

The Cornerstone Imprint of Kandinsky in the History of Abstract Art

Dr. Samah Nassar

*October University for Modern Sciences and Arts (MSA), Faculty of Arts and Design, Cairo, Egypt
snassar@msa.eun.eg*

ABSTRACT: With all forms of art being continually subjective in the process by which they are perceived and appreciated, abstract art has been no exception, facing both elicited support and criticism over the years. The greatest debate on abstract art was experienced over a century ago when the art first emerged, that is in its initial stages of development. A century ago, abstract art signified a new perception of art that was conceived and accepted only by a few people. However, the art later transformed to be accepted by many as one of the purest and most beautiful forms of art, a change that was brought about through the works and ideas presented by Wassily Kandinsky. Kandinsky had, through his artistic vision and modes of expression, led to a critical revolution in the way abstract art was visualized and conceived. Therefore, he had not only helped lay the robust foundation that governed many of the concepts in abstract art, in contemporary and modern times, but he had also helped revolutionize its framework enriching it with the elements it still carries to the modern day.

KEYWORDS: Abstract art, Kandinsky, Avant-garde, Contemporary art

Discussion

Preceding the 20th century, art was closely associated with realism, since it was always attached to “reality”. In other words, art has been a tool through which artists captured and reflected realistic elements, much similar to modern-day cameras. In fact, the invention of the camera in the 19th century had changed the common ideologies regarding the purpose and execution of art. The growth of photography, especially after the development of the first Kodak Camera in 1888, had also given artists another reason to reject realism, as there was no meaning to do what the camera is already doing; even much better.

Consequently, artists keen meaning in individual perception and this paved the way to the emergence of other art forms, most notably Cubism and Abstract Art respectively (Duiker and Spielvogel 2006). Vincent van Gogh viewed art as a profound level of spiritual experience where he was specifically interested in colors as he believed they offered unique forms of expression, almost similar to a distinctive language. He believed that artists must paint and express what they simply feel (Duiker and Spielvogel 2006). Shortly after that, the belief that the purpose of art was to reflect “reality” has fallen out of date. By that time, newly identified concepts in both psychology and physics left people unclear of what ‘reality’ really was. By the beginning of the 20th century, Pablo Picasso, a pioneer in modern art was just starting his career. He was extremely open to different variety and disciplines in painting, feeding the hunger for different styles. Also, he was serving the aim of the establishment of an experimenting and novel approach known as “Cubism” that created geometrical figures in attempt to re-create a reality to be perceived by the viewer (Duiker and Spielvogel 2006).

After the cubism style, the modern art reached a new peak in 1910 when abstract painting began. Principally, abstract art does not produce a link with reality as much with the concept of this reality. Basically, it puts and reflects reality through another form that links to illusion and offer another replacement to reality away from the main subject and focus on the principle of the subject.

Wassily Kandinsky, a Russian artist who was working in Germany, recorded and achieved the world's first paintings as a form of abstract art. Kandinsky tried to aside the old methods in representing art forms, entirely, and he assumed that art truly communicates on its own to reach souls, and so it had to prevent the old paths and ideas about visual reality and

instead focus on lines and color (Duiker and Spielvogel 2006). In the following century, Kandinsky became a founding pioneer in the growth and expansion of art, especially in abstract art.

Abstract art can be described as the art that does not paint tangible objects or familiar scenes. Instead, it utilizes equivalent shapes and senses from the surroundings that reflect and present the abstract in best form, ignoring similarities from the real visual world and disconnecting them from reality. In that sense, abstract art was able to gain its unique identity and became observed as the one of the milestone achievements in early 20th century art. Ever since then, abstract art has developed into several different types and approaches, yet with the fundamental elements still noticeable (Chilvers and Graves-Smith 2009).

Although some people were amused and astonished by the paintings of Kandinsky, others acknowledged the new artistic vision of abstract art. One of the critical figures was the reviewer and critic: Clement Greenberg who thought Kandinsky's art was rather showy and demonstrated meaningless or worthless objects. "Instead of a picture...a gimcrack is produced", commented Greenberg who obviously failed to understand the depth behind Kandinsky's paintings. Another critic: Fairfield Porter, an American critic and painter, also thought that Kandinsky's paintings had "dead areas" and that Kandinsky did not connect with the surface.

By contrast, other critics, for example, Hilton Kramer (1995) had reached the depth and meaning of Kandinsky's abstract paintings. In the article, "Kandinsky & the Birth of Abstraction", he praises Kandinsky's art and refers to his paintings as "some of the most beautiful" abstract paintings that were ever created.

Abstract art became an impressive hallmark in the history of art, and admittedly Kandinsky has helped establish the elements of this novel style. This was a result of emotional developments that came to Kandinsky throughout his long path of influences and gained experience. Because Kandinsky drew what he felt and experienced, his abstract paintings had depth and lots of meaning, however, some people seemed to fail to acknowledge the ingenuity of this new art form.

