of the artist's studio to France. The exhibition in Amsterdam presents an extraordinary overview of Kandinsky's artistic oeuvre: a personal journey that made him one of the pioneers of abstract art. More than 60 masterpieces from the Centre Pompidou collection are presented - ranging from Kandinsky's early figurative, almost impressionistic, work to the distinctive abstract paintings that ultimately evolved into more organic and hybrid forms on canvas. Visitors to the exhibition have the opportunity to experience Kandinsky's artistic journey and discover the sources of inspiration that resulted in his extraordinary career.

Based on a text from Angela Lampe, curator Centre Pompidou

1. The early years of learning

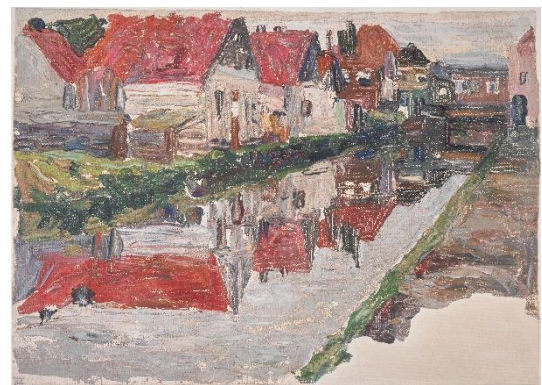
After a short legal career, Kandinsky left his Russian homeland (1896) and moved to Munich with the intention of becoming an artist. This radical gesture marked a genuine break. He was already thirty years old and left a well-ordered life behind him. After secondary school, he had chosen to study law and economics in Moscow. His path was already marked out, but Kandinsky rejected it for a city teeming with artistic and intellectual energy.

At the turn of the century, Munich was a center of great effervescence, with theatres, concert halls, cafes, salons, museums, a relatively free press, art magazines, an art academy and innumerable private studios, not to mention a university with renowned professors. It was the birthplace of the anti-academic Jugendstil (Art Nouveau) movement, which abandoned the subject in favor of surfaces enlivened by the dynamism of wavy lines and flat color areas. This 'young style', embracing architecture, graphic design and the applied arts, sought a total fusion of art and life that would pave the way for modern society to come. And it was hardly surprising that a young Russian artist who wished to study painting, would choose Munich, where a number of his compatriots already lived. Like them, Kandinsky enrolled in the private school of Slovene painter Anton Ažbe and at the same time he began his first outdoor landscape studies. Leaving the school after two years, he went on to study with the Symbolist painter Franz von Stuck in 1900. The intensive exploration of two-color compositions led the way to his prints and, in particular woodcuts, but also to tempera painting, a technique taught in Stuck's studio. The woodcut allowed him to increase the abstraction of his work by flattening the motifs and separating the color areas.

In 1901, Kandinsky put an end to his academic training and co-founded the Phalanx group, which was to organize exhibitions (including those featuring Monet and the Post-Impressionists). Early in 1902, after receiving a substantial inheritance, he also set up an art school of the same name. It was open to women and among them was the young painter Gabriela Münter, who became Kandinsky's student and later his companion. After the closure of the school, he decided to use his wealth to travel with Münter. The couple undertook a long journey around Europe (including the Netherlands) and Tunisia. During these nomadic

years, the dichotomy in Kandinsky's work persisted. On the one hand, he produced a considerable number of small studies in oil, executed outdoors using a palette knife in a Post-Impressionist manner. On the other hand, he continued painting his so-called 'colored drawings': consisting of multicolored scenes in a Pointillist style that seemed to come straight out of traditional Russian tales and legends. During the couple's stay in Tunis (1904-1905), Kandinsky took an interest in the applied arts and came to admire the ornamental abstraction characteristic of the Middle Eastern city. However, he continued sketching small beachside seascapes using a palette knife and an increasingly thick impasto. His naturalism became even more expressive during his 1906-1907 stay in Paris, which was rich in discoveries. In parallel, he continued to work in gouache, using the multicolored spots of paint on a dark ground – typical of his early production. During these long years of training and development, the Russian artist gained confidence in the potential for abstraction offered by his pictorial means.

