



"KANDINSKY'S ABSTRACTION: A TWILIGHT OF SPIRITUALISM IN EUROPEAN LANDSCAPE OF MATERIALISM"

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Abstract

Before the First World War Wassily Kandinsky set out towards forming an abstraction out of an image, one that concealed and erases representation to an ever greater extent. What he wanted was to maintain just enough vestiges of the 'real world' into his canvases as to ensure his viewers would recognize the key that would unlock the set apocalyptic visions and spiritual overtones he planned to impart. In the essays that he penned between 1911 and 1913, Kandinsky underlined the importance of 'concealed' imagery which, in his opinion, was a prerequisite for conferring expressive potential to the work of art and for moving toward what he called 'pure art. ' By 1919, Kandinsky had become a different person. After that he left Munich and went back to Russia, he was able to work with new generation of abstract artists who employed geometrical shapes. This exposure made Kandinsky to change his perception of the place of imagery in his works; Kandinsky to give earlier dates to his efforts in the direction of abstraction and to play down the significance of esoteric symbols in his artistic evolution. During the pre-World War I period there is religious colouring in his work which is evidenced from his reaction to Christian Theosophy and apocalyptic faith which was reigning among the intelligentsia. In the period between 1909 and 1914, there is an emphasis on the apocalyptic and Christian image in Kandinsky's works, for instance in Horsemen of the Apocalypse and Resurrection. Often, these paintings portrayed virtues of judgment and regeneration familiar in imagery from the Revelation to John. While progressing more and more towards abstraction the author started purposely hiding the subjects in his paintings and thus causing the viewers' confusion which was to guide them towards spiritual freedom. This trend testifies to Kandinsky's view on art as ability to proclaim the new spiritually conscious stage of the human evolution.

Keywords: Kandinsky, Small Pleasures, Synesthesia, Apocalyptic Imagery, Spirituality, Abstract Art, Color Vibrations, Theosophy, Pure Form, Folk Art

Introduction

Prior to the First World War, Kandinsky evolved elaborated a serious devotion to using art for the explicit purpose of sending messages to the spiritual plane. As an artist of the first third of the twentieth century, Kandinsky was imbued with the spirit of the works of the thinkers and visionaries of the early twentieth century, first of all Christian Theosophy, he believed that art is one of the main carriers of the message that will help humanity enter a new age. As for his apocalyptic motifs, Kandinsky's fascination with Christian art in the early period of his work 1909-1914 also demonstrated his dogmatic perception of the coming of the better world. These years are the period of intensive work on art, which Kandinsky tried to penetrate to the



spiritual side of the viewer using the symbolism of the depicted images to tell about the struggle between the powers of darkness and the powers of light.

Writing about his productions in 1911–1913, Kandinsky had explained the use of the concealed content in his works. To his mind, by concealing some of the thing depicted behind the shroud of mystery one can achieve a more profound art that would kindle people's inner lights and lead them towards the cognition of the spiritual truths contained within the picture. This was an aspect of his wider philosophy of a 'l'artpur', art that was free from materialism and instead pointed towards the heavens. Thus, although after moving back to Russia in 1919 Kandinsky met quite novices in abstract art, who strive for the simplification of geometrical forms and pure abstraction. This exposure made him to have a rethink on the use of imagery in his works thereby shift his focus from the motifs of abstraction in his previous paintings.

The changes in the concept of abstraction and spirit in Kandinsky's works suggest a gradual transformation in his creative outlook that made him one of the founding fathers of the new art movement of the 20th century, which could be termed as 'modern art.' The works that came out of his spiritual phase were more than exhibiting potential for the new type of streamline abstraction; they also presented a possibility of exploring art as the means of a spiritual evolution. Thus, combining the topicality of the apocalyptic narrative with the forms of abstraction, Kandinsky has furnished the world with a body of perplexing and profound works which desire to tell the audience about the existence and attainability of something 'beyond', about art as the way to spiritual self-realization.

