

# Kandinsky

## Learning resource

Art  
Gallery  
NSW



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

## Vasily Kandinsky

This learning resource is designed to engage primary and secondary students with the exhibition *Kandinsky* and inspire art-making, critical thinking and discussion about the art and life of one of the great innovators of European abstraction. Like the exhibition, this resource traces Kandinsky's aesthetic evolution. It is divided into six periods within Kandinsky's life, each accompanied by artworks and educational prompts for learning about the ideas that inspired him.

- **Beginnings**  
Kandinsky's early career in Munich at the start of the 20th century
- **Towards abstraction**  
The artist's first experiments with abstraction
- **A new reality**  
Kandinsky's return to Moscow with the outbreak of the First World War
- **Cosmic realms**  
The interwar years in Germany as a teacher at the Bauhaus art school
- **A circular journey**  
The Paris years with a new palette and an interest in biomorphism
- **Final years**  
Kandinsky's final years and a return to early ideas and subjects

Use this resource in the classroom or in conjunction with a visit to the exhibition *Kandinsky* at the Art Gallery of New South Wales from 4 November 2023 to 10 March 2024, curated with the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York.

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In this resource you will find images of key artworks, exhibition wall labels along with artist quotes, curator audio and curriculum-based strategies for making and responding.

K–6 questions and activities encourage students to identify, discuss and experiment with different techniques, media and variations of form and colour to gain an understanding of abstraction and Kandinsky's art. These making and responding ideas help students to connect the artworks to their own world.

7–12 questions and activities are designed to support student analysis of Kandinsky's artworks using the frames and conceptual framework. These prompts encourage critical thinking about the artist's practice and the relationships between the artist, artworks, audiences and the world in which they were created.

# Who is Kandinsky?



Born in Moscow to a wealthy family, Vasily Kandinsky (Wassily Kandinsky, 1866–1944) spent his early childhood in Odessa, Russia (now Odesa, Ukraine). His parents instilled in him an early love of music that later influenced his work. Though he studied law and economics at the University of Moscow and his life seemed destined to follow a conventional path, at age 30 he abruptly decided to abandon his legal career and devote himself to art.

His decision was prompted by two important experiences. In 1896, he attended an impressionist exhibition, where he saw a *Haystack* painting by the French artist Claude Monet (1840–1926). Stirred by the encounter, Kandinsky later realised that the painting's colour and composition, not its subject matter, caused his response. That same year, he attended a performance of the opera *Lohengrin* by Richard Wagner (1813–83) and noticed that music could elicit an emotional response without a connection to a recognisable subject. This experience led him to believe that painting should aspire to be as abstract as music.

In 1896, Kandinsky left Russia for Munich in Germany, where he studied art and began to pursue his new career. In 1908, while in his early 40s, he began developing a range of artistic tools, gradually stripping away recognisable imagery from his work. Kandinsky participated in several of the 20th century's most influential and controversial art movements, among them the Blue Rider (*Der Blaue Reiter*), a loose affiliation of artists he founded in 1911 with German artist Franz Marc (1880–1916). As Kandinsky stated: 'We thought up the name while sitting at a cafe table ... Both of us were fond of blue things, Marc of blue horses and I of blue riders. So the title suggested itself.' In 1912, Kandinsky published his book *On the spiritual in art* – one of the first modern theoretical treatises on abstraction. It examined the capacity of colour to communicate the artist's innermost psychological and spiritual concerns.

Kandinsky's life was strongly affected by the wars and politics that raged in Europe during the early 20th century. With the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, Kandinsky left Germany and moved back to Moscow. He remained in Russia throughout the Russian Revolution of 1917, and in 1921 returned to Germany. In 1929 he became a German citizen – one of three nationalities he held during his life, along with Russian and French – but the

Nazis' rise to power and their closure in 1933 of the Bauhaus art school, where he taught, forced him to move to France. Despite the war and German occupation of France, his works were shown in small exhibitions. In 1939, he became a French citizen and died in Neuilly-sur-Seine outside Paris in 1944. His reputation had been firmly established in the United States through numerous shows and his introduction to American collectors, including Solomon R. Guggenheim, who became one of his most enthusiastic supporters.

This biography is drawn from the [Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum's teaching materials](#) on Kandinsky.

# What is abstraction?

In the first decades of the 20th century, a radical new approach to art emerged almost simultaneously across Europe and in the United States: abstraction.

Abstraction, with its long history in diverse world cultures, was never a 'movement'. In European modernism, it didn't originate in one place, and it wasn't practised by one cohesive group of artists. Instead, it evolved gradually, as artists experimented with colour, form and materials, calling into question some of the traditional functions of art, such as narrative and representation. The final decades of the 1800s saw a proliferation of artworks in which the figure or the landscape was – in increasing degrees – abstracted, distorted or simplified.

The paths to abstraction were varied and unpredictable. In 1867, the London-based artist James McNeill Whistler began emphasising the 'musical' qualities of painting. In 1890, in Paris, Maurice Denis declared that 'a picture is essentially a plane surface covered with colours assembled in a certain order'. One of the first theoretical treatises on abstraction, *On the spiritual in art*, was written by Kandinsky in 1912, and by 1917, many artists had abandoned representation altogether.



Roy de Maistre is considered a pioneer of modern Australian painting. Like Kandinsky, he explored the relationship between art, music, colour and abstract form. His experiments with collaborator Roland Wakelin produced Australia's first modern abstract paintings, characterised by high-key colour, large areas of flat paint and simplified forms.

Think about the term 'abstract' and its use in art. What is the difference between abstracted art and abstract art or abstraction? How does the way we use the term in art compare to how we use it in everyday language?



# Artist's writings

In addition to making art, Kandinsky produced several texts including poetry and writings on art.

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'.

*The blue rider almanac* was part of Kandinsky and fellow artist 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, reflecting the imperialist and colonialist attitudes of the era while aiming for cultural exchange.

