

5-28-2014

# Kandinsky at the Milwaukee Art Museum

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## The inner world of a great 20th-century modern artist

Wednesday, May 28, 2014

By Curtis L. Carter



“Kandinsky: A Retrospective,” a joint project of the Milwaukee Art Museum and Centre Pompidou in Paris, opens in Milwaukee on June 5. The exhibition features works by Wassily Kandinsky (1886-1944) and related artists from Munich’s Blaue Reiter group, the early 20th-century circle of modernist painters that helped nurture Kandinsky’s vision.

The more than 100 paintings, watercolors, prints and photographs in the retrospective include a selection from the different periods of Kandinsky’s 40-year career in his Russian homeland as well as Germany and France. Early landscape and village scenes reflect Kandinsky’s interest in Russian fairy tales and folk art. Later on, Kandinsky became one of the first to introduce abstraction into modern art. His imaginative, often playful abstract images draw upon his own inner subjective life using bright colors, geometric shapes and bold lines to express feelings and ideas. Even today Kandinsky’s art continues to challenge the imaginations of viewers accustomed to representational images focused on the external world.

Kandinsky’s remarkable accomplishments have earned his art a place in major museums worldwide as well as in art history. Currently his works are at the top of the art market. It may thus

come as a surprise to learn that Kandinsky did not decide to become an artist until age 30. He made this decision after viewing Monet's wheat stack paintings at an Impressionist exhibition in Moscow in 1895. The following year he traveled to Munich—then a rival to Paris as a cultural mecca—to study art.

Despite a late start, Kandinsky's presence at important art happenings in Europe and the U.S. attests to his recognition as a major artist in his own time. He managed to exhibit not only in Munich, but also in New York, London and Paris, the other leading centers for the art world of that period.

Kandinsky's art was represented prominently in the important 1913 New York Armory Show that introduced modern art to America. In 1916 Kandinsky visited the Dada Café in Zurich, and his *Klänge Poems* were read at the Cabaret Voltaire, the home of the international Dada art movement. His 1922 appointment at the Bauhaus, a leading academy of modern art, alongside major artists including Paul Klee and Walter Gropius attests to his international standing. His paintings were shown in the Venice Biennale of 1930, the most important international gathering of artists.

Not everyone during his time appreciated the bold and original images that Kandinsky offered. The Russian Constructivists preferred art that reflected the forms of machines of the industrial revolution. They found his Expressionist images out of step with the revolutionary spirit in Russia. Nevertheless, Kandinsky served in numerous cultural posts in Russia between 1914 and 1921 including director of the Museum of Painterly Culture and member of the Fine Arts Section of the People's Commissariat for Enlightenment. He returned to Germany in 1922 to accept an appointment as professor at the prestigious Bauhaus art school. In 1937 the Nazis condemned Kandinsky's art as decadent and destroyed 57 of his works along with art of other modern artists. He moved to France in 1933 and continued to create until his death in 1944.

As a writer, Kandinsky contributed at least two important works to art theory. *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1911) and *Point and Line to Plane* (1926) explained his ideas concerning the origin of art in the inner life of the artist and the principles of visual composition. Both remain important to the development of visual aesthetic theory.

Apart from his contributions as an artist and theorist, Kandinsky served as a leader in arts and cultural organizations. In addition to his cultural leadership positions in Russia, he was instrumental in creating the Blaue Reiter group and served as founder and president of various artists' organizations.

Lectures at the Milwaukee Art Museum throughout the exhibition, including a series of weekly Thursday noon sessions, will provide visitors with opportunities to explore and appreciate the importance of Kandinsky's legacy. A handsome illustrated catalogue with essays by MAM curator Brady Roberts and other scholars accompanies the exhibition. Works in the exhibition are mainly from the Centre Pompidou and MAM's Bradley Collection, with additional works from the Guggenheim Museum in New York, the Art Institute of Chicago and the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis.

*"Kandinsky: A Retrospective" runs June 5-Sept. 1 at the Milwaukee Art Museum, 700 N. Art Museum Drive.*