

TIGHT BINDING

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THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

1 WEST 53 STREET, NEW YORK 19, N. Y.

TELEPHONE: CIRCLE 5-8900

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FOR RELEASE:
Wednesday, May 23, 1956
PRESS PREVIEW:
Tuesday, May 22, 1956

KANDINSKY MURALS, RE-UNITED AFTER 25 YEARS, ON VIEW AT MUSEUM

After being "lost" for a quarter of a century, four large decorative panels commissioned by a New York businessman in 1914 for his Park Avenue apartment from the pioneer abstract expressionist Wassily Kandinsky, have been reunited through a series of coincidences, a country auction, a television show and scholarly research in Europe and this country. They will be on view at the Museum of Modern Art, 1 West 53rd Street, for the first time as a series from May 23 through August 5 in an exhibition under the direction of Letitia Howe, Curatorial Assistant in the Museum Collection's Department.

The exhibition also includes three preparatory studies in pencil, watercolor and oil, which provide an unusual opportunity to follow the creative process of the artist in the development of an idea. Documentary photographs relating to the history of the panels will also be shown.

Now valued at tens of thousands of dollars, two of the panels were bought by an antique dealer at a Connecticut auction two years ago for \$15 and \$25. They now belong to the Museum of Modern Art. Two others were rescued from oblivion in Florida and sold to the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in 1941, but they were not identified as part of this series commissioned by the New York businessman, Edwin R. Campbell, until last year.

Produced at the height of Kandinsky's most significant period and, aside from two large wall paintings in Germany, the only major examples of decorative painting in Kandinsky's work, the panels take on an added interest because of their unusual history. 115

The Museum of Modern Art first learned of the existence of two of the panels when the art appraiser, Sigmund Rothschild, who appears on a TV show called "Treasure Hunt" asked help in authenticating two large paintings which had been sent to him by an antique dealer in Connecticut. They were signed with the initial K and dated 1914. In the auction at which they were bought, they were listed as "modernistic panels" artist unknown, and had been bought for \$15 and \$25. The dealer had

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brought them to Rothschild for identification and appraisal. Photographs of the panels were sent to the German art historian Dr. Will Grohmann, who immediately identified them as two of four paintings commissioned by a "Mr. Campbell of New York."

A New York framer's stickers were still on the backs of the pictures, and he was contacted. He said the numbers indicated that the frames had been put on about 1916-17 but his records did not go back that far and he did not remember the name Campbell.

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Another set of notations on the stretchers, in a European handwriting, read "ERC 8249 New York." A search of New York City directories of the period revealed the name of Edwin R. Campbell. He died in 1929, but he had a son and a daughter to whom the Museum wrote. They disclosed that their father, who had helped found the Chevrolet Company, had commissioned the paintings for his apartment at 635 Park Avenue, from which he had moved in 1921. They had no records about the transaction, had not seen the paintings in many years, and knew nothing of the present location of the other two panels. Through Mr. Campbell's children the Museum got in touch with Mr. Campbell's widow who recalled that her husband had acquired the paintings "as a good investment" at the suggestion of his friend Arthur Jerome Eddy, well-known collector of modern art.

The Museum of Modern Art purchased the two panels from the antique dealer and continued throughout 1954 to trace their previous history. Examination of Kandinsky's private catalog, now in the possession of his widow in Paris, gave the additional information that the paintings were completed near Munich in the summer of 1914 and exhibited at Stockholm in February, 1916 before being sent to New York. Kandinsky's notes reveal that he received 500 marks or \$117.30 for each panel.

In January, 1955 A. L. Chanin, the Museum of Modern Art's docent, discussed the mystery of the Kandinsky panels in an article published in the New York Times. This article brought a reply from the Kandinsky scholar, Professor Kenneth C. Lindsay of Harpur College, Endicott, New York. With his list of all the paintings done by Kandinsky in 1914 and their present whereabouts, and guided by the sizes of the four panels as recorded in Kandinsky's notebook, Professor Lindsay was able to match the Museum of Modern Art's pair with two paintings bought some years earlier by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

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Further investigation disclosed that the Guggenheim Museum had bought its two panels in 1941 from a dealer who had acquired them in Palm Beach, Florida. These had been left in a Palm Beach house sold by a member of the Campbell family. The new owner wanted to get rid of them, and her seamstress told the artist, Murray Hoffman, about them. Mr. Hoffman took them although he did not know they were the work of Kandinsky, and his wife refused to hang them in their house. The following summer, on a trip to New York, Mr. Hoffman saw Kandinsky's paintings in the Museum of Modern Art and mentioned his two canvases to the New York dealer who bought them for \$400 and subsequently sold them to the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

The final link in the story was added by a visit to the apartment at 635 Park Avenue for which the panels were originally commissioned by Mr. Campbell. The circular foyer of the apartment still retains its original moldings, outlining the wall spaces for which the four paintings were designed and matching exactly the varying widths of the paintings.

After a careful study of these paintings, Professor Lindsay suggests that the series may represent the four seasons, the Museum of Modern Art's panels being "Spring" and "Summer," and the two Guggenheim Museum panels "Autumn" and "Winter."

In the Park Avenue apartment the paintings were hung with the two wider panels, "Autumn" and "Winter," to the left, followed by "Spring" and then "Summer." This order is confirmed by faint pencil marks in a European handwriting on the backs of the paintings, reading "1" through "4" in the same order.

The Museum of Modern Art is grateful to the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum for making it possible to show the Kandinsky panels together publicly for the first time.

Photographs are available from Elizabeth Shaw, Publicity Director, Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53rd Street, New York 19, N. Y. Circle 5-8900, Ext. 203.

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