

From Representation to Non-Objective Art: Spiritual Language in Kandinsky's *Composition* Series

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Abstract: Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) was an early figure in non-objective art in the early 20th century who believed that painting should convey spiritual and emotional connotations rather than represent external objects. This paper studies the development of his philosophy of abstraction and how he attempted to convey spiritual ideas in terms of pure form and colour. In the *Composition* series (1910–1913), it is proposed that these works show how abstraction became a spiritual language and that Kandinsky believed painting could move away from the material world to create a multi-sensory experience inspired by music. Based on his own theoretical writings and other representative art-historical research, this study first lays a theoretical and biographical foundation for Kandinsky's years in Munich, his study of Theosophy, and his participation in the Blue Rider circle. Then, in order, it studies the *Composition* series and traces the development of his work from partially figurative paintings with apocalyptic and religious symbolism to fully non-objective abstraction in *Composition VII*. In the context of other modern art, Kandinsky systematically broke down representation and thus altered the aim of painting to explore profound, spiritual worlds; this became a new mode for apprehending reality in art.

Keywords: Wassily Kandinsky, abstraction, non-objective art, spirituality, synesthesia.

1. Introduction

Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944), a Russian artist, was one of the first to develop non-objective art in the early 20th century. He advocated for this way of expression in his work to convey his thoughts on the spiritual and emotional impact of art. How did he first come to think abstractly, and in what ways did he present spiritual concepts through pure shapes and colours? These questions are important because, in his pursuit of abstraction, he also modified the notion of painting and sought to convey profound spiritual and emotional thoughts. This paper believes that Kandinsky's *Composition* series shows how abstraction can be used as a language of spirituality, and he believed that paintings should transcend the material world to create a multi-sensory experience inspired by music. The following section presents the fundamental works by Kandinsky and other representative scholars who have studied it, providing a theoretical foundation for this paper. The subsequent section will introduce the historical and intellectual background of his work, and then, in detail, trace the development of his control over abstraction in the *Composition* series. Kandinsky's works are also examples of the Modernist movement. By observing the progress of his work from figures to abstraction, one can see that art is also a way to express emotion and spirit that stirs people deeply.

2. Literature Review

One of the first representative works of Kandinsky's ideas on non-objective art is "Concerning the Spiritual in Art" (1912). This text holds that painting should be driven by an "inner necessity", that is, the artist creates out of a deep spiritual desire rather than from external observation; colour and form are thus used to express spiritual power rather than to reproduce reality [1]. Kandinsky thinks that both music and painting can express the soul. This basic work provides the

philosophical foundation for non-objective art and sets out the goal of eliminating imitation of nature in art to explore its profound implications. It can also be seen that Kandinsky believed non-objective art expressed emotions and inner feelings.

Later in life, Kandinsky began to explore how all sorts of visual elements, such as points, lines and planes, could be combined in his works to create spiritual unity, and thus produced "Point and Line to Plane" (1947) [2]. Forms and shapes are used with emotion and symbolism, diagonal lines are used to show tension, and circles represent unity and concentration [2]. The book introduces how spiritual art is achieved by means of organisation of basic elements and builds upon the theories proposed in "Concerning the Spiritual in Art". Kandinsky used different lines, points and planes to convey emotions, and thus his work achieved this effect through these techniques.

Many top scholars of Kandinsky point out the multiple influences on his work. In *Kandinsky: The Path to Abstraction* (2006), Hartwig Fischer and Sean Rainbird examine the changes in Kandinsky's work from early figurative pieces to his later abstractions and investigate the influence of Theosophy, Russian folk art and music on his creation [3]. This volume provides the biographical and cultural background to help explain why Kandinsky turned to abstraction and why it attracted the attention of others at the beginning of the twentieth century. It can add some real-life examples and intellectual movements to Kandinsky's writing.

Other scholars have extended this cultural background through comparisons with the works of other modernists. In *Paths to the Absolute*, John Golding places Kandinsky with artists such as Mondrian, Pollock and Rothko, and these artists also sought spiritual connotations in abstraction [4]. Golding makes direct thematic connections between their works, such as their shared desire to break free from material life. Golding's account does not believe that Kandinsky's spirituality is extraordinary; rather, he belongs to the broader

trend of abstraction in art that seeks to reveal the essential qualities of life. Based on the above comparison, Kandinsky's non-objective art should be understood as part of a broader philosophical movement.