*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, a spiritual movement founded in the late 19th century. His use of the word 'spirit' is complex, with the German word *geist* ranging from the mystical to intellectual consciousness.

Kandinsky developed this text *Point and line to plane* in 1926 while teaching at the Bauhaus art school. It was released in English in 1947 for the Museum of Non-Objective Painting – the original name of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York. In it, Kandinsky formulates a language of abstract art, analysing line and form and asking the novel question 'what are art's basic elements?'

**ON THE SPIRITUAL IN ART  
BY WASSILY KANDINSKY**



**POINT AND LINE TO PLANE  
BY WASSILY KANDINSKY**

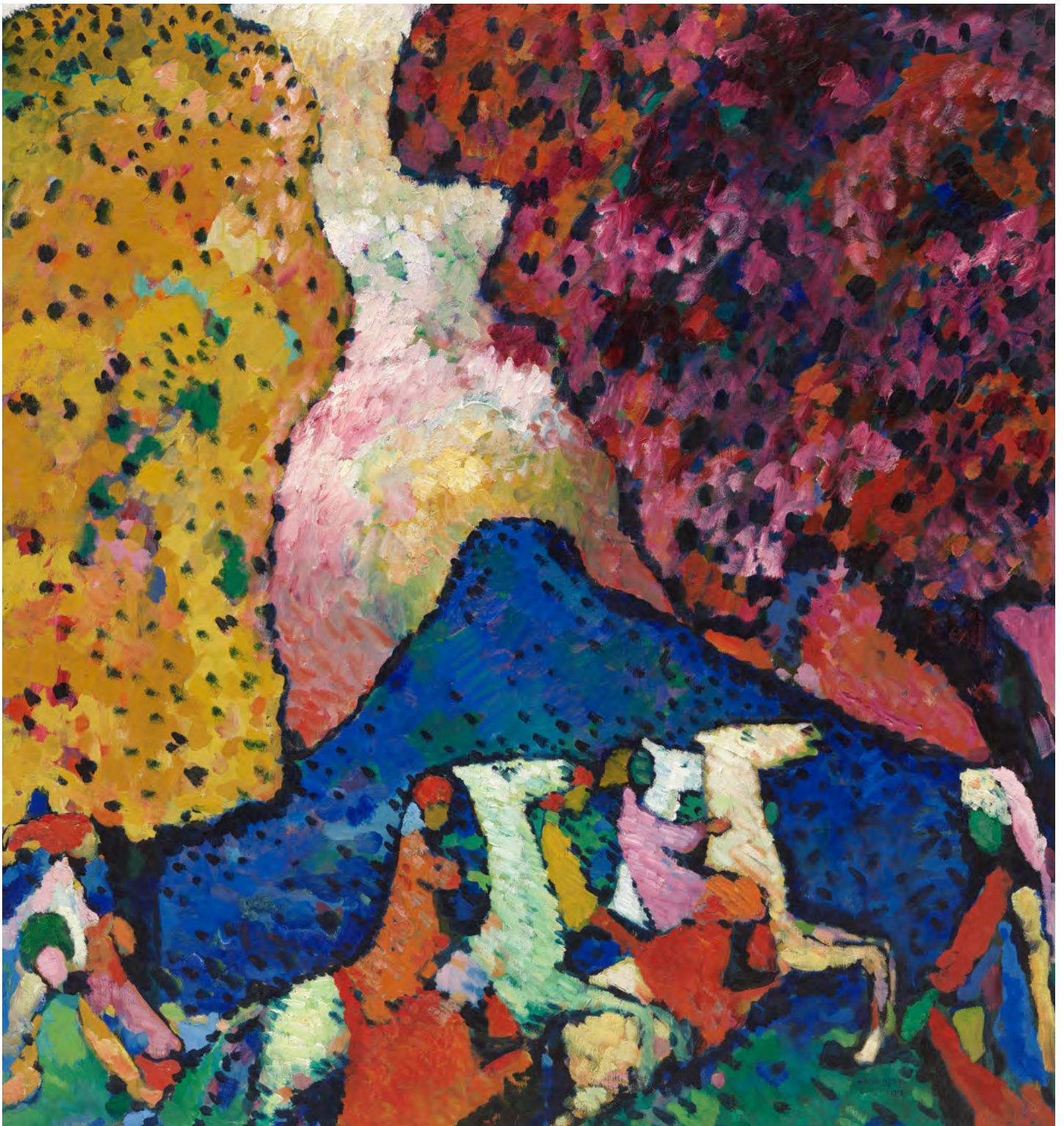
# Beginnings

**'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 ...'**

Kandinsky spent his childhood in Russia and Ukraine, where his family instilled in him an early love of art and music. He initially studied law and economics and his life seemed destined to follow a conventional path. Yet at age 30, he left the city to study painting in Munich, Germany, one of Europe's leading cultural centres. Later, with his companion, artist Gabriele Münter (1877–1962), he travelled throughout Europe and North Africa, absorbing diverse cultures and new artistic developments.

After settling in Bavaria in 1908, Kandinsky took part in the Munich-based group the Blue Rider, its artists united around a common interest in the expressive potential of colour and the symbolic, often spiritual, resonance of forms.

As his work shifted to reflect these new values, his paintings transformed from naturalistic scenes to visionary narratives, moving increasingly towards abstraction.



### ***Blue mountain* 1908–09**

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 the First World War, 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.

