

Marc Chagall & Wassily Kandinsky

## Contents

<b>Marc Chagall (1887 – 1985)</b> .....	3
Early Life .....	3
Vitebsk 1914-1922.....	5
France.....	11
Later life.....	13
<b>Wassily Kandinsky (1866 – 1944)</b> .....	16
Early Life and Germany 1896 - 1914.....	16
A brief return to Russia and the Bauhaus.....	22
Paris.....	27
<b>References</b> .....	30

## Marc Chagall (1887 – 1985)

### Early Life

Marc Chagall was born in the Jewish suburb of Vitebsk in the Pale of Settlement, a western region of the Russian empire set up in 1791 and running to 1917, into which Jews were confined. Living outside the Pale was exceptional and required official sanction. Even inside the Pale life was limited: Jews were in the minority and allowed to live only in certain areas of cities, were prohibited from many occupations (most were small shop-keepers or artisans) and were not allowed to attend state schools. The last didn't worry the majority who followed their rabbi, read Hebrew and spoke Yiddish. Indeed, Chagall's grandparents grumbled about him learning Russian after his mother paid bribes to get him into a state school. Chagall was born midway through the reign of Alexander III who institutionalised anti-Semitism, making it popular and encouraging violence. His son, Nicholas II gave his blessing to the notorious thugs and murderers of Jews, the Black Hundreds, in their regular organised pogroms.

Vitebsk was stronghold of Hasidic Judaism, which differed from the intellectual Talmuds. Hasidic Jews sought an intuitive communion with God, and they loved to dance and chant. Fiddlers were popular, often travelling from event to event, central figures in the Jewish festivities, their tunes accompanied all the important moments in life. Chagall portrayed these fiddlers – the one in the example beating out a rhythm with his foot is clearly at a happy event. He is shown standing on a roof: Chagall's Uncle Neuch used to play the violin sitting cross-legged on the roof to relax.

Chagall's father was an assistant at a fishmonger and his mother ran a haberdasher's shop. The family, including Chagall's seven sisters and two brothers lived in one of the simple wooden dwellings by the River Dvina. There were small vegetable gardens, courtyards, and backyards in which fowls, goats, pigs and even the occasional cow could be found. Chagall nattered away to these animals and felt close to them, cows especially.



Marc Chagall, *The Fiddler*, 1912/3

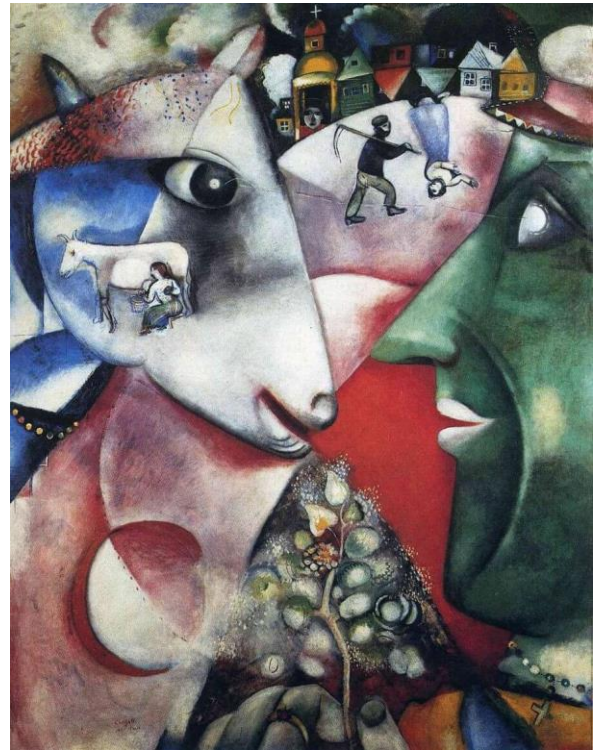
Uncle Neuch was a cattle dealer and Chagall would often travel with him in a little wooden cart to pick up a calf or cow at the market. One grandfather was a butcher, who killed in a kosher way two or three cows a day. Chagall recalls a big bellied cow being prepared for slaughter it.

*"She falls with a sigh. I reach out to put my arms round her muzzle, to whisper words to her – that she shouldn't worry, I won't eat the meat; what more could I do? She hears the rye rippling, and she sees the blue sky behind the hedge. Then there is prayer and knife in throat, torrents of blood and you little cow, naked and crucified, are dreaming in heaven. The glittering knife has raised you to the skies."*

Chagall's painting of cows catches his friendship with them and their important role in sustaining the community. In *To Russia, Asses and Others*, the cow is portrayed as "a gigantic, good-natured, all providing idol, nourishing animal and human being alike (Haftmann)." The milkmaid, singing to soothe the beast, sails through the heavens. *I and the Village* shows, "the cow in our yard, with her milk as white as snow, the cow used to talk to us." A faint line links the eyes of animal and artist.



Marc Chagall, *To Russia, Asses and Others*, 1911-2



Marc Chagall, *I and the Village*, 1911-2

Chagall enjoyed drawing at school and badgered his parents into letting him join a local private art school ran by Yehuda Pen. His uncle Zussy would have argued against it. Chagall painted a portrait of Zussy, “and I offered it to him, he glanced at the canvas then, looking at himself in the glass, reflected a little, and said, ‘Well, no – keep it!’” Chagall applied to the Steiglitz Arts Academy in Petersburg - acceptance would have given him a permit to live in the city – but failed the exam. He enrolled in the Society for the Protection of the Fine Arts, directed by Nicolas Roerich, and to get the permit had to be apprenticed to a sign-painter.



Marc Chagall, *Golgotha*, 1912

Chagall got advice from Leon Bakst. When Bakst decided to leave Russia for good to work with Ballet Russe, he suggested Chagall move to Paris with him and learn to paint scenery. Chagall was introduced to Maxim Vinaver, a member of the Duma who championed equality for Russian Jews; *“were it not for him I might have remained a photographer, established myself in Vitebsk and never had any idea of Paris.”* Vinaver agreed to pay Chagall a monthly allowance during his time abroad, so off to Paris in 1910 (a journey of four days).

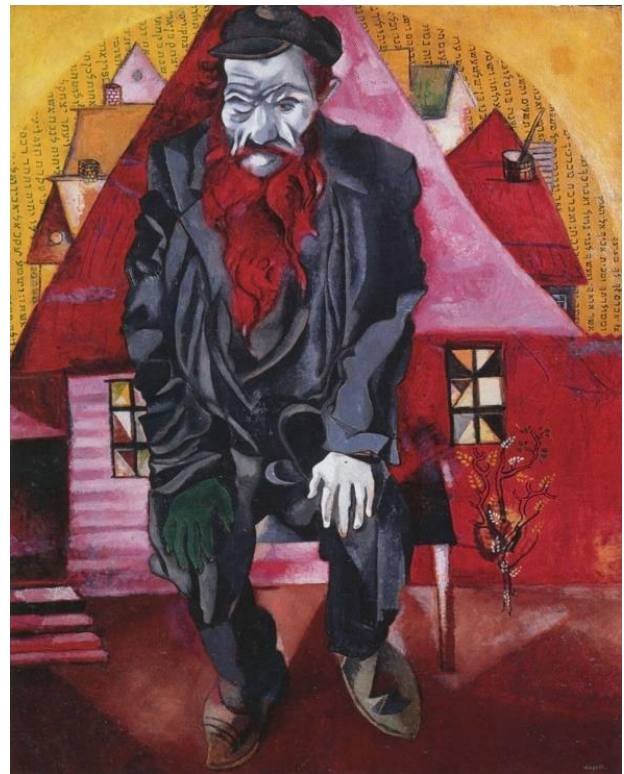
Chagall loved the colours of Veronese and Delacroix, and works by Rembrandt, Fouquet, Chardin and Gericault in the Louvre, and Manet and Matisse. He had reproductions of paintings by El Greco and Cezanne in his little studio in the poor artistic area, The Beehive. He was influenced by Cubists (but only briefly, finding them arrogant, *“let them choke themselves on their square pears on their triangular tables!”*) He became close friends with the Delaunays and their discs influenced *Golgotha*. *“Strictly speaking, there is only a blue child in the air. The Cross was of less interest to me ... I wanted to portray Christ as an innocent”* – a figure not crucified but resurrected into childhood as the messenger of salvation. Chagall made many friends in Paris, but missed home and was lovesick for his fiancé Bella. He returned to Vitebsk to be with her.

### Vitebsk 1914-1922

Later in life Chagall said these were, *“the most productive years of my whole career.”* He gloried in being back in Vitebsk and his paintings reflect his two great loves; his home and his bride. Chagall painted people who visited his father’s home.



Marc Chagall, *Jew in Green*, 1914



Marc Chagall, *Jew in Red*, 1915

*Jew in Green* was a preacher, one of those wandering Jews filled with holy inspiration proclaiming the Word of God, their lives full of poetic radiance *“there he sat, quiet and lost to the world in front of the samovar in the living room.”* His face is green, often for Chagall a colour depicting trance or hallucination (*The Fiddler*, the artist in *I and the Village*, worshipping figures in *Golgotha* have green faces; all clearly lost in their thoughts).

