

The Museum of Modern Art

11 West 53 Street, New York, N.Y. 10019 Tel. 245-3200 Cable: Modernart

KANDINSKY WATERCOLORS

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Wall Label

Our century has been swept by a series of revolutions, seemingly as relentless as the tides, as men continually search for deeper truths. In society, it has been a search for a truth that is not served by authoritarian structures; in psychology, a search for truth that lies beyond the reasoning mind; in art, a search for a truth that exists elsewhere than in visible appearances. In his assertion of the individual spirit against all that is external, rigid, and imposed, Wassily Kandinsky is one of the pioneers of our revolutionary century.

Kandinsky was born in Moscow in 1866, and he maintained a lifelong attachment to his native city and his Russian heritage, although he was to spend most of his adult life in western Europe. At the age of thirty, he abandoned a promising legal career in Moscow to study art in Munich. In this city, which welcomed art nouveau but maintained its allegiance to artistic conventions, Kandinsky lent a decisive impetus to the radical explorations that were to occur in the years preceding the first World War. His book Concerning the Spiritual in Art (written in 1910), sums up the goals of a small group of artists who united under the poetic symbol of a "Blue Rider." As revolutionaries, they sought an art beyond accepted norms, an art that would express feeling rather than represent nature. They wished to submit the formal means of painting -- color, line, image -- to the guidance of a personal "inner necessity" rather than to the dominance of academic standards and realistic traditions.

The outbreak of World War I interrupted this drive toward a more expressive and meaningful art. Kandinsky was forced to leave Germany, and he returned to a Russia also caught in turmoil. Believing that the Revolution of 1917 promised a new life for his beloved country, Kandinsky enthusiastically enlisted in its service. The new regime

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offered expanded opportunities for artists, and Kandinsky participated energetically in government-sponsored workshops and the founding of many new museums. But conflicts among the leading artists regarding the goals that art should pursue led him to return to Germany in 1921 to pursue a more private path. He soon joined the Bauhaus in Weimar, where working and teaching in an atmosphere devoted to the modern idiom enabled him to consolidate his earlier insights. In a work published in 1926, Point and Line to Plane, Kandinsky described the theoretical background for the deliberate exploration of the formal means of art which was to occupy him during his eleven years with the Bauhaus. When the Nazis closed the Bauhaus in 1933 and artistic life in Germany came to an end, Kandinsky moved to Paris, where he continued the evolution of his deeply personal vocabulary. He died in France in 1944, at the age of seventy-eight.

Kandinsky himself located the sources of his art in his intense response to Moscow, as a city and as a symbol of the complex Russian history. Describing in poetic terms the brilliant colors and changing moods of his native city, Kandinsky wrote: "I have the feeling that at bottom I have always painted this single 'model' merely strengthening the expression and perfecting the form over the years." In his early works, motives drawn from nature are gradually replaced by a vivid play of color and line as he found a way to translate the lyrical responses of his youth into form. During his mature years at the Bauhaus, Kandinsky systematically explored the expressive powers of his newly liberated medium. Both his heritage and his formal discoveries merge during the final years in Paris. The last works suggest a mysterious language of signs, as evocative shapes and unexpected color harmonies recall the ancient and primitive arts of his homeland and at the same time convey a wholly contemporary freedom in the use of formal means to transmit emotion directly. Throughout his life, watercolor provided him with an intimate medium in which to express himself spontaneously; many were subsequently translated into larger works in oil.

Kandinsky had no immediate circle of followers, but his inspiration has been acknowledged by artists as different in goal and method as Diego Rivera and Arshile Gorky. It is his search for a new way to communicate deeply felt truths that links Kandinsky to the revolutionary spirit of our time.