Apocalypse According to Vasily Kandinsky

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THESIS
Submitted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Art History in the Graduate College of the University of Illinois at Chicago, 2014

Chicago, Illinois

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For my children, Alexsandra and Ian.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Peter Hales, who served as my primary advisor. His advice and guidance have been invaluable. He has improved my writing, my teaching, and my scholarship. For comments and advice, I am also very much indebted to other members of the dissertation committee: Hannah Higgins, Jonathan Fineberg, Michał Markowski and Matthew Jesse Jackson.
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<tr>
<td>RAKhN</td>
<td>Russian Academy of Artistic Sciences</td>
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<td>NKVM</td>
<td>New Artists’ Association of Munich</td>
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SUMMARY

The main objective of this dissertation is to identify and analyze the influence of Russian icons, frescoes and popular broadsheets (lubki) and prove their essentiality to Vasily Kandinsky’s breakthrough into abstraction. This study scrutinizes the painter’s thematically and stylistically radical transition during the five-year period prior to the outbreak of the First World War and argues that the stimulus of the Russian sacred and folk art was far greater than previously thought.

The dissertation points out that the 1910 visit to Russia was critical to Kandinsky’s artistic development. It attaches significance to the painter’s participation in the artistic ambiance of Moscow and maintains that exposure to Neo-primitivism and to the mystic currents within Russian philosophy was instrumental to Kandinsky's progress, since the artist stood in need of an imaginative graphic foundation for his messianic vision of the New Spiritual Era.

This dissertation assesses the interconnection between Kandinsky’s specific visual, formal strategies and his emerging synthesis of a wide variety of spiritual traditions, practices, and beliefs and their zeitgeist. The study ascribes particular importance to Kandinsky’s religious orthodoxy and his drive toward the genetic apprehension of the Word; to the concept of affirmative, positive (cataphatic) theology and negative (apophatic) theology and scrutinizes the artist’s use of reverse perspective, which takes into account the intuitive, spiritual, and psychological aspects of the creative process. The dissertation is specifically focused on the first seven Compositions since they represent and chronicle the artist's path to abstraction.
Introduction. Ainmillerstraße Photograph

In truth, the origin of my abstract painting essentially ought to be looked for in the Russian icon painters of the tenth to fourteenth centuries and in Russian folk painting, which I saw for the first time on my trip to northern Russia.¹

Vasily Kandinsky, Letter of July 31, 1937, to Andre Dezarrois

Fig.1 Vasily Kandinsky at his desk in apartment at Ainmillerstraße 36, Munich 1911.

In a snapshot taken by Gabriele Münter on June 24, 1911, Vasily Kandinsky sits at his desk in their Munich apartment. He faces a wall covered with paintings, wooden crosses, German reverse glass paintings (Hinterglasbild), Gothic sculpture, popular Russian folk prints (lubki),² and other framed and unframed graphic works. On the table in front of him is the watercolor study for the woodcut Three Riders in Red, Blue and Black.

² Lubki (sing. lubok), Cyrillic: Russian: любок, лубочная картинка are simple printed pictures colored by hand. Often called broadsides, popular prints, folk prints, folk etchings, or folk engravings, they represent a vivid and fascinating page in the history of Russian culture.
Münter’s photograph captures the way Kandinsky, consciously or unconsciously, recreated a substitute for the internal “screen” – iconostasis – of the Orthodox Church. The cluttered wall Kandinsky faces envelops him. It encompasses the artist not just spatially but also temporally; it reaches back to vital elements of his childhood and reintroduces them into his adult life. For every member of the Orthodox Church the iconostasis provides the first exposure to large-scale religious art. The magnificent screen of icons that forms an iconostasis creates a specific esthetic environment, which in turn forms the foundation of Russian Orthodox consciousness: the imagination of an Orthodox Church member develops as an emotional response to the world of the holy icons and the essence of their sacredness.

When the Ainmillerstraße photograph was taken, Kandinsky was on the threshold of new expressive territory. Though he did not yet know exactly what direction he would take, he certainly knew that he could not stay within what he considered the obsolete language of figurative art. The existence of real world objects had already become problematic for the painter during his student years in Moscow, when he saw the work of Monet in which
“objects were discredited as an essential element within the picture.”3 Back then, Kandinsky had already asked himself the commonsense question: Why not go a step further? Kandinsky’s conviction that objects harmed his paintings was reinforced by a fortuitous incident: coming home late one evening, he saw a painting that he could not recognize. As it turned out, this perplexing image was one of his own paintings, standing on its side. At that moment it became apparent to Kandinsky that recognizable objects connected to some degree with reality contaminate the artistic value of the painting and, therefore, the quality of the viewer’s response.