Recently, the edited volume *Kandinsky's Universe: Geometric Abstractions in the 20th Century* (2025) has also covered a larger network of twentieth-century abstractionists [5]. Through visual comparison and critical essays, it can be seen that Kandinsky's theories have been applied by many artists over time, and geometric abstraction has become a common language for exploring spirituality. Kandinsky was one of the most influential artists of the 20th century, and he was considered a pioneer of abstract art.

Kandinsky's own writings present the ideological and formal systems for his non-objective art; Fischer and Rainbird describe the personal experiences that led to the formulation of these theories; Golding and *Kandinsky's Universe* explore how he interacted with his peers at the time and what made his work innovative and influential.

3. Historical and Intellectual Context

Kandinsky's life in Munich, his involvement with Theosophy, and his participation in the establishment of the Blue Rider group all had an impact on his ideas of art and his work in abstraction.

In the years Kandinsky lived in Munich between 1896 and 1914, he developed many of the ideas that would form the basis of his new style. At the turn of the 20th century, Munich was a place where new ideas took root; thus, writers of the Symbolist school, modern musicians and artists were able to depart from tradition. Kandinsky was also interested in Theosophy at the same time, and Helena Blavatsky had formed this spiritual movement by integrating Eastern mysticism with Western occultism. Theosophy thought that the material world was only an illusion covering a deeper spiritual order, and art could be employed to show people this hidden truth. These ideas were in line with Kandinsky's belief that painting should go beyond depiction, and he came to believe that artists had a moral responsibility to make people feel the unknown sides of life.

In 1911, Kandinsky and Franz Marc, along with other like-minded artists, founded the group *Der Blaue Reiter* (The Blue Rider). Kandinsky believed that the colour blue had a spiritual quality, so he chose it to represent the horse-rider, and thus also movement out of the material world. The group's almanac, also titled *Der Blaue Reiter*, was first published in Munich in 1912 and collected essays by Kandinsky and Marc, as well as reproductions of works by artists such as Cézanne, Gauguin, and Van Gogh. It also included examples of Bavarian glass painting, African sculpture and children's drawings, and the editors believed that all kinds of artistic expression could be a way to achieve spiritual rejuvenation [6]. As J. A. Thwaites reports, the Blue Rider artists in Munich were motivated by "a belief in the capacity of art to transcend material reality and awaken a spiritual response" [7]. The Blue Rider Circle advocated for intuition, spontaneity and the inner demand of life in art. Kandinsky's theoretical works at this time, such as "Concerning the Spiritual in Art", put forward his idea that art should express the artist's inner world rather than imitate the outside world.

Exposure to modern music and compositions by Arnold Schoenberg also contributed to this change. After hearing a Schoenberg performance in Munich in 1911, Kandinsky was convinced that the spirit of creation was free from all

conventional forms and rules. Schoenberg's new methods for harmony and organisation mirrored Kandinsky's efforts to remove identifiable subjects from paintings, and he sought a form of expression that could reach people's souls through art.

Kandinsky thus created the first system of non-objective art by concentrating on pure forms and colours rather than storytelling. In addition to his work in Munich, he was also involved in Theosophy, music and the Blue Rider group; thus, he also helped shape much of twentieth-century modernism. The reason for his abstract paintings was not a new formal system, but rather a new way of being. Through these innovations, Kandinsky wished to build an all-encompassing system of signs that could reach the soul directly and make the viewer experience art as an intimate meeting with profound truths.

4. The Composition Series

Kandinsky's Composition series aimed to express spiritual ideas through art. Starting in 1910, these works explored ideas and emotions through arrangements of colour.