[🔊 Listen to students from Years 2, 3 and 4 respond to \*Blue mountain\*](#)

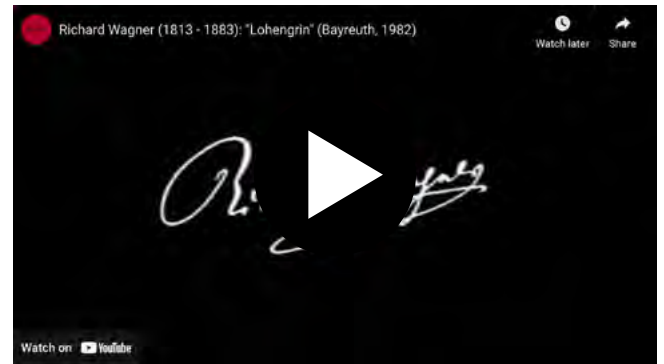
Vasily Kandinsky *Blue mountain* 1908–09 oil on canvas, 107.3 × 97.6 cm, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection, by gift 1941, photo courtesy Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

## K–6 discussion questions

- Kandinsky is known for his expressive use of colour. He wanted colour to make people feel things rather than describe them. When you look at this painting, how do the colours in it make you feel? What things do they remind you of? Think about each of your senses and describe what these colours might make you hear, taste, smell or feel.
- For Kandinsky, blue was the most spiritual of colours. He even thought the colour blue, when deep, sounded like a cello. What does blue symbolise to you? What does it sound like? How do different shades of blue affect you?

## K–6 activities

- In 1896, two events inspired Kandinsky to think about art in a new way. He saw one of Claude Monet's *Haystack* paintings from 1890–91, a body of work about the effects of light and colour, and heard Richard Wagner's opera *Lohengrin*, a musical performance that stirred strong emotions in the artist. Look at Monet's paintings and listen to Wagner's opera. Create an artwork inspired by what you see and hear.



- In *Blue mountain*, Kandinsky depicts motifs, symbols and the landscape from his childhood in Russia and Ukraine. Create an artwork using motifs and symbols from your childhood. Think about a special memory and capture the mood through colours and forms.
- Collect colour swatches and choose five colours you are particularly drawn to. What feelings or emotions do these colours represent to you? Create an abstract artwork only using the colours you have chosen.

## 7–12 discussion questions

- Kandinsky believed the artist expressed their own inner world; a radical belief for a time when most artists painted the real, visible world around them. He also believed that painting and colour could move the viewer, vibrating the soul. Kandinsky wrote: 'Open your ears to music, open your eyes to painting. And don't think! Examine yourselves ... when you have heard and seen. Ask yourselves, if you like, whether the work of art has carried you away to a world unknown to you before. If so, what more do you want?' Reflect on this quote. How does it relate to your own experience with art? Look at *Blue mountain* and follow Kandinsky's directive. Discuss your observations with your classmates.
- *Blue mountain* includes one of Kandinsky's many depictions of the horse and rider, a motif that appears throughout his work. Consider this quote by Kandinsky: 'The horse carries its rider with vigour and speed. But it is the rider who steers the horse. Talent steers the artist to the highest heights with vigour and speed, but it is the artist who is the master of his talent.' Think about this statement in relation to *Blue mountain*. Who are the horse riders and where are they going? What do you think the mountain symbolises? How do you think an artist might control their talent?
- In 1911, Kandinsky and Franz Marc founded the Blue Rider (Der Blaue Reiter), the highly influential group of artists from the worlds of visual and folk art, music and theatre, united by a desire to find synthesis in art across these different artforms. Research and develop a case study on the Blue Rider group and its significance to abstract art. Consider the origins of this movement and the artists' attempt to expand the concept of art.

## 7–12 activities

- Kandinsky uses colour expressively rather than naturalistically. For example, for him, blue was the most spiritually resonant colour, and he used it to paint subjects that are not blue in the real world. What does it mean to use colour in this way? Create your own artwork using colour expressively rather than naturalistically.
- Kandinsky is best known as a painter, but during his early years as an artist he also made woodcuts, a printmaking technique that often requires simplified forms and compositions. Read about Kandinsky's early representational woodcuts and discuss their role in shaping the artist's style and imagery at this time. Create your own woodcut or lino print, depicting a place that has significance to you, then use the forms from your print to create a painting. How does this exercise make you think about the relationship between nature and abstracted form, or about the process of translating what you see into simplified shapes?

# Towards abstraction

'Painting is like a  
thundering collision  
of different worlds ...  
every work of art is  
created in the same  
way as the cosmos –  
through catastrophes  
that finally form a  
symphony from the  
chaotic roar of the  
instruments, which  
is called music of the  
spheres. The creation  
of a work is the  
creation of a world.'

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, his intrepid work marked a broader shift toward nonrepresentational art, which proved to have an enduring impact.



### ***Pastorale* February 1911**

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.

🔊 Listen to students from Years 2, 3 and 4 respond to *Pastorale*





***Improvisation 28 (second version) 1912***

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.

## K–6 discussion questions

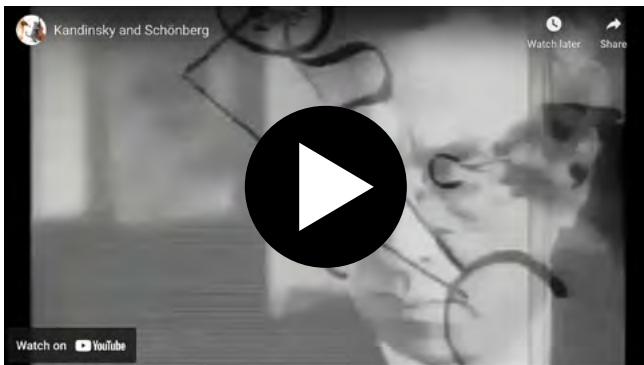
- When Kandinsky began painting in the early 1900s, abstract art felt like a new language. What do you think 'abstract' means? Refer to the definition of abstraction in this resource. Is your definition similar? Find examples of art created in the early 1900s, both abstract and non-abstract artworks. How are they similar and different? What style do you prefer and why? Choose your favourite one to present to the class.
- Kandinsky purposefully left the characters in Pastorale 1911 in a blurry state. Look at the forms made of colour in the painting. Are the edges of each shape hard or soft? Imagine if the figures were outlined with a black line. How would this change the way you see this painting and the objects in it? Why do you think Kandinsky painted these forms without an outline?