Chagall tries to invest a mundane moment with significance, *“I start from the initial shock of something actual and spiritual, from some definite thing and go on toward something more abstract ... This is what happened in the Jew in Green, whom I painted surrounded by Hebrew words and script characters - this is no symbolism, it is exactly how I saw it, this is the actual atmosphere in which I found him ... I believe that in this way I arrive at the symbol, without being symbolic or literary.”* *Jew in Red* dominates the town, as if he is the only thing that matters; he is the yardstick against which folk should measure themselves. The images work as symbols, but Chagall painted many of them very quickly; *“sometimes a man posed for me who had a face so tragic and old, but at the same time angelic. But I couldn’t hold out more than half an hour... he stank too much.”*

Views of Vitebsk appear, most famously as the background for paintings of Chagall and his bride, but also as landscapes in their own right, with a typical wooden house set against the Dvina and the Cathedral of the Assumption.



Marc Chagall, *The Grey House*, 1917

*The Grey House* seems to capture the sadness Chagall sometimes felt for his birthplace; “Vitebsk is a place apart; a town unlike any other, an unhappy town, a boring town.” The ominous sky looks as though it holds a figure screaming to the heavens. Chagall’s scenes of Vitebsk convey different emotions. *The Blue House* was painted in the summer of 1917 when he returned to Vitebsk for a two-month holiday from his job in the War Economy Office in Petersburg as a clerk. The work meant that he avoided being drafted. At a time when life in Petersburg was uncertain and complicated, Vitebsk must have seemed something of a haven. The colours and the high viewpoint of *The Blue House* produce a feeling of vibrancy, whereas the low viewpoint of *The Grey House* helps create the sense of foreboding. There are traces here of Chagall’s love of Cezanne and his singing colours of Paris are evident. There is some abstraction too – the roof of the house compared to the realism of the chimney. Chagall called his buildings of Vitebsk, “simple and eternal, like the buildings in the frescoes of Giotto”.

Avoiding war was important to Chagall’s art, and not just in the obvious way of allowing him to continue painting. Young teenagers were drafted into regiments. Indeed, more Jewish boys were drafted than non-Jewish under the misconception that the army would ‘normalise’ them. As a youth, Chagall was told by his mum to hide under the bed, when she heard soldiers in the street; “I creep underneath and stay there for a long time, quiet and happy. You can’t imagine how happy I am – and I don’t know why – when I am lying down flat under a bed or on a roof in some sort of hiding place. I plunge into my thoughts. I fly above the world.”



Marc Chagall, *The Blue House*, 1917

Flying above the world is an apt phrase for Chagall's paintings of Bella, where one might say they were lost in their love for each other. The first instance of the flying image came in 1915.



Marc Chagall, *Birthday*, 1915

In her memoir, *First Encounter*, Bella recalled wanting to decorate Chagall's room with flowers and coloured shawls to celebrate his birthday. While she was still holding flowers, he asked her to stand still so he could paint her. *"You flung yourself upon the canvas so that it quaked under your hand; you snatched the brushes and squeezed out the paint – red, blue, white, transporting me in a stream of colour. United we float over the decorated room, come to the window and want to fly out. The brightly hung walls whirl around us. We fly out over fields full of flowers, over shuttered houses, roofs, yards, churches."*



Marc Chagall, *Over the Village*, 1915-18

Chagall and Bella got married on 25 July 1915. Bella's family, who owned three jewellery shops, did not approve. Her mother warned her,

*"What kind of husband will that boy make you? He's as pink as a girl. He'll never be able to make his living ... you'll ruin yourself with him, my daughter. You'll ruin yourself for nothing. Besides, he's an artist, whatever's that? And what will people say?"*

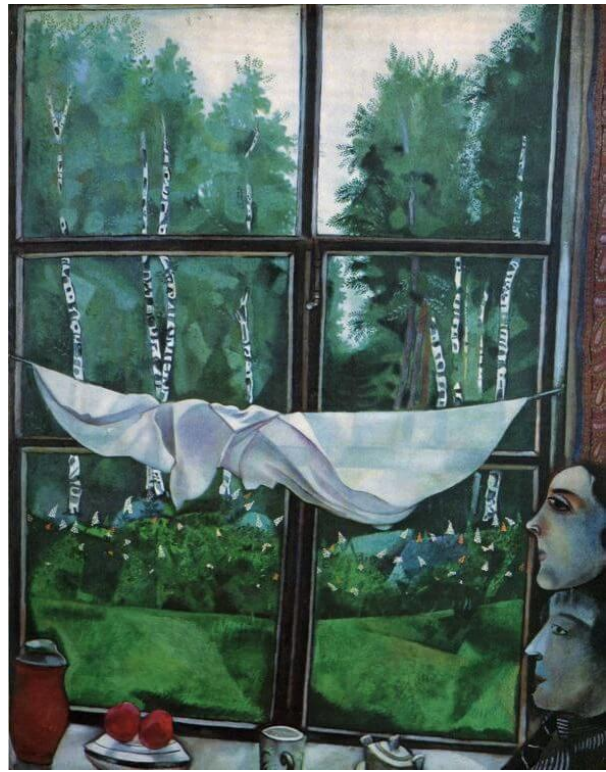
His father was worried and a little intimidated.

*"My poor father. 'Papa,' I would say, 'come to my wedding!' He, like me, would rather have gone to bed. Was it worth while getting involved with such high-class people? On arriving, very late, at my fiancée's house, I found a whole Sanhedrin [a Jewish court, especially the supreme council at Jerusalem] already assembled there. A pity I'm not Veronese [a reference to painting crowded banquet scenes] ... with emotion, I clasped my wife's slender bony hands. I wanted to run away to the country with her, to kiss her and burst out laughing."*



Chagall got his wish. The couple honeymooned for a month at Zaolcha, a hamlet in the countryside outside near Vitebsk; "Woods, pine trees, solitude. The moon behind the forest."

These paintings of the devoted couple continue. Perhaps the most famous is *The Promenade*. Chagall and Bella are out for a picnic, but she flies off light-headed with love: her grin tinged with a touch of alarm – joyous abandon evoking a sense of fragility in the rational part of the mind. The colours are dreamlike, as are the patches which make up the ground, sky and houses. The picnic is more naturalistic. The figure of Chagall is strong, as he needs to be while anchoring Bella to the earth.



Marc Chagall, *Window in the Country*, 1915



Marc Chagall, *The Promenade*, 1917

By the time *The Promenade* was painted, the couple's daughter Ida was born - on the 18<sup>th</sup> of May 1916. Chagall painted Bella as a Madonna, looking down as Chagall helps Ida take her first steps. Bella helped with his art too;

*"I had only to open the window of my room, and the blue air, love and flowers entered with her. Dressed all in white or black she seemed to float over my canvases, for a long time guiding my art. I never finish a picture or an engraving without asking her 'yes' or 'no'."*



Marc Chagall, *Bella with White Collar*, 1917

These were happy times for the young family. Aside from their nuptials, the Revolution was cause of rejoicing for Jews: Russia withdrew from World War I (in which Jewish men had been used disproportionately heavily as common troops) and Jewish people gained equal rights. In *Cemetery Gates*, Chagall cites text from the Old Testament to express the optimism of the time. Words from Ezekiel in Hebrew are written above the gates; *"Thus saith the Lord God: behold, O my people, I will open your graves, and cause you to come up out of your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel."* (Walther and Metzler)



Marc Chagall, *The Cemetery Gates*, 1917

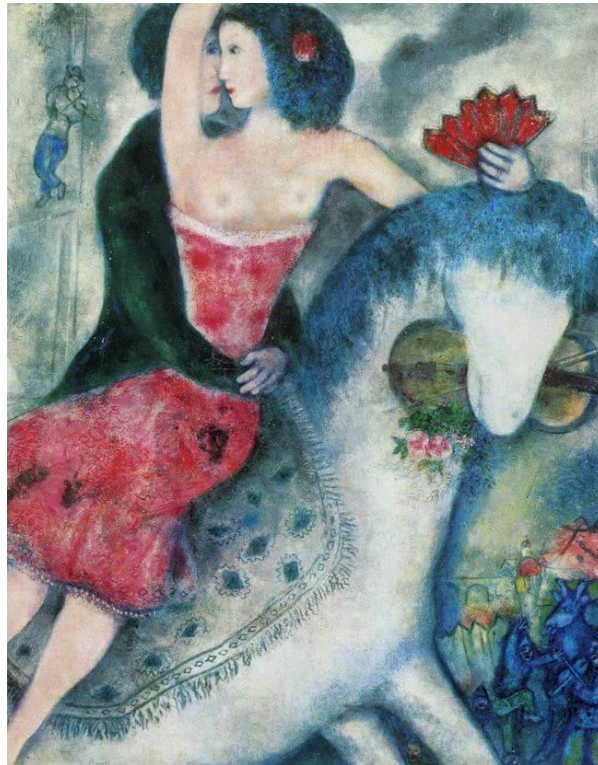
Optimism faded. Within a decade, Stalin would begin to restrict rights for Jewish people and start a new era of anti-Semitism in Russia. Chagall's troubles started pretty quickly (as recounted in the chapter on Modern Art) – hounded out of a post he enjoyed in Vitebsk. Bella had warned him that running a school would end in insults, and she got very anxious when she saw that administrative duties meant Chagall neglected his painting. Thrown out of Vitebsk, life in Moscow was not much better. Chagall produced murals for the State Jewish Theatre in Moscow, for which he was never paid. He took the decision to head west; *"the only thing I want is to paint pictures ... neither Imperial Russia nor Soviet Russia needs me. I am a mystery, a stranger, to them."*

## France

After a brief stay in Berlin, Paris and most notably the French countryside, first discovered by Chagall when he stayed at the Delauney's weekend cottage. After that he loved to go to Normandy and Brittany, where he painted *The Window*. His colours and contours were more muted. Aside from such landscapes, Chagall produced flower paintings, usually with a loving couple embracing, and a series of circus scenes. *The Equestrienne* has the same softness as *The Window*. The happiness in these works disappeared, as news reached Chagall about conditions in Europe.