4.1. Apocalyptic Symbolism and Early Abstraction in Composition II

Although Composition I (1910) and Composition II (1910) are no longer available, the accounts suggest that they were early attempts to combine musical analogies with expressive colour fields, and they represented the beginning of Kandinsky's intention from 1910 to 1914 to move his work from abstraction towards full non-objective art. Susan Alyson Stein believes that Kandinsky had long thought that, much like music, painting could reach a purely abstract language of form and colour to arouse strong spiritual and emotional responses [8]. Figure 1 is a sketch of what Composition II would have looked like. There are still some figurative expressions, such as four upright figures at the corners, which may be worshippers or saints in a procession. Domes at the top right of the building are similar to those in Orthodox churches, so they are connected with Kandinsky's ideas of Russian spiritual architecture. The symbolic crosses on the left may be associated with Christian symbolism and, thus, carry the meanings of sacrifice and redemption. Along with areas of green that suggest an Edenic renewal, these elements also show that Kandinsky still used religious symbols to connect the material world with the ideal world. Together, they indicate that he was starting to reduce the number of explicit narrative references and keep some traces of Christian themes in his development of visual language. There is no system for organisation; instead, there are irregular diagonals that cut across the picture to give it a sense of motion. Kandinsky used large, simple blocks of colour to express emotions and focused on the emotional effect of colour; bright yellows and oranges are often paired with cooler blues and greens to create a dynamic contrast of warm and cool colours. Stein believes that Kandinsky's stage works sought to "suggest the cosmic forces of destruction and creation through abstract shapes and shifting color" [8]. Although these paintings are now lost, they still serve as the foundation for the series of visual symphonies Kandinsky aimed to build. The first few works also show that he was interested in the idea of the end times and the Book of Revelation. While living in Munich, Kandinsky was also deeply involved in theosophical circles, and there, he learned that the Apocalypse was not about the end of the world, but rather the required

decline of the material world for higher consciousness to emerge. According to Theosophy, humanity was about to enter a period of revolutionary change, and thus Kandinsky wished to create a new visual language that could convey spiritual truth. Given the above circumstances, the abstract forms and rich colours in this work can be viewed as artistic expressions of prophetic dreams that deviate from tradition and awaken people's spirituality. Therefore, his works in this period are not mere formal experiments but rather attempts to reach a spiritual truth beyond the surface through new ideas in art and esoteric belief.

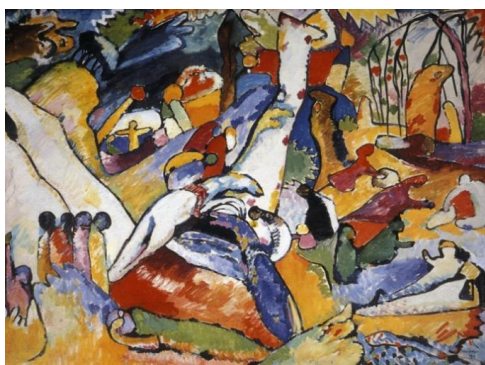


Figure 1. Wassily Kandinsky, *Sketch for Composition II*, 1910. Oil on canvas. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

Many of Kandinsky's early abstractions are apocalyptic in character and reflect a time of collapse and renewal in society. At the beginning of the 20th century, Western countries were rapidly industrializing, making scientific discoveries, and facing political instability, all of which led to the First World War. Due to the Book of Revelation, many Europeans thought that the end of the world was near. Kandinsky saw the end of the world not as ruin but as the need to clear away material illusion for a new birth of the spirit. He was familiar with Theosophy, a mystical idea that predicted changes in humanity through spiritual growth, and therefore his pictures of floods, disasters and changes in the world were based on this. Rose-Carol Washton Long believes that Kandinsky's abstract works have not lost narrative content; rather, they "veiled an apocalyptic folk imagery" derived from the Russian tradition and Christian eschatology [9]. In *Composition II*, he used strong diagonals and rich colours to create visual metaphors for this time of upheaval, and the old form broke apart to reveal new consciousness.

