

Large-print labels

KANDINSKY

Art
Gallery
NSW

'If fate grants me sufficient time, I shall discover a new international language that will be eternal, and will develop infinitely ... It is called painting.'

'Open your ears to music, your eyes to painting. And don't think! Ask yourselves ... whether the work of art has carried you away to a world unknown to you before. If so, what more do you want?'

'Colour is the keyboard, the eyes are the hammers, the soul is the piano with many strings. The artist is the hand which plays, touching one key or another, to cause vibrations in the soul.'

'Must we not then renounce the object altogether, throw it to the winds and instead lay bare the purely abstract?'

— Vasily Kandinsky

Guided tours

Daily 12pm, 2pm

Wed 6.30pm

Children's trail

Pick up a free children's drawing trail that provides young visitors with a fun way to experience the exhibition.



Free audio experience

English / Français / 简体中文

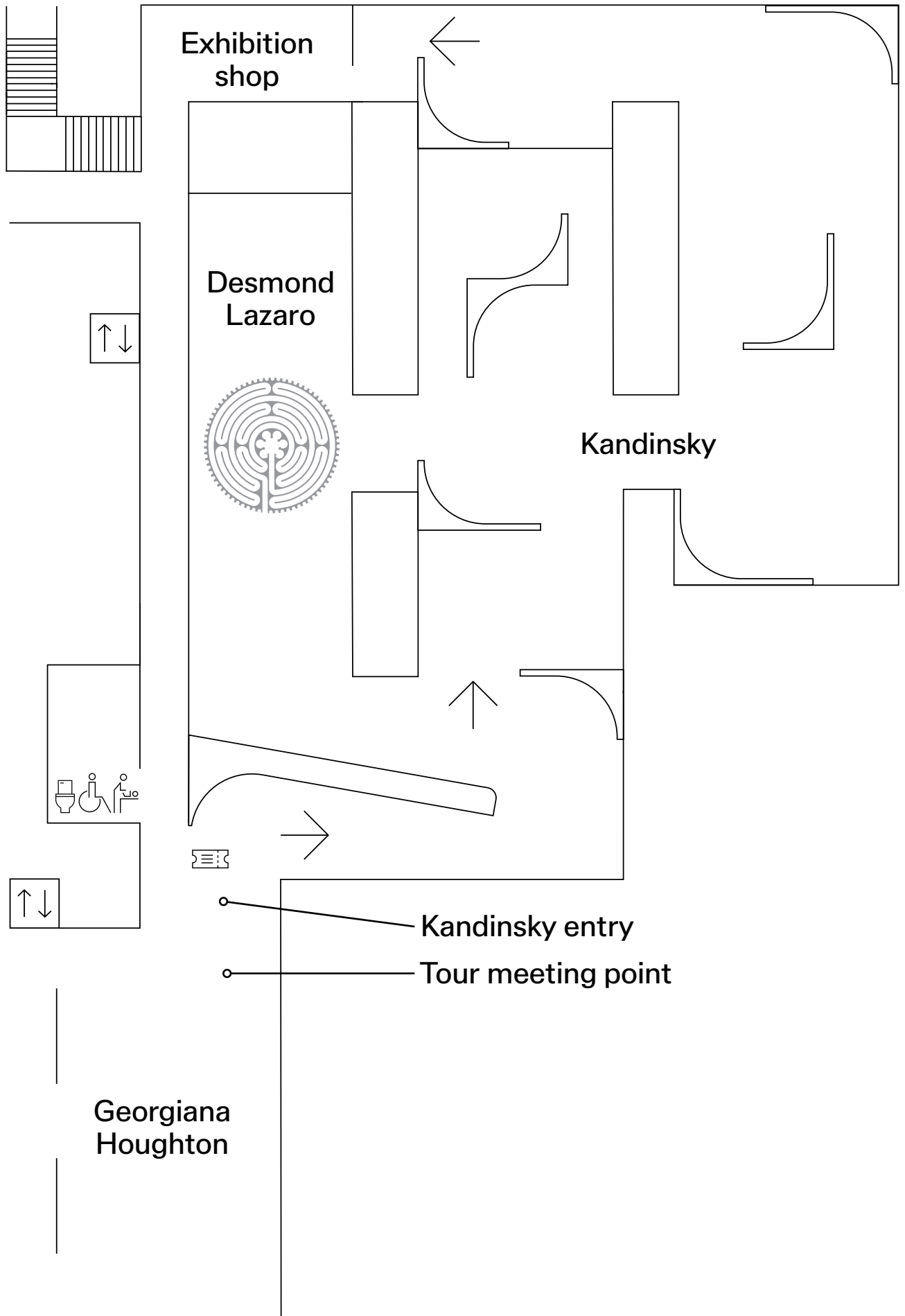
Listen to a curator-led tour.

Join AGNSW wifi and go to agnsw.art/listen

Photo at entry: Vasily Kandinsky in front of his painting *Dominant curve (Courbe dominante)* 1936.

Photo: Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Centre Pompidou, Paris © Lipnitzki/Roger Violett/Getty Images

Photo at exit: Vasily Kandinsky at Schnorrstrasse 44, Dresden, 1905. Photo: Gabriele Münter © Gabriele Münter and Johannes Eichner Foundation, Munich/ VG Bild-Kunst. Copyright Agency, 2023



Welcome to *Kandinsky*, a major exhibition celebrating the extraordinary art of Vasily Kandinsky, organised by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York.