The exhibition in Amsterdam will show an extraordinary collection of Kandinsky's early artworks, revealing his first artistic studies and early developments (as described above), which were largely achieved during his lengthy travel around Europe and Tunisia. The Dutch scenes, created during his visit to the Netherlands in 1904, are exceptional examples. The images of Rotterdam, Scheveningen and a Dutch canal take us back to a carefree, pre-war world. Another outstanding example of his work during this period is the Parc Saint-Cloud series (1906), showing contrasting illuminations of undergrowth in the open air. The dissolution of the motif into a moving mass of autonomous patches of color reaches its apogee in these early paintings by Kandinsky.



Wassily Kandinsky, *Kanal in Holland*, 1904.
Collection Centre Pompidou. MNAM-CCI/Christian Bahier et Philippe Migeat/Dist. RMN-GP

2. Towards abstraction

In the summer of 1908, the couple's travels came to an end. Kandinsky and Münter settled in Munich, where they lived until the outbreak of the First World War. Looking for a place where they could continue to paint outdoors, they discovered Murnau. The small lakeside town on the banks of the Staffelsee had as its backdrop the "blue" range of the Bavarian Alps. Charmed by the site, and above all by the intensity of the light and its multicolored reflections, the couple persuaded former schoolmates to spend the end of the summer there in their company. This stay was marked by the spectacular birth of a new way of expressionist painting. Building on his earlier experiments and inspired by his Paris discoveries, from Paul Gauguin to Henri Matisse, Kandinsky achieved a major breakthrough. His broad brushstrokes came together in increasingly autonomous blocks of vivid color. The next summer, at Kandinsky's urging, Münter bought a house in Murnau, where the couple would now spend the summer months. They were fascinated by the surrounding landscapes but also by the local folk art. In particular, they were drawn to the reverse glass paintings of religious legends such as Saint George killing the dragon or Saint Martin cutting his cloak in two, which reminded the artists of the religious woodcuts (*lubki*) they knew from Russia. The simplified forms and flat areas of bright color outlined in black greatly inspired the two painters, as can be seen in Kandinsky's

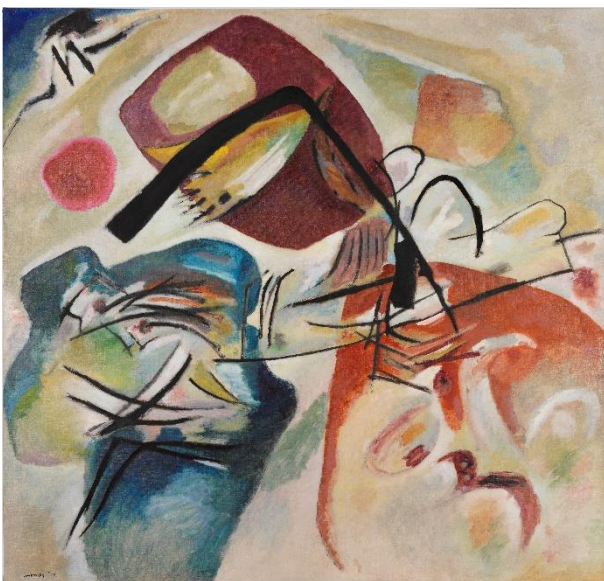
Improvisation III (1909).

At the beginning of the same year, Kandinsky and Münter joined with other artists to launch the *Neue Künstler Vereinigung München* (Munich New Artists' Association). The group's two exhibitions were attacked so violently by the critics that the young Munich painter Franz Marc took up their defense and contacted Kandinsky. This marked the start of one of the most productive friendships in the history of the avant-garde, leading to the genesis of the *Blaue Reiter* (*Blue Rider*) movement. In 1911,



Wassily Kandinsky, *Improvisation 3*, 1909. Collection Centre Pompidou. MNAM-CCI/Adam Rzepka/Dist. RMN-GP

Kandinsky and Marc came up with the idea of the *Blaue Reiter Almanach* (published in May 1912). This synthesis of the arts was based on a visual dialogue without boundaries or categories. In addition, Kandinsky managed to publish the book he had been working on for several years, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (*Concerning the Spiritual in Art*). One of the most important paragraphs regarding Kandinsky's pictorial theory reads: 'Color is a means of exercising direct influence upon the soul. The color is the keyboard. The eye is the hammer, while the soul is a piano of many strings. The artist is the hand through which the medium of different keys causes the human soul to vibrate. It is evident that color harmony can rest only on the principle of the corresponding vibration of the human soul. This basis can be considered as the principle of innermost necessity.' It would be a mistake, however, to think that the Russian artist was seeking to paint music. His comparison is based on an analogy between two art forms sharing similar abstract laws.