Kandinsky's Use of Hidden Religious Motifs

The process of becoming an abstract painter was not a simple rejection of realism but a grey transition in which Wassily Kandinsky's religious motifs were in fact disguised. Nevertheless, having started to paint fewer works with religious themes in 1911, Kandinsky did not abandon the motifs in which the tradition of religious iconography was reflected, but encoded them. It enabled him to paint on spiritual ideas at one and the same time considering the extremity of abstraction.

Notable among them is Composition V, 1911, a large oil piece on which Kandinsky only wrote: 'The painting comes from the 'Resurrection' that is the awakening of the dead. In this work there is also depicted a trumpet – a symbol frequently used in the religious and apocalyptic systems, especially within the Last Judgment frame mentioned in the Revelation to John. In this work the trumpet appears to be the central object that acts as a point around which the rest of the imagery can be viewed. Unlike many of the other compositions, the representations in Composition V are not readily identifiable; however, the viewers are provided with a kind of key within the composition and are able to decode the ambiguous shapes that expand around the symbol of the trumpet. In the same manner, in Composition VI (1913) where the theme is illustrated by Kandinsky inspired by the Biblical account of flood, he paints forms which though related to the flood story cannot be identified in the initial sight.



Kandinsky's approach of inserting religious motifs into the abstract canvases is a vision of how the spectator should be led to the understanding of the spiritual message of the artwork. He considered such latent images necessary for stretching out the emotional charge of his paintings, because they revealed the connection between the material and the spiritual, which the artist aimed at. In fact, moving through the painting to identify these motifs was almost a representation of the path to salvation, one of the core concerns of Kandinsky's oeuvre.

This is well illustrated in Kandinsky's paintings, particularly the Last Judgment which he painted in 1912, where the imagery only comes into focus when the viewer concentrates on a symbol, here a black outlined trumpet in the upper right corner. The clarion trumpet like this motif of Composition V serves to make clear the rest of the painting into an ascending triangle of a mountain and above it a walled city in which the falling towers are part of an apocalyptic reference. In this way, Kandinsky put motifs into his compositions which linked them to the spiritual experiences which preceded them.

The relevance of these concealed religiosity references can also be observed in contrast between the later and the earlier works of Kandinsky, which are painted by him in abstract manner and those where the reference to the real world objects could be detected. For example, motifs in paintings of 1912, 1913, 1914 many of which do not have titles or textual descriptions of subject matter can be related to earlier works with more explicit religious subjects. Such continuity indicates that, even as Kandinsky progressed more into abstraction, he retained the profound spiritual substrate, which he had cultivated in the earlier days. That is why Kandinsky was able to use secular forms and signs and, at the same time, express spiritual ideas at the level of hidden imagery, which makes him a pioneer for a spiritual approach to abstraction as a connection between the material and the spiritual world.

The Role of Ambiguity in Kandinsky's Abstract Style

In this paper I am analysing how ambiguity became the crucial aspect for Wassily Kandinsky's abstraction. Abstraction for Kandinsky was not about the exclusion of the representational forms but about the development of a multi-scalar semiotic system that may convey the profound psychological and spirituality experience. He suspected that color and line, if employed in their own right, that is, without having regard to the external world, would reduce abstract art to mere ornamentation, which contained no significance. In its turn, to prevent such a problem, Kandinsky emphasized the need to preserve some definite points – albeit concealed or semantically oblique – so that the viewer could orient herself/himself in the composition and get to the intended religious message.

Nevertheless, drawing on Kandinsky's concern that abstraction might turn into mere ornamentation, one can address here his work Concerning the Spiritual in Art (1912). In this work, he cautioned that the use of pure colour, form which is cut off from exterior reality, this would lead to what he scornfully called the geometrical 'ornament', similar to the design on a tie or on a carpet. For Kandinsky – the essence of abstract art is in the emotions and ideas it



produces, and this is why he tried to find equilibrium between abstract shapes on the one hand and the signs, which are secretly encoded into the artwork on the other hand.

