

## WASSILY KANDINSKY

1866 - 1944

### Chronology

Born Wassily Wassilyevich Kandinsky on December 16, 1866 (December 4 in the old calendar) in Moscow, Russia, son of Wassily Kandinsky, a well-to-do native of Kyakhta in Siberia, and Lydia Tikheeva; 1866-1871 lives in Moscow, but also travels to Italy, including Venice, Rome, and Florence; 1871 the Kandinsky family moves to Odessa due to father's poor health; 1871-1886 grows up in Odessa; studies the piano and the cello; attends the gymnasium, where he studies German; begins painting in an amateur way, and develops the feeling that each color has a particular life of its own; vacations in the Caucasus and in Crimea; 1886 returns to Moscow to study law and economics at the University of Moscow; is entranced by the colors of Moscow's architecture and by its icons; 1889 travels to the province of Vologda on an ethnographic expedition to study peasant law, and discovers Russian folk art; also visits the Exposition Universelle in Paris; 1892-1895 receives law degree; marries his cousin Ania Chimiakin (they are divorced in 1911); receives doctorate in law and teaches law at Moscow University; sees exhibition of Monet's Haystacks and is moved by their power; 1896-1900 leaves the law in favor of art; moves to Munich where he studies at Anton Azbe's art school and with Frank von Stuck at the Munich Academy; meets Paul Klee and Alexej Jawlensky; completes earliest paintings; 1901-1904 works with Phalanx group, which he founds; meets Gabriele Munter, an art student,

with whom he is involved until 1916; 1905-1908 travels to Tunisia, Holland and Russia; lives in Berlin, Paris and Switzerland; 1908-1912 returns to Munich; helps found the Neue Kunstler Vereinigung; meets Franz Marc, with whom he founds the Blue Rider (Blaue Reiter) school; publishes Concerning the Spiritual in Art; has his first one-man show; 1914 last Blue Rider show is held; Kandinsky moves to Moscow; 1917-1921 marries Nina Andrewskaia; serves as a member of the arts section of the Commissariat for Public Instruction; helps establish the Moscow Museum of Pictorial Culture and a network of museums across Russia; the state holds an official exhibition of Kandinsky's paintings; returns to Germany in December 1921; 1922-1933 belongs to the Bauhaus school of art and architecture, first in Weimar, then in Dessau (1925), finally in Berlin (1932); paints 30 to 40 canvases per year during this period; 1924 founds the "Blue Four" group with Klee, Jawlensky, and Lyonel Feininger; 1926 publishes Point and Line to Plane, his second major theoretical work on the nature of art; on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday, numerous exhibitions and tributes are held in his honor; 1928-29 takes German citizenship; holds first one-man show in Paris; 1933 Nazis close the Bauhaus; the Kandinsky's move to Paris, living in the suburb of Neuilly-sur-Seine; 1933-1944 continues to paint and write, publishing articles in XXe Siecle and Cahiers d'Art; meets Joan Miro and Piet Mondrian; 1939 takes French citizenship; 1944 falls ill in March, and dies on December 13, 1944 and is buried in the Neuilly-sur-Seine cemetery.

### **Activities of Historical Significance**

Wassily Kandinsky, perhaps more than any other artist of the twentieth century, led the movement to nonmimetic, or abstract, art. Both as a painter and as a writer on art, he explored ways in which colors and shapes, without reference to real-life objects, can in themselves give meaning to art.

Although he began his adult life in the field of law, and did not begin serious study of art until he was thirty, Kandinsky was influenced by his discovery of Russian folk art, by exhibitions of impressionist paintings he saw in Moscow, and, as a young child, by the purely emotional effects that colors had on him. Arriving in Munich in 1896, he became involved in important art movements there, particularly the Phalanx group in 1902 and the Blue Rider school in 1911-1914. His theoretical treatise, Concerning the Spiritual in Art, published in 1912 and widely read, discusses the central role of "inner necessity" in the act of artistic creation, and immediately marked him as a leading figure of the European art world.

From fauvist and expressionist works full of color, Kandinsky moved, in the years before World War I, to more abstract paintings. These works, while much less representational than works painted before 1909, do retain certain motifs and pictorial elements from his earlier period. Although critics have differed as to the extent to which real-life elements can be discerned in these works, they were a radical departure from other art of the period in Germany.

The years spent in Russia, between 1914 and 1941, were less productive, when measured in terms of canvases produced. The upheaval throughout Europe caused by World War I, and in Russia by the Bolshevik Revolution, disrupted much artistic activity. However, Kandinsky worked during this period within

the Russian government in a variety of positions. In these roles, he helped extend culture throughout the country, by establishing more than twenty provincial art museums, and by developing new art education programs. However, he was not in touch with the Russian artistic community, and devoted much of his energy to political or bureaucratic, rather than purely artistic, activities.