Wassily Kandinsky, *Mit dem schwarzen Bogen*, 1912. Collection Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI/Hélène Mauri/Dist. RMN-GP

On show in the exhibition are a few magnificent examples from the *Blaue Reiter* period. From Kandinsky's intriguing paintings showing the beautiful landscapes of Murnau (1908) to more simplified and brightly colored forms in works like *Improvisation III* (1909), *XIV* (1910) and *V* (1911). One of the top pieces in this section of the exhibition is *Mit dem Schwarzen Bogen* (1912). In this masterpiece, three blocks of color, arranged in a triangle, are held in tension by a large black line that suggests a 'dougá', the arched piece of wood used in hitching horses to a Russian troika. With this work, Wassily Kandinsky asserts that the construction of a painting can be based on the principle of dissociation of lines and colors, as well as on that of dissonance, with forms seemingly ready to collide. This cardinal notion of dissonance, which he discovered in the musical compositions of his

friend Arnold Schönberg, was to be central to his work during the 1908-1914 period. Another striking example is *Bild mit rotem Fleck* (1914). This major canvas marks the apogee of Kandinsky's Munich-based research into abstraction. All reference to reality is abolished in favor of a shapeless, organic world that explores the conflicting relationship between colors. The red spot at top left, which gives the painting its name, is the only shape clearly delineated.



Wassily Kandinsky, *Bild mit rotem Fleck*, 1914. Collection Centre Pompidou. MNAM-CCI/Adam Rzepka/Dist. RMN-GP

3. Russia: years of transition

The exceptional period during which Kandinsky achieved his justification of abstract art came to an end with the outbreak of the First World War. When Russia declared war on 1 August 1914, he suddenly became an unwelcome foreigner in an enemy country.

After a long journey through Switzerland, the Balkans and Odesa, he arrived back in Moscow at the end of December. During the eighteen years spent in Munich, Kandinsky had never severed his ties with the artistic scene in his native country, where he regularly exhibited his work and published articles in art magazines. Nonetheless, 1915 was a difficult year of transition. Devoting himself exclusively to graphic works in an abstract vein, he did not produce a single oil painting. Produced alongside the colorful watercolors, a series of black-and-white India ink drawings attest to the austerity of this period and are strikingly subtle in their energetic compositions playing on the different thicknesses of the strokes. It was only when he rejoined Münter in Stockholm that Kandinsky succeeded in painting a large canvas that summed up his experiments on paper. His return to Moscow in March 1916 marked his final break with Münter. Two months later, in the course of a telephone conversation, he made the acquaintance of twenty-year-old Nina Nikolaevna Andreevskaya, a family friend who was the daughter of a Russian officer. Captivated by her voice, he wanted to meet her. And a short time later, the young woman became his second wife in 1917. Their son Vsevolod was born that same year, but did not survive the severe hardships of the revolutionary years and died in June 1920. The storming of the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg triggered the October Revolution. After the establishment of the Bolshevik government under Lenin's leadership, Kandinsky, who was the owner of a building and a plot of land in Moscow, had all his property expropriated. Drawing on his experiences in Munich and his reputation, he nonetheless assumed a very active role in the reorganization of the country's cultural institutions and programs. At the invitation of Vladimir Tatlin, he became a member of the Visual Arts Department (IZO) of the People's Commissariat for Education (Narkompros). These new involvements brought Kandinsky close to young artists of the avant-garde such as Alexander Rodchenko and his wife, Vera Stepanova. In February 1919, he became the first director of the Museum of Artistic Culture in Moscow. Absorbed in all of these institutional responsibilities, he did not paint a single canvas between 1917 until the middle of 1919, and only six that year and ten in 1920. *Im Grau* (1919) is the masterpiece of the Russian