In order to resolve this tension, Kandinsky suggested a method of camouflaging objects in his paintings, so that they would become abstract still, but would still be easily recognizable by the viewer. The use of this approach enabled him to paint in a manner where there is an interplay between the painted figuration and the viewer and a tension between the depicted referent and what is painted. Every time the viewer recognized these covert signals, the geometrical shapes would start revealing their meanings so as to complete a transition from physical reality to the realm of metaphysical.

The aspect of the ambiguity as applied by Kandinsky did not only concern the form, but also the colors as well as the line. He considered that, as music may open emotion, color can do so as well. While line may hint at motion in the same way that dance suggests it. But he argued that these elements were not sufficient to transmit the sophisticated metaphysical concepts. The idea, as Kandinsky sought was that there should be something more to comprehend than what is actually seen; there should be hidden messages conveyed through colors, lines as well as forms. Such transitional move was supposed to guide the viewer into the sphere of abstraction gradually and thus aiming at a direct awakening of the sense organs – the spirits.

In his autobiography written in 1913, Kandinsky was quite open about the difficulties that the new art of abstraction defined for both – artists and viewers. Speaking about abstraction he urged artists to use it moderately, proposing to mix abstract forms and unnoticed signs in order not to deprive work of understanding. This approach is one that is seen in his works of this period where in his paintings he concealed objects which he was able to abstract yet retain a working symbolism.

That is why Kandinsky's references to the use of points of reference in abstract art can be seen as a conceptual decision rather than aesthetic one. He thought of art as a means to cause people to think higher thoughts and felt that it could do so only if it is grounded in the earth even in its most ethereal expressions. Thus, while all of Kandinsky's objects were veiled – he physically obscured them within his compositions – he also established an effective link between things that can be seen and things that cannot be seen, material and non-material things, and abstract painting retained its function of conveying important ideas.

Influence of Theosophy and Symbolism on Kandinsky's Abstraction

It is noteworthy that the formation of W. Kandinsky's abstract painting was clearly associated with the Art of Theosophy and Symbolism, but the peculiarities of Steiner's ideas as well as Symbolist poetry by Maurice Maeterlinck. These things that influenced Kandinsky, only allowed him to form the foundations for his own approach to art, which included the spiritual potential of the art works and the obscure symbolism and imagery as a method for the transmission of multifaceted concepts and ideas.



Rudolf Steiner, an influential Theosophist, claimed that the ordinary person could not perceive the ‘supersensible world,’ in which ‘colours and forms are floating in space. He insisted on myth, saga, comparison to explain spiritual knowledge and said that suggestion was stronger than explication because of what is not seen is deeper than what is seen. In a similar way, Steiner’s ideas appealed to Kandinsky who was looking for a way to overcome the materialism inherent with representation in art to reach the spirituality inherent in the abstract.

Usual procedure of some typology of concealing an image is reflected in Kandinsky due to Steiner. Kandinsky painted everything in such a way that it was quite concealed and became a part of multifaceted geometrical shapes to make it look rather enigmatic and captivating so that the viewer begins to decipher something. Kandinsky thought this would help him better understand the esoteric messages that he was determined lies within many of his paintings, in the same way that Steiner wrote that hidden knowledge could be used to attain being.