As one of the most adored artists of the 20th century, Kandinsky's revolutionary approach to visual expression – involving a profound exploration of the interplay between colour, form and the human spirit – has captivated generations. Our deep appreciation goes to Richard Armstrong, the former director of the Guggenheim Museum, for allowing so many treasures from their collection to come to Sydney, and to deputy director and chief curator Naomi Beckwith for her continuing support. Our great thanks also go to Megan Fontanella, the Guggenheim Museum curator of modern art and provenance, for her outstanding curation of this exhibition.

Kandinsky forms part of the Sydney International Art Series, and we acknowledge the support of the NSW Government through Destination NSW and the Create NSW Blockbusters Funding initiative in enabling us to stage such outstanding international exhibitions in Sydney.

As part of the exhibition, you can experience a music program that underlines the important relationship Kandinsky had with music, as well as a specially

commissioned artist project by Desmond Lazaro
that draws inspiration from Kandinsky's ideas to form
an immersive and wondrous experience for all ages.

Thank you for visiting – I hope you greatly enjoy
Kandinsky's art and his transformative vision that
continues to inspire the world.

Michael Brand

Director

Art Gallery of New South Wales

On behalf of the NSW Government, it is my pleasure to welcome you to the Art Gallery of New South Wales for the Sydney International Art Series exhibition *Kandinsky*.

Vasily Kandinsky was one of the most influential European artists during the most tumultuous period in the 20th century. Against the backdrop of social and political upheaval, Kandinsky contributed to an overhaul of how painters conceived form and applied colour.

This comprehensive exhibition has been curated with the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, drawing on their significant holdings of this important modernist's work. *Kandinsky* brings together a collection of exceptional works from abroad and presents them to Australian audiences and visitors.

This collaboration has been supported by the NSW Government through the Create NSW Blockbusters Funding initiative and its tourism and major events agency Destination NSW. *Kandinsky* is presented as part of the Sydney International Art Series, along with *Louise Bourgeois: Has the Day Invaded the Night or Has the Night Invaded the Day?* in the Art Gallery's North Building.

The Hon John Graham MLC

Minister for Jobs and Tourism

Minister for the Arts

Minister for Music and the Night-time Economy

KANDINSKY

Vasily Kandinsky (Russia/France 1866–1944) is recognised as a major artistic innovator and painting theorist. In the opening decades of the 20th century, he was among those who advanced nonrepresentational modes of art-making to lasting effect. The artist's stylistic evolution in this regard was intimately tied to his sense of place and the communities with which he engaged. Kandinsky gained insight from his meaningful interactions with an array of artists, musicians, poets, and other cultural producers, especially those who shared his transnational vision and experimental bent. Uprooted time and again, he adapted with his every relocation across Germany, back to Russia, and eventually to France – all against the backdrop of the socio-political upheavals occurring around him.

Kandinsky's earliest paintings were made while he was living in or around Munich from 1896 to 1914. There he participated in heightened vanguard activity across multiple disciplines, fluidly moving between painting, poetry and stage composition. In time he interrogated the expressive possibilities of colour, line and form, inspired in part by contemporary music. The body of work from his decade teaching at the Bauhaus, a progressive German school that promoted a synthesis of the arts, manifests Kandinsky's conviction that art could transform self and society. It exemplifies the

revitalisation of his abstract style following direct contact with the avant-garde in Russia in the late 1910s.

Kandinsky eventually adopted geometric motifs as a vehicle for his emotive language. In his final chapter, set in France in the 1930s and early 1940s, the natural sciences and the surrealist movement, as well as an abiding interest in Russian and Siberian cultural practices and folklore, informed Kandinsky's organic imagery and prompted recurrent themes of renewal and metamorphosis.

Ultimately his was not a fixed path from representation to abstraction, but rather a circular passage traversing persistent themes centred around the pursuit of one dominant ideal: the impulse for spiritual expression. This, what Kandinsky called the artist's 'inner necessity', remained the guiding principle through the periodic redefinitions of his life and work.

Drawn from the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum's extensive Kandinsky collection in New York, the paintings presented in this exhibition illuminate the journey of an artist who would not leave behind the precedents of representation or of his own early work altogether, even as he explored the transcendent potential of abstract forms.

BEGINNINGS

Kandinsky spent his youth in his birthplace of Moscow and in Odessa, Russia (now Odesa, Ukraine), with the arts ever-present in his upbringing. He studied law and economics before a transformative encounter in 1896 with one of Claude Monet's *Haystacks* paintings (1890–91), as well as a performance of Richard Wagner's 1850 opera *Lohengrin*, inspired his full commitment to the arts. At the age of 30, he made the pivotal decision to relocate to Munich, a nexus of vanguard activity.

Memories of Russia would define Kandinsky's early work and resurface throughout his career. His imagery drew inspiration from the brightly decorated furniture and votive pictures he encountered in homes as an ethnographer in northern Russia in 1889, as well as Romantic historicism, poetry, folklore and fantasy.

In Germany, Kandinsky soon abandoned classroom instruction to work outdoors, painting on small-format, portable boards or canvases in a neo-impressionist style. Before long he founded an art school, Phalanx, where he met his future romantic partner, the artist Gabriele Münter (1877–1962). Together they painted side by side in the Bavarian countryside, engaging with folk practices and the decorative arts.