## K–6 activities

- Kandinsky made art like a composer might create music. Music doesn't describe an object in the world, it lets you feel and think and has its own independent language. Listen to a piece of music that inspires you. While you listen, imagine the sounds as shapes, lines and colours. Create an artwork that uses these forms.
- Kandinsky was interested in creating art that conveyed emotions. Look at either Pastorale 1911 or Improvisation 28 (second version) 1912 and consider the emotions they suggest. Compile a list of adjectives to go with the artwork. Write a poem in response to the artwork using your adjectives.

## 7–12 discussion questions

- In *Pastorale*, the figures and objects are barely recognisable. In his first steps towards abstraction, Kandinsky wanted to hide the objects under a veil of unbound colour and abstracted form, rather than eradicate them. What objects do you think have been concealed or dissolved in this painting? Do you think Kandinsky has been successful in achieving his aim? What makes you feel this way?
- Kandinsky went to a concert by the Austrian–American composer Arnold Schoenberg a month before he painted *Pastorale*. Schoenberg's atonal, dissonant and radically progressive music overwhelmed him, and convinced Kandinsky of the validity of his own abstract explorations in art. Watch this video of Kandinsky painting with Schoenberg's music overlaid. How does his mark-making relate to the music? What aspects of his music were as daring and experimental as Kandinsky's paintings?



- Many of Kandinsky's artwork titles come from musical terms, such as improvisation, composition and impression. He called his improvisations 'suddenly created expressions of processes with an inner character'. Reflect on this quote and think about why he borrows these terms from music and how they are reflected in his art. Could you apply other musical terms like staccato, rhythm or crescendo to *Improvisation 28 (second version)* 1912?
- Research the mounting socio-political tensions in the years leading up to the First World War in Europe. How did they impact Kandinsky and other artists in this period?

## 7–12 activities

- *Gesamtkunstwerk* is a German word that roughly translates to 'total work of art'. It is a term used to describe an artwork, design or creative process that encompasses all or many of the creative and performing artforms at once. Kandinsky was interested in this idea. Can you see evidence of this approach in his art practice? Create a body of work inspired by this method.
- Kandinsky wasn't eradicating all objects in his paintings, but 'hiding' and veiling them under a skin of abstracted forms and unbounded colour, 'so that they might not all be recognised at once'. Create an artwork that has veiled objects and hidden meanings.
- Kandinsky was interested in synaesthesia, a phenomenon in which the senses are commingled and felt simultaneously, such as experiencing colour as sound. Research this phenomenon and find other artists who may have experienced this condition. Why do you think this was a source of inspiration for Kandinsky? Create a list of five colours and write down the sounds and emotions you associate with each one.

## A new reality

'It is not obvious geometrical configurations that will be the richest in possibilities, but hidden ones, emerging unnoticed from the canvas and meant for the soul rather than the eye.'

At the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, Kandinsky was forced to leave Germany because of his Russian nationality. Later that year he returned to his native Moscow, where he continued to explore abstraction in painting. His pictorial vocabulary underwent changes that reflected the utopian artistic experiments of the Russian and Ukrainian avant-gardes, including the emphasis on geometric forms designed to establish a universal aesthetic language. Kandinsky's emphasis on spirituality, however, placed him at odds with the dominant, production-based artwork of his Russian contemporaries.



### ***Painting with white border* May 1913**

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 – including *Study for 'Painting with white border'* 1913 in the Art Gallery of New South Wales collection – 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).

🔊 Listen to students from Years 5 and 6 respond to *Painting with white border*

Vasily Kandinsky *Painting with white border* May 1913, oil on canvas, 140.3 × 200.3 cm, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection, by gift 1937, photo courtesy Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum



### ***Red oval* 1920**

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.

Vasily Kandinsky *Red oval* 1920, oil on canvas, 71.6 × 71.2 cm, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York 1951, photo courtesy Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum



***Study for 'Painting with white border' 1913***

This study for the major work *Painting with white border* May 1913, 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. It is the format of this study that suggests it to be one of the earliest in the group.

## K–6 discussion questions

- Kandinsky said he wanted painting to express 'a feeling I am unable to convey in words'. Think about this quote and imagine plunging into all three of these paintings. Where do you land? What can you see? What does it sound like? What can you smell? What's the overall feeling of each painting? Is it hard or soft, happy or sad, fast or slow, cold or hot? Why do you think this way? How are they different? How are they similar?
- Look closely at *Painting with white border* May 1913. Do you see the white lance of Saint George on horseback, or the three black reigns of a Russian troika or horse-drawn carriage? Kandinsky called this artwork 'boisterous'. What does this mean and why has the artist described it this way? Do you agree or disagree? Think about the Russian motifs he's used – are they in motion or still? What are other adjectives you would use to describe this painting?

## K–6 activities

- Kandinsky was interested in the idea of unlearning what you know and thinking about shape, line and colour in a different way. What does a line sound like? What does a shape feel like? What does colour taste like? Think about one of these questions and create an artwork that reflects your ideas.
- Throughout his artistic life, Kandinsky was drawn to Russia's art and history. Collaborate with the class and create a large-scale visual timeline of important events in Russia from 1900 to 1950. Add examples of Kandinsky's body of work to this timeline. Can you see a change in the way he painted?



## 7–12 discussion questions

- Kandinsky's intention was to see reality as being more than just the recognisable and to enhance the concept of the spiritual. Discuss this notion with the class, drawing references from Kandinsky's body of work. Using Study for 'Painting with white border' 1913 as evidence, debate whether Kandinsky has successfully achieved his aim.
- Kandinsky produced at least 16 studies before completing Painting with white border May 1913, including Study for 'Painting with white border' in the Art Gallery's collection. Compare these two works. How do they show artistic progression? Kandinsky struggled with this subject because he wanted to make an image of his home. Why is it hard to paint something that's so important to you? When do you know a painting is finished?