Moreover, at that particular moment the artist believed that the opulent pictorial tradition of the Russian Orthodox Church provided an additional and powerful foundation for an urgently needed transformation of the visual arts. He viewed this transformation as a necessary preparation for something he believed, at the time, to be inevitable: the impending New Age of the Spirit. As the painter stated in his Conclusion of On the Spiritual in Art: “We have before us the age of conscious creation with which the spiritual in painting will be allied organically; with the gradual forming structure of the new spiritual realm, as this spirit is the soul of this epoch of great spirituality.”4 The sources for this transformation are diverse, but they are mutually complementary elements within Kandinsky’s unique understanding of the role of art in our relation to the spiritual realm. These influences include: naïve Slavic folk art, icons and iconostasis, the philosophical views of contemporaries like Pavel Florensky and Sergei Bulgakov, Symbolism, Theosophy, and Neoplatonism.

The highly abstracted Compositions, painted before the summer of 1911, suggest that it was only a matter of time before the painter would take abstraction a step further, that he would soon stop extracting what is essential in objects and would create a “pure painting”

unconstrained by representation, fully autonomous, direct from his imagination. In short, it was only a matter of time before he would stop *re*-presenting and would instead *present* previously uncreated events and entities.

Soon after, in the autumn of the same year, 1911, Kandinsky completed sketches for *Composition V*, the very important, major abstract painting.\(^5\) According to the art historian Magdalena Dabrowski “*Composition V*, in its search for pure painting, went far beyond the abstract image.”\(^6\) In his *Reminiscences* Kandinsky described his main artistic goals. His books and his art “had as their principal aim to awaken this capacity for experiencing the spiritual in material and in abstract phenomena, which will be indispensible in the future, making ultimate kinds of experiences possible.”\(^7\)

Münter’s snapshot is valuable because it captures the components critical to the artist’s breakthrough into abstract painting. Other factors that influenced Kandinsky’s transition into abstraction are visible in the content of the *Blue Rider Almanac* on which painter worked at the time. The *Almanac* included, among other works, folk art, children’s art (which we know that Kandinsky and Münter collected avidly), Malayan figurines, gothic sculpture, San Marco mosaics, developments within contemporary music and ultramodern artistic trends that came from Paris.

Kandinsky’s personal iconostasis clarifies continuities and relationships that would otherwise be obscure. To see the components of this assemblage as a unity is to understand that they are clues to the puzzle of Kandinsky’s leap into abstraction. In this context, the iconostasis functions as a border between the two worlds of the sacred and the secular, the visible and the invisible, lightness and darkness, and the concealed and the revealed. The iconostasis reflects the dichotomy of Creation. Just as the distinctive style of holy icons was

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\(^7\) Kandinsky, *Reminiscences*, 381.
developed to enable icons to serve as intermediaries uniting earthly and divine, Kandinsky invented abstraction because he needed a form that expressed the continuum of the material and the spiritual.

We can trace some of Kandinsky’s ideas about art’s role as a mediator between the spiritual and material worlds to the Russian mathematician, philosopher and art historian Pavel Florensky, whose views must have been important for Kandinsky during this period. Florensky believed that “all icons possess in themselves the power of spiritual revelation, though some veil it almost impenetrably. [Florensky was convinced that] the hour [was] coming when the spiritual state of every icon’s beholder will bestow upon him the power to experience every icon’s spiritual essence even through the most impenetrable of form-distorting veils, and then every icon on earth will live and effect its operation as witness of the supreme world (emphases added).” Florensky saw an icon as a vehicle to transport the viewer to the world beyond, despite the icon’s “veil.”

In many respects, Kandinsky’s magnum opus On the Spiritual in Art coincides with Florensky’s views. It is no accident that Florensky’s early work The Meaning of Idealism (Smysl Idealizma) of 1914, which contains some thoughts on Picasso’s work, draws conclusions similar to those that Kandinsky draws in On the Spiritual in Art. Kandinsky’s

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8 There is no hard evidence that Kandinsky read Florensky, nor documents that make reference to an actual meeting between the two men; however, anyone who knows Moscow’s artistic environment of the first two decades of the 20th century would agree that it would be impossible for these two men, in tightly connected group of creative people where everyone knew each other, not to have knows each other’s writings, not to have heard about each other. In the course of this work I will point to a number of highly probable connections that make it virtually impossible that the painter and the artist never met, or more importantly, didn’t know each other’s work. For example: Kandinsky and Florensky were very familiar with, or knew personally, influential Symbolist poets like Bely (the son of the famous mathematician and Florensky’s teacher and protagonist, Nikolai Bugaev), Blok, and Ivanov; they both knew works by Balmont and Merezhkovsky, Briusov and many others. Florensky certainly was aware of Kandinsky, since he had read Mir Iskustva diligently since 1900 (Avril Pyman, Pavel Florensky, 184); Mir Iskustva was the journal in which Kandinsky published his Correspondence from Munich in 1902. Kandinsky and Florensky were both deeply influenced by Symbolism and Theosophy, although both of them took from these movements what was useful to them and after 1913 kept their distance, especially from the ideas of Rudolf Steiner, the head of German branch of Theosophical Society. Finally, in the later years after the October Revolution, they both taught in RAKhaN. The similarities between the two men are clearly described by Nicoletta Misler in her brilliant essay Toward an Exact Aesthetics in John E. Bowlt and Olga Matich. Laboratory of Dreams. The Russian Avant-Garde and Cultural Experiment (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

view of Picasso’s destruction of various parts of the material and their subsequent scattered reconstruction is close to Florensky’s understanding of the “supplementary planes” in the medieval icon, or in other words, understanding the “reality of the artistic image … realized in … unifying in one apperception that which is given in different moments and, consequently, under different angles of vision.”\(^{10}\) The comparison of “the construction of space in Cubist art, especially Analytical Cubism, and that in medieval Byzantine and medieval Russian images”\(^{11}\) is illuminating.

