

Concerning the Spiritual in Art Study Guide

Concerning the Spiritual in Art by Wassily Kandinsky

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Plot Summary

Art is the expression of the spiritual atmosphere of a certain period. Its form pertaining to its characteristic features evolves from the culture that inspires artistic expression. Copying form, where certain typical elements are imitated, such as that of ancient Greeks, leads only to replication deprived of significance. It is the inner insight that should guide the formation of ideals rather than just the reproduction of forms.

Kandinsky engages the concept of a spiritual triangle that involves various constantly struggling efforts in his view of art and the world. Human striving changes this triangle, although certain endeavors can be misunderstood. Beethoven as part of this triangle achieved the level that few managed to attain, but his genius was only recognized after his death. The advancement of the triangle is only possible through the ability to see beyond certain limits in artistic struggle. As Kandinsky regards true art as part of spiritual life, he considers struggle as most important and compares it to a struggle against sinking.

Vision and struggle makes champions and art can only advance the triangle through exceptional achievements. Progress is vital for the advancement of spiritual world that otherwise regresses. Such stagnation incurs when importance is attached to external success and well-being rather than inner expression.

Music is an art that incorporates various ways of creating spiritual atmosphere. To achieve that, some musicians find inspiration in nature while others may engage external means to achieve certain inner beauty that constitutes the rejection of conventional beauty.

For Kandinsky, the relationship between form and color is particularly important. Their mutual dependence is shaped by the way they influence each other. Color properties, such as its warmth or coolness, stimulate differently, and such influence needs to be considered when combining it with form. Various forms and colors are used in composition in an unlimited number of ways. The expression of an inner feeling is achieved through form. Such expression creates a response in the viewer that can be compared to a vibration. The purity of such vibration grows along with greatness or artistic potential. The experience of the internal structure of form as part of such vibration is possible when compositions are created through with the guidance of an inner feeling.

The most essential part of art involves the element of time, where artistic achievement can reach more than just its contemporaries. The current artistic recognition involves mostly personality and style. The greatest art moves people beyond its current time. Such art can be developed through the inner spirit when inner guidance is applied. Nationality and style become of a lesser value as it is more the mystics of the inner content that matter as they create meaning. External expression helps in searching for meaning.



Among expressions of joy and fear, there are also others that are more subtle and that need to be explored. To achieve that, links between primitive and modern art can be of assistance. Along with new parameters of beauty, conventional beauty incorporates elements that belong to the past. Composition may be enhanced through engaging musical, pictorial, and dance aspects.

Although experimentation is beneficial, certain methods can be dangerous, such as involving the abstract use of color as part of geometrical form and using naturalistic color with concrete form.

Since childhood, Kandinsky's childhood was inspired by colors and considered them extremely important. Through his experience of colors he explored smells and sounds in them.

He started painting when he was thirty, teaching at Azbe school in Munich, and then in the Royal Academy. The areas of his interest and exploration involved priming, chemical reactions, tempera, and varnishing.

Kandinsky found most inspiring the art of the tenth and fourteenth century Russian religious art. Apart from his talent, his success was partly due to his attitude of doing everything thoroughly. During the development of his art, he engaged in trends such as realism, French impressionism, and abstract in 1908. In 1910, he made his first work where his painting is detached from the object. His first work that was detached from the object was made in 1910, marking the beginning of the non-objective art.

His first book, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, was written in 1910 and published only in 1912. In this book, he raises various artistic issues while dealing with forms such as squares, triangles, and circles. The revolutionist character of the book involves various artistic possibilities that make art detached from the object while making it also free from dogmas.

The creative periods in his art may be divided into realistic landscapes, impressionism, Fauve period, dream landscapes, dramatic period, calm period, period of circles, romantic period, and period of great synthesis.

The main attributes that pervade his art involve authenticity and personality. He was optimistic in dealing with conflict in his work, which gave inspiration due to the way he approached art.

Kandinsky was eager to explore new modes of creation, using different colors that were mainly simple, and incorporating new things. His art initiated the beginning of a new epoch in painting. The influence of his art led to recognition while his insights allowed for understanding of the issues involved.

His other areas of work involved murals, stage settings, music and banqueting rooms, and panels.



Wassily Kandinsky had many facets of his personality that were mostly familiar to those who knew him. Julia and Lyonel Feininger fondly remember Kandinsky from the time of their friendship with him in Weimer and Dessau. They met him in 1921 in Berlin. Following the devastation created by WWI, creativity was needed. The Bauhaus was founded and its director, Gropius, invited Kandinsky to join.