period and marked the transition. While maintaining the principle of small, interpenetrating hieroglyphic forms that he had invented in Munich, this painting displays a more pronounced geometry and a subdued palette accentuated with primary colors. Even if, from an artistic point of view, Kandinsky moved closer to the Suprematist and Constructivist avant-garde, he continued to defend his aesthetic convictions and their underlying spiritual values. Thus, following his appointment to the National Institute of Artistic Culture (Inkhuk) in May 1920, he refused to renounce his ideal of a pure abstract art touching the subconscious, which was unacceptable within an institution dominated by Constructivist groups advocating a functional, materialist art. Weary of the conflicts, he left Inkhuk in January 1921. His artistic and political isolation, aggravated by the increasingly difficult material conditions resulting from the revolution and the ensuing civil war, led him to choose exile. At the end of the year, he left his homeland for the second time and returned to Germany.



Wassily Kandinsky, *Im Grau*, 1919. Collection Centre Pompidou. MNAM-CCI/Philippe Migeat/Dist. RMN-GP

This turbulent period of Kandinsky's life resulted in a decline in his production. However, the exhibition does contain a few paintings that show the artist's work during these difficult years. Im Grau (1919) is one of the masterpieces in this section. This canvas stands out due to its muted palette, heightened by primary colors, and due to its forms floating in infinite space. In the upper left, like a star, stands a 'douga', the wooden archa used to harness horses to a troika. This painting represents a turning point; after it, Kandinsky committed himself to clear geometric forms with a consolidated composition. Another interesting artwork in this section of the exhibition is Akhtyrka. Nina et Tatiana dans la véranda (1917). Nina and Wassily spent the summer

following their marriage in Akhtyrka, a village 700 kilometers southwest of Moscow. This work is a conspicuous exception within the collection because of the presence of human figures. It is the result of a desire, unique in the painter's practice, to capture a moment in his private life: Nina (several months pregnant) and her sister, Tatiana, are shown quietly going about their business, seated on the veranda of the house.



Wassily Kandinsky, *Akhtyrka. Nina et Tatiana dans la véranda*, 1917.
Collection Centre Pompidou. MNAM-CCI/Service de la documentation
photographique du MNAM/Dist. RMN-GP

4. Bauhaus: years of theory

At the end of December 1921, after a seemingly endless journey by train, Kandinsky and his wife arrived in Berlin.

It took them several months to recover

from the hardships endured in Moscow. In the summer of 1922, Kandinsky was officially appointed to the Weimar Bauhaus. He immediately felt at home in this revolutionary school, founded by the architect Walter Gropius in 1919 and based on a multidisciplinary approach to integrating all the arts. The innovative teaching program established by the Bauhaus was comparable to what the artist had imagined for artistic education in Bolshevik Russia. He began teaching classes on abstract formal elements and analytical drawing, while also directing the wall painting workshop. In October 1922, the organizers of the *Juryfreie Kunstschau* in Berlin invited him to take part in their next temporary exhibition by designing a wall painting to decorate the entrance of a fictitious museum. Around 1923, the expressionist philosophy of the early Bauhaus gave way to a more rational and productive approach that was summed up by Gropius as: '*art and technique: a new unity*'. This shift encouraged Kandinsky to pursue the geometric path he had already adopted in Russia, as can be seen in *Auf Weiß II* (1923).

In 1925, confronted by the harassment of a right-wing government in the conservative city of Weimar, the school was forced to close its doors and settle in the more modern, industrialized town of Dessau, southwest of Berlin. In July 1926, the Kandinsky's moved into one of the new modernist houses that Gropius designed for the Bauhaus's teaching staff. This was the beginning of a fruitful period which, according to Nina, was perhaps the most productive phase of Kandinsky's entire life, with no less than 289 watercolors and 259 paintings produced between 1925 and 1933. The start of this period was marked by the writing of his second major theoretical treatise, published in 1926 in the Bauhaus Book series under the title *Point and Line to Plane: Contribution to the analysis of the pictorial elements*. Illustrated with his own drawings and diagrams as well as pictures from scientific textbooks and photographs, the book constituted the basis of Kandinsky's teaching for the years to come. Meanwhile, his painting was no longer rigorously geometric: the curved line



