



Abstract Art

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Wassily Kandinsky: Reciprocal Accords: 1942;

Musée d'Art Moderne, Centre George Pompidou, Paris

Picture with an Archer: 1909;

Museum of Modern Art, New York

Reciprocal Accords is a delightfully balanced large format composition painted by Kandinsky in the final synthesising phase of his art. In it there is a striking accord between two strongly coloured, multi-composite geometric forms finely anchored on their tips as they project outwards from a background of three distinctly softened panes of colour that elegantly defines them and the surrounding space. Assemblages of linear, curved and circular forms are either attached to the two dominants or float freely between them in clusters of pulsing energy that is equally reminiscent of the music of nature, our cellular biology and a socially connected life. Biomorphic abstraction has come to the fore on a background of “inner necessity” as Kandinsky remains consumed by his inner world right to the end. The resonating agreement between “eye and soul” is now matched by the romantic coupling of new life emerging from chaos. In a penultimate symphonic burst of creative synthesis, Kandinsky’s unique expressive use of form and colour once again becomes original signal amongst what for him was the artistic noise of the time.

Kandinsky is often credited with creating the first purely non-objective painting and as being the founder of abstract art which he saw as the “expression of mystery by means of mystery”. His synaesthetic embrace of colour-inspired painting, musical thinking and exploratory writing was bounded only by his imagination. In the passionate analogy between art and music, Kandinsky saw his colours and forms “sounding and vibrating” and used them to create **Impressions** (which still had an element of naturalistic representation) of “inner nature” (**Improvisations**) from which the internal action of the picture was slowly and deliberately refined into big, sweeping statements about the inner world of thought and feeling (**Compositions**). Although his art weaved through many movements and continuously evolved, it always stayed true to core principles that also resonated strongly with his major theoretical writings. In “*Concerning the spiritual in art*” (early years in Munich and Russia), music and painting were intimately linked such that musically inspired repetition, inversion, variation, dynamic intensification, and diminution influenced visual patterns in which signal and noise created thematic tension that needed a reviewer’s response for meaningful resolution. Similarly, for all the penetrating rational analysis of art and design in “*Point and line to plane*” (Bauhaus years in Germany), it was still founded on a platform of non-rationality which emphasised the reciprocal relationship between intuition and intellect – neither of which was of much use without the other. And finally, Kandinsky’s essay “*L’Art concret*” (later years in Paris) gave abstract art a concrete feel by consolidating the secret correspondence between the arts, man’s nature and the cosmos that was the founding conviction of his life’s work and overall sense of well-being.

Just as *Reciprocal Accords* exuded peaceful resolution whilst looking back at what was, *Picture with an Archer* was a seminal picture of enigmatic searching for what could be. The self-assuredness of Kandinsky’s later years contrasted sharply with his beginnings in Russia (single child, separated parents, changing cities, career choice struggles and socio-political realities). Arguably, Kandinsky’s personal difficulties and the sick times that he lived in created a yearning for existential healing and the spiritual renewal that a world of imagination and fantasy could provide. Although *Picture with an Archer* is still figurative at its core, its assertive use of Fauvist forms and vibrating colours, disrupted patchworks of landscape, and the volatility of romantic energy meant that the sensitive young man with the urgent need to paint “nature’s chorus of colours” so that her “inner sounds” could be seen, was well on his way to finding his artistic voice. The knightly figure (fairy-tale motif) on the leftward galloping horse on the right is now an avant-garde symbol of conflict and advance as he turns and draws his bow at some unseen target. Indeed, within a few months of this picture, Kandinsky would purposefully paint the first modern entirely abstract composition. Der Blaue Reiter expressionist phases in Munich, peri-revolutionary experiences in Russia and pure abstract painting with all its variations in an exigent Europe all subsequently helped Kandinsky’s archer discover a completely new way to move around the canvas. For Kandinsky, “the more frightening the world became, the more art became abstract”; and “the more abstract his art, the more clear and direct its appeal”. Despite this, however, he always remained acutely aware of the dangers presented by a meaningless autonomy of form and colour. Even more powerfully, the new conception of painting that Kandinsky sought out, developed and bequeathed to us is so inexhaustably rich in its ideas and theories that its infinite potential is in perfect accord with the notion that “an empty canvas can be a living wonder... far lovelier than certain pictures”.

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