From 1904 to 1908, Kandinsky and Münter travelled widely, spending time in the Netherlands, Italy and Tunisia, prompted in part by a desire for distance from Kandinsky's marriage with his first wife, Anja. The couple spent a year in Paris in 1906–07. There the daring use of non-naturalistic and vibrant colours in the paintings of the fauves ('wild beasts') further influenced Kandinsky's shift to magical fairytale pictures and Russian folk themes painted in a decorative art nouveau style. In June 1908, the pair rejoined the artistic community in Munich, armed with the visual insights they had gained during their years abroad.

The years spent in or around Munich were tremendously fertile ones. Kandinsky steered the city's leading avant-garde groups, including the New Artists' Association of Munich, and published groundbreaking poetry and theoretical texts.

In 1911, Kandinsky and Franz Marc (1880–1916) formed the Blue Rider, a loose, transnational confederation of artists, writers, and musicians united by an interest in the expressive potential of colour and the symbolic – often spiritual – resonance of forms.

Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944)

Study for 'Landscape with tower'
Studie für 'Landschaft mit Turm' 1908

oil on board

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection 1938

The year of Kandinsky's return to Germany, 1908, was a breakthrough one. Where the artist had previously felt his colours to be 'weak and flat', now everything came together in works distinguished by a heightened sense of colour that reflected the artist's emotions.

Here Kandinsky continues the 19th-century German Romantic painting tradition of venerating the landscape. His approach also reveals the important changes his painting had undergone following his familiarity with contemporary French art during 13 months in Paris in 1906–07. Of the rich array of influences in evidence, the most significant is the vitality of fauvist colour.

Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944)

clockwise from left:

Munich

München c1901–02

oil on canvas board

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York 1950

Fishing boats, Sestri

Fischerboote, Sestri 1905

oil on canvas board

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York 1950

Pond in the park

Parkteich c1906

oil on board

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

The Hilla Rebay Collection 1971

Amsterdam – view from the window

Amsterdam – Blick aus dem Fenster 1904

oil on board

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection 1946

At the turn of the century, Munich was known as 'a nursery of the arts' – one particularly favoured by emerging Russian and Ukrainian artists. It was the centre of *Jugendstil*, the German art nouveau movement, and home to a spirited and politicised avant-garde. In Munich, Kandinsky began his professional studies at the school of Anton Ažbe, then with the symbolist Franz von Stuck.

Breaking away from his teachers, Kandinsky began sketching fleeting impressions outdoors in thick paint with a palette knife. Informed by impressionist and neo-impressionist approaches to portraying light and urban life, these small boards display an increasingly expressive use of colour.

Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944)

Blue mountain

Der blaue Berg 1908–09

oil on canvas

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection, by gift 1941

The horse-and-rider motif appears frequently in Kandinsky's work around this time. It first featured in the artist's folk-inspired paintings executed in his native Russia at the turn of the 20th century and, in 1909, on no less than seven other canvases with images of riders.

The motif symbolises the artist's crusade against conventional aesthetic values and his hope for a spiritual revolution or 'great upheaval'. This was likely in response to mounting socio-political tensions in the years leading up to World War I, as well as what he perceived to be a clash between matter and spirit in human society more generally.

For Kandinsky, who uses colour here expressively rather than naturalistically, blue was the most spiritually resonant colour.

Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944)

**Landscape near Murnau
with locomotive**

*Landschaft bei Murnau
mit Lokomotive* 1909

oil on board

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York 1950

Upon his return to Munich, Kandinsky translated the language of printmaking, with which he'd been deeply engaged, to landscape painting. Graphic elements such as clearly delineated forms, flattened perspective, and the black and white 'non-colours' of his woodcuts pervade the jewel-coloured Bavarian landscapes.

He and Münter also began to spend considerable time in Murnau, a small village near the Alps. They took their easels outdoors to capture the fresh colours and energy of the surrounding countryside, and both were avid cyclists. Such activities coincided with the German *Lebensreform* (life-reform) movement, which promoted the restorative effects of a return to the land in reaction to rapid urban industrialisation.

Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944)

from left:

Winter landscape with church

Winterlandschaft mit Kirche 1910–11

oil on board

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection, by gift 1937

Landscape with rolling hills

Landschaft mit welligen Hügeln 1910

oil on board

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection, by gift 1941

Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944)

books 1 and 2:

Point and line to plane

Punkt und Linie zu Fläche c1947

first printed 1926

Edited by Hilla Rebay; translated by Howard Dearstyne and Hilla Rebay.
Published by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York

**On the spiritual in art, and painting
in particular**

*Über das Geistige in der Kunst. Insbesondere in der
Malerei* 1946

first printed 1911/12

Edited by Hilla Rebay. Published by the Solomon R. Guggenheim
Foundation, New York

In *Point and line to plane*, developed while at the Bauhaus in 1926, Kandinsky analyses line and form. He formulates a language of abstract art, asking the novel question: 'What are art's basic elements?'