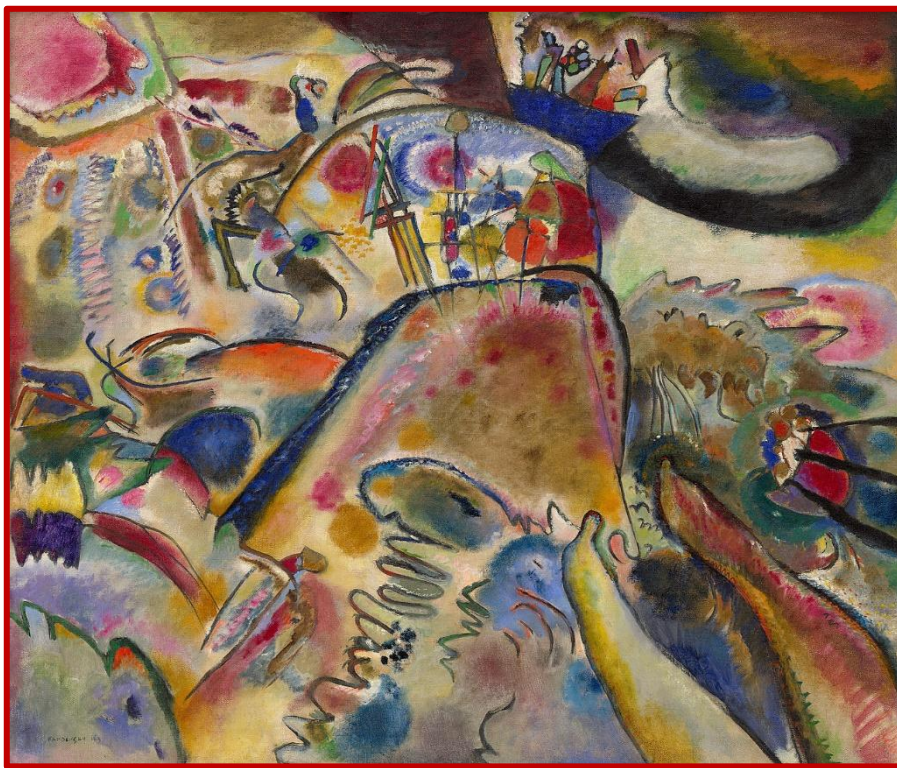
This paper also showed that Kandinsky’s dabbling with both Literature and music were tactical in his conversion to the acceptance of abstraction. Through the Symbolist movement of art, which aimed at suggesting the concentration, the inexpressible through the things that were metaphoric of the content that was to be envisaged, Kandinsky had been provided with the inspired use of the hidden imagery. While Kandinsky was engaged with Symbolist ideas about art and language, two were central: That language, if its literal content was obscured, could stir passions with a powerful effect on behavior, which influenced his use of paintings, while applying the plotting of the Symbolists in artistic works.

Among those authors that Kandinsky admired was Maurice Maeterlinck, the highly famous Symbolist dramatist. Another aspect of Maeterlinck’s work which was close to Kandinsky was the use of the element of the unknown and the mysterious in the plays which were to generate a ‘supernatural’ experience in the case of the spectators deeply influenced Kandinsky as well. What especially impressed Kandinsky was Maeterlinck’s attitude to language, as the latter succeeded in stripping the words of references to the external world, thus making them vibrate in an emotional way. This was due to the aim in paintings such as those made by Kandinsky that the objects depicted had to be depicted in residual form, that is, in an organic way that would create a strong emotional appeal.

Theosophy and Symbolism also met in the research of Kandinsky the phenomenon of synesthesia—the harmony of the different senses. This concept was familiar to both Theosophists and Symbolists and presupposed that one of the senses could stimulate another, thus generating the many-vectored perception of the world that might bring the individual to Spiritual State. He himself successfully employed this principle in his paintings, as he thought that every color, shape, and line could create a proper spiritual gust in human beings. Rather than having an ideal balance between them, his purpose was to utilize them in contra puncta manner – the chaos of the modern world to him was la de da.

Theosophy and Symbolism are the two most important movements in the development of Kandinsky's ideas about abstraction and the popularity of spiritual messages in the art works. By using the techniques such as the presence of the hidden picture and distortions in the picture, Kandinsky attempted to create an enigmatic system of signs to convey the context of the spiritual plane and asked the viewer to make a search for the truth. Thus, his work can be still studied as an evidence of art as a phenomenon which is in a way devoted to the spiritual world rather than physical one, which marks Kandinsky as one of the most influential artists in terms of executing the ideas of abstract art.