## 7–12 activities

- Painting with white border May 1913 was inspired by a trip Kandinsky took to Moscow in the autumn of 1912. He said he wanted to capture the 'extremely powerful impressions I had experienced in Moscow – or more correctly, of Moscow itself'. Think of a location that has had a powerful impression on you. Use Kandinsky's art as inspiration to create your own artwork that captures the essence of this place.
- In 1914, Kandinsky moved back to his homeland of Russia where he encountered the artistic experiments of the Russian and Ukrainian avant-garde. Research suprematism, an art movement founded by Kandinsky's contemporary Kazimir Malevich. What are the ideals and expressions of this movement? Do you see any of these elements reflected in Kandinsky's art at this time? What sets Kandinsky apart? Create an artwork that plays with pure geometric forms, like Malevich, and geometric forms that still retain expressive content, like Kandinsky.

# Cosmic realms

**'I do not choose form  
consciously; it chooses  
itself within me.'**

Kandinsky returned to Germany in late 1921 after working as an arts teacher and administrator in Russia for many years. In 1922, he began teaching at the Bauhaus, a progressive school of art and applied design founded in 1919 by architect Walter Gropius (1883–1969) in Weimar, Germany. The school was sympathetic to the artist's belief in the ability of art to transform self and society, and fostered an environment of experimentation and innovation.

There, Kandinsky furthered his investigations into the correspondence between colours and forms and their psychological and spiritual effects. The circle, especially, would come to play a dominant role in many works and suggest the spiritual and cosmic realm. The Bauhaus was closed under pressure from the Nazi government in 1933, and Kandinsky was forced to abandon Germany a second time.

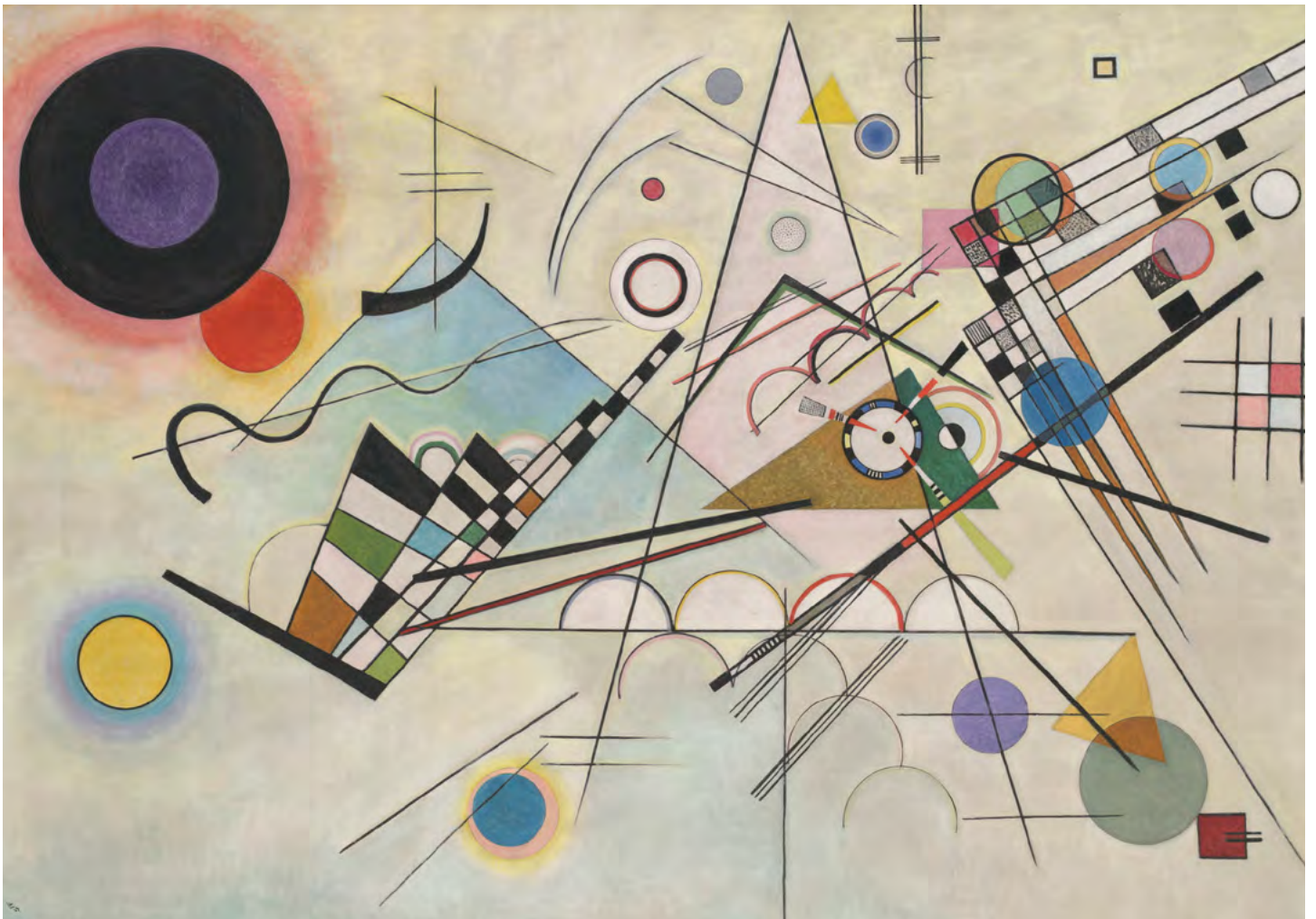


### ***In the black square* June 1923**

Executed two years after he returned to Germany 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 non-objective 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.

