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Some abstractions on Kandinsky [Review of an exhibit of Wassily Kandinsky's work at the Milwaukee Art Center, Milwaukee]

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Some abstractions on Kandinsky

By Curtis L. Carter

Wassily Kandinsky, whose works are featured in a current exhibit at the Milwaukee Art Center, is a major pivot in the turn from so-called figurative to abstract-non-objective painting.

His work is important, if for no other reason than for the fact that he was the first major western painter to develop a full-blown abstract or non-objective style.

His major contribution to the theory of painting lies in the important suggestion that painting can be compared to languages. The vocabulary of painting is expressed in its uses of color, line, and shapes. In two major works, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* and *Point and Line to Plane*, he sets forth the basis for a vocabulary of geometric shapes—circles, triangles, rectangles, and of colors.

But its dominant qualities are striking color integration and strong linear features. The dark blues, greens, blacks are punctuated with bright color daubs -- reds, yellows, pinks, and gradations of beige and lavender. Sharp angles favoring the energizing force of the diagonals accentuate formal properties, anticipating the style which will later appear absent of figurative functions.

The oft-cited "untitled first abstract Water Color, 1910" anticipates the freedom of form characteristic of the school of abstract expressionism. "Encircled, 1911," "Red and Blue, 1913," and "Study for Small Pleasures," exemplify in biomorphic shapes and vibrant greens, oranges, blues, reds, yellows the spiritual mystery which pervades Kandinsky's first period.

Sergei Eisenstein, the film maker and contemporary of Kandinsky, denounced Kandinsky's use of abstraction and his devotion to the "abstract ideal." Labelling the abstractionist pursuit "facist," Eisenstein found Kandinsky's choices of abstract form obscure, bewildering, and elusive.

Yet, Kandinsky pressed even further the notion of abstraction in his work at the Bauhaus, 1922-33. Intellect, still warmed, but to a lesser degree, by the mystical-emotional roots of the earlier abstractions, generates forms whose rigorous geometric skeletons dominate the picture plane.

More basic geometry can be found in "Vertical Construction, 243, 1928." But I prefer to cite "Fragrant Green, 350, 1929" because of its

greater mastery of geometry as an artistic convention. The dominant forms in "Fragrant Green" are angles, triangles, and intersected circles.

The Paris period finds Kandinsky transcending but not necessarily abandoning the geometric rigor of the Bauhaus works. Dream-like phantasies, reminiscent of his Munchen period, both freer and more child-like, characterize the final works of Kandinsky. "Untitled, 692, 1940" and "Watercolor on Light Blue, 699, 1941" are fine examples.

Relationships

What are some relationships between Kandinsky's Paintings and abstract works of the sixties from the Schwartz Collection (shown concurrently at the Art Center)? First, the lyrical, metaphysical, and mystical characteristics of Kandinsky's works are largely absent in the works of Stella, Noland and the others.

If particular correlations will not hold up, surely more general ones will. The uses of abstract geometric and also biomorphic shapes, angles, etc. by the painters of the sixties are anticipated in the earlier works of Kandinsky. Also, the highly decorative surfaces especially characteristic of Stella's works finds correlations in the decorative phantasies of Kandinsky.

The exhibit continues at the Art Center through February.

Auditions for Amen Corner

Claudia McNeil, the black actress who starred in the movie version 'Raisin in the Sun' will star in the People's Theater version of James Baldwin's Amen Corner in Milwaukee.

She played the lead in the play on Broadway. The other parts will be performed by local black actors and actresses.

The People's Theater is a non-profit group which is trying to establish black cultural programs in Milwaukee. It is associated with UWM.

Auditions for 20 roles in the play will be held Feb. 16, 17, and 18 at the Community Program Center, 2208 N. 3rd St. The play is scheduled for seven performances in March at the Pabst Theater.

Revolutionary play

Theatre X of Milwaukee will re-visit last year's highly successful production of *The Measures Taken*, Bertolt Brecht's musical drama on the dynamics of revolution, this weekend.

The Measures Taken, which aroused controversy in both pro- and anti-Communist camps in the 1930's in Germany, was the subject of equally heated debate at the 1970 Brecht Symposium where it was produced cooperatively by Theatre X and UWM.

However, critics and Brecht scholars were unanimous in praising the power and polish of the production.

The play concerns four revolutionary agitators who return from a successful mission in China and report to their Control Commission that they have murdered one of their own comrades.

In a series of episodes, they enact events leading up to the murder and ask the Commission whether or not they were justified. Each

agitator in turn plays the Young Comrade they have killed, while the others portray coolies, factory workers, a policeman, a merchant, and others connected to the incidents.

The Control Commission is actually a chorus of 15 and the production features the complete original musical score by Hanns Eisler. Linda Bishop, a theatre composer for numerous productions at UWM and elsewhere, is musical director and accompanist.

As an example, during the student strike at UWM, *The Measures Taken* was performed for an audience of strikers in the Student Union, and the discussion immediately transformed into a mass meeting on the goals and methods of the strike itself, with speakers continually referring back to the play for examples.

The Measures Taken will open at The Coffee House, 631 No. 19th St., tonight (Thursday), tomorrow and Saturday, at 9 p.m. Admission is \$1, and tickets are available at the door.