KANDINSKY



**Vasily Kandinsky, *Small Pleasures*, 1913, oil on canvas,
110.2 x 119.4 cm (Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York)**

Vasily Kandinsky's *Small Pleasures* (1913) might look somewhat like an expression of apostrophized hysteric with organic motifs and bright shades of colors. The central inverted U, enclosed by the serpentine strips and the colour splashes, might look solely decorative but is not. The U likely stands for a mountain which is a symbol of spiritual journey and the other forms symbolize forces or perhaps battles of some sort. Symbolic representation in Kandinsky's paintings makes viewers to look behind the outer layer of the painting in order to see spiritual and emotional aspects, for which he believed art to be otherworldly.



Vasily Kandinsky, *With Sun*, 1910, glass painting,
30.6 x 40.3 cm (Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus)

But one may find an understanding of the points of *Small Pleasures* in the work created three years before it, where the subject is somewhat more obvious. In that earlier work, the inverted U is actually shown as a hill, on which is built a city of tall towers and onion domes, as found in Russian design. Above the hill, the blue water, and below it yellow-orange flames; one couple lies on the grass. To the left, three horsemen crawl up the slope; to the right, three men try to flee in a red rowboat. It is in this context that *Small Pleasures* is seen as a more distanced, but similarly freighted, development of these themes.

APOCALYPSE

The imagery in *Small Pleasures* by Kandinsky can also be regarded as having revelations, in the regard of the text which is as follows: the revelation of the apocalypse. This scene is rather associated with the various disasters preceding the appearance of Christ and the creation of a spiritual Garden of Eden. St. John the Divine foretells a period of immense destruction: such as angels blowing trumpets; the raising of the four horses of the apocalypse wars, pestilence, famine and death. ; the sun becoming black and the moon being turned into blood red. There will be showers of fire and torrents of angry waters destroying the earth. Kandinsky often depicted apocalyptic themes in his works painted between 1909-1913; *Small Pleasures*, though not as Nevzorov's works, reflects such themes but in a more abstract manner.



**Vasily Kandinsky, *All Saints I*, 1911, glass painting,
34.5 x 40.5 cm (Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus)**

There is no doubt that in *All Saints I*, it is relatively easy to identify the angel on the left trumpet, flood waters and fires, souls coming out of the grave to be judged. The wing of the angel overlaps with the image of saint George, the patron of Kandinsky's 'Der Blaue Reiter' group, and three old Russian saints, Vladimir, Boris and Gleb.

And out of destruction, people are beginning to see the signs of a new spirit and new life. A dove under the angel's trumpet means previous annihilation of the world by God – the attempt of purification. Resurrection or 'Raising from the Dead' is indicated by Christ on the cross in the background and a phoenix and a butterfly to the extreme right of the image. It should be noted that, similarly to mythological phoenix that rises from the ashes of the dead parent, butterflies start their life within the shelter of a cocoon, in the form of a caterpillar.

In the upper left, we see a walled city with dome-capped towers next to another emblem of rebirth: the still new dawn. This city is the 'new Jerusalem', the 'city that stands on the hill', of the revelation and the sermon on the mount where it is prophesied that in the kingdom of heaven the meek shall inherit the earth and the everlasting kingdom shall be given to them (Revelation 21:2; Matthew 5; Psalm 37).

Kandinsky's fascination with such themes pertains to his vision of the world entering a stage of transformation from the material to a 'Spiritual Epoch'. This apocalyptic thinking was quite popular in the Theosophical context of the period.

PRIMITIVISM



**Unknown artist, *Anna Teaching Mary*, glass painting,
early 19th century (Museum für Volkskultur in Württemberg, Waldenbuch)**

Also a vital factor when it came to Kandinsky's developments during this period was primitivism. Each of the paintings *All Saints I* and *With Sun* was produced as a result of the application of the method known as *hinterglasmalerei* – the painting on the back of the glass. Symmetrical compositions were characteristic of folk art of Russia and some districts of southern Germany, where Kandinsky worked at that time, but such an organization of the picture was inapplicable for professional artists. Kandinsky's acquaintance with the works of Russian folk artists took place during an ethnographical trip to Vologda province in Northern Russia in the 1890s. It becomes clear that this experience greatly shaped the Surrealist's desire to continue to derive ideas from art produced by graphic designers, medieval craftsmen, people of other nationalities or any culture not belonging to the Western world or classified as 'primitive'. He considered that the style which dominated investigative reports in professional academies of art was a narrowly materialistic one that ignored the external appearance of an object and was, therefore, incapable of presenting significant spiritual properties of an object.