On the spiritual in art, one of the most influential texts in the history of modern art, establishes the philosophical basis of Kandinsky's abstract painting. It explores the special relationship of colour to feeling, revealing his great debt to theosophy. His use of the word 'spirit' is complex, with the German word *geist* ranging from the mystical to intellectual consciousness.

books 3 and 4:

Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944)
Franz Marc (1880–1916)

The blue rider *Der blaue Reiter* 1912

woodcut, letterpress
Published by R Piper & Co, Munich
National Gallery of Australia, gift of Orde Poynton Esq CMG 1994

Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944)

Sounds *Klänge* 1912

woodcut, letterpress
Published by R Piper & Co, Munich
National Gallery of Australia, purchased 1980

The blue rider almanac was part of Kandinsky and Franz Marc's search for the spiritual in art and the dissolution of its categories. As they wrote, 'art, knows no borders or nations, only humanity.' Reproductions by modern artists were shown alongside images of medieval woodcuts, bronzes from Benin, children's drawings and musical scores.

The 'musical album' *Sounds* is a collection of tone poems and abstract woodcuts that furthered Kandinsky's fundamental idea of 'synthesis' – the unification of all the arts. For Kandinsky, the word 'sound' was interchangeable with the notions 'inner resonance' or 'spiritual vibration'. You can view the pages of *Sounds* on the adjacent screen.

Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944)

Group in crinolines
Reifrockgesellschaft 1909

oil on canvas

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection 1945

Group in crinolines depicts an outdoor gathering with several women wearing dresses supported by crinolines, the hooped petticoats fashionable in the mid 19th century. Painted in Munich two years after Kandinsky lived and worked in Paris from 1906 to 1907, this eccentric painting attests to the artist's shift away from early fairy-tale pictures and toward highly abstracted compositions.

In its anachronistic subject it nods to the painter of modern French life, Edouard Manet (1832–83), and makes clear Kandinsky's appreciation of the contemporary work of Henri Matisse (1869–1954). In the 1906 Salon d'Automne exhibition in Paris, Kandinsky showed paintings from his stay in Tunisia while Matisse and the fauves displayed their own radical work.

TOWARDS ABSTRACTION

Early pastoral landscapes and cataclysmic scenes emerged from Kandinsky's dissatisfaction with urban industrialisation and perceived materialism. By 1910, many shared a common literary source, the Bible's Book of Revelation, with its visionary descriptions of the conflicts between good and evil. His earlier motif of the horse and rider had now come to signify the Horsemen of the Apocalypse, who bring destruction after which the world is redeemed. By 1913, that and his other recurrent motifs – rolling hills, towers and trees – had become subsidiary to line and colour.

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 its rich history in diverse world cultures, Kandinsky's intrepid work marked a broader shift toward nonrepresentational art, which proved to have an enduring impact.

Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944)

Pastorale February 1911

oil on canvas

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection 1945

Kandinsky had responded in wonder to the hidden forms in Islamic paintings he'd encountered in a major exhibition in Munich in 1910. In works like this electrically charged 'landscape', *Pastorale*, he proposed a method of concealing images aimed to dissolve 'objects to a greater or lesser extent within the same picture, so that they might not all be recognised at once'.

Pastorale is a transitional work in which one can still identify figures and landscape elements, but where colour and rhythm dominate. It was painted only a month after Kandinsky had attended a concert by composer Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951) and been shaken by the dissonant music that seemed to parallel his own move toward abstraction. The two artists began a longstanding and creatively stimulating friendship.

Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944)

Landscape with factory chimney
Landschaft mit Fabrikschornstein 1910

oil on canvas

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection, by gift 1941

Since the summer of 1908, Kandinsky had worked in the Murnau countryside alongside his partner Gabriele Münter and the Russian artists Marianne von Werefkin (1860–1938) and Alexej Jawlensky (1864–1941), painting in a shared expressive style of densely flattened views featuring jewel-bright colours.

Landscape with factory chimney (like *Landscape with rain* adjacent), depicts Murnau, not as a precise record, but as an evocation of an inner emotional state. By 1910, Kandinsky's sense of focus on an underlying spiritual order had intensified and his pure colours unbounded by forms were beginning to obscure any surface reality.

Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944)

Landscape with rain

Landschaft mit Regen January 1913

oil on canvas

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection 1945

With its falling rain drawn in shorthand and its emphasis on colour and form, *Landscape with rain* sees Kandinsky dematerialise the objective world to bring out its underlying expressive content. Leaving narrative references aside, Kandinsky instead builds vigorous colour relationships within open forms, energised by dynamic lines.

Landscape with rain portrays a common enough scene, yet it connects with a theme of apocalyptic deluge that emerged in Kandinsky's art around 1912.

Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944)

Improvisation 28 (second version)
Improvisation 28 (zweite Faßung) 1912

oil on canvas

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection, by gift 1937

The title of this series, *Improvisations* (1909–14), is a nod to terminology from music, a discipline that captivated Kandinsky throughout his life. The artist was additionally interested in synaesthesia, a phenomenon in which the senses are commingled and felt simultaneously, such as experiencing colour as sound in one's mind.

Here it is possible to find abstracted figurative elements relating to both cataclysmic events and redemption or salvation – a favoured dichotomy of the artist. The canvas contains images of a boat and waves (signalling a global deluge), a serpent and, perhaps, cannons, as well as an embracing couple and what appears to be a church or tower.

Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944)

Sketch for 'Composition II'

Skizze für 'Komposition II' 1909–10

oil on canvas

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection 1945

The vibrant colours and condensed imagery of this sketch prefigure the more 'purely abstract' works that follow in this section. It is the last of several preliminary studies Kandinsky prepared steadily and thoughtfully for the painting *Composition II*, destroyed in World War II (1939–45) – the second in what he considered his most important series. It came to Kandinsky in a dream, 'with great clarity', after a bout of typhoid. The underlying colour notations just visible in graphite beneath the thin paint layer, and the many studies, attest to his attempt to recapture his 'crumbling' dream.

Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944)

Study for 'Painting with white border'
Entwurf zu 'Bild mit weissem rand' 1913

watercolour, gouache, ink on paper
Art Gallery of New South Wales, purchased 1982

This study for the major work *Painting with white border*, is one of many created over five months in which Kandinsky used graphite, pen and ink, watercolour, gouache and oils to explore his subject: his nostalgia for *Moscow*.

Kandinsky wrote about the meticulous process in a famous text of 1913, *Reminiscences*, but did not mention the evolution which took the format from the vertical seen here, to the horizontal one of the finished oil painting, adjacent. It is the format of this study that suggests it to be one of the earliest in the group.

A NEW REALITY

Since 1896 Kandinsky had predominantly lived in Western Europe, where he experienced heightened cultural exchange, joining or founding artist groups in Munich that promoted 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.

After 16 years 'devoted to German artistic life', it was, he said, 'like I have been torn out of a dream'. Returning to Moscow, Kandinsky initially focused on watercolours and drawings to explore his creative instinct and perhaps make sense of his new reality.

The October Revolution of 1917 in Russia tempered his impulse to resume painting on canvas and at larger scales and 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 Russian and Ukrainian avant-gardists who emphasised the

technical and scientific. While Kandinsky adopted their geometric vocabulary, he maintained his commitment to spiritual expression and to intuition.

In 1916 Kandinsky married Nina Andreevskaya and in September 1917, the couple had a son, Vsevolod, who did not survive the severe hardships of the revolutionary years and died in June 1920.

Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944)

Blue segment

Siny segment; Blaues Segment 1921

oil on canvas

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection 1949

Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944)

White centre

Bely tsestr; Weißes Zentrum 1921

oil on canvas

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

The Hilla Rebay Collection 1971

In 1920 and 1921, Kandinsky created a series of paintings that hint at his position regarding the Russian and Ukrainian avant-garde. In *White centre*, schematised landscape elements floating in an airy ground reveal Kandinsky's distinctly ambivalent relationship to the nonobjective art movements of suprematism and constructivism.

After the revolution, Kandinsky found himself at the heart of cultural policymaking in the new Russia. He made significant contributions such as founding the Institute of Artistic Culture in Moscow. There he designed the inaugural foundation programs to be 'scientific', but still held to the need for content and the esoteric principle of 'inner necessity' that would be roundly criticised by his colleagues as subjective.

Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944)

Painting with white border

Bild mit weißem Rand May 1913

oil on canvas

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection, by gift 1937

This painting was inspired by a trip the artist took to Moscow in autumn 1912. On his return to Munich, where he had lived intermittently since 1896, Kandinsky searched for a way to record the 'extremely powerful impressions I had experienced in Moscow – or more correctly, of Moscow itself'.

After producing at least 16 preparatory works – one of which from the Art Gallery of New South Wales' collection is shown adjacent – Kandinsky finally arrived at the pictorial solution to the painting: the white border. According to Kandinsky, the colour white expresses a 'harmony of silence ... pregnant with possibilities'.

The canvas includes schematic allusions to key motifs from Russia: the horse-drawn troika (the three diagonal, black lines connecting brown forms, at top left) and Moscow's patron, the Christian martyr Saint George on horseback (the arched form at centre), with his white lance aimed at the dragon (bottom-left corner).

Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944)

Circles on black

Krugi na chyornom; Kreise auf Schwarz 1921

oil on canvas

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection 1946

This is the last work Kandinsky painted before his return to Germany after largely spending the years of World War I (1914–18) and the Russian Revolution (1917–23) in his native Moscow.

Encounters with the vanguard constructivist and suprematist artists there, who were in pursuit of a universal aesthetic language, led Kandinsky to expand his use of geometric forms and overlapping flat planes. However, he insisted that even his most abstract works retain expressive content.

When communist policies required that all cultural production contribute to the propaganda effort, Kandinsky's expressive abstraction was deemed indulgent and subversive. He was attacked by figures like art critic Nikolai Punin, who cried 'Down with Kandinsky! ... Everything about his art is arbitrary and individualistic.'

Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944)

Red oval

Krasny oval; Rotes Oval 1920

oil on canvas

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York 1951

Kandinsky's 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.

In *Red oval*, among the few oils he painted in Russia, Kandinsky brings the remnants of his expressive prewar style together with that most emblematic symbol of suprematism, the trapezoid form. This central yellow form he pins in place with a sharp black diagonal and a pulsating red ovoid.

COSMIC REALMS

When he returned to Germany in late 1921 with his wife Nina, Kandinsky attempted to regain some of the pre-1914 works he had left for safekeeping with Gabriele Münter. After much acrimonious wrangling, he finally regained some, the rest remaining in Münter's hands.

Kandinsky came to Germany when invited to teach at the Bauhaus art school by its founder, the architect Walter Gropius (1883–1969).