4.2. Synaesthesia and the Turn to Colour in *Composition IV*

Kandinsky continued this trend and, by progressively reducing and simplifying recognisable symbols, approached pure abstraction. *Composition IV* is a typical case of this development; it does not show the end of days in the usual way but creates a feeling of the sacred through colour and line. *Composition IV* (1911) (Fig. 2) has thick black lines and very saturated primary colours, but no discernible objects. Kandinsky studies synaesthesia here, which is a state in which stimulation of one sense automatically leads to sensations in other senses. A person hears a musical note and at the same time perceives a colour or shape. Kandinsky thought that by using all the senses, one could learn more about life; thus, he created a broad range of expression for paintings by combining senses. In "Concerning the Spiritual in Art", he

believed that colours could produce sound and shapes were capable of generating emotions, much like music. Although some people have synesthesia neurologically, Kandinsky chose to express his own experience of it in painting so that others could perceive and feel it as well. By blurring the lines between sight and sound, he created a multi-sensory work of art.

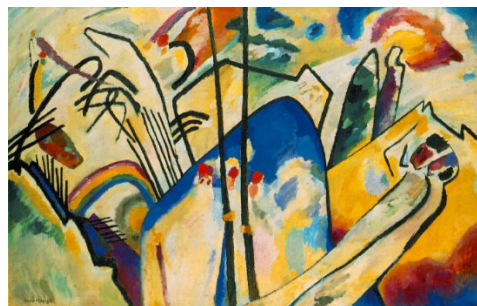


Figure 2. Wassily Kandinsky, *Composition IV*, 1911. Oil on canvas. Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf.

In 1911, he was particularly moved by a performance of Arnold Schoenberg in Munich; at that time, Schoenberg had begun to explore atonal harmony for emotional purposes. Based on this concert, Kandinsky created *Impression III (Concert)* in 1911 (Fig. 3) to express the dynamic rhythm and dissonant harmony of that evening. He arranges irregular oval shapes to show the audience at the concert, and colourful patches of red, yellow and ultramarine are scattered over a light background in a way that resembles musical notes; thus, a sense of chords clashing and resolving unexpectedly is created. He frequently uses wide areas of yellow to evoke a high-pitched, persistent sound, such as the sound of a trumpet or a loud brass band. Kandinsky considered yellow to be one of the more forceful and penetrating colours; it could be used to express emotions such as agitation and tension, and thus it was pushed out from the canvas in an attempt to communicate sharp sounds and other sensations directly to the viewer through colour. Sharp black lines are used diagonally in the work to express the motion of the conductor's hands and the spread of sound. The result is a sense of lively disorder, and it is as if the viewer is no longer observing a picture but experiencing life through sound and colour. Kandinsky believed that by expressing auditory phenomena in the visual language of painting, one could create a kind of sensory symphony and, thus, reveal the deep spiritual truth that connects the worlds of sound and sight.



Figure 3. Wassily Kandinsky, *Impression III (Concert)*, 1911. Oil on canvas. Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich.

Composition IV also relates colours to music in the same way, and these sounds are expressed in the form of colour. The first thing people's eyes are drawn to is the saturated blue in the middle, not the smaller background detail, such as a little rainbow. Overall, the work shows a sudden sadness in a generally cheerful world and is like a song. A thick black line and curve are drawn over a colour block to show that peace and trouble are connected. The two nearly parallel lines in the middle are first thought to be stable, but they can also be regarded as the "unbalanced" part of the painting. Both readings leave many colours, shapes and lines open to interpretation, and some viewers may feel that these are spiritual, as Kandinsky believed. The artist was deeply moved by Russian folk tales, so blue might be associated with the concept of new life or even the end of days. Kandinsky liked the colour blue and believed that it had deep spiritual connotations; it was quiet and profound, and a darker shade of blue could lead one's attention to the inner world of the picture and convey feelings of the infinite and the mysterious, while a lighter blue had a gentle spirituality [1]. Therefore, the noticeable blue area may signify the prospect of spiritual rebirth following hardship, or it could also be a representation of the will to live and emotional suffering. Cossack motifs and warrior figures are also shown as long, flat shapes with thick outlines in the picture. In Kandinsky's iconography, these figures serve as symbols of conflict and the cycle of destruction and rebirth, supporting his idea of an apocalypse, and specifically an apocalyptic battle that will give rise to a new world [10].