Marc Chagall, *The Window*, 1924

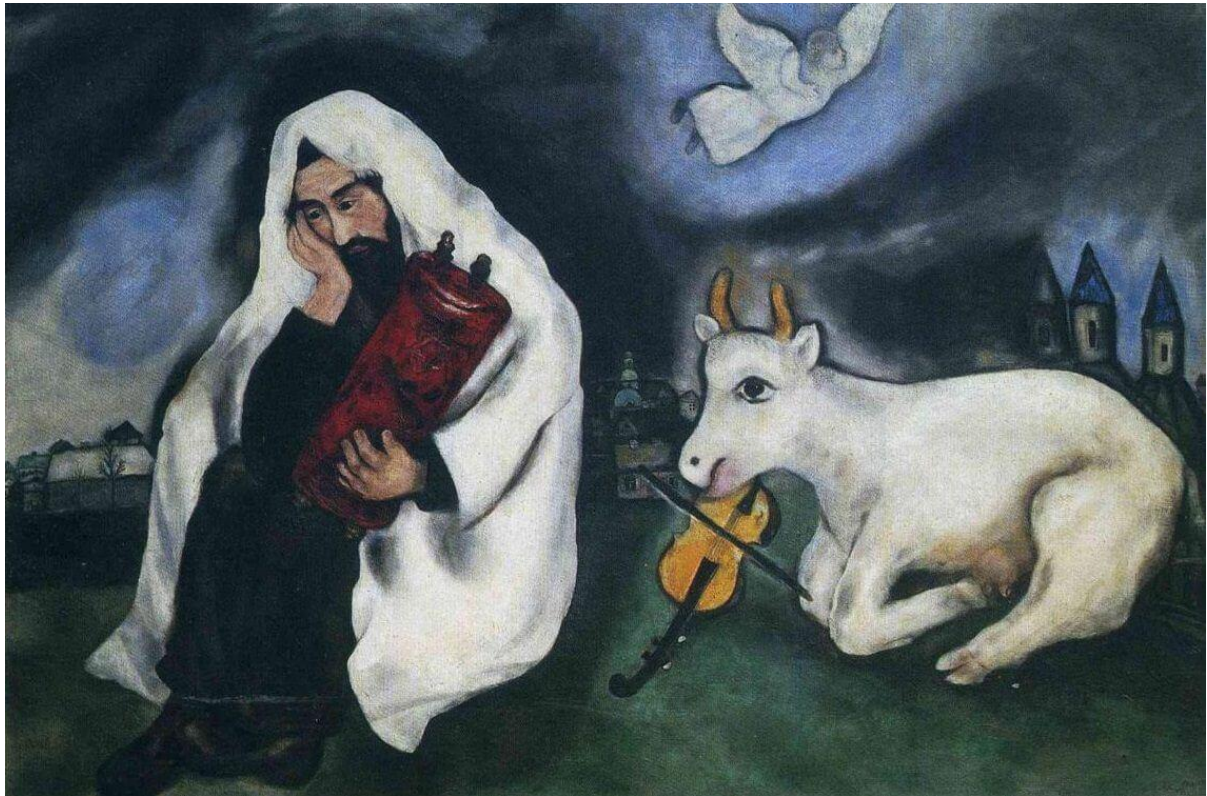


Marc Chagall, *The Equestrienne*, 1931



Marc Chagall, *Nude above Vitebsk*, 1933

Conditions in Belarus were dreadful as collectivisation wreaked havoc. Moreover, Bella's well-off family had had belongings confiscated and were treated nastily. The classical nude has turned away from Vitebsk as if to weep in her pillow. The city, usually vibrant under Chagall's hand, is now grey, evoking sadness and a sense of desolation.



Marc Chagall, *Solitude*, 1933

Chagall felt the anti-Semitism growing in Europe, and painted *Solitude*, showing an exiled Jew in his prayer shawl and holding a Torah scroll. The white cow, the image from youth, suggests the Jews are not completely friendless and offers hope.

Anti-Semitism was experienced by Chagall when he visited Warsaw in spring 1935 and saw his friend abused in broad daylight. *White Crucifixion* was painted after Kristallnacht when synagogues were pillaged and torched. One Torah scroll burns with the white smoke of incense, another is saved. The placard forced on the man in the blue tunic originally had "Ich bin Juden" written on it, but this was erased by Chagall.

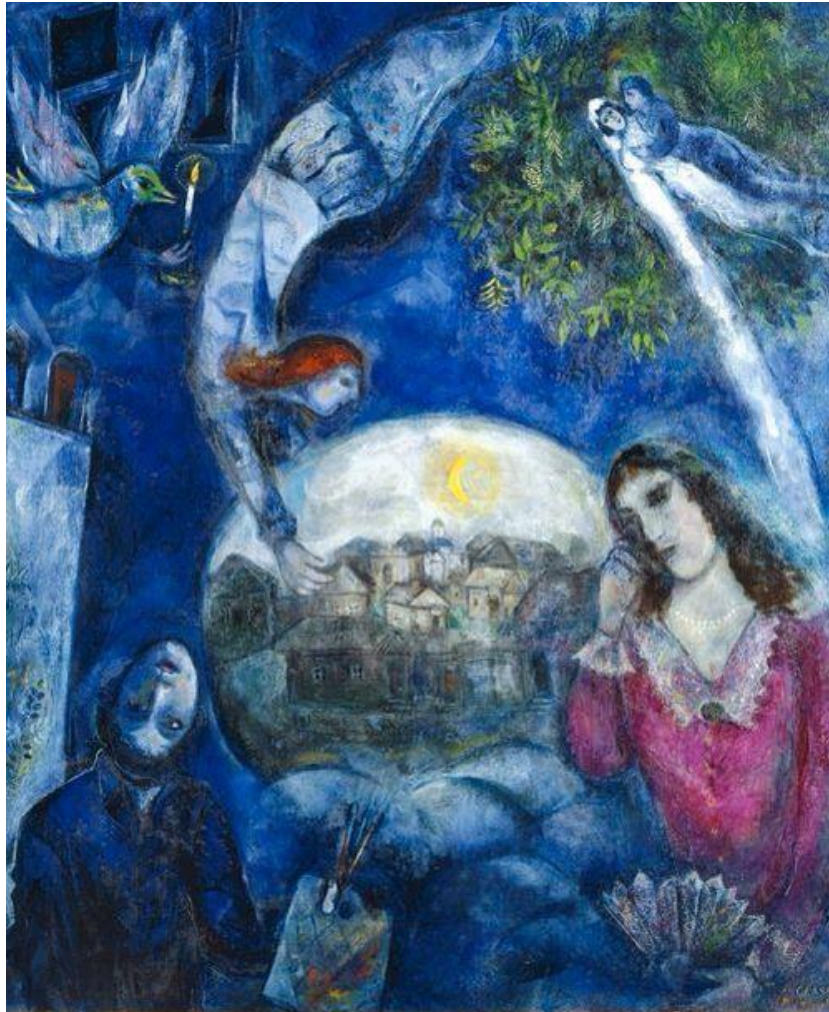
When World War II broke out, Chagall took his family to southern France, but was eventually persuaded to leave for America.



Marc Chagall, *White Crucifixion*, 1938

## Later life

New York City fascinated Chagall. He did not learn English, but spent his time talking in Yiddish to Jewish artisans and owners of small shops in Manhattan – it must have reminded him of his youth in Vitebsk. Tragically, just as they heard news of the liberation of Paris and were hoping to return home, Bella died. At the beginning of September 1944, having spent the summer in the country in upstate New York, she contracted a viral infection. It would not normally have been serious, but she was taken to a poorly equipped hospital which did not have antibiotics, and she died there. Chagall grieved, unable to paint until in the spring of 1945 he found an old painting *The Harlequins* from 1933. He cut this in two and from the left half made *Around Her* – he is on the left with a weeping Bella opposite, separated from him by a globe with a vision of Vitebsk.



