

Kandinsky's "Compositions" – a connoisseur's show now on at MoMA

His huge struggles towards abstraction united as he never saw them

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A sharply focused exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (until 25 April) examines ten seminal canvases by the Russian-born master Vasily Kandinsky (1866-1944). Held by the artist to be his most important body of work, the series of large-scale paintings, each titled "composition", succinctly recapitulates the artist's stylistic evolution and sheds light on the origins of abstraction at the dawn of the twentieth century. The show's organiser, Magdalena Dabrowski, a senior curator in the Department of Drawings, has managed to assemble for the first time all seven of the surviving "Compositions" (numbers I, II, and III were lost in Germany during World War II), a situation Kandinsky himself never experienced. In addition, she has gathered an array of preparatory studies and related works, including six large oils and twenty-five works in various media on paper, many of which are in the US for the first time.

About half the show is drawn from the 1981 Nina Kandinsky bequest to the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. An even larger cache of material germane to the series is in the Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus in Munich, to which it was bequeathed in 1957 by Kandinsky's early companion Gabriele Münter. The German museum has loaned only two works to MoMA, and those at the very last minute. The "Compositions" themselves are widely distributed geographically: Numbers IV (1911) and X (1939) are loaned by the

Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen in Düsseldorf; the rarely exhibited number V (1911) belongs to a Swiss woman who inherited it from her father, who in turn bought it in Chicago in 1914; numbers VI and VII (both 1913) remained in Russia and have been borrowed from Hermitage and the Tretyakov Gallery, respectively; the Guggenheim Museum in New York, which has the greatest holdings of Kandinsky outside Europe, contributed two works, including the pivotal "Composition VIII" (1923); number IX (1936) is among the items from Pompidou.

The series is hung chronologically, the three lost "Compositions" represented by scale reproductions of extant black-and-white photographs (there is a final study in oil for "Composition II"), and studies are placed near their related, finished "Compositions". The result is a compelling dissection of the artist's creative process. The term "Composition" held special meaning for Kandinsky. In his 1911 text "On the Spiritual in Art" he distinguished three categories of what he called painting's "new symphonic construction": a) Impression - "a direct impression of external nature", b) Improvisation - "a largely unconscious, spontaneous expression of internal character... the non-material nature", and c) Composition - "an expression of slowly formed inner feeling... which after the first preliminary sketches, I have slowly and almost pedantically examined and worked out... In [a Composition,] reason, consciousness, [and] purpose, play an overwhelming part. But of the calculation nothing appears, only the feeling". In other works, the "Compositions" are symphonic constructions calculated to convey an inner feeling.

Ms Dabrowski points out that the "Compositions" share "their almost mural-like scale [they average around 6 x 9 feet], their deliberate, premeditated process of creation, and an overt transference of value from subject matter to pure painting". Indeed, they illustrate Kandinsky's methodical transition to "non-objective" painting. The horses and riders, mountains, and trees in numbers I-III (all 1910) disintegrate in the more abstract number IV of the following year, and are virtually indistinguishable within the shimmering colour fields and looping black lines of numbers V-VI (1911-13). The most abrupt transition occurs between numbers VII (1913) and VIII (1923). The former is nearly Orphic in its exuberant kaleidoscope of painterly gestures in

wet, saturated hues. The latter, by contrast, is a spare, dry diagram of immaculate triangles, circles, and lines. Ms Dabrowski explains that "the first seven share a certain continuity of thought, an interest in expressionistic brushwork and colour. In the ten years before Kandinsky would paint another in the series, he had been in Russia where he was active in the circle of avant-garde artists developing Suprematism and Constructivism. You can very clearly see the influence of those styles in 'Composition VIII'", says the curator: "Stylistically, VII and VIII have absolutely nothing in common". In the final pair, numbers IX-X (1936-39), the artist closes the contours of the geometric shapes, and fills them with colour, emphasising their separateness from one another and their background.

An interesting aspect of Kandinsky's abstraction is its connection to music. Ms Dabrowski notes, "He felt music best expresses emotions, and that it does so through abstract means; in pictorial abstraction he was searching for an equivalent. That was important in his transition from overt figuration to veiled figuration and abstraction. He still had doubts as to whether the viewer, and even he himself, was ready to accept abstraction, so he left figurative elements as an anchor". Kandinsky's struggles paralleled those of his contemporaries, Malevitch and Mondrian. Ms Dabrowski maintains that by 1913, when Kandinsky had painted his early Compositions, Malevitch was yet to commence flat Suprematism (though he had drawn the "Black Square" for the 1913 set of "Victory over the Sun"), and Mondrian had yet to invent his "plus-and-minus" fragmentation. "Mondrian is a much more systematic painter", she observes "he is after objective means of expression, as opposed to Kandinsky who wants to express emotion through plastic means".

"Vasily Kandinsky: Compositions" travels to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (4 June-3 September). The 144-page catalogue by Ms Dabrowski is published by MoMA and distributed by Abrams. The exhibition is supported by the Robert Lehman Foundation.

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