Wassily Kandinsky, *Auf Weiss II*, 1923. Collection Centre Pompidou. MNAM-CCI/Hélène Mauri/Dist. RMN-GP

made its return and color gradations once again brought nuances to his compositions. The circle became such a favorite motif that Nina named the period between 1925 and 1928 'the circle era'. In August 1932, the Dessau Community Council, now dominated by the Nazi party, decided to close the school. The Bauhaus moved to Berlin but eventually, after Hitler came to power in 1933 the teachers were forced to vote for its definitive closure. Gropius's dream of a social utopia was shattered. In December 1933, Nina and Wassily left Germany for Paris.

*An outstanding example of work from the so-called 'circle era' in the Amsterdam exhibition is the very fine canvas *Auf Spitzen* (1928), which Kandinsky valued a great deal and exhibited several times during his years at the*

*Bauhaus and subsequently in Paris. The almost ethereal lightness of the composition, the interplay between black lines and colored clouds, and the flowing succession of forms all attest to Kandinsky's mastery of his pictorial means. A second example from the 'circle era' is *Akzent in Rosa* (1926). For this work the artist used the Bauhaus technique of airbrushing, revealing the great chromatic subtlety adopted by him at the time. Thanks to delicate chiaroscuro effects, the surface acquires an almost cosmic dimension, reflecting the depth of space. Kandinsky presented this painting to Nina for her birthday on January 27, 1930.*

An absolute highlight of the Bauhaus period in this exhibition is the lifesize reconstruction of the Salon, created by Kandinsky and his students for the Juryfreie Kunstschau in 1922. The original walls were lost, but a reconstruction with the same colors and dimensions was made on canvas, under the watchful eye of Nina Kandinsky for the opening of the Centre Pompidou in 1977. Now, for the grand opening of H'ART Museum, the immense canvases of the Salon will find a temporary home in Amsterdam.

*Finally, another masterpiece in this section is the previously mentioned work *Auf Weiss II* (1923). With its primary colors, geometric shapes and weightless composition floating in seemingly infinite space, this painting is closely related to the Suprematism of Kasimir Malevich, whose work the artist discovered in Russia. With its intersecting diagonals punctuated by checkerboards, triangles, quadrilaterals and three small black lines underlining the composition's axis, *Auf Weiss II* can also be seen as a geometrical reworking of a motif that Kandinsky had painted many times: that of Saint George carrying a lance. This major work had a place of honor in Kandinsky's dining room at the Bauhaus in Dessau.*