Marc Chagall, *Around Her*, 1945

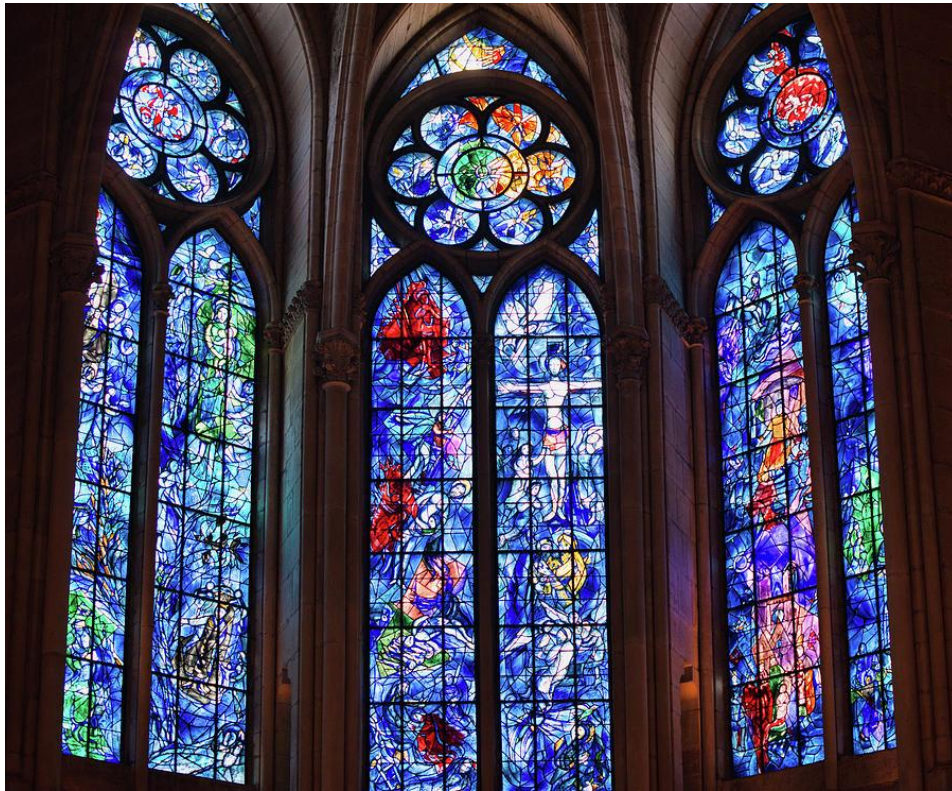
Chagall was in a bad way and his daughter Ida engaged a housekeeper, Virginia Haggard McNeill who was married to a Scottish stage-designer and painter, to look after him. They became lovers. Chagall and Virginia were together for seven years and had a son together (she left her husband when she got pregnant). By the time she obtained a divorce in 1951, life with Chagall had become stressful and she started a new love affair and left him. Virginia later published an account of this time; *Seven Years of Plenty – My Life with Chagall* (1986). Soon afterwards, in early 1952 Ida got married and at the reception introduced her father to Vava Brodsky. The pair got married in July 1952. By that time Chagall had returned to France. From the 1950s, although he painted pictures of the French countryside and scenes in Paris, Chagall turned increasingly to larger works.

In 1963 Andre Malraux, novelist and art theorist turned Culture Minister commissioned Chagall to paint a new ceiling for Paris Opera. Malraux was violently attacked in anti-Semitic tones for allowing a French National Monument to be decorated by a Jew.



Chagall's designs were transferred to canvas which was then glued to polyester panels and hoisted into position a few centimetres beneath the original decorations *The Muses and Hours of the Day and Night* (1872) by Jules-Eugène Lenepveu. Chagall's segments pay tributes (clockwise from the bottom): Mozart *The Magic Flute* & Mussorsky *Boris Godunov* (blue region); Adam *Giselle* & Tchaikovsky *Swan Lake* (yellow); Stravinsky *The Firebird* & Ravel *Daphnis et Chloe* (red region); Debussy *Pelleas and Melisande* & Rameau (white region); Berlioz *Romeo and Juliet* & Wagner *Tristan and Isolde*. In the small central circle; Beethoven *Fidelio*, Verdi *La Traviata*, Bizet *Carmen* & Gluck *Orpheus and Eurydice* are celebrated. The French press were unanimous that the work made a great contribution to French culture. The New York Met Opera then commissioned Chagall to paint two monumental murals for the outside of the building. Commissions for murals and mosaics, and also tapestry designs, naturally poured in.

Another medium which brought much work for Chagall was stained glass. Henri Matisse had designed the Chapel of the Rosary at Vence, achieving brilliant effects with decorations and stained-glass windows. The chapel was consecrated in 1951. Chagall had settled in Vence in 1950 and must have seen the results of Matisse's genius and the widespread approval it engendered. Perhaps echoing Rembrandt and his desire to outdo the engraver Lucas van Leiden who was revered in Rembrandt's home town, Chagall was drawn to stained glass. He could never, of course, even approach the standard of Matisse, but he nonetheless made many attempts – indeed, over 80 windows in Europe, Israel and the USA.



Marc Chagall, Axial Chapel Windows, Cathedral of Notre Dame de Reims, 1974

*America Windows* was presented as a gift to the Art Institute of Chicago to mark the bicentennial of the United States. The windows merge symbols of American history, the Chicago skyline, and the arts (from left to right) the panels represent music, painting, literature, architecture, theatre, and dance.



Marc Chagall, *American Windows*, 1977

Chagall collapsed and died on the 28<sup>th</sup> March 1985 at the age of 97. When Henri Matisse died in 1954, Picasso said, *“Now that Matisse is dead, Chagall is the only painter who really understands what colour is.”* There was criticism of Chagall’s later work - motifs repeated in murals, mosaics and windows for commercial reasons. This chapter on Chagall reflects a personal view that tends to agree with that. His best works are personal; his home life, his love for Bella, his reaction to anti-Semitism. Chagall said, *“Despite all the troubles of our world, in my heart I have never given up on the love in which I was brought up or on man’s hope in love.”* It is in those works that we see a glimpse of the truth of another statement by Picasso; *“When Chagall paints you do not know if he is asleep or awake. Somewhere or other inside his head there must be an angel.”*

## Wassily Kandinsky (1866 – 1944)

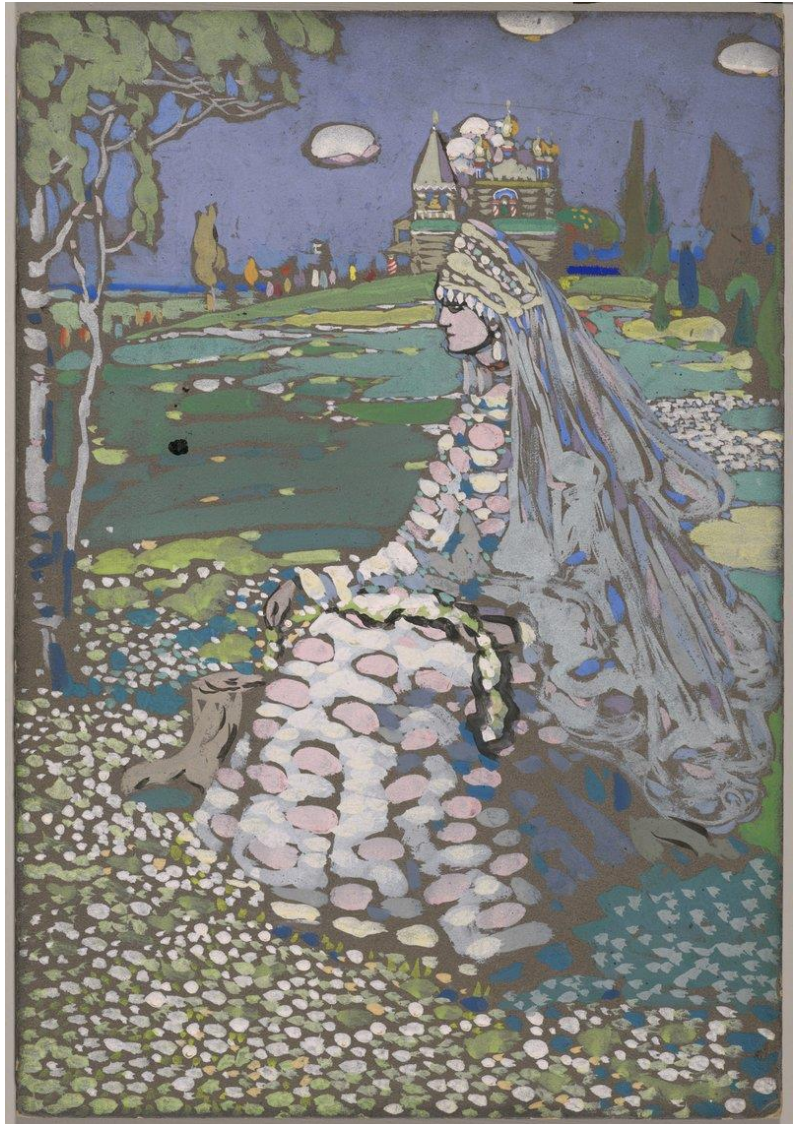
### Early Life and Germany 1896 - 1914

Wassily Kandinsky was born in Moscow, but his family moved to Odessa when he was a small boy. Soon afterwards his parents divorced and his maternal aunt Elisabeth Ticheeva looked after him, reading him Russian and German fairy tales as an escape from tensions at home. He was fascinated by these folk tales and the colourful pictures associated with them. As a youth he studied at Odessa Art School, but pragmatism demanded a profession, and Kandinsky went to Moscow to read law. On a field trip in 1889 to study peasant criminal law and pagan religion in Vologda he was entranced by the colourful decorated houses, furniture and costumes. Kandinsky graduated in 1892 and was appointed a lecturer at Moscow University – a life of teaching and researching law lay ahead of him.