This progressive school endeavoured to bridge fine and applied art – and, later, art and technology. In this generative period, Kandinsky further delved into the correspondence between colours 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.

The Bauhaus was established in Weimar, then moved to Dessau, before conservative political interference saw its final move to Berlin. Nina and Vasily Kandinsky remained at the Bauhaus throughout its relocations, until 1933 when the school was definitively closed due to pressure from the Nazi government.

Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944)

Blue circle

Blauer Kreis 1922

oil on canvas

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection 1946

Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944)

Bright unity

Helle Einheit April 1925

oil on board

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection, by gift 1937

Kandinsky spent his Bauhaus years analysing the elements in painting to determine a kind of visual grammar in which colour, shape and line play an equal part. He tied primary colours (red, blue and yellow) to primary form (square, circle and triangle), with his goal the synthesis of external (natural) and internal (artistic) laws in pictorial composition.

While he wrote often of the circle, the other important shape for Kandinsky was the triangle, which he used as a metaphor for the avant-garde artist-prophet advancing society.

Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944)

In the black square

Im schwarzen Viereck June 1923

oil on canvas

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection, by gift 1937

Executed two years after he returned to Germany in late 1921, *In the black square* epitomises Kandinsky's synthesis of the Russian and Ukrainian avant-garde's utopian artistic experiments and his own lyrical abstraction. The white trapezoid and black square recall the powerful nonobjective emblems of suprematist paintings. The work seems at first glance to rely exclusively on line and the forms of circles, rectangles and triangles, but the dynamic compositional elements resembling clouds, mountains, sun and a rainbow, still refer to the landscape.

Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944)

Composition 8

Komposition 8 July 1923

oil on canvas

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection, by gift 1937

Kandinsky believed his *Compositions* series constituted his most accomplished output. Between 1910 and 1939, Kandinsky produced ten paintings that investigate colours and forms and their psychological and spiritual effects. Here, colourful, geometric shapes interact in a dance with precise directional lines to create a pulsating surface that is alternately dynamic and calm, aggressive and quiet.

Composition 8 represents an important touchstone in the relationship between the US businessman Solomon R. Guggenheim and Kandinsky. At the urging of Guggenheim's art advisor, the German artist Hilla Rebay, the future museum founder purchased this painting – which Kandinsky called 'the high point of his postwar achievement' – in summer 1930 during his first meeting with the artist at the Dessau Bauhaus.

Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944)

Blue painting

Blaues Bild January 1924

oil on canvas board

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Gift, Fuller Foundation, Inc 1976

A number of works from the early Bauhaus years (that Kandinsky called his 'cool period') are dominated by powerful diagonals: Kandinsky liked the 'lyric tension' of them piercing the image. Here the lance of Saint George seen in early works is writ large, slicing across the varying shades of blue – the hue Kandinsky once described as the 'typical heavenly colour'. In spite of the cool geometry of his forms, Kandinsky expressed a strong impulse towards Romanticism at this time. As he wrote in 1925, 'The circle, which I have been using so often of late, is nothing if not romantic.'

Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944)

Extended

Ausgedehnt May–June 1926

oil on panel

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection, by gift 1939

A CIRCULAR JOURNEY

Kandinsky lived and worked in the Paris suburb of Neuilly-sur-Seine in his last decade. His style shifted and in his final move to France, long-held concerns resurfaced. He incorporated a soft palette of pastels and jewel tones, conjuring his early depictions of Russian and fairytale subjects and revealing little of the dejection surrounding his departure from Nazi Germany in late 1933.

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.

Many among the Parisian vanguard were familiar with alchemical, astrological, and occult practices, through the literary and artistic pursuits of the surrealists, who aimed to unlock the unconscious and irrational mind. Kandinsky's own memories of his youthful encounters with the mystical re-emerged.

In 1937, the artist recalled his formative 1889 fieldwork as an ethnographer with the Komi tribes of 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, whose shamanic narratives involved transformation and ascendance.

The Bauhaus was established in Weimar, then moved to Dessau, before conservative political interference saw its final move to Berlin. Nina and Vasily Kandinsky remained at the Bauhaus throughout its relocations, until 1933 when the school was definitively closed due to pressure from the Nazi government.

Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944)

Dominant curve

Courbe dominante April 1936

oil on canvas

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection 1945

In his late-life work, the natural sciences often informed Kandinsky's compositions; he had for some years collected organic specimens, illustrations from journals, and scientific textbooks. In *Dominant curve*, the figures within the green rectangle in the upper left recall microscopic marine animals, while embryo-like shapes appear elsewhere. These buoyant, biomorphic forms painted in jewel-like colours gesture to rebirth and regeneration – an optimistic view that contrasts with the mounting European political crisis that precipitated World War II.

Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944)

Violet-orange October 1935

oil on canvas

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection, by gift 1937

The spatial ambiguity created by a slight shadowing of the forms, offset by the floating elements that had first appeared in his 'cool' period of the early 1920s, brings a certain illusionism to Kandinsky's *Violet-orange*. This ambiguity is underlined by the little 'picture within a picture' that summons the artist's words of decades earlier: 'For many years, I have sought the possibility of letting the viewer "stroll" within the picture, forcing him to become absorbed in the picture, forgetful of himself.'

Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944)

Yellow painting

La toile jaune July 1938

oil and enamel on canvas

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection 1945

In 1938, the same year this vivid yellow painting was made, Kandinsky wrote: 'YELLOW ... has the special capacity for "rising" higher and higher and for reaching heights unbearable to the eye and to the spirit: [it is like] the sound of a trumpet played louder and louder, becoming "shriller and shriller".'

The geometric forms serving as the structure to *Yellow painting* directly echo the diagrams of complex linear relationships found in Kandinsky's 1926 book, *Point and line to plane* (some of which can be seen in the corridor outside the exhibition). The central 'figure' that emerges was once described by art historian Rose-Carol Washton as being a 'harlequinlike figure, poised on one leg and balancing a tray of boxes on its head'.

Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944)

Coloured sticks

Bunte Stäbchen 1928

varnished tempera on paperboard

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection, by gift 1938

Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944)

Far away

Fern November 1930

oil on board

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Estate of Karl Nierendorf, by purchase 1948

Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944)

Pink sweet

Rosa-Süß December 1929

oil on board

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

The Hilla Rebay Collection 1971

In *Pink sweet*, pyramidal structures move up towards a celestial blue band – ‘the quieting blue which rises to the heavens’. For Kandinsky, the pyramid represented the spiritual life of humanity: ‘Every man who steep himself in the spiritual possibilities of his art is a valuable helper in the building of the spiritual pyramid which will some day reach to heaven.’

Kandinsky hoped people would finally grasp ‘what lies behind my painting, and are no longer content with the observation that I use triangles or circles ... form for me is only a means to an end ... I am so thoroughly and completely concerned with form – in my theories, too – because I want to penetrate its inner nature.’

Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944)

Decisive rose

Entscheidendes Rosa March 1932

oil on canvas

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection 1949

Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944)

Levels

Etagen March 1929

oil on board

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection 1946

The format of Kandinsky's paintings from his late Bauhaus period was often divided both horizontally and vertically. *Levels* is split by a strong central vertical, then sectioned by horizontals into distinct areas. The grid patterns here and in *Coloured sticks* (adjacent) acknowledge the designs of the groundbreaking Bauhaus textile artists, such as Gunta Stölzl (1897–1983) and Anni Albers (1899–1994). Together with a kind of hieroglyphic alphabet of forms, they suggest Kandinsky's close working relationship with his dear friend the Swiss artist Paul Klee (1879–1940).

Klee and Kandinsky had known each other since the early in days in Munich, but their relationship grew closer when they taught together at the Bauhaus. They lived next door to each other in semi-detached houses on the new school site at Dessau.

Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944)

Inclination

Neigung December 1931

oil and tempera on board

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection 1949

In 1924, the German–American painter and art dealer Galka Scheyer formed the ‘Blue Four’ group with Alexej Jawlensky, Kandinsky and his Bauhaus colleagues Paul Klee and Lyonel Feininger. Responding to a San Francisco exhibition of their works in the year of this painting, 1931, the Mexican painter Diego Rivera said: ‘I know of nothing more real than the painting of Kandinsky – nor anything more true and nothing more beautiful. A painting by Kandinsky gives no image of earthly life – it is life itself. If one painter deserves the name “creator”, it is he. He organises matter as matter was organised, otherwise the Universe would not exist. He opened a window to look inside the All. Someday Kandinsky will be the best known and best loved of men.’

Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944)

Environment

Environnement October 1936

oil on canvas

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection 1945

Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944)

Graceful ascent

Montée gracieuse March 1934

oil on canvas

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection 1945

Kandinsky left his adopted country of Germany after the Bauhaus – the school of applied art and design at which he had taught since 1922 – closed under political pressure in summer 1933. His subsequent work created in France conceals the downhearted mood that precipitated his relocation, instead exhibiting a lighter palette and increasingly organic imagery. Kandinsky explained: 'Paris, with its marvellous light (both strong and soft), had expanded my palette. Other colours appeared, other forms, radically new, or that I had not used for years.'

Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944)

Green accent

Accent vert November 1935

tempera and oil on canvas

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection, by gift 1937

Breaking from the strict geometry of his work of the 1920s, *Green accent* and *Environment* (adjacent) show Kandinsky's shift towards biomorphic imagery that finds echoes in the exploration of invisible worlds and new knowledges being discovered by modern science. Around 1934, other kinds of signs entered Kandinsky's pictorial vocabulary too: exclamation and quotation marks.

Kandinsky scholar Vivian Endicott Barnett suggests the primary source of inspiration for these latter motifs was Paul Klee, whose own works had featured such notation since the late 1910s and early 1920s. Here, she says, the central biomorphic form is 'punctuated' by an inverted comma or apostrophe, also in green – a colour Kandinsky associated with rest and passivity.

Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944)

Capricious forms

Formes capricieuses July 1937

oil on canvas

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection 1945

In the late images *Capricious forms* and *Various actions*, Kandinsky's shapes recall the tiniest, cellular elements of life. Like soft tissue on microscope slides, amoebas, marine invertebrates or embryos in utero, Kandinsky's dislocated forms float in space with no centre of gravity. Suspended in a kind of primordial fluid, they speak directly to Kandinsky's growing interest in the origin of life.

In 1935, Kandinsky stated: 'this experience of the "hidden soul" in all the things, seen either by the unaided eye or through microscopes or binoculars, is what I call the "internal eye". This eye penetrates the hard shell, the external "form", goes deep into the object and lets us feel with all our senses its internal "pulse".'

Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944)

Various actions

Actions variées August–September 1941

oil and enamel on canvas

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection 1947

Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944)

Vertical accents

Accents verticaux July 1942

oil on plywood

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection 1949

Even though Kandinsky engaged with the surrealists in Paris, and they held him in high regard, he never considered himself one of their group. He was interested in the freedom their ideas offered, but was indifferent to psychoanalysis, and had reservations about the group's enthusiasm for all things erotic. For all that, he befriended not only Jean Arp (1886–1966) and Joan Miró (1893–1983) whose influence he absorbed and can be seen here, but also artists like Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968) and the leader of the surrealists, André Breton (1896–1966). Breton praised Kandinsky 'as one of the most exceptional, greatest revolutionaries of vision'.

Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944)

Untitled

Sans titre 1940

gouache on brown card
Private collection

This gouache was one of approximately 250 works on card or paper that Kandinsky created in his 11 years in Paris, and one of 60 gouaches from 1940 alone. By this point Kandinsky had stopped giving such works titles. The work has been identified by a sketch in Kandinsky's 'handlist'— the detailed inventory he maintained for decades.

With its dry technique, it sits somewhere between a painting and a 'coloured drawing', though Kandinsky paid 'little attention to the traditional distinctions between oil paintings, gouaches, temperas and watercolours ... The central issue for me', he said, 'is that I can ... recount my dreams.'

FINAL YEARS

During World War II, German authorities confiscated and declared Kandinsky's work 'degenerate', while Stalinists in the Soviet Union closed museums, distressingly sending the artist's important canvases into storage. Earlier, in 1938, Nina and Vasily Kandinsky had not attempted to renew their expired German passports upon learning that they needed proof of Aryan ancestry to do so; Vasily instead accepted French citizenship in 1939. In 1941, the couple were offered passage to the United States, but they remained in Paris.

By mid 1942, wartime shortages in German occupied France led Kandinsky to cease painting on large canvases and instead make small-scale works on board and works on paper. His final group of inventive compositions exemplifies the personal iconography that recurred at every stage of his life's work.

Though he fell ill in the spring of 1944, Kandinsky continued to paint until the end of July, and lived long enough to see Paris liberated on 24 August. He died at home in December at the age of 78.

Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944)

Around the circle

Autour du cercle May–August 1940

oil and enamel on canvas

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection 1949

Around the circle reflects not only contemporary concerns but also Kandinsky's abiding interest in the belief systems and folklore of Russian and Siberian cultures. The dominant red circle at top centre, the form cresting the undulating lines of 'sacred waters' below, and an upside-down stylised humanoid form at bottom right have all been interpreted as potential allusions to shamans, or spiritual leaders and healers, in states of transformation.

At bottom left, a lunar orb glows in the expanse beyond an open doorway, which is connected to a set of stairs with no physical support. This could be a portal to the cosmos, or some indeterminate space beyond the picture plane, in a probable nod to alternative dimensions or the capacity for mystical ascendance.

Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944)

Ribbon with squares

Ruban aux carrés January 1944

gouache and oil on board

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection 1947

Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944)

White figure

La figure blanche January 1943

oil on board

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection, by gift 1947

To Kandinsky, the role of the artist in society was as a shaman, a spiritual leader who could help heal the sickness of modern life. *White figure* returns us to Kandinsky's lifelong fascination with shamanism. As a figure it recalls the mermaids of Slavic folklore, a mythic bird associated with the northern Russian Komi ethnic group, or a medieval dragon slain by Saint George.

In his early works, Kandinsky depicted the vitality of nature through his interest in non-European art, synaesthesia, and his own Russian Christian and mystical heritage. In his middle years in Soviet Russia and at the Bauhaus, he advanced a discourse in paint, a language of signs and symbols that could express thought and spirit in visual terms. Here in Paris in his final years, he synthesised those stages to attain his lifelong goal: the expression of the spiritual in art.

Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944)

from left:

Twilight

Crépuscule June 1943

oil on board

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection 1949

Fragments May 1943

oil and gouache on board

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection 1949

Red accent

L'accent rouge June 1943

oil on board, mounted to panel

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

The Hilla Rebay Collection 1971

The darker palette of these late paintings is far from the soft, light works Kandinsky created when he first arrived in France. After the occupation of Paris in spring 1940, the difficulty of sourcing materials had forced him to work at a reduced scale, on small boards, not canvas. Some of these late works are divided into independent floating elements which, like those seen earlier, include a miniature 'picture within a picture', creating the illusion of three-dimensionality.

Kandinsky experiments with fantastical forms and with texture: often with sand; at times with the new enamel paints just hitting the market. Come full circle, he returns to the dark backgrounds and shimmering spots of colour of his early Russian folktale images, and to the themes and iconography of theosophy – the esoteric philosophy that had inspired him before World War I.

Thank you to our sponsors

SYDNEY INTERNATIONAL ART SERIES

Organised by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York

GUGGENHEIM

This project is proudly supported by the NSW Government through the Create NSW Blockbusters Funding initiative



Strategic sponsor



Media partner



Support partners



Art Gallery of New South Wales support partners

Members

President's
Council

The Art Gallery of New South Wales gratefully acknowledges the support of the following donors:

Major exhibition patrons

Matt Allen AM

Rowena Danziger AM