After the war, Kandinsky lived in Sweden and then went back to Russia. He was teaching at the university in Moscow, from which he resigned in 1921 and started teaching at the Bauhaus. Apart from painting, he also wrote. His work was published in the *Blaue Reiter*, his biography in *Der Sturm*, and his book *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, in 1912.

Kandinsky and Feiningers had common friends, such as Alfred Kubin and Maria Marc, whose husband, also a painter, died in 1915. He shared with Feiningers some of his family history in 1922, and explained Mongolian traits in his aristocratic family that were due to the marriage of one of his ancestors to a Tartar princess in the seventeenth century. He studied political economy and law, but upon finishing his studies, he became a painter because of his interest in art.

Feiningers found Kandinsky's personality balanced, poised, and self-controlled. He was full of compassion yet reserved with a sense of humor while being perceptive as a listener. His negotiating skills were admired and utilized during his teaching career, as was his reserve and criticism.

He had the ability to make contact and inspire admiration from students, often offering help when needed. This attitude gave him personal satisfaction. His professional abilities made him critical and engaging, allowing for effective use of teaching methods through constructive criticism. He didn't discriminate between those who were genuine about painting and those only interested in it.

His other areas where he expressed his creativity were writing and music, although he never performed in public. Kandinsky engaged in everything with professional attitude that was genuine and persistent.

He applied in his painting techniques color and the skilled handling of forms without mechanical expression or such that was merely decorative, conveying a vision that made his art universal.

There is an extensive literature written on Kandinsky's work. His contribution is more evident in the implications of his work, where the means of expression makes his art prominent. Kandinsky became recognized at the time of analytic cubism in Paris, and freed painting from the standard representation used in western countries. His creativity was based on the use of imagination with past visual experience.

Traditional visualization imposed certain expectations from the public, while freedom required certain responsibility on the part of the artist. To gain the acceptance of the public, he had to justify meaning and language with every produced art.



Kandinsky abandoned the traditional modes of representation. He achieved that through the over-emphasis at first of the means employed, such as utilized in impressionism and partly in cubism, then using the selected visual material, and finally combining the concept with the final result of work. These developments led to the transformation of his art through his experiences of finding that prepared visual representations were insufficient to creatively express. The final work could not be based on any logical processes.

His inability to become proficient in mathematics encouraged certain admiration for this science as well as geometry. He was unable to instill the superficial order of mathematical means, rejecting various mathematical ways of conveying graphic material.

He incorporated a different order of space than had been accepted since Leonardo da Vinci, eliminating the basal plane and making it continuous in all directions, no longer referred as solid. Previously, a panorama in the shape of the inside surface of a cylinder was accepted. He used various dimensions, perspectives, and superpositions, making color functional but at the same time related to the element that it characterized. The color also involved certain quality. The line was expanded, moved in various dimensions, and incorporated transparency. His use of color that becomes separated from color that is detached from characterizing the element helps to place elements in space.

Kandinsky found similarity between musical and pictorial expression, using hue and color saturation. The relationship between pictorial elements and the space would modify and change the space itself. Through the development of movement as part of a certain direction, motion and space were integrated, giving space with more dimensions.

Traditionally motion was regarded as fixed and being directed towards certain consequence. Kandinsky changed this concept, using motion itself as an element represented and ignoring the cause or consequence of such movement. Various points, traces, or orbits may be represented as part of the movement. Often such movement is also evident through the lack of balance in tension between various forms.

Since 1920, motion becomes suspended and insinuated. Movement engages a certain closed path, various positions with delays in coming back to the original position, and various directions.

Kandinsky mastered the way motion was expressed, acquiring various skills. He managed to gain control of motion in his compositions, being able to employ various means, such as limiting stable or static constructions where various elements showed motion. His exploration of pure color in treating depth was part of such work as Structure of Points, where a rigid construction with a smaller factor of motion is limited, while engaging various frames and forms. A static frame of composition is part of the background where the movement of flow is shown through the rigid element.



In the same way that astronomers estimate the speed of regression through the shifting of color of a star, Kandinsky muted the vibration to active pulsation. His painting showed a gradual change increasing in precision that was also criticized as being too mechanical. Precision used by Kandinsky requires confidence and the ability to depend on creativity.

Kandinsky's reliance on precision made him less inclined towards feelings and thoughts of his time. Certain resemblance in the art of other artists such as the Miro gouache (1941) may suggest that artists borrowed from each other, but in reality they used similar means in the language of their art.