Kandinsky's love of art remained, however, and two events compelled him to abandon an academic career. He saw Claude Monet's *Haystack* at French Impressionist exhibition in Moscow: *"suddenly for the first time I saw a picture. The catalogue told me it was a haystack. I could not recognise it as such. This inability to perceive was embarrassing. I felt that the painter had no right to paint so unclearly. Dully I felt that the subject of the painting was missing. I noticed with astonishment and confusion that not only does the picture enthrall one, but also impresses itself indelibly on the memory, always quite unexpectedly appearing down to the last detail before one's eyes ... what was totally clear to me was the unsuspected power of the palette, a power which had earlier been hidden from me, but which surpassed all my dreams. Painting acquired a fairy tale strength and magnificence (quoted in Kovtun)."*

Also dawning on Kandinsky was the idea that representing the visual world accurately was not essential. Soon afterwards, the power of colour was expressed in a different form for him. At a performance of Wagner's *Lohengrin* at the Moscow Royal Theatre, the orchestral sounds conjured up the colours of sunset and stirred him deeply; *"I saw all my colours in my mind's eye. Wild lines verging on the insane formed drawings before my very eyes."*

Kandinsky switched to studying art. He was mocked by his fellows for his poor drawing in the anatomy class; *"I really felt far more at home in the world of colour than the world of drawing."*



Wassily Kandinsky, *Russian Beauty in a Landscape*, 1904

Kandinsky's early works reflect his feeling. The images are simple – just as the figures in *Iubki* - it is the colour that astounds, arranged largely in patches. *Russian Beauty* reflects the northern peasant tradition of associating the bride and the silver birch. Weiss records that the tree was sacred to pagans (as it is in Celtic mythology) and hundreds were chopped down by Christian missionaries led by St Stephen. *Colourful Life* depicts many peasant practices and beliefs, some coming from Kandinsky's field trip (Weiss notes the archer – in red with white crossbow – and points out that squirrel pelts were the mainstay of the economy, as well as being used for sacrifices to the forest spirit). Saints and religious images appear too.





Wassily Kandinsky, *Colourful Life*, 1907

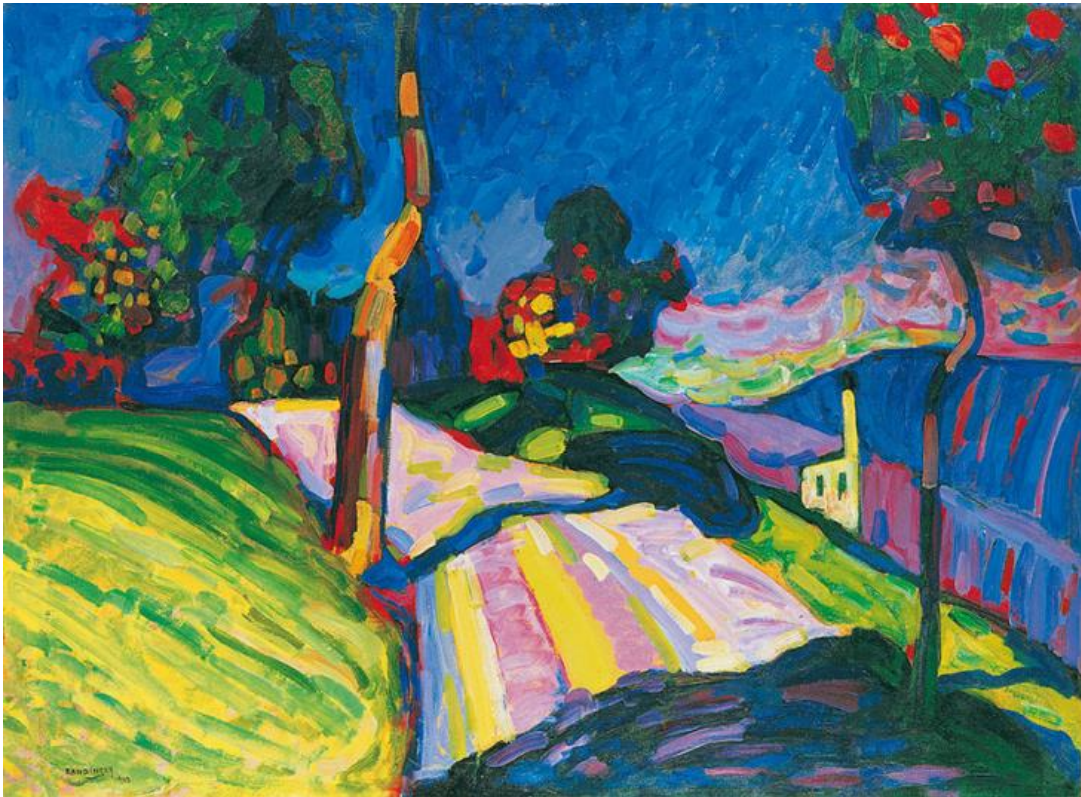
These works were produced as a result of bouts of homesickness for Russia during his five-year travels around Europe with Gabriele Munter, whom Kandinsky met soon after moving to Munich in 1896. Gabriele became his intimate companion when he separated from his wife. She introduced him to Bavarian glass painting which reminded him of the folk art he had seen in Vologda. The characteristic bright colours outlined in black lines appear in paintings Kandinsky produced during their four-month stay in Tunis in 1904/5.

Gabriele and Kandinsky settled in Munich in 1908 in an apartment (no 36) very close to Paul Klee's (no 32). The couple spent summers in Murnau, where Gabriele bought a house in 1909. Kandinsky's marriage breakdown caused him pain and he stayed in a sanatorium when he first returned to Munich in 1908.



Wassily Kandinsky, *Improvisation 6 (African)*, 1909

Munich had long been a vibrant artistic city. Jugendstil, the German counterpart of Art Nouveau, was formed in 1892 and aimed to use powerful undulating lines and decorative ornament entirely subtracted from representational world. August Endell's design for the façade of the Elvira Hofatelier a notable example, which caused a scandal in Munich. Endell scandalised the Establishment when he said, "*the greatest mistake one can make is to believe that Art is the reproduction of Nature*", but this resonated with Kandinsky. The years in Munich and Murnau are marked by a move away from objective painting.



Wassily Kandinsky, *Murnau – Kohlgruberstrasse*, 1908



Wassily Kandinsky, *Riegsee Village Church*, 1908

Colour patches continue for a while, as can be seen in *Murnau – Kohlgruberstrasse*, doubtless influenced by the Fauves. But the patches become zones. Kandinsky wrote a lecture for an exhibition of his work in Cologne in 1914, "... objects began gradually to dissolve more and more in my pictures – this can be seen in nearly all the pictures of 1910 (in *Becks-Malorny*).” This transition can be seen by comparing the two churches. The representational world became unimportant; “I had little thought for houses and trees, drawing coloured lines and blobs on the canvas with my palette knife, making them sing just as powerfully as I knew how (in *Becks-Malorny*).”

Between painting these two churches, Kandinsky produced his first (despite the title) of his Compositions. These were paintings, “consciously planned, carefully worked out” (Honour & Fleming), which Kandinsky described as an, “expression of slowly forming inner feeling.” *Study for Composition II* drew unanimity among Munich’s art critics; “the work of a madman or someone under the effects of morphine or hashish.”



Wassily Kandinsky, *Murnau with Church I*, 1910



Wassily Kandinsky, *Study for Composition II*, 1909-10

Figures can be discerned in *Composition II*, particularly the two riders in the centre – Florus and Laurus, the patron saints of horses long-depicted in icons on a light and dark horse. Also noticeable are the black outlines of glass painting. When talking about the work, Kandinsky stressed one departure from realism: “*In Composition II one can see the free use of colour without regard for the demands of perspective.*” It wasn’t long before the move to abstraction was made: around 1912 saw “*the recognition of the superfluousness, for me, of real forms ... this is the period of transition to pure painting, which is called absolute painting, and the attainment of the abstract form necessary for me.*”



Wassily Kandinsky, *Composition VI*, 1913

*Composition VI* is “*one of the most significant paintings of VK’s Munich years (Becks-Malorny).*” Kandinsky left notes on the work, pointing out that, “*the pink and the white [left centre] seethe in such a way that they seem to lie neither upon the surface of the canvas nor upon any ideal surface. Rather, they appear as if hovering in the air, as if surrounded by steam. This apparent absence of surface, the same uncertainty as to distance can be observed in Russian steam baths. A man standing in the steam is neither close nor far away; he is just somewhere. This feeling of ‘somewhere’ about the principal centre determines the inner sound of the picture.*”

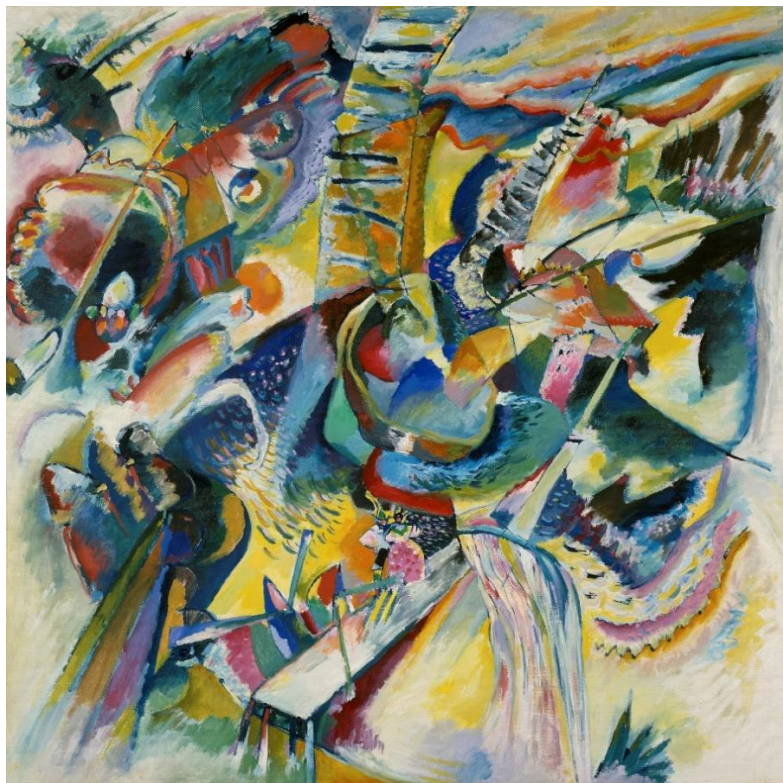
The relationship between colours and sounds and feelings was also explained by Kandinsky. Yellow invokes a disquieting sound; “*yellow can be raised to such a pitch of intensity unbearable to the eye and to the spirit ... affecting us like the shrill sound of a trumpet being played louder and louder.*” Blue is the heavenly colour which awakens the desire for the pure and supernatural, and can be compared to the deep notes of an organ. Green, a mix of blue and yellow, is a peaceful, passive colour which has a beneficial effect upon tired people, but which can become tedious; “*thus pure green is to the realm of colour what the so-called bourgeoisie is to human society; it is an immobile, complacent element, limited in every respect. This green is like a fat, extremely healthy cow, lying motionless, fit only for chewing the cud, regarding the world with stupid, lacklustre eyes.*” Red is a highly lively, turbulent and powerful colour, offering a wealth of psychological and musical effects: “*bright red is like the sound of a fanfare, vermillion like a tuba and madder lake like the high notes of a violin.*” Black amplifies the effects of colours.