🔊 Listen to students from Years 5 and 6 respond to *In the black square*

Vasily Kandinsky *In the black square* June 1923, oil on canvas, 97.5 x 93.3 cm, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection, by gift 1937, photo courtesy Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum



### ***Composition 8* July 1923**

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.

[Listen to students from Years 5 and 6 respond to \*Composition 8\*](#)

## K–6 discussion questions

- What made Kandinsky different to many other artists exploring abstract art in the early 20th century was his interest in staying connected to real objects in some way. Can you find a yellow mountain, sun, clouds or a rainbow in *Composition 8*? Do any of the shapes and forms make you think of something you know?
- The Bauhaus was a school in Germany that brought a community of artists together to bring design, new technologies, architecture and applied arts in line with the fine arts such as painting and sculpture. Research the Bauhaus and find examples to display in the classroom. Choose an example and discuss why it is your favourite.

## K–6 activities

- Kandinsky was a teacher at the Bauhaus school from 1922 to 1933. At the Bauhaus, a common teaching activity involved taking a white A4 sheet of paper and folding, twisting and ripping it in the most creative way possible to transform it into a 3D form. Try this activity and exhibit your form with others in the class. How similar or different are they? Do any of them make you think about something you've seen before?
- Create a set of cards that name an emotion on each card. Working in pairs, have one person select a card and call out the emotion. The other person immediately draws a line that represents this emotion and one that contrasts with it. They should draw automatically and without thinking. Take turns until all the emotions are drawn. Discuss the types of mark making you have both created.

## 7–12 discussion questions

- Kandinsky's teacher colleagues at the Bauhaus included the artist Paul Klee (1879–1940). How does Kandinsky's art compare to the work of Klee? Is there evidence in their bodies of work to suggest their conceptual practice aligned or if they traded motifs? Discuss.
- Kandinsky regarded *Composition 8* July 1923 as a high point of his achievements following the First World War. Primary forms such as circles, triangles and squares interact across the surface. Compare this artwork to one from the artist's earlier career. Has the use of colour, form and line changed? Why do you think the artist considers this artwork a high point?
- In 1930, Kandinsky's work was collected by New York businessman Solomon R. Guggenheim, with the help of Hilla Rebay, the first director of the Guggenheim Museum. Research who these key figures are and consider why Rebay believed in Kandinsky's art practice. How does being in a major museum collection impact the career and status of an artist?

## 7–12 activities

- As a class, create a Bauhaus exhibition in the classroom. Decide who will work as the curators, artists, exhibition managers, installers and writers. Include well-known Bauhaus examples from the visual arts, design and architecture, as well as original artworks that reflect key Bauhaus ideals. Write wall labels and publish a catalogue including an introductory essay. Think creatively about the display. How can you make the space also reflect Bauhaus design?
- At the Bauhaus school, Kandinsky challenged his students to answer the question 'what shape is colour?' with this exercise. Draw a triangle, square and circle. Colour each shape in with a different primary colour that you feel it represents. What colour did you choose and why? Kandinsky believed that yellow is a 'sharp' colour that corresponds with the triangle, red is an 'earthbound' colour that corresponds with the square, and blue is a 'spiritual' colour that corresponds with the circle. Did your decision align with Kandinsky's? What are your thoughts on shape as colour?

# A circular journey

'Form without content is not a hand, but an empty glove filled with air.'

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 peoples 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.



### ***Dominant curve* April 1936**

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 the Second World War.

[!\[\]\(3d8c13c92b853674f749aac6fa869926\_img.jpg\) Listen to students from Years 5 and 6 respond to \*Dominant curve\*](#)



## K-6 discussion questions

- Describe the visual qualities of *Dominant curve* April 1936. How has the artist used line, shape, colour, space, balance and repetition. What elements stand out to you? What makes this composition interesting to look at? Why do you think the artist has called this work *Dominant curve*? Imagine being an art critic and write an article about this artwork discussing your thoughts.
- In the 1930s, Kandinsky started using pastels and soft tones in his artworks, along with bright colours. Look at the colours in *Dominant curve* April 1936. How is the colour palette different from earlier works? What patterns do you see?

## K-6 activities

- Kandinsky collected organic specimens and scientific encyclopedias, embracing imagery related to the natural sciences. Create your own artwork inspired by organic and scientific imagery.
- Choose five 2D materials with varying textures and forms from your school bag or classroom to use for a collage on an A4 piece of paper. Cut or tear into simple shapes and create an abstract work. Consider layering and composition before you make the final decision.

## 7–12 discussion questions

- In 1937, Kandinsky's art was exhibited in the *Degenerate Art* exhibition that showcased work the Nazi regime believed challenged their ideals. Research this exhibition. Why do you think Kandinsky was included? Which other artists were included and why?
- How do you think audiences responded to Kandinsky's artworks at the time of their creation? How did art critics and audiences define 'good art' in the early 20th century? How does this differ to people's response to Kandinsky today? Debate the lasting effects of modernist artists, particularly abstract artists, on current art practice.
- Alchemy is defined as the ancient tradition of sacred chemistry, in particular of attempting to convert base metals into gold. Find out more about alchemy. Why do you think Kandinsky was interested in this concept?

## 7–12 activities

- Kandinsky wrote that 'the circle is the synthesis of the greatest oppositions. It contrasts the concentric and the eccentric in a single form and in equilibrium. Of the three primary forms, it points most clearly to the fourth dimension'. Build a body of work around the form of a circle. What are the emotive, spiritual and symbolic representations associated with this primary form. How does the circle relate to your world?
- The Bauhaus aimed to establish a universal aesthetic language, and Kandinsky was inspired to expand his own pictorial vocabulary – mainly by focusing on geometry (line, shape, form) rather than colour. Create an abstract artwork using your own pictorial vocabulary inspired by your thoughts, feelings and the world around you.

