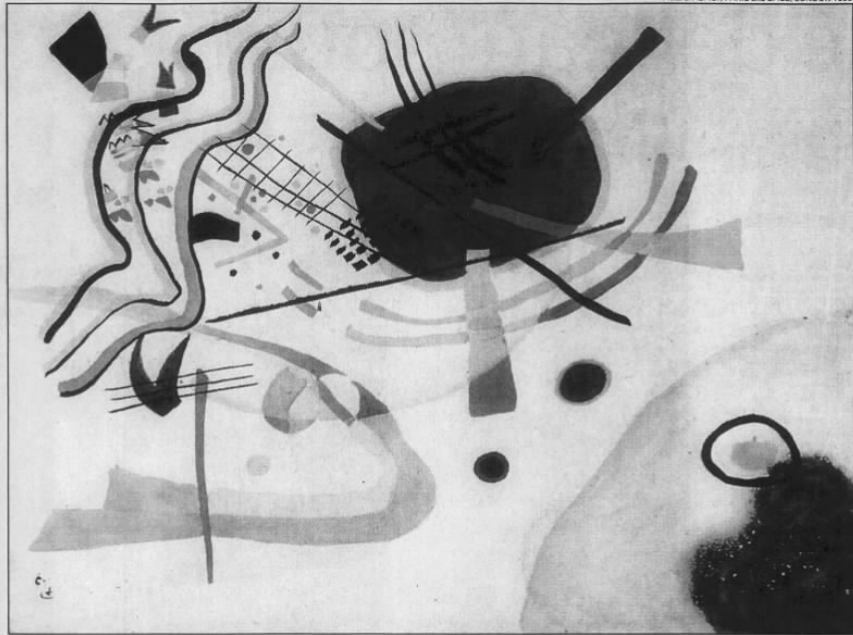


ARTS

An exhibition of Kandinsky's whimsical abstracts leaves **Richard Dorment** craving something more substantial

Where's the meat?

Picture: ADAGP, PARIS and DACS, LONDON 1999



Decorative: Kandinsky's untitled work, 1921

IN RECENT months, the books page of *The Sunday Telegraph* has been running an entertaining series in which literary bigwigs nominate the most overrated books or authors of the past 1,000 years.

Naturally, I have been hard at work drawing up my own shortlist in the visual arts, an area positively groaning with the weight of inflated critical reputations, especially in the 20th century. Ask me on another day and my choice might fall on Edward Hopper or Georgia O'Keeffe. Balthus gives me the creeps and Marc Chagall is always in the running. But this week I have it in for the Russian-born painter Vassily Kandinsky, a show of whose works on paper has just opened at the Royal Academy of Arts in London (until July 4).

No one would deny that Kandinsky is among the most influential artists of the 20th century. He may have had only one idea, but, boy, was it a big one: that forms and colours could be used not to represent tangible things, but to express feelings and ideas.

In articulating this theory, his early writings provided the theoretical justification for abstract art. Even so, for me he remains a lightweight. His work has none of the depth of Picasso, Malevich, Mondrian, Matisse, Braque, Pollock, Duchamp or Warhol. I'm not saying that Kandinsky was without originality, but that his range was as

limited as theirs was vast. It's time to see him for what he was.

Born in 1866 in Moscow, Kandinsky belonged to the same generation as Seurat and Toulouse-Lautrec, giving him roots in 19th-century aesthetic theory that the other giants of 20th-century Modernism didn't have. In particular, the young Kandinsky must have been seeped in the art-for-art's-sake aestheticism ubiquitous in Russia in the 1890s. Through the writings of Walter Pater and the paintings of JM Whistler, it had become a critical commonplace to compare painting's power to evoke emotion with that of music's.

You could argue that all Kandinsky did was to take this musical analogy to its logical conclusion by attempting to use colours and shapes abstractly, in exactly the same way that a composer uses sounds.

The problem is not with Kandinsky's theories, but with the works of art that emerged from them. Even as a figurative artist, he strikes me as weak. The naively drawn princesses, witches, dragons and trolls in his earliest watercolours and woodcuts have enormous decorative elegance, certainly, but they also reveal an unfortunate addiction to whimsy that he was never to shake off.

In a scene of the *Resurrection*, painted in Munich around 1910, for example, the most awe-inspiring of sub-

jects is reduced to a musical interlude. Composed of hesitant lines and faintly drawn squiggles, anaemic angels and stick-men sinners are painted in shades of pink and blue in a style closer to the watercolours of Marie Laurencin than of the Russian icon that presumably inspired them.

This, to me, is the visual equivalent of vegetarianism. There is a bit more meat in his radiant *Study for Compo-*

sition II (Two Riders and a Reclining Figure), also of 1910, but once again the primary colours stop and start across the page as though tentatively searching for a form.

In it, watercolour is used not to create shape or volume, but to suggest the physical sensation of movement. From there it was but a step to the realms of the mind. By the time he published his treatise *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, in 1912, Kandinsky genu-

inely believed that a composition consisting entirely of colours could evoke for the viewer the moral, psychological and spiritual experience of the artist.

But how? Like Mondrian at the beginning of his career, Kandinsky grounded his theories in the pseudo-philosophy of theosophy, proposing that every shape and colour had its spiritual equivalent, so that the circle, square or triangle rendered in blue, yellow

or red could evoke feelings ranging from joy to peace or ecstasy.

Of course, many artists have been capable of synaesthesia. The difference is that Kandinsky claimed the spiritual qualities he detected in colours were universal and objectively verifiable. They could, in themselves, form the content or subject of a work of art.

Again I ask, how? For the sake of argument, let's say

that you haven't yet read *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. That being the case, I'm afraid Kandinsky's mature work looks like decoration, and not very daring decoration at that.

If, like me, you just don't buy the theosophy that justifies this art, then how you interpret it depends on the mood you happen to be in when you look at it. Your associations may or may not be the same as those of the

artist — or there may be no associations at all, in which case all that's left is design.

And, anyway, if Kandinsky's aim was to express ideas and feelings by means of colours and forms alone, he failed. True abstraction proved elusive. It's hard not to see in the *Study for Green Border* of 1919 a sea-bed full of crayfish, oysters, minnows and wavy lines indicating water. To Kandinsky's contemporaries, the circles intersected by straight lines in *Delicate Tension* of 1925 must have looked like radio beams and aerials, while the charming *Horizontalis* of 1939 appears to me like the game of snakes and ladders.

THE problem with abstraction is that even when the painter intended to represent "nothing", the viewer instinctively makes associations with forms and shapes in the natural world.

Kandinsky, of course, knew this. In the 1920s, when he taught in Germany at the Bauhaus, he tried to minimise expression by using rulers and compasses to make straight lines and circles, spraying pigment on the paper, or used a marbling technique to distance himself still further from the act of creation. The trouble is that the emotional range of these works is very narrow. In a show of this size they become repetitive. Walking from one to another, I found it difficult to keep my attention focused on the individual works of art.

For an artist so rooted in Whistlerian aestheticism, the presentation of his work is all-important. You can't just frame Kandinsky's watercolours, hang them on a wall and expect them to register. If the Royal Academy had exhibited them in illuminated glass vitrines, in darkened galleries, like jewels, they might have looked much stronger than they do. With 159 works, including etchings and colour lithographs, this show is also twice as big as it should be.

Kandinsky Dorment Telegraph



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