Kandinsky's return to Germany in late 1921, and his association with the Bauhaus, which began the following summer, marked a new phase in his development, one in which his teaching and his painting became equally important contributions to the art world. His work with Paul Klee, Marcel Breuer and others sought to develop the links between art, architecture, and the applied arts. During these years, his canvases became markedly more geometric, their composition based on circles, triangles, squares, and lines. His treatise Point and Line to Plane, published in 1926, presents the theoretical bases of Kandinsky's use of the elements of form in painting. It continues the reflection on art begun in Concerning the Spiritual in Art. In fact, Kandinsky indicates in his introduction that some of the material, on "the incipient science of art," had been prepared as early as 1914. The ideas in this work served as a portion of the course material he presented to beginning Bauhaus students in his class on color and form. Indeed, Kandinsky devoted much of his energy in these years to teaching, and excelled at it. As Herbert Bayer, one of his students, recalls, "Kandinsky had that divine gift that consisted in never placing himself above his pupils but rather helping them and guiding them in their developments."

In 1933, the rise of Nazi Germany forced the closing of the Bauhaus and

the departure of the Kandinskys for Paris. Here Kandinsky spent the last eleven years of his life, continuing to paint and write. Although he produced 352 oils, watercolors, and gouaches, these were not easy times for him. The political turmoil in Europe made it difficult for Kandinsky to sell his paintings to the German collectors who had supported him in the past. In addition, he found himself outside the mainstream of the French art world, which had not yet accepted abstract art. The only friends he had among French painters were the Delaunays, Fernand Leger and Hans Arp. He nevertheless developed strong ties with these artists, as well as with Miro, Chagall, Pevsner, and Brancusi, who were also working in France. His writings on art appeared in several important periodicals, including Cahiers d'Art and XXe Siecle, in which he described his latest works as "concrete art." With the arrival of World War II, his production slowed as supplies became increasingly scarce, but Kandinsky continued to work until a few weeks before his death at 78.

Although his work was not widely appreciated by the general public during his lifetime, Kandinsky's influence on modern art, both through his teaching and his radically new view of painting, has been enormous. In the 1930s, figures as different as Andre Breton and Diego Rivera extolled the impact of his vision on his contemporaries. The efforts of his widow, until her death in 1980, brought his works to the attention of an ever-growing audience, both in Europe and in the United States, while the level of ongoing critical inquiry on Kandinsky reflects his stature as a major figure of twentieth-century art.

## **Overview of Biographical Sources**

As befits a major, and often controversial, art figure of the twentieth century, Wassily Kandinsky has been the subject of numerous studies, beginning as early as 1920 with a brief German monograph by Hugo Zehder. A large proportion of these critical works have focused on Kandinsky's art, rather than on his life; many of these studies, biographical or otherwise, originally appeared in Russian, German, or French (countries where Kandinsky lived and painted).

Most early studies narrowly sought to determine when Kandinsky became an "abstract painter," thus limiting their interest as global biography. It was not until the late 1950s that two events sparked a major scholarly interest in Kandinsky. In 1957, the Munich municipal museum was given a large number of Kandinsky's works, including his sketchbooks, which belonged to Gabriele Munter. These items, called now the Gabriele Munter Stiftung, provided art historians with vast new raw materials for research. Secondly, in 1958, Will Grohmann published his comprehensive monograph on Kandinsky's life and work, thus laying the groundwork for many of the modern studies of the artist. Grohmann knew Kandinsky for over two decades. He was intimately knowledgeable about his Bauhaus and Paris years, and quoted extensively from their correspondence in his biography.

In the years since 1960, many studies of Kandinsky have appeared, as well as exhibition catalogs, and Hans Roethel's monumental two-volume Catalogue Raisonne of the oil paintings. Several studies, including those by Peg Weiss and Rose-Carol Long, have focused on Kandinsky's pre-World-War-I years in Germany as he moved toward abstraction. Each author discerns different forces - the Jugendstil movement or Theosophy for instance - as having key roles in

the artist's development. More recently, Clark Poling has examined the Bauhaus years and Kandinsky's relationship to his students.

Almost thirty-five years have passed since Grohmann's landmark study; it is no doubt time for another recapitulation of Kandinsky's life, based on the many varied sources now available to biographers and art historians. In addition, students might also benefit from an English translation of Nina Kandinsky's memoirs, Kandinsky und ich, published in 1976 and available currently only in German and French. In any event, Kandinsky will continue to fascinate scholars interested in the evolution of twentieth-century painting.

### **Evaluation of Principal Biographical Sources**

Grohmann, Will. Wassily Kandinsky: life and work. New York: Abrams, 1958.

(A,G,Y) Extremely full review of his life and work written with obvious sympathy by a long-time friend of Kandinsky. It begins with Kandinsky's early life in Russia and follows him through his Munich, Bauhaus, and Paris periods. Stronger in detailing the artist's life than in elucidating and analyzing the meaning of the paintings, its further strength is the presentation, in black-and-white and color photographs, of hundreds of Kandinsky's works.

Le Targat, Francois. Kandinsky. New York: Rizzoli, 1987. (A,G) Although predominantly color plates of Kandinsky's work, this book provides a clear overview of his life. (Regrettably, there is an error concerning his date of birth.) Translated from the French.