Through his colour theory, Kandinsky was able to arrive at abstraction – expressing his inner feelings and the juxtaposition of different colours producing harmonies and disharmonies. The completely object-less *Black Lines* is an example from this period.



Wassily Kandinsky, *Black Lines*, 1913

Kandinsky was worried that complete abstraction might be regarded as simply decoration, whereas for him it was spiritual. So some forms remain in works after 1913. *Gorge Improvisation* was prompted by a trip with Gabriele to one of picturesque gorges near Garmisch-Partenkirchen. A couple in Bavarian costume can be seen on a landing stage with moored boats. Around them are impressions of torrential water. Deluge scenes feature in a few of the Improvisations, which Kandinsky did not produce in the same way as his Compositions. Instead, he described them as “*largely unconscious and spontaneous expression of inner character.*”



Wassily Kandinsky, *Gorge Improvisation*, 1914

### A brief return to Russia and the Bauhaus

When war broke out Gabriele and Kandinsky moved to Switzerland, but the pull from home was strong. The pair separated and Kandinsky returned to Moscow. The break-up depressed him and few paintings were produced in 1915. Meeting Nina Andreevskaya helped him recover, and they married in 1917. He reverted to painting scenes of Moscow, Russian tales and saints. But Moscow was in the grip of Suprematism and this began to influence Kandinsky. *Red Oval* first shows this, but bears old motifs – the boat, for example. *Red Spot* moves closer to Suprematism, but it is cluttered and so lacks the peaceful spirituality which Kazimir Malevich invoked.



Wassily Kandinsky, *Red Oval*, 1920



Wassily Kandinsky, *Red Spot II*, 1921

Kandinsky struggled in a Russia dominated by Suprematists and Constructivists. He was invited to work out a programme for the Institute of Artistic Culture (Inkhuk) set up in Moscow in May 1920. But his comprehensive ideas were rejected by artists and Communist Party members as far too academic, spelling the end of his career in Russia. Walther Gropius, however, heard about the programme and invited Kandinsky to teach it at the Bauhaus, so in 1922 came the move to Weimar, via a brief stop in Berlin.

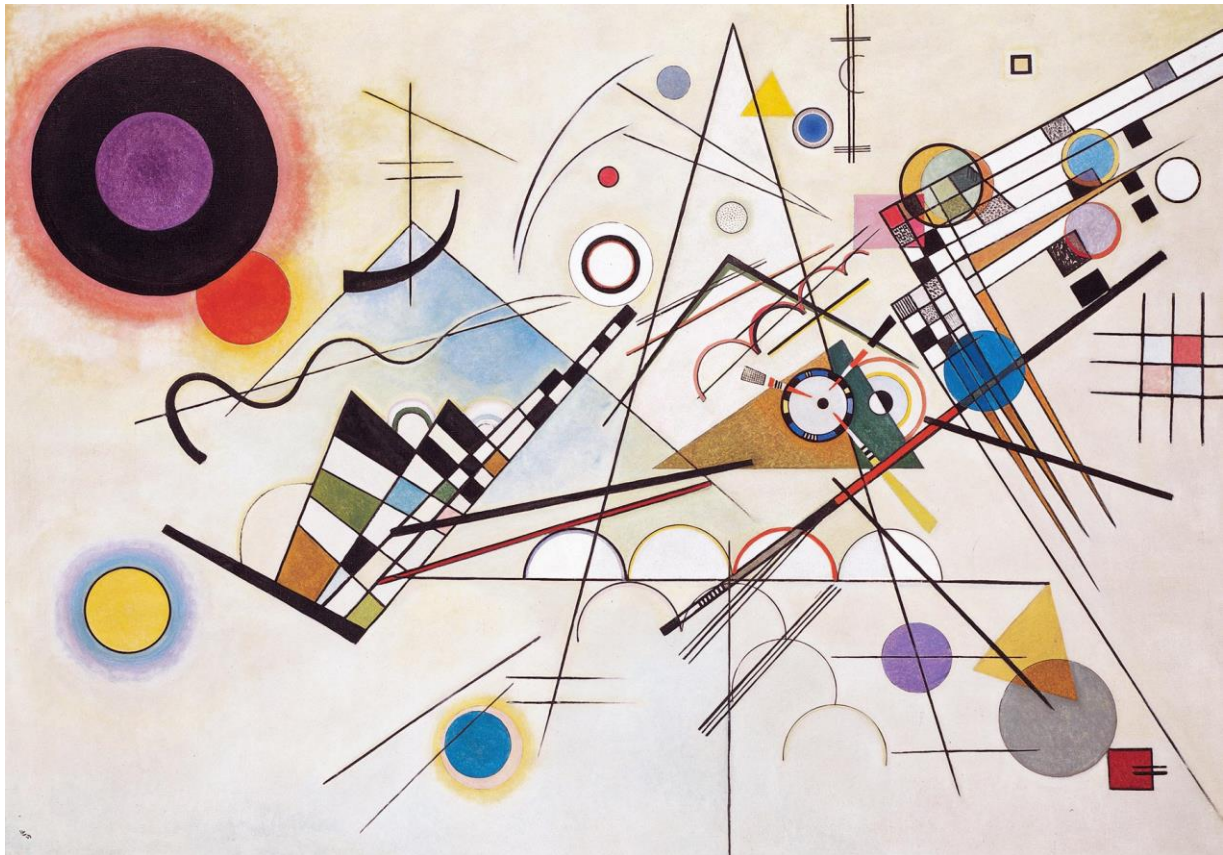


Wassily Kandinsky, *Blue Circle*, 1922



Wassily Kandinsky, *On White II*, 1923

At Weimar, Kandinsky's art became more geometric. The shift was quite marked, as can be seen by comparing *Blue Circle*, one of just two pictures he painted in Berlin before taking up his appointment in Weimar, with *On White II*, produced less than a year later, which is more disciplined and clearer.