## Final years

'Every serious work of art has an inner sound like the peaceful and exalted words, "I am here".'

In December 1933, Kandinsky and his wife Nina settled in a suburb of Paris, where he was highly creative despite political turmoil and deprivation. The artist increasingly experimented with materials, creating imaginative works with enamel paint, or pigments combined with sand. His compositions from this period resemble miniscule worlds of living organisms, clearly informed by his contact with surrealism, and an interest in natural sciences, particularly embryology, zoology and botany.

During the Second World War, German authorities confiscated and declared Kandinsky's work 'degenerate', and Stalinists in the Soviet Union closed museums, sending many of his canvases into storage. His work in this final period grew smaller in scale, and Kandinsky often worked on board due to wartime canvas shortages. He died in Paris in 1944 at age 78.



### ***Around the circle* May–August 1940**

*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 alternate dimensions or the capacity for mystical ascendance.

🔗 Listen to Years 5 and 6 students respond to *Around the circle*

## K–6 discussion questions

- Describe the colours Kandinsky has used in *Around the circle* May–August 1940. List the colours in the foreground and background. Do the colours or colour relationships feel new to you compared to his earlier work? Which period in Kandinsky’s career do they resemble the most? Share your thoughts and ideas with the class.
- What do the forms, lines and shapes remind you of in *Around the circle*? This artwork feels like a puzzle or a kind of coded language. Can you solve the puzzle or understand the language? Or is it something of a mystery? Would it matter to Kandinsky if you could solve it? Why do you think this way?

## K–6 activities

- In *Around the circle* May–August 1940, Kandinsky places a portal or open door in the composition with a staircase leading up to it. What world exists behind this open door? Create an artwork based on your idea. Take inspiration from Kandinsky’s use of colour and form.
- At this stage in Kandinsky’s life, he returns to his favourite Russian stories. Think about your favourite folktale or mythical story and create an abstract artwork that depicts the narrative or characters.

## 7–12 discussion questions

- Discuss the role Kandinsky has played in influencing generations of artists after him. Compare his work to the abstract expressionists, for example. Can you see his influence on postmodern artists? Present your findings to the class.
- In response to Kandinsky's art, the Mexican painter Diego Rivera said that 'a painting by Kandinsky gives no image of earthly life – it is life itself'. Does this add to your thoughts on Kandinsky's late paintings? Do you agree or disagree with Rivera? How do you think Kandinsky would respond to this statement?
- In his early work, Kandinsky captured the energy and dynamism of nature, and at the Bauhaus he turned to the language of form. At the end of his career, he united these elements towards the expression of the truly spiritual in art, which was his lifelong aim. Can you see this progression through his body of work? Choose examples to justify your point of view.

## 7–12 activities

- In his final years, Kandinsky returns to the shamanic motifs and colours that appeared in his early career. Find an artwork you created when you were younger. Build a body of work inspired by this artwork layered with who you are today.
- The circle had symbolic, cosmic meanings to Kandinsky and it represented the past and the present to him. What does the main circle in this composition make you think of? Write a narrative inspired by this artwork and have the circle as the main part of the storyline.

# Essay

## Into the abstract

by Megan Fontanella  
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From 4 November 2023 to 10 March 2024, the Art Gallery of New South Wales presents 47 paintings by Vasily Kandinsky drawn from the collection of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, curated by Megan Fontanella and Art Gallery curator of exhibitions Jackie Dunn. More so than any other artist, Kandinsky is intertwined with the Guggenheim Museum's history and numerous works by the artist formed part of the core collection of the institution when it opened in 1939.



In the opening decades of the 20th century, Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944) was among those who advanced nonrepresentational modes of artmaking 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 hardly ever worked in isolation. On the contrary, he gained insight from his meaningful intersections 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, Kandinsky adapted with his every relocation across Germany, back to his native Russia, and eventually to France – all against the backdrop of the sociopolitical upheavals occurring around him. Ultimately his was not a fixed path from representation to abstraction, but 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.

The arts were ever present in Kandinsky's upbringing, even if his decision to pursue such a profession was circuitous. He spent his youth in his birthplace of Moscow and in Odessa, Russia (now Odesa, Ukraine), studying law and economics at university before changing course in 1895 to become a printing house manager. A year later his encounter with one of Claude Monet's *Haystacks* (*Les meules* 1890–91), as well as a performance of Richard Wagner's opera *Lohengrin* 1850, inspired his

Vasily Kandinsky *Landscape with rain* January 1913, oil on canvas, 70.5 × 78.4 cm, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection, photo courtesy Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum



full commitment to the arts and his move to Munich, a nexus of vanguard activity. Memories of Russia, such as brightly decorated furniture and votive pictures from the homes of the communities he had visited as a self-professed ethnographer in 1889, would define Kandinsky's early work and resurface throughout his career, as would romantic historicism, lyric poetry, folklore, fantasy and other subjects of his youth.

Kandinsky's earliest artworks were made while he was living in or around Munich from 1896 to 1914. This period was tremendously fertile for the artist. He quickly abandoned classroom instruction to work outdoors, painting on small-format, portable boards or canvases. His works from this developmental phase demonstrate a neoimpressionist style of dappled brushwork.

From around 1904 to 1908 Kandinsky traveled widely with his partner, the German artist Gabriele Münter, spending their time in the Netherlands, Italy and Tunisia, then a French protectorate. Kandinsky's independent wealth sustained the artist-couple's itinerant lifestyle, which was prompted in part by his desire for distance from his marriage to his first wife, Anja. He and Münter followed well-trodden itineraries and typified the bourgeois fascination with what they perceived as 'picturesque' or simpler ways of life in colonised lands, in contrast with their urban vantage point.