Characters

Beethoven

Beethoven's works are relevant to the art that has the characteristics of a Gothic cathedral with systematic structures that are also transitional, while representing various inspirational sources through impression, improvisation, and composition. He was one of the artists that was misunderstood in his time, considered even to be a madman. Beethoven stood at the highest peak of the artistic triangle that few managed to achieve. He could see beyond the limits of his own segment.

Weber considered Beethoven's Seventh Symphony as having certain extravagances. He thought of Beethoven as being ready for a psychiatric hospital while his art reached the limit.

Abbe Stadler commented on Beethoven as using the same notes that are simply boring.

Picasso

Picasso was a painter living in Paris, who rejected conventional beauty, being torn between self-expression and various means of expressing it. He used various modes of conveying message in art and always found new methods to do this. As others tried to catch up with him, he would always change his pace and means of expression. It led to the emergence of cubism as one of the French movements. Within this trend, Picasso attempted to reach construction through numerical proportion. His latest works from 1911 involve an annihilation of materiality that is achieved by logic. To do this, he fragments various separate parts while dispersing them constructively. In all this, he tried to retain material appearance. Picasso would fully engage in innovation, rejecting any color that would distract him. These qualities were his strength. Picasso pursued form unlike other artists that may have been engaging other elements such as color.

Goethe

Goethe considered painting as the first stage of the road, where abstract sense would increase the ability to attain, in the end, composition. In this way he was able to predict the way painting would develop. He thought that the artist can use nature for appropriate purposes, being above nature. Such an artist needs to both serve art and be its lord at the same time. Through earthly means he can be understood, while such means should be part of certain higher intentions. The work of an artist is the reflection of the spirit rather than nature.



Schonberg

Schonberg was an Austrian composer who discovered the freedom of art through various combination of notes and advances. He wanted to fully explore such freedom, discovering new beauties while trying to attain certain spiritual structure. Through his music one can gain spiritual experience that leads to the music of the future. A similar tendency can be observed in impressionism. He combined external and internal harmony in quartets, where internal harmony becomes more forceful and important.

Maeterlinck

Maeterlinck is a poet that uses fantastic and transcendental worlds, such as in "La Princess Maleine", "Les Sept Princesses", and "Les Aveugles", that are souls trying to find their way in fog while being threatened by certain forces that are both invisible and somber. He is one of the first prophets that uses the spiritual atmosphere, fear, and the absence of the guide in his artistic means. He uses gloomy mountains, wind, and cries as part of a symbol to attain a certain inner tone. His main device are words that have inner sound, being part of a certain object. When the object is only heard, such object becomes dematerialized while certain vibration reaches the heart.

Wagner

Wagner used personality in his characters through a motif as a musical method. In this way he managed to create a spiritual atmosphere through a musical phrase that comes before the hero and glows from a distance.

Debussy

Debussy was one of the modern musicians who was able to form a spiritual impression that was incorporated from nature but involved musical form. He was considered to be an impressionist painter, as he used similar methods in his work by using natural phenomena. Despite such similarities, he also incorporated a certain anxiety and jangled nerves, although he never incorporated material notes, but used an abstract impression. He was influenced by the Russian music, especially Moussorgsky.

Moussorgsky

Both Scriabin and Moussorgsky had a certain internal relationship using modern discords as part of certain conventional beauty. Their work involves the necessity to choose between internal and external beauty. The internal beauty is part of necessity, and they abandon conventional beauty that to some may appear as ugly.



Scriabin

Scriabin tried to make musical tone more intense through the use of a corresponding color as part of a basic attempt that involved various possibilities.

Madame Blavatzky

Madame Blavatzky explored the connection between primitive and modern civilization in India. She gave rise to a spiritual movement called the Theosophical Society that consists of groups trying to find answers to various problems through the spirit, using certain inner knowledge. They use various methods that are mostly derived from ancient wisdom. Such wisdom involves formulas that have a considerable precision. She created the theory of Theosophy that provided the basis for the movement, devising certain rules involving answers that incorporate the theosophical point of view. According to Blavatzky, Theosophy involves eternal truth, as such answers find everybody prepared for their acceptance while enabling them to combat various difficulties.

Henri Matisse

Henri Matisse was a French painter who painted in such a way as to incorporate certain divine elements using any subject but achieving it through color and form. He was a gifted colorist, but was too much preoccupied with color while referring too often to conventional beauty. According to Kandinsky, impressionism was innate in Matisse. His art is full of internal vitality, but driven by internal need. His pictures also have certain external charm due to certain external impulse. Hence, his painting involves French subtlety and delicacy regarded by Kandinsky as having a melodic quality.



Objects/Places

Concerning the Spiritual in Art

Concerning the Spiritual in Art was published in 1912. This book endeavors to answer questions that pertain to various problems in art. The author expresses here revolutionary views in art.