Kandinsky introduced the idea of an artist as a shaman – a Russian-Siberian tradition – who is an intermediary between the visible and the invisible world and a mediator to take society to the “Epoch of the Great Spiritual”. It is equally due to this link with primitivism that Kandinsky chose to work with a minimum of drawing. In *hinterglasmalerei*, objects are depicted in a manner that is almost childlike: very stereotyped, but the subject’s likeness is depicted without much effort to capture their actual likeness.

Indeed, Kandinsky’s engagement of this expressionistic, simplification of the naturalistic manner could be seen as an effort to more squarely locate his painting’s work within his theological projects. In so doing, he turned away from the sort of illustrative detail which characterizes much academic art, preferring to produce paintings of a nature which will be understood on a more metaphorical level, which will help people to move beyond the physical and into the realm of the spiritual. This approach enabled Kandinsky to incorporate both primitivism and more general vision of art into the single picture resulting in the creation of a new specific artistic language that combines the spiritual power of the folk art with the possibility of the abstract art of the modern epoch.

TOWARD ABSTRACTION



Vasily Kandinsky, *All Saints I*, 1911, oil and gouache on cardboard, 50 x 64.8 cm (Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus)

Images in the second version are, however, difficult to decipher since Kandinsky abstracted *All Saints I* for what he believed to be true: art as a spiritual route. Through this, Kandinsky is forcing the viewers to think much harder over the painting and scrutinize the painting so as to be able to have a shot at interpreting the spiritual aspect of the work. This can be done in a way that reflects the conditions and the enigmatic nature of apocalyptic processes, thus

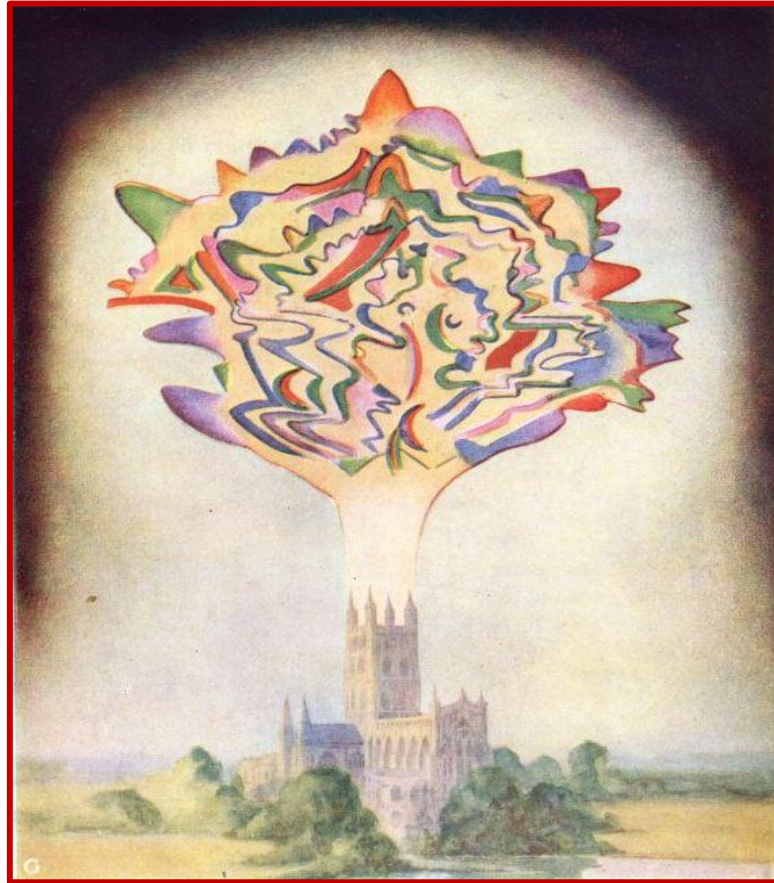
drawing the audience's attention to the nature of the world and the timelessness of such themes. In Kandinsky's works the geometric shape should be regarded as liberating people from the materialist vision and leading a person to the contemplation about spiritual values and the process of the spiritual change.