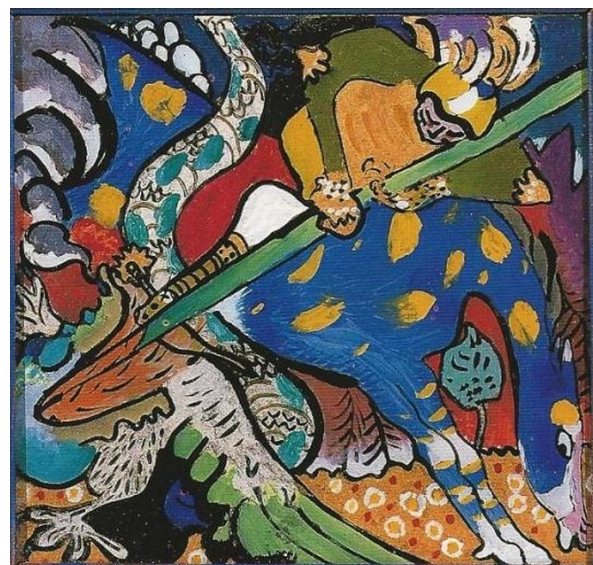


Wassily Kandinsky, *Composition VIII*, 1923

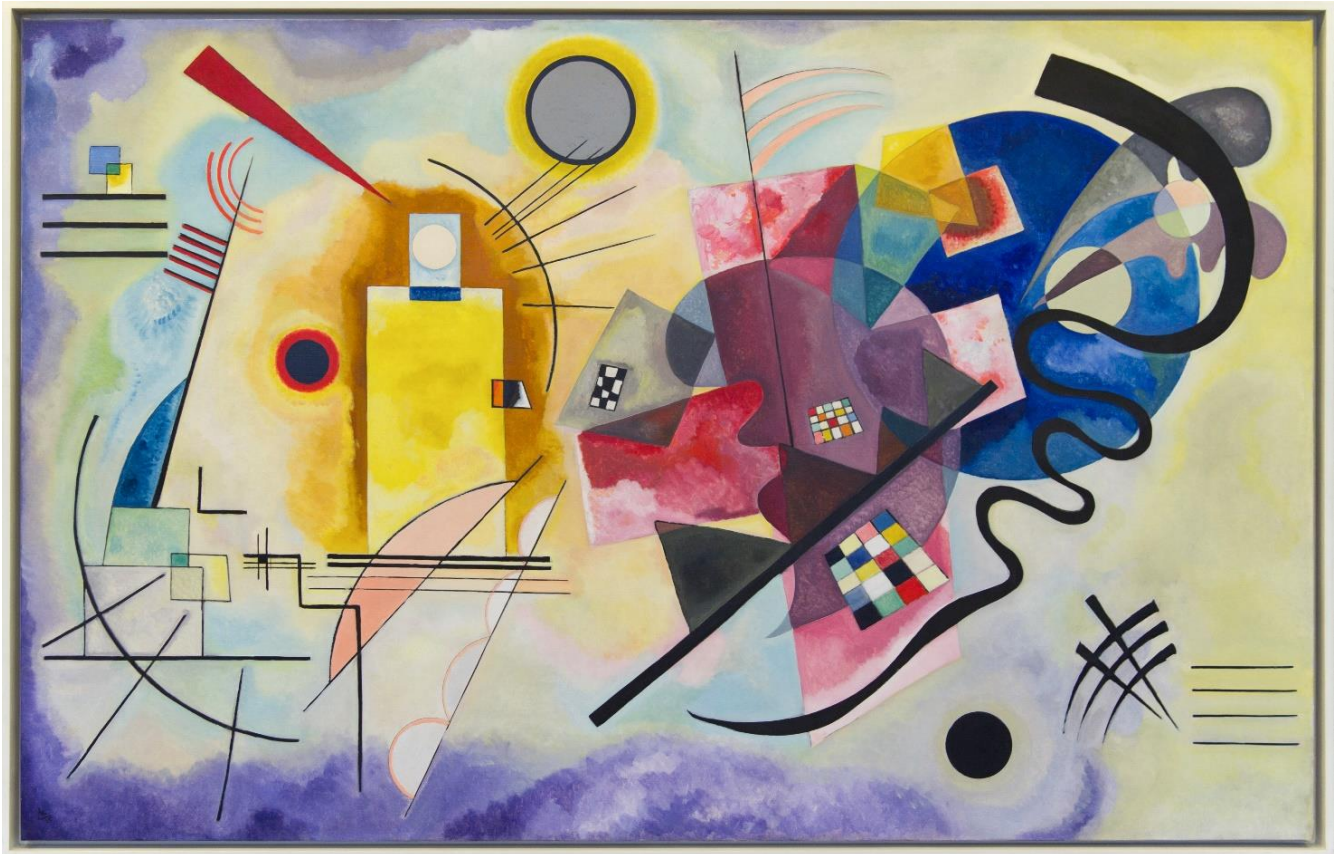
*Composition VIII*, one of the major works of the Weimar period and regarded by Kandinsky as one of his most important post-war works, is almost exclusively geometric. There are contrasts of opposites – yellow and blue, with triangles denoting movement while circles symbolise stability. In his classes at the Bauhaus Kandinsky devoted particular attention to colour and form. He tested his belief that certain colours respond to certain forms by asking his students to fill in the three elementary forms of triangle, square and circle with the primary colour they felt suited it most – by far the largest number coloured the triangle yellow, the square red and the circle blue – confirming his own conclusions (Becks-Malorny).

Kandinsky applied these theories to his work. In *Yellow-Red-Blue* the earthly yellow is firm and the left side seems stable and static. In contrast the right side with heavenly blue dominating seems to want to float away, but is held in place by the red area. The right side has Kandinsky's motif of St George and the Dragon, but now in abbreviated forms: the black snaking line as serpent, the heavy straight line as lance and the circle as horse.

Kandinsky included St George in *Colourful Life* and painted an icon-like version while he was in Munich (right). By the time he painted *Yellow-Red-Blue*, the Bauhaus had moved to Dessau, where the circle would be the dominant form in his art. Kandinsky explained this in a letter in 1930 to Will Grohmann, the art critic and historian.



Wassily Kandinsky, *St George*, 1911

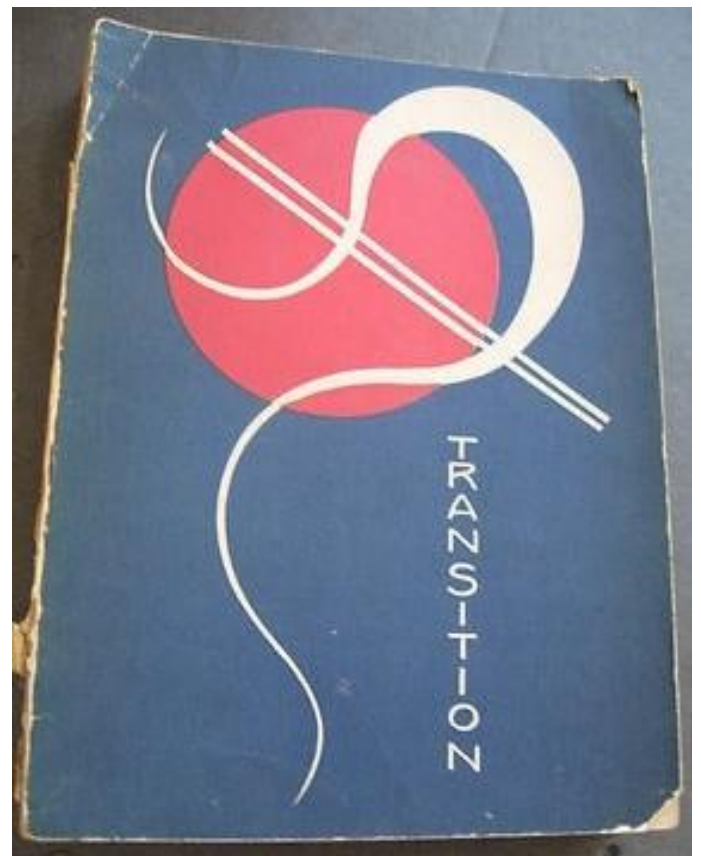


Wassily Kandinsky, *Yellow-Red-Blue*, 1925

“ ... I have in recent years so frequently and so enthusiastically made use of the circle ... I love circles today in the same way I have previously loved, e.g., horses – perhaps even more, since I find in circles more inner possibilities, which is the reason why the circle has replaced the horse.”

This explains the forms in *Yellow-Blue-Red* used to depict St George and the Dragon. Kandinsky repeated the combination in his cover design for the literary journal for surrealism, expressionism and Dadaism *Transition* (Issue 27 April/May 1938).

The circle is the only form used in ten of Kandinsky's works from 1926 to 1929. Life was gentler at Dessau, free from the politics which forced the move from Weimar. Perhaps works like *Several Circles* originate in that calmer atmosphere; strict geometry giving way to freedom. However, Kandinsky produced some works of a regular horizontal-vertical composition, but even in these there is a sense of freedom as if the forms are flying away upwards: *Decisive Pink* and the softer *Gentle Ascent*.