Wassily Kandinsky is credited as the pioneer of abstract painting, with his artistic ambition going even further than laying a solid foundation. He had a deep interest in music, and he proposed that there was a deep existing connection between painting and music. He wanted to align the sound through creation and to link the sight with hearing. He realized that music could create unique visual experiences for the audience through establishing connections with certain colors and moods. Based on that, viewers can find connections to musical themes in many of Kandinsky's artwork, with elements such as vivid shades and dynamic structures signifying the flow of musical notes. He simply described the relationships between color, form, and sounds. In his art: "Concerning the Spiritual in Art" and "Point and Line to Plane", Kandinsky believed that music and painting, are united through feelings with different elements to express it and express the form, color, and tone. That is why Clement Greenberg, as mentioned earlier, wasn't aware of the resemblance of music and poetry in Kandinsky's paintings. Greenberg paid attention to the surface of the pictures, but not to their evolution and depth.

Apart from music, Kandinsky's art has always been influenced by other elements in his surrounding environment. For instance, the "avant-garde" movements which affected art prominently in the 1930's and offered new routes of perception to familiar artistic pieces, was such an influential artistic stream for him (Walther and Suckale, 2005). At that time, several artists came to utilize approaches that were inspired by avant-garde yet still maintained their own identity. Aside from structures that were realistic and represented exact elements from reality, other geometric structures evolved that can create meaning and deliver new interpretations. This could be observed in Kandinsky's Bauhaus paintings where he utilized the use geometric figures together with other elements to create musical forms and movement.

Following the shut down of the Bauhaus by the Nazis in 1933 in Germany where 57 pieces of Kandinsky's works were destroyed, he relocated to France. He approached a non-permanent shelter, yet he was able to quickly build a new private circle, which ended up attracting a lot of artists from different cities. Meanwhile, was able to keep the contact at an international level. In 1936, Kandinsky took part in the "Abstract and Concrete" exhibition in London as well as the "Cubism and Abstract Art" which was based in New York. In France, Kandinsky was exposed to the exhibitions of the fauves where he was able to witness artistic expressions such as the liberation of color that inspired his art from this point onwards (Reily 2017). He also admired the art of Matisse and his application of color; however, his paintings became brighter and broke away from the Bauhaus geometry.

Kandinsky's abstraction became one of the most important art forms all over the world. Because of its ingenuity and creativity, people accepted this form and therefore it has been spread worldwide. In addition, Kandinsky had inspired lots of artists and painters: Hans Hoffman, William Baziot, Hans Hartung and Arshile Gorky. In the world of that distinct art, Wassily Kandinsky is deemed by many art historians to be the key founder of abstract expressionism, as early as from 1910 (Zeri 1999). This term: "abstract expressionism" was practiced in the United States, for the first time in 1929 recognition of Kandinsky's works (Kuhn 1957). Also, in Germany, he had a profound influential effect on the "blaue reiter" artists, facilitating the movement towards and adoption of abstract expressionism.

In addition, Kandinsky is seen by historians and artists to have established and advanced an artistic approach that is deemed revolutionary and largely influential especially in shaping art in the 20th century. He proposed that a unique piece of art can be evaluated in terms of the artist's inner motives and how well the piece can reflect his vision. This connection was more important than assessing how well the artwork connected to widely known realistic elements or how well it depicted reality. Such an approach created a greater space for the artists to be creative with their vision and with how they presented it to the audience. Furthermore, Kandinsky also proposed that a correlation exists between the artist's utilization of various artistic elements, such as colors, shapes, etc., and the resulting effect of the artwork on the audience (Bova 2003). Not only that, Kandinsky branched the artistic work into three recognizable divisions based on the artist's individual inner world which represent his artwork. The first division representing the perception of the artist to reality (impressions). The second reflecting his inner world (improvisations). And the third division reversing the collectivity conventions (compositions) (Kandinsky 2012). Kandinsky's rationales towards abstract art was extraordinarily credible regarding his associates, allowing his approaches and methods to have an extensive impact on modern art's advancement in Europe and Russia.

Although a source of inspiration for many, Kandinsky himself had been influenced dramatically during his personal and professional life. The initial impact came during his travel to Vologda, in Siberia, in 1889, when he was part of a group assigned to make ethnographic research. There, he was enormously impressed by the house decorations and colors. He was also attracted to the style of wooden churches, and moreover, he studied Vologda's folk art that left its trace in his use of colors. In addition to that experience, Kandinsky accentuated two central emotional and aesthetic encounters that touched and impacted his determination and choice to turn to arts. Kandinsky was exposed to a huge experience that left him with great impression and wonder when he first visited the French Impressionism exhibition in Moscow in 1892. And experimented the allure of Claude Monet haystack painting before perceiving it define subject. Kandinsky was captivated by the color and form merger and prompted him to speculate and questioning the audience optical perception and trying to navigate the viewer emotional impact regarding the artwork while comparing this to the normal optical influence of the pre-recognized shapes and forms. The second key experience was the musical performance of Wagner's "Lehngryn", as music integrated his artistic view and was expressed somehow in his paintings.