**Vasily Kandinsky, *Small Pleasures*, 1913, oil on canvas,
110.2 x 119.4 cm (Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York)**

In this regard, Kandinsky's approach to abstraction functions in two ways. First of all, he blurs the reference in order to leave no chance for the spectators to be tied to the real life with the help of the familiar objects. That is why, reducing the details of the representation to the simplest and more abstract, Kandinsky intends to acquaint the viewer with the transition to a new – spiritual – era. But he also realizes that while such an approach of total absence of representations might be helpful to some individuals, it might also be difficult for them to grasp since many of them still operate in the physical plane of existence. In order to fill this gap, the author begins from the depiction of objects familiar to the viewer and concepts borrowed from mythology and religion introduced stylistically as folk art; then the author deconstructs such images, making the process of recognition subordinated, secondary, or merely latent. According to Kandinsky, it is not the subject matter that informs the artwork but the artistic materiality of painting – its colours, lines, and the rhythms it creates. This consolidation of the specific and the general leads the spectators to the realm of the spiritual as to the interpretation of his work.

SYNESTHESIA



“A ringing chorus by Gounod,” from Annie Besant and C. W. Leadbeater, *Thought Forms* (London, 1901), plate G

For Kandinsky, the elements of relation between color, music, and spirituality was probably strengthened by the effects of synesthesia, a disorder of the mind in which different sensations are combined, and a person can feel color and taste shapes. This is but hinted at in language where we refer to something loud being a loud color or sharp being a sharp cheese. For example in Theosophical writings synesthesia is depicted with such models as a cloud of color being perceived rising from the church tower for notes of a chorus composed by Charles Gounod. One can imagine how Kandinsky’s synesthesia would dramatically have affected his theories on the religious properties of color and shape.



**Vasily Kandinsky, *Small Pleasures*, 1913, oil on canvas,
110.2 x 119.4 cm (Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York)**

While standing before Kandinsky's *Small Pleasures* perhaps one might feel a hidden message of certain apocalyptic motifs that might serve to orient the viewer to the work's inner spirituality. But, according to Kandinsky, people were completely wrong – it was impossible to pay too much attention to the objects painted by him. However, the message of spirituality as an ontological type is disclosed through the clear and refined shapes and by the carefully balanced vibration of hues and tones. All these elements are intended for the impact on our souls, bringing the perception beyond the physical and offering the spiritual, what Kandinsky pursued as the goal of art.

Conclusion

Derived from Kandinsky's *Small Pleasures* and the rest of his production, some of his practices were revolutionary for the time and showed that art, indeed, could convey spirituality. Kandinsky consciously shifted away from realism details into more abstract level, as he implied that there are things beyond an object and intended the audience to find more than the object's subject matter in the paintings. Synesthesia—that is the combination of sensory impression which allowed Vriesse translate the shades of color, forms, and rhythmic into the vibrations of emotions and spirituality. Kandinsky was to offer the connoisseurs more



than a depiction of objectivity by abstracting what is in front of us in a bid to help them discover the essence of what is inside of them.

Kandinsky's work involves ideals that engrave the notion of art as a form of spirituality that is beyond the physical plane. His use of Theosophical precepts and his distinctive artistic idiom point to it in their entirety. In conclusion, Kandinsky's contribution in the world of art is a quality of unifying art and spiritual essence by adopting colour, shape and purpose to a new style in the modern world that adapts spiritual relocation of the abstract. In *Small Pleasures* Kandinsky presents the audience with art and an invitation to pay more than lip service to transcendental, other-worldly aspects of life and meaning in the meaningless abundance of the dots abstracted into the higher symbolism.

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