Spaltung der Personlichkeit

"Spaltung der Personlichkeit" is an article by Freudenberg, where the issue of hearing color is raised, where there are no rules in this regard. One of his patients always could see blue color when tasting a certain sauce.

Prometheus

In "Prometheus", Scriabin describes the association of sounds and colors and proves such theory.

Bathers

"Bathers" is built by Cezanne in the shape of a triangle based on an old geometrical principle, where new pictorial-compositional elements were stressed, thus incorporating a new meaning. Such geometrical form also served as a composition device in painting.

Courbe Dominante

Illustration of the painting "Courbe Dominante" painted in 1936, being a frontispiece: Kandinsky who faces his painting in his studio in Neuilly in 1938.

The University of Moscow

Kandinsky studied law and political economy there.

Russia

One of the countries Kandinsky visited.



Tunisia

One of the countries Kandinsky visited.

Holland

One of the countries Kandinsky visited.

Italy

One of the countries Kandinsky visited.

France

One of the countries Kandinsky visited.

Themes

Spirituality in Art

Kandinsky compares spiritual life to a triangle that is divided into various parts that can move both forward and upward. At the very top of such triangle there are various human efforts, including artistic endeavors. This triangle can advance only through efforts, such as artistic ones that are able to perceive beyond limits. Artists create to achieve certain spiritual satisfaction even though they may not be aware of it.

The spiritual life, as claimed by Sienkiewicz, requires a constant fight to avoid going under, as in during swimming. The spiritual element in the art involves "what" rather than how and allows for richer expression. Spirit in art is part of enthusiasm. Without spirit art becomes understood only to artists. Spirit also allows for originality and conquest, discouraging dependence on mannerism.

Although spirit in art may be ignored, it is needed even more when external supports, such as morality or freedom, are in danger. The spiritual sphere is most potent in art, where it can shed light on what is most important, but it may not be noticed. As the soul strives towards non-material, even most dark representations are instigated.

The spiritual darkness is part of the ignorant insecurity that is affecting the world. The spiritual atmosphere in art may represent lack of guidance. The spiritual properties of art can be achieved through depriving it of external references using devices such as word repetition. When external reference is abandoned, the spiritual experience is attained through objectless vibration.

Colors in art

Colors encourage a physical effect of pleasing the eyes, which leads to experiencing satisfaction. After experiencing enchantment, such feeling disappears. Colors affect the soul in the same way that discoveries provide new experiences comparable to those of children discovering new objects. Through these new experiences learning occurs, and new knowledge is acquired that remains in the mind.

Different colors influence in different ways. Light, clear colors are more attractive, especially those that are also warm. Some colors may stimulate to the point of hurting the eye in the same way that certain sharp sounds can. The effect of color deepens if experienced by a sensitive soul.

The psychological effect of color is part of the association that colors have according to what they represent in nature. If colors represent flame they may be exciting, but if they represent blood they may cause the feeling of disgust. There can also be various associations that cannot be explained. Besides taste, sight may also correspond with touch or smell, as some colors may seem prickly or perfumed.



Color is a feature in art that cannot exist by itself, and needs to be part of form as it needs certain boundaries. It also needs definite shades and surfaces that are separated from other colors. Through the relationship between form and color, certain spiritual effects can be created, although both form and color have certain internal resonance. The characteristics that are common to both form and color also encourage the way they relate as sharp forms, such as how triangles are better suited to sharp colors, like a yellow triangle, while soft colors better suit soft forms, such as a blue circle. Different combinations provide different harmonies.

Music in art

The connection between various arts have been explored by both musicians and painters. The Russian composer Scriabin attempted to intensify music through color.

Music can produce certain reverberations with the sound of an instrument, which can enhance various effects in arts, such as literature. Sounds produced in certain ways can intensify atmosphere. External means such as thunder or moon can provide imaginary effects that are associated with the sound.

Wagner used theatrical effects in his music through motifs using devices such as a musical phrase that could provide a spiritual atmosphere. In the same way, Debussy used nature to create a spiritual atmosphere that impressionist painters also used in their work. The spiritual atmosphere in the musical compositions of Debussy was achieved through an abstract impression.

Moussorgsky, who had a great influence on Debussy, used internal and external references. He achieved that through rejecting conventional beauty while incorporating internal beauty that is part of necessity.

Also, Shonberg rejected conventional beauty as discords, and other combinations of notes allowed for greater freedom in artistic expression. In this way, he tried to reach the soul rather than just the ear. A similar movement was part of impressionism in painting.