Long, Rose-Carol Washton. Kandinsky: the Development of an Abstract Style. Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1980. **(A)** Seeks to decode the motifs in Kandinsky's pre-war paintings, and link them to his philosophical beliefs and utopian views, and to Theosophy. Also explores "the cultural as well as the artistic ambience" in which he worked between 1906 and 1914. Although much of the book is art historical analysis, there is much biographical information for the years before World War I.

Poling, Clark V. Kandinsky's Teaching at the Bauhaus. New York: Rizzoli, 1986. **(A)** Analyzes Kandinsky's teaching of his theories of color and form, and his influence on a decade of students. Originally published in German in 1982, this book discusses the crucial contributions Kandinsky made to the Bauhaus educational program, and outlines the relationship between his theoretical writings and his teaching. Reproduces many works, exercises and studies, of Kandinsky and his pupils.

Roethel, Hans K. Kandinsky. New York: Hudson Hills, 1979. **(A,G)** This work is primarily an analysis of 48 paintings (presented in color). However, this oversized volume also contains an overview of Kandinsky's life and artistic importance, tracing his relationship with Gabriele Munter, recounting his stay in Moscow from 1914 to 1921, and generally outlining his stylistic evolution. Contains a detailed chronology of his life.

Weiss, Peg. Kandinsky in Munich. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979. **(A)** Examines Kandinsky's years in Munich to 1914 and discerns a major influence of the Jugendstil movement on the artist's pictorial evolution.



Close contacts with Munich's symbolist milieu also helped form his aesthetic vision and effect his revolutionary move to abstraction. Contains numerous illustrations, including several color plates, and extensive notes.

### **Primary Sources**

Kandinsky's writings are extensive. Although raised in Russia, he often stated that he felt German was his first language, having spoken it with his maternal grandmother. The majority of his writings are in German, although he also wrote in Russian, and later, in French. His two major works, Über das Geistige in der Kunst (Concerning the Spiritual in Art), published in Munich in 1912, and Punkt und Linie zur Fläche (Point and Line to Plane), published there in 1926, have been translated in the landmark two-volume collection Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art (Boston: MA: G.K. Hall, 1982; **A**). Editors Kenneth Lindsay and Peter Vergo, in their introduction, provide a useful overview of the evolution of Kandinsky's thought, as well as of the intricacies of translating his texts. This work will remain the standard source for Kandinsky's thought. Two separate translations of Über das Geistige in der Kunst appeared soon after Kandinsky's death: Hilla Rebay edited On the Spiritual in Art (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1946; **A**). The translations vary considerably one from the other, both in language and in organization. Elizabeth Mapier edited and introduced a translation of Klänge (Sounds), originally published in 1912 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981; **A,G**). Called "the most beautiful and most extraordinary of all Kandinsky's publications," this work contains 38 prose poems and 56 woodcuts by the artist. Hilla Rebay, a long-time friend of Kandinsky and director of the Guggenheim

Museum, published a translation of the 1918 Russian version of Kandinsky's autobiography in In Memory of Wassily Kandinsky (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1945; **A,G**). Unfortunately, the accompanying biographical section, while eulogistic, contains some inaccuracies.

Kandinsky's writings are crucial to our understanding of modern art. As Lindsay and Vergo state, "Not only do his ideas and observations modify our thinking about the nature of art and the way it reflects the aspirations of a certain time, but they touch on matters that concern the human condition" (p.32).

### **Museums, Historical Landmarks, Societies**

Musee d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou (Paris, France). Holds numerous works of art and archival materials dealing with Kandinsky, placed there after the death of his widow in 1980.

Norton Simon Museum (Pasadena, CA). Contains the Galka Scheyer collection of papers of the Blue Four group (Kandinsky, Klee, Jawlensky, and Feininger).

Solomon Guggenheim Museum (New York, NY). Contains the largest collection of Kandinsky's work in the United States, much of it acquired through the effort of Hilla Rebay, whose archives are also held there.

Stadtische Galerie (Munich, Germany). Houses the Gabriele Munter Stiftung, consisting of scores of works from Kandinsky's Munich period, which had been left with Munter in 1914. Incltdes rketchbooks.

### **Other Sources**

Grohmann, Will. "Kandinsky, Wassily." Encyclopedia of World Art. Vol.8. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963. Brief discussions of Kandinsky's life and impact, with eclectic, if now dated, bibliography and four plates.

Heibel, Yule F. "They danced on volcanoes: Kandinsky's breakthrough to abstraction, the German avant-garde and the eve of the First World War." Art History 12 (September 1989): 342-361. Traces Kandinsky's relationship with avant-garde circles in Berlin and the interplay of policial views and artistic technique.

Werenskiold, Marit. "Kandinsky's Moscow." Art in America 77 (March 1989): 96-111. A study of Kandinsky's millenarian vision of Moscow, (gained as child and a student), and its portrayal in his paintings.