4.3. Music, Schoenberg, and the Visual Symphony in Compositions V and VI

Composition V (1911) (Fig. 4) was also created in the same year and is relatively cold in colour. A thick black line in the middle of the picture is shaped like a dragon, and on both sides are dark cyan and teal-blue mountains as in an ink wash painting; upwards, these forms rise in vertical waves. At the top, a dark red stain spreads out into black outlines like a setting sun, and gradually, it is mixed with olive smoke in the blue area. The sense of movement is sorrowful in the face of disorder, and there are small waves of change. Despite the apparent disorder, there is a sense of rhythm in the work through the repetition of lyrical lines; at the same time, Kandinsky has used both ethereal blue and warm red to evoke the emotions of peace and excitement in music.



Figure 4. Wassily Kandinsky, *Composition V*, 1911. Oil on canvas. Private collection.

Kandinsky wanted to express his feelings about music through colour and shape. Synaesthesia enabled him to

connect music and colour, and through his letters and friendships, he also gained a deeper understanding of music from Schoenberg. The two had the same aim of achieving abstraction—in visual or auditory form—and hoped to break free from conventional rules to address the soul directly. Kandinsky wrote that Schoenberg had achieved a deep expression of emotion in his music without the need for story or traditional forms [3]. Kandinsky found that the atonal structures in Schoenberg's work were directly related to his own disinterest in representation. As Courtney Adams pointed out, both artists sought to express their inner worlds rather than their outer appearances, and their simultaneous movement towards abstraction also stemmed from a wish to convey deep emotions and structural newness [11]. Schoenberg's music was no longer bound by the traditional system of harmony, and Kandinsky had also moved away from representation. Inspired by this kinship, Kandinsky created works such as Composition V and Composition VI that are in the form of visual symphonies, adding rhythmic structure and colour in a way that corresponds to the irregular intervals and dissonant chords of Schoenberg's music.

Composition VI (1913) (Fig. 5) was completed shortly before the beginning of World War I and has a different character than Composition II. In short, it evokes a sense of a spiritual deluge, and colours and lines are unified. In shades of dark amber, indigo and rose red, there are also light colours that are moving continuously in a lively way. They are like waves in the sea, relatively thick and gradually fading away; thus, there is a sense of visual undulation. Kandinsky's synaesthesia is also present here; one can almost hear the sound of music in the abstraction. Light and shadow are used to show good and bad; together, all the parts create a picture of both ruin and new life, an orderly mess full of powerful emotions. Large curves and layers of colour are, in a way, the waves one hears when different parts of music are played simultaneously. Kandinsky does not want to show a particular place in this work; rather, he wishes to express his emotions abstractly and demonstrates how chaos can be arranged in a reasonable way with a certain sense of rhythm.

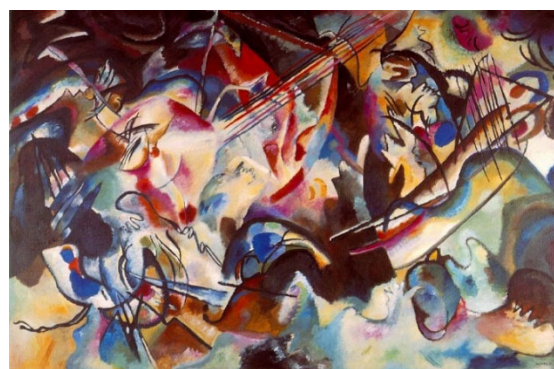


Figure 5. Wassily Kandinsky, *Composition VI*, 1913. Oil on canvas. State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

4.4. Full Non-Objectivity in Composition VII

The last work of the series, Composition VII (1913) (Fig. 6), is often considered Kandinsky's best and integrates the ideas introduced in the previous works. It has a large scale and high aspirations, and uses many bright colours and shapes. At first glance, it appears disordered, and there are too many bright colours and lines. Upon closer observation, there is an intricate internal system of arcs and spirals radiating outwards from a central vortex; this suggests the origin of the universe,

and thin, fine lines also move back and forth in a regular way, as in music. In this work, Kandinsky has moved away from representation entirely and no longer shows recognizable people; emotion is now the subject. It is a work that layers motifs and elements, as in a complex piece of music.