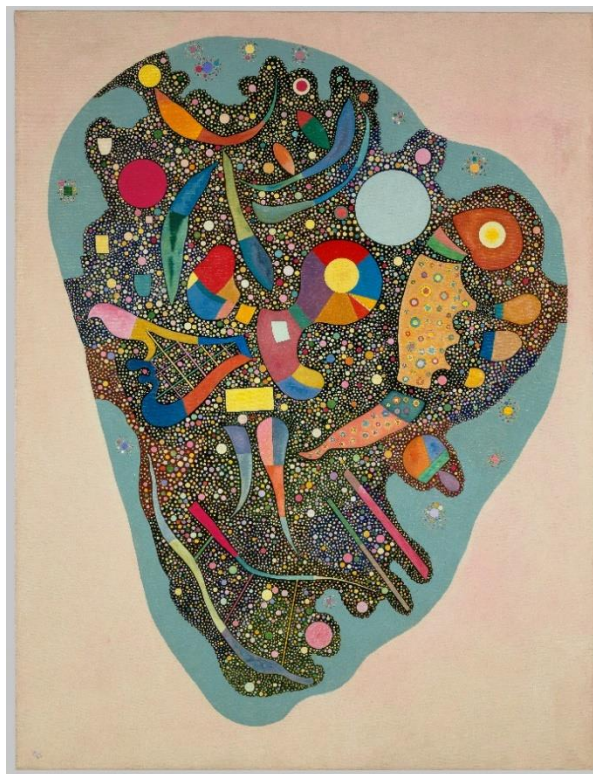
5. Paris: years of maturity

When Nina and Wassily Kandinsky arrived in Paris, they thought their stay would be brief. But their two-bedroom flat on the sixth floor of a new apartment block in Neuilly-sur-Seine was to be their final home. What most fascinated the Russian couple was the elevated view from the modern building. From his studio, Kandinsky could see the Seine flowing below and Mount Valérien on the seemingly infinite horizon. As he later wrote to Alfred H. Barr, Jr., the director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, *'When I moved to Paris, I was so deeply moved by the light and by the nature there. Paris with its wonderful (intense soft) light had relaxed my palette.'* When we look at Kandinsky's output over the eleven years he was to live in Paris – some 144 paintings and more than 200 watercolors and gouaches – it is undeniable that his art underwent an evolution there. The austerity of the final Bauhaus paintings gave way to a surprising formal jubilation in a delicate, light palette dominated by pastel and citrus colors. The decision to move to France had been motivated by the fact that Kandinsky was not completely unknown in Paris. He had been exhibiting there since 1929. But as a Russian-born foreigner who had taken German nationality and was an abstract painter, he would always remain an outsider in the Paris art world, with its two warring camps, the abstractionists and the Surrealists. Kandinsky had no choice other than to assert his own voice, notwithstanding a certain degree of isolation.

The first paintings from the beginning of 1934 reveal the singular path to come: a syncretic style enriched by both the Constructivists' idioms and the biomorphism introduced by Salvador Dalí, Pablo Picasso and Joan Miró. Suddenly, Kandinsky liberated his flowing little shapes from the geometric yoke he had imposed on them in the earlier compositions made at the Bauhaus and transformed them into a playful ballet of half-animal, half-fantasy motifs. Freed from the weight of his theoretical teachings, Kandinsky reinvented himself by reversing the balance and placing nature, life itself, in the forefront. He was captivated by nature's constantly changing forms containing the mystery of life. He felt close to Jean Arp, whom he saw regularly in Paris, as well as to Miró.

In spite of the rapidly deteriorating political and economic climate, he seemed glad to be in Paris and *'be able to work in my studio behind closed doors. My wife pampers me as usual so I can work without being distracted.'* In the summer of 1942, however, conditions in the Nazi-occupied city became worse. Kandinsky had no more primed canvases, which were now unavailable in Paris. He started painting directly on whatever he could find: pieces of wood or cardboard. His palette became darker and the compositions more detailed and structured, *Un Conglomérat* (1943) is an example that will be on show in the Amsterdam exhibition. It was only towards the end of his life, with his very last watercolors, that the artist recovered his lost exuberance.

Kandinsky died on 13 December 1944.



Wassily Kandinsky, *Entassement réglé*, 1938. Collection Centre Pompidou. MNAM-CCI/Bertrand Prévost/Dist. RMN-

One of the masterpieces in this section of the exhibition is *Entassement réglé* (1938) - Kandinsky's Easter gift to his wife Nina. This work recalls both the painted eggs offered in Russia at the end of Lent, and the Fabergé eggs, made of precious stones and enamels, given by the Tsars to their wives. The composition functions like a nesting doll, with each level fitting into the next, from the most general (the canvas) to the smallest (the dot). The title reveals a desire to combine order and disorder, unity and multiplicity. The accumulation of dots creates a grid on which float forms reminiscent of micro-organisms. These include a ladder, an animal and a gousli, a traditional lyre-like Russian instrument.

Another outstanding example from Kandinsky's final years is *Accord réciproque* (1942). With its cool tones, accentuated by the enamel effect of Ripolin (a popular brand of house paint), this last large-scale canvas, which Kandinsky produced in early 1942, appears to be the swan song of his Parisian years. In a final attempt to assert his unique voice, Kandinsky precariously balances the way in which the Paris years inflected his geometric abstraction with a natural organic inflection. After Kandinsky's death, Nina chose this binary composition to place behind the artist's body, which in accordance with Russian custom was displayed in his studio in an open casket.



Wassily Kandinsky, *Accord réciproque*, 1942. Collection Centre Pompidou. MNAM-CCI/Hélène Mauri/Dist. RMN-GP