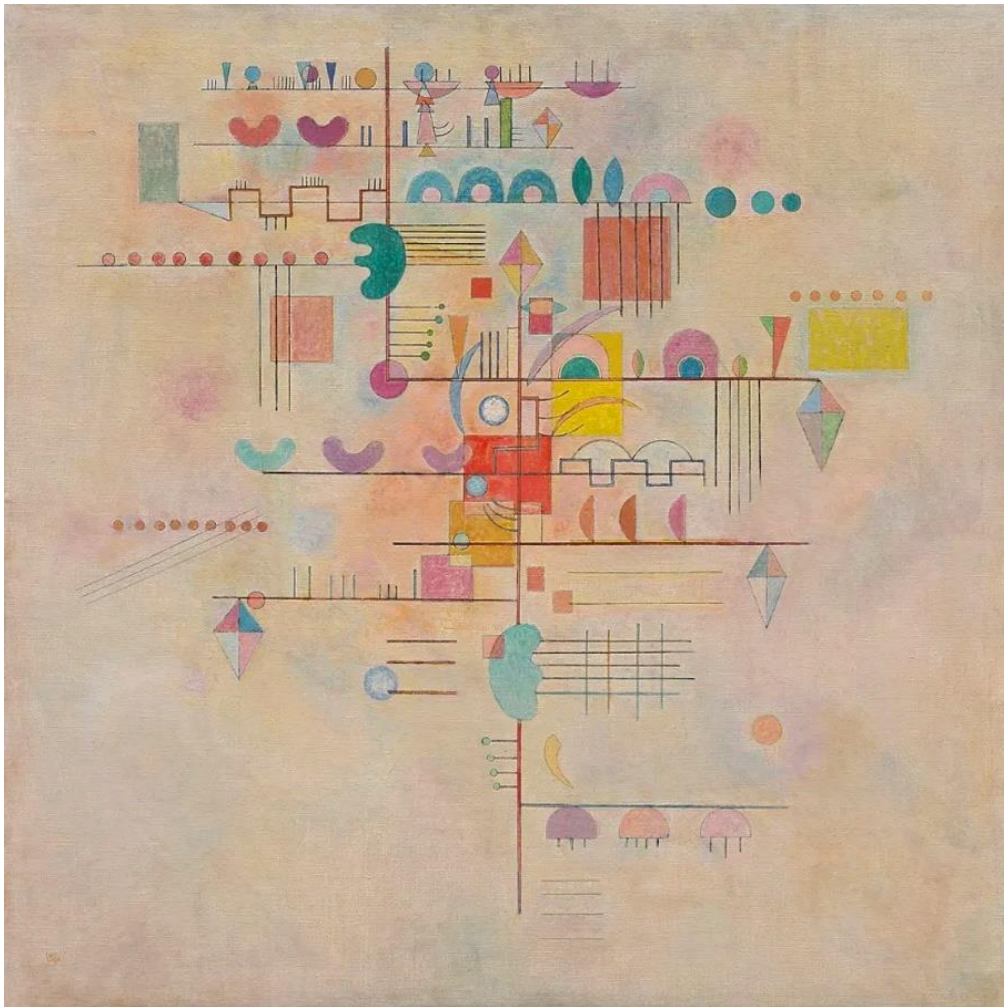




Wassily Kandinsky, *Several Circles*, 1926

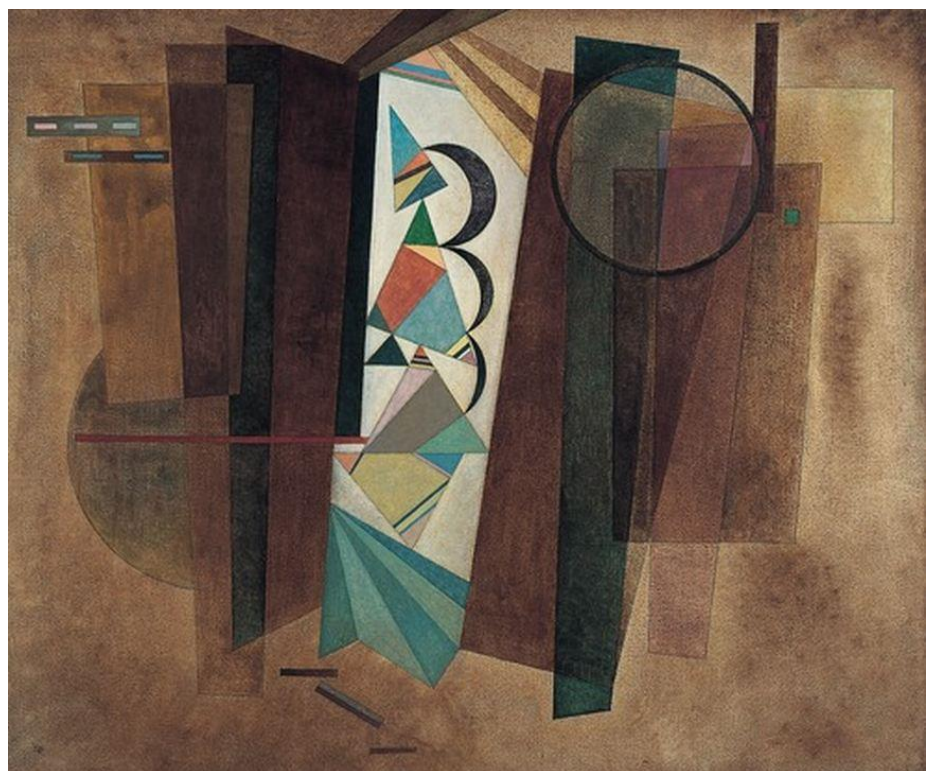


Wassily Kandinsky, *Decisive Pink*, 1932



Wassily Kandinsky, *Gentle Ascent*, 1934

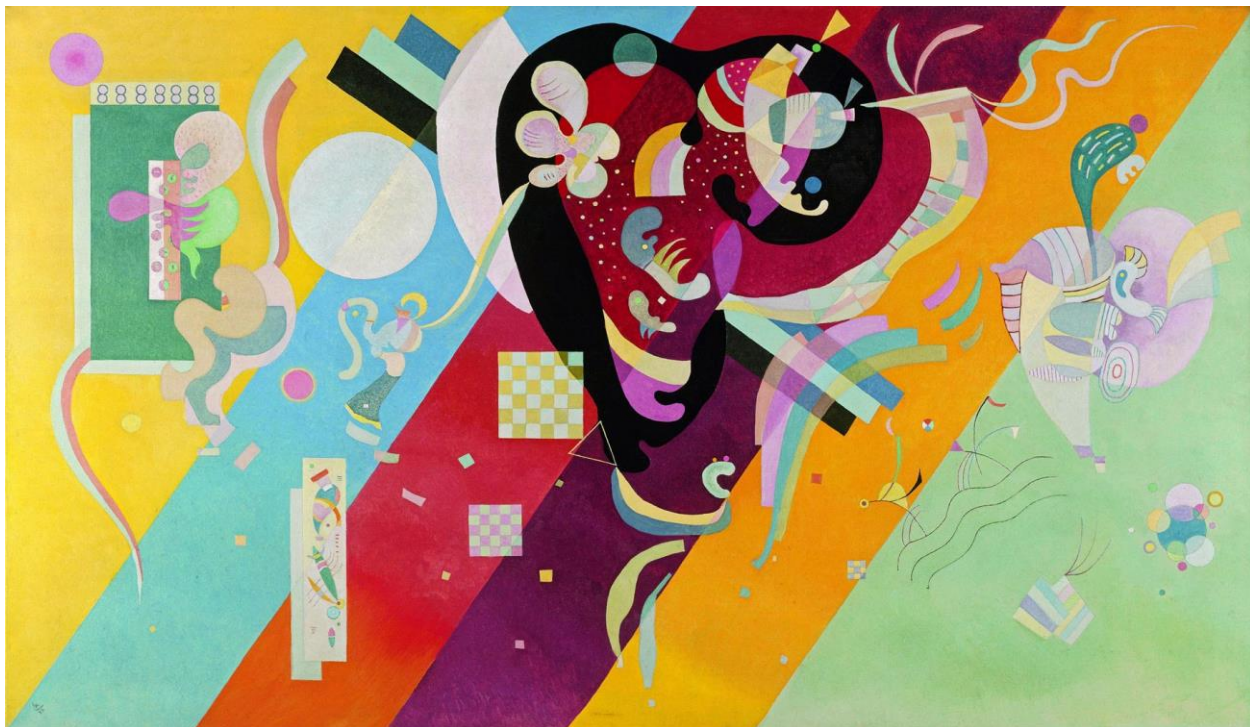
Politics soon bit. At the start of the 1930s Kandinsky and Paul Klee were attacked by Communist students at the Bauhaus for their 'ivory tower painting' and their classes were boycotted. This must have been a reminder of Russia. Then from the opposite end of the political spectrum, the German National Socialist government demanded the closure of the Bauhaus: "*Foreign members of staff must be dismissed without notice, since it is incompatible with good municipal government that our German comrades should go hungry while foreigners are richly remunerated out of taxes paid by the destitute German people.*" Dessau closed in September 1932 and a stay at a disused telephone factory in Berlin was ended by the Gestapo in April 1933. Kandinsky depicted brownshirts hemming in the forces of art and freedom.



Wassily Kandinsky, *Development in Brown*, 1933

## Paris

*Blue Circle* and *On White II* (above) included a few small forms which look biological. These were the theme of the Paris years. In *Reflections on Abstract Art* (1931), Kandinsky wrote; "In time it will be demonstrated for certain that abstract art does not exclude an association with Nature, but that on the contrary this liaison is greater and more intimate than in recent times." *Composition IX* is part geometry and part natural forms, which look like exotic sea creatures.



Wassily Kandinsky, *Composition IX*, 1936



Wassily Kandinsky, *Dominant Curve*, 1936

*Composition IX* has a calmness, the soft tones and biomorphic shapes seem to float across the stable diagonally-arranged stage. More urgent and louder, *Dominant Curve* is “a fireworks show of fantasy and complexity, a swarm of symbols and biomorphic shapes sweep over the once so coolly constructed circles (Kovtun).” The tilting staircase appears in some of Paul Klee’s works, and may refer to the stages of psychological perception.

Kandinsky and Nina had become German citizens in 1928, when they must have seen a long future ahead with the Bauhaus. Their German passports expired in 1938 and on trying to renew them, they were told that they must prove their Aryan bloodline. The couple decided to put Germany behind them and apply for French citizenship, which was granted in 1939. As if to celebrate this new freedom, *Sky Blue* discards any form of geometry and allows natural forms to float gently over the surface.

Paris had not liked the strict geometry of Mondrian and Georges Vantongerloo. Kovtun reports that Kandinsky “was repelled by the constructive artists of the ‘Cercle et Carre’ [Circle and Square] was the group of abstract artists in Paris formed in 1929] and particularly by Mondrian because of their puritanism.” He “admired Joan Miro, Jean Arp and Alberto Magnelli and regularly went to their openings.” Some of Arp’s forms are biomorphic and the organisms in *Sky Blue* would fit admirably in Miro’s works.



Wassily Kandinsky, *Sky Blue*, 1940

Kandinsky continued to love circles, and the connection between painting and music. *Around the Circle* has all manner of creations moving around a circle. The dark background enhances the colours. Daily life under German occupation was hard. Food was in short supply and fuel confiscated for the war. Naturally, painting materials were scarce. After painting his last large picture in the summer of 1942, Kandinsky had to resort to gouache on small pieces of cardboard.



Wassily Kandinsky, *Around the Circle*, 1940

His work was hampered by arteriosclerosis, which sapped his strength and from which he died on the 13th December 1944. Becks-Malorny includes an extract from an article Kandinsky wrote for a Swedish magazine in 1937:

*"I ask you to understand that my painting does not try to reveal 'secrets' to you, that I (as many people think) have not found a 'special language' that has to be 'learned' and without which my painting cannot be read. This should not be made more complicated than it really is.*

*My 'secret' consists solely of the fact that over the years I have obtained that fortunate skill (have maybe fought for it subconsciously) to liberate myself (and with that my painting) from 'destructive secondary sounds', so that each form comes alive – acquires sounds and consequently expression, too. ... Here, I do not need to worry about the 'content', but solely about the right form ... The content of painting is painting. Nothing has to be deciphered. The content, filled with happiness, speaks to that person to whom each form is alive."*

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