Figure 6. Wassily Kandinsky, *Composition VII*, 1913. Oil on canvas. Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

5. Kandinsky Within Modernism

Kandinsky advocated for non-objective art and changed the purpose of painting. In response to the demand for all-encompassing spiritual ideas, he did not create realistic depictions of objects but instead used abstract forms and colours. Thus, it deviated from the 19th-century ideal of art as mimesis. Other modern movements include Cubism, led by Pablo Picasso, and Suprematism, founded by Kazimir Malevich; these have also moved away from the traditional notion of illusionism, and Kandinsky believed that abstraction was necessary to express the inner world of humanity. As he wrote, "the artist must train not only his eye but also his soul, so that it can weigh colors in the balance and thus become a determinant in artistic creation" [1]. He wished that the artist could build an inner world and discover the meaning in all sorts of colours, and through his works, he presented a model for other artists who desired a deep, non-material type of expression.

Kandinsky creates a series of visual symphonies in Compositions IV, VI and VII, and thus further develops his idea of non-objective art. The three works of art all have dynamic shapes, rich colours and a sense of rhythm that can be traced back to music. In Composition IV, Kandinsky is still attached to fragments of figurative pictures, such as suggested people and landscapes; thus, the viewer may interpret a story of conflict or change; its energetic diagonals and strong contrasts of colour give it a sense of movement, in line with the rising and falling of music. Composition VI and Composition VII, on the other hand, have almost completely eliminated these references and use colour and form as emotional languages. In the later works, the canvas is used to create multiple layers of colour harmony and large, flowing curves that convey both chaos and the idea of the divine. The above development shows that Kandinsky systematically removed literal content to create an artistic language capable of conveying invisible forces, believing that painting should engage all the senses as fully as music. Through these works, he created a new way of experiencing art and sought to convey deep emotions and ideas in his works rather than relying solely on visuals.

The main feature of the works in this series is that Kandinsky uses curves, lines and intersecting shapes to lead

the viewer's eyes according to the tune of a song. Red, blue, yellow and black form bright contrasts, and they can be combined or used separately. He does not present a realistic world for the viewer but rather wants to make them "feel" the picture through their senses. In all three works, Kandinsky does not create a picture but builds psychological worlds that arise in people's minds. These paintings express the emotions of people and are based on the idea that art can reveal deep spiritual truths beyond the world of things.

6. Conclusion

Wassily Kandinsky's Composition series is a typical body of work in which he sought to express emotions and spiritual ideas through shapes, moving away from the imitation of nature. Kandinsky systematically dissolved the division between visible reality and inner sensation by building a series of compositions. Composition II uses partly figurative elements and refers to apocalyptic struggle and renewal; Composition IV is rhythmically turbulent, and Composition VI is lyrically undulating; finally, Composition VII is fully liberated abstraction. In his work, he has achieved technical perfection in line, colour and geometry, and simultaneously extended the concept of art to encompass the invisible world and music.

Kandinsky's works are not only his own life stories but also a cultural and spiritual search in the early 20th century. Like many of his contemporaries, he also felt that the loss of materialist values in modern society called for a new visual language. He did not wish his works of art to be viewed; rather, he desired them to be felt and heard. Thus, Kandinsky wished to return to the original function of an artist as a visionary of the inner world rather than creating beauty or reproducing reality. His association with Theosophy, his sensitivity to music and the foundation of Der Blaue Reiter all indicate that he desired to unite art, music and spirituality in an all-encompassing manner. He believed that visual form could touch the soul, and artists who sought to convey ideas without depiction had inherited this idea; thus, they broke away from mimesis and aimed for an emotional and spiritual impact, inviting the audience to experience a new way of seeing.

This study is necessarily limited in range. It focuses on a single series and uses reproductions and existing scholarship rather than directly examining the works, and two of the early compositions have survived only as sketches and secondary accounts. Further research can extend the analysis to Kandinsky's later Bauhaus and Paris periods, or systematically study how his theory of synaesthesia has been received in subsequent research on cross-sensory perception. Within these bounds, the Composition series shows how abstraction became a spiritual language for Kandinsky and continues to raise questions about the purpose of art.

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