Kandinsky's work, his targets in the quest for an unused painting expression, is a new art conception that in general might appear to most people as mysterious and tense, as if built on a previous statement or proposition that is unrecognizable. For instance, yellow was a high ranked and main color for Kandinsky, which is considered a key to manipulate and react with the audience on an emotional level and steer their feelings. Kandinsky's shared and supported the theosophists met earlier in Germany (Kandinsky 2012). In addition, Kandinsky's childhood and youth were blended with his thoughts and also influenced his works. Moreover, he was inspired by Picasso's style and the creative treatment of geometrical shapes and forms. Kandinsky was also inspired by Claude Monet and Richard Wagner. He reciprocally also influenced key artists, like Munch and Franz Marc.

Kandinsky's composition VII came to represent amorphous forms away from reality, shared an advanced theme of apocalypse and was influenced by Theosophy and the new wave of art recognition and turned to become one of the most solid apotheosis divine purity form in art. He was also involved in the avant-garde movements which influenced art enormously in 1930, as mentioned previously. Meanwhile, Alfred H. Barr coordinated a various exhibitions which reflect his strong leading chart that revealed the abstract evolution. Further, it focuses on the metamorphosis in modern art. Also, by that time, abstract art endured massive challenges in the Nazis time being and exposed to destruction and extermination.

Abstract art faced a substantial challenge when the Nazis either destroyed or auctioned art including Kandinsky's work, prior to the Second World War.

Conclusions

Art has undergone a significant revolution during the past century. Targeting the spiritual facets and linking this form to the artist individual aspects and principles. Therefore, mind setting the perception of reality from the artists own consciousness.

Abstract art produced a new perception that caused a new form of art, which open gates to explore new horizons and arguments away from the old artistic forms and created a new platform to express art. Abstract art targets was to eliminate the effect of reality in the subject, and instead make the forms, colors and shapes make the impact and the outcome of the subject. Abstract painting is also geometric and fluid, and for that, it is completely different from realism.

A clear example of that, is the work of Wassily Kandinsky, credited as the pioneer and main influence behind that form of art during the early 20th century (Sers and Kandinsky 2016). Kandinsky was to perform a leading part in the surge of abstract art, and he argued that artists should not be evaluated correspondingly with the "inherent requirement." The widespread of abstract art was related to many artists departing from Germany accordingly to numerous societies in Europe, in addition to the United States. The Abstract art extended to spread in the consecutive for many years, and became a cornerstone to several leading artists, fine arts groups, educational acclaimed centers and faculties who initiate this type of art.

Abstract art is more than a painting, as it is an integrated expressionism that borrowed the expressionism concepts into the abstract painting (Lucie-Smith 1977). Obviously, keeping and integrating the creativity to produce art that simulates other forms but with different structure and affect. Considering the main subject as a hidden element and introduce similar concepts with new elements like lines, shape and colors. On the other hand, the figurative reality was able to reflect and produce a real structure to the painting which always suggests the subject as a real matter and main target to creativity. Therefore, art in Kandinsky's work was critiqued by several artists, and on the other hand, was credited and appreciated by others who could deeply figure out the tools utilized and the combination of feelings and views in each painting.

Kandinsky was influenced by several events in his life, and consequently, he was able to add several elements to his painting including the presentation of colors and the feeling of

sounds. Overall, the elements that represented was not important as the formation that hold the creativity in producing the artwork that reflects and symbolizes the intended subject by comparison methodologies as line, shapes and colors to put the forms in effect and explore the principle of the design behind the outlined forms, causing dramatic feelings with the black lines.

Finally, the abstract art pioneer drew what he felt and experienced, creating a wonderful canvas that carries beauty and meaning throughout different times and centuries. Kandinsky concluded his artistic view and philosophy by saying: “move in the painting, to live in the picture.”

References

- Bova, R. (Ed.). 2003. *Russia and western civilization: Cultural and historical encounters*. Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe.
- Chilvers, Ian, and John Graves-Smith. 2009. *A dictionary of modern and contemporary art*. Oxford University Press, USA.
- Duiker, William J., and Jackson J. Spielvogel. 2012. *The Essential World History, Volume II: Since 1500*. Nelson Education.
- Kandinsky, W. 2012. *Concerning the spiritual in art*. Courier Corporation.
- Kramer, Hilton. 1995. "Kandinsky & the birth of abstraction." *The New Criterion* 13(7): 3-7.
- Kuhn, C. Louis. 1957. *German expressionism and abstract art: The Harvard collections*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Lucie-Smith, Edward. 1977. *Art now: from abstract expressionism to surrealism*. New York: William Morrow.
- Reily, Nancy Hopkins. 2003. *Georgia O'Keeffe, A Private Friendship, Part I: Walking the Sun Prarie Land*. Sunstone Press.
- Sers, P., & Kandinsky, W. 2016. *Kandinsky: the elements of art*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Short, Christopher. 2010. *The art theory of Wassily Kandinsky, 1909-1928: the quest for synthesis*. Peter Lang.
- Walther, Ingo F., Robert Suckale, and Barbara Eschenburg. 2005. *Masterpieces of Western Art: from the Romantic Age to the Present Day*, Volume 2. Köln; New York; Taschen.
- Zeri, F, Dolcetta. M., Mazour, E., & Casling, A. James. 1999. *Kandinsky: the first abstract watercolour*. Richmond Hill, Ont.: NDE Pub.