Kandinsky and Münter spent a year in Paris, in 1906–07. The daring use of non-naturalistic and vibrant colours in the paintings of the so-called fauves (or 'wild beasts') further influenced Kandinsky's shift to magical fairytale pictures painted in a decorative art nouveau style. Russian folk costumes and themes also made their way into his work and, for a time, he turned to printmaking as a primary medium.

In June 1908 the pair rejoined the artistic community in Munich, armed with the visual acuity they had gained during their years abroad.

Kandinsky participated in heightened vanguard activity across multiple disciplines, fluidly moving between painting, poetry and stage composition, and engaging with the traditional decorative arts and cultural practices of the Bavarian countryside. He steered leading avant-garde groups, including Neue

Künstlervereinigung München (New Artists' Association of Munich), and his poetry as well as his groundbreaking treatise *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (*On the spiritual in art*) were published. Notably, in 1911 Kandinsky and the German artist Franz Marc formed Der Blaue Reiter (The Blue Rider), a loose and 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.

Early pastoral landscapes and cataclysmic scenes emerged from Kandinsky's dissatisfaction with urban industrialisation and perceived materialism. But by 1913 his recurrent motifs – among them the horse and rider, rolling hills, towers and trees – had become secondary to line and colour. Though he was not the first to experiment with abstraction, either among his European modernist peers or within its long history in diverse world cultures, Kandinsky's intrepid work marked a broader shift toward nonrepresentational art, which proved to have an enduring impact.

The outbreak of the First World War in 1914 compelled the artist, as a Russian citizen, to leave Germany and suspend his fruitful relationships there. The artist described the devastating displacement in a letter to his Berlin dealer Herwarth Walden, writing, 'I feel as if torn from a dream. Within myself, I was living in a time when such things would be impossible. My illusion was taken from me. Mountains of corpses, all kinds of dreadful torments, spiritual culture wound back for an indefinite time.'

Eventually 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.

Marrying Nina Andreevskaya in 1917, the Kandinskys returned to Germany in 1922 and the artist began teaching at the Staatliches Bauhaus in Weimar (and, later, its locations in Dessau and Berlin). Established by the architect Walter Gropius, this progressive school endeavoured to bridge fine and applied art – and, later, art and technology. Kandinsky taught mural and then easel painting, along with analytical drawing, and delved further into the correspondence between colours and forms and their psychological and spiritual effects, theorising these associations as general artistic principles. He especially seized upon the circle as a signifier for the cosmic realm, and as evocative of balance and harmony. Kandinsky's body of work from this period manifests his conviction that art could transform self and society.

In the summer of 1930, Kandinsky received a consequential visit in Dessau from Solomon R. Guggenheim, who purchased his monumental *Composition 8* from 1923. The US industrialist and future museum founder had begun acquiring Kandinsky's work only one year before at the urging of his art advisor, the German artist Hilla Rebay. Guggenheim would ultimately amass more than 150 works by this single artist in his 20 years of collecting contemporary art. After Guggenheim established his eponymous foundation in New York in 1937, he opened the Museum of Non-Objective Painting (forerunner of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum) in 1939, and frequently showcased Kandinsky's work.

Nina and Vasily Kandinsky remained at the Bauhaus until 1933, when the school was definitively closed due to pressure from the Nazi government. In his final chapter, set in France in the 1930s and early 1940s, the artist's style shifted yet again while also surfacing long-held concerns. Kandinsky incorporated a soft palette of pastels and jewel tones, conjuring his early depictions of Russian and fairy-tale subjects and revealing little of the dejection surrounding his departure from Nazi Germany. Earlier, he 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. Contact with the art of Jean Arp and Joan Miró additionally impacted his intricate arrangements and biomorphic forms.

Many among the Parisian vanguard were familiar with alchemical, astrological and occult practices, in part given the literary and artistic pursuits of the surrealists, who aimed to unlock the unconscious and irrational mind. Against this backdrop Kandinsky's own memories of his youthful encounters with the mystical reemerged and prompted themes of renewal and metamorphosis. As late as a 1937 interview discussing influential precedents, the artist recalled his 1889 field work in northern Russia, noting, '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, including those with shamanic narratives involving transformation and ascendance.

By mid 1942, wartime shortages in 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 production. The artist died at home in Neuilly-sur-Seine, France, in 1944. Solomon R. Guggenheim's Museum of Non-Objective Painting organised a memorial exhibition the following year and, in the decades to come, would continue to interrogate the legacies of abstraction.

The 2023–24 exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales appears 41 years after a major Guggenheim-organised survey of Kandinsky's work at the Art Gallery in 1982. Illustrating the full arc of his remarkable career, this year's major exhibition provides a critical reexamination of a modernist innovator who was unwavering in his belief in the transformative power of art.

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A version of this article first appeared in the Art Gallery's member magazine *Look* October–November 2023

# Resources

## Exhibition resources

🔗 [Listen to an audio tour by curator Jackie Dunn](#)

🔗 [Read the exhibition wall labels](#)

## Additional resources

🔗 [Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum's teaching materials](#)

🔗 [Kandinsky form and colour exercise](#)  
Maristella Casciato, Gary Fox, Katherine Rochester, 'Kandinsky form and colour exercise', *Bauhaus: Building the New Artist*, online exhibition, The Getty Research Institute, 2019

🔗 [Play a Kandinsky](#)  
Centre Pompidou in collaboration with Google Arts & Culture Experiments

🔗 [Kandinsky: Chrome Music Lab](#)  
Chrome experiment built by Active Theory

## Learn more

🔗 [Explore abstract art in the Art Gallery's collection](#)

The Art Gallery of New South Wales thanks the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum for permission to reproduce the *Kandinsky* exhibition texts in this education resource.

The Art Gallery also thanks students and teachers from Nicholson Street Public School for their responses to artworks from the *Kandinsky* exhibition.

Developed and written by the Art Gallery's creative learning team: Leeanne Carr, Alexandra Gregg and Louise Halpin  
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