Music as well as other arts can become combined together through various methods. According to Kandinsky, the tendency towards abstract and abandoning representation is part of the internal structure. Investigating the artistic material is part of learning it and researching the spiritual value that various artistic elements contain. Music allowed for the expression of the artistic soul, where an independent life was achieved through a musical sound.

Style

Perspective

Kandinsky was interested in colors since he was a child, and used them in his painting. He already then could distinguish in them various smells and sounds. His ability to play piano and the cello enabled him to incorporate a musical sense in all his work. When he was thirty, Kandinsky started to focus only on painting. He left for Munich in 1896. In his painting he was mostly inspired by the Russian religious art created between the tenth and fourteenth century, which also involved certain folkloric elements. Other inspirations that influenced his art pertained to the art of Rembrandt, in particular gradations, and also impressionism. The work of Claude Monet had such an impact on him that he described it as moving forward. Such effects enabled him to perceive abstract in art that changed his view on the iconic art.

These experiences shaped his perception on art that he considered as part of a free expression. Other features that shaped his work were his personal attitudes of doing everything thoroughly. His first influences were realistic French impressionism abandoned in favor of landscapes that slowly started turning into abstract. He then started painting without any attachment to objects. He called this non-objective art.

In 1910 he wrote *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, published in 1912. In his painting he abandoned the object while applying the unlimited number of possibilities while also incorporating various other tendencies in art. Mostly though, he was inspired by intuition. He followed authenticity and internal necessity while engaging in new ways of composing.

Tone

The tone of the book carefully weighs the issues involved in painting, engaging in insights with adequacy and linguistic astuteness. His descriptions are vivid and insights interesting. He explores various points that affect our approach to art with imaginative comparisons that encourage reflection.

The tone is further enhanced through the thorough knowledge of the subject, especially concerning issues pertaining to the use of colors. References to other modes of expression and artistic endeavors indicate versatility in various matters related to the subject of painting as artistic expression that can combine various areas of art, including music. It is evident that the knowledge of painting and the art is based on extensive practical experience.

The subtle issues of such artistic endeavor as painting is raised with equal sensitivity to the subject. A wide range of vocabulary is sufficiently incorporated to maintain interest without overbearing effect.



Different structure employed in sentences provides further stimulus to engage in insights. Almost casual, yet deliberately entertaining, such language is enhanced through interesting comparisons.

Structure

The book has been divided into eight chapters, each dealing with a different matter. In the first chapter, that of introduction, the author provides an overview of the characteristics involving the art, the way materialism affects art and how emotions provide an inner way of influencing the recipient.

The second chapter describes the life of the spirit represented as the movement of a triangle through the progress of mankind. The achievements of individual artists are exerted through the emotional power.

The third chapter deals with the components of the spiritual pyramid, where each segment incorporates different attempts by different types of people to move, although only certain type of advancement marks a true progress that is spiritual progress.

The fourth chapter is devoted to the nature of the pyramid that encourages self-examination and inward effort through which the power can be coordinated in the pursuit to reach heaven.

The fifth chapter describes the effect that color has on human experience through various associations, spiritual vibration, or the psychological effect.

The sixth chapter discusses the relationship between color and form and the direct influence of simple colors.

In the seventh chapter, the author formulates a theory, considering the way different colors affect our perception as well as the connection between various arts and inspirational elements.

Chapter eight explores the nature of artist's work, the qualities of the artist, and the way the artist needs to approach work.

Quotes

"Just as each spoken word rouses an internal vibration, so does every object represented." p. 50

"There is no 'must' in art, because art is always free." p. 50

"Inner necessity is the basis of both small and great problems in painting." p. 54

"Color is the keyboard, the eyes are the hammers, the soul is the piano with many strings." p. 45

"It is evident therefore that color harmony must rest ultimately on purposive playing upon the human soul; this is one of the guiding principles of internal necessity." p. 45

"form is the external expression of inner meaning."

"Everything is at first a matter of feeling." p. 54

"The final abstract expression of every art is number." p. 73

"Painting is an art; and art is not vague production, transitory and isolated, but a power which must be directed to the development and refinement of the human soul, to raising the triangle of the spirit."

"The artist must have something to communicate, since mastery over form is not the end but, instead, the adapting of form to internal significance" p. 75

Topics for Discussion

What is the nature of spiritual in art?

How does spiritual pyramid advance art?

What spiritual means are effective in art?

What artistic methods allow for learning?

In what way are colors connected with music?

How do colors interrelate and affect each other?

What is the role of color in art?

What spiritual influence does form and color have on art?