It is no surprise, then, that in “The Meaning of Idealism … Florensky relied on the same esoteric sources that we find in Kandinsky’s personal library.”\(^{12}\) Like Florensky, Kandinsky was convinced that the works artists produce “will necessarily awaken finer emotion in the spectator who is capable of them, emotions that we cannot put into words.”\(^{13}\)

For Kandinsky “[t]he spiritual life, to which art also belongs and in which it is one of the most powerful agents, is a complex but definite move forward and upward…”\(^{14}\) Furthermore, the “form-distorting veil” referenced twice in the above quotation from Florensky is strongly reminiscent of the “veiling” of recognizable forms that I will argue best characterizes Kandinsky’s abstraction. The connection is almost to be expected, since Kandinsky was most likely familiar with and sympathetic to Florensky’s ideas. Kandinsky could have heard about Florensky’s early days from David Burliuk. The philosopher and the future Futurist artist were classmates in the classical gymnasium in Tiflis. Later, in Moscow, Florensky became the best friend of Sergei Bulgakov, one of the most original minds of Russian philosophy,


\(^{13}\) Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art*, 128-129.

\(^{14}\) Ibid., 131.
whom Kandinsky engaged to participate in his *Blue Rider Almanac*. In a letter to Franz Marc he called Bulgakov his colleague and “one of the greatest experts on spiritual life.” Additionally, Florensky, like Kandinsky, with “the onslaught of the Great War and the Revolution … heard the trumpets of the Apocalypse sounding through the noise of time - just as the writer and philosopher Vasilii Rozanov was compiling his pamphlets on *The Apocalypse of Our Time.*” Kandinsky’s position in this regard was definitely similar to that of Florensky and most Russian artists. “At the beginning of the Revolution … Florensky used to deliver public papers and lectures whose principal idea was of an imminent and inevitable catastrophe …that everything would lose its structure and form and everything would disintegrate, be destroyed and atomized completely. Until the old was liquefied in total chaos and reduced to dust, it would impossible to speak of new and stable values.”

Let us return to Münter’s photograph and Kandinsky’s personal “iconostasis.” A full understanding of iconostasis requires awareness of its context. We have to consider how an iconostasis functioned during the religious service. On the side of the Sanctuary is a curtain that is drawn open or closed during the various points of the church service. In this way the Sanctuary screen makes the sacred space both visible and at the same time invisible. “These two worlds – the visible and the invisible – are intimately connected, but reciprocal differences are so immense that the inescapable question arises: what is their boundary? Their boundary separates them; yet, simultaneously, it joins them.”

The ceremony of the Holy Mass is theatrical, as it illuminates the sacred space but forbids physical access to it. This division of space shapes the perception of every believer. The screen of images serves a dual

15 Kandinsky’s cousin Elena Tokmakova was married to Sergei Bulgakov.
17 An author supported and deeply respected by Florensky and Kandinsky. Kandinsky included his short text from the *Italian Impressions* (1909) in the *Blue Rider Almanac*.
18 Misler, 21.
19 Aleksei Losev’s (the philosopher and a prominent figure in Russian religious thought of the 20th century) recollection quoted in Nicoletta Misler, *Pavel Florensky: Beyond Vision*, 21.
function; it displays the holy prototypes and it prevents free movement between the spaces. A
domain governed by neither perspectival illusion nor laws of physics exists behind the screen
of icons.

The character of the believer is molded and fortified through this denial of access to
what is beyond comprehension by affecting his experience of physical space in two ways.
First, it allows the Sanctuary to be visible, giving the viewer a glimpse of a consecrated space
in which transubstantiation takes place, in which neither laws of physics nor their perceptual
analogue, perspectival illusion, reign as they do in our ordinary experience. Second, it forbids
access to this place that is wholly beyond human comprehension. So the effect is one of both
revelation of the sacred space – the believer knows that the realm of the sacred exists – and
an underscoring of the distance between the believer and that realm (as opposed to an
illusionistic approach, in which the believer might develop the mistaken idea that the sacred
realm is like the material one or is already accessible to his understanding). The idea of
contact between the human and divine becomes a spatial, experiential reality – but in such a
way that the believer’s awareness of the separateness of these two spheres is not erased, but
rather heightened. This experience shapes his comportment to both the material and the
spiritual realms. Thus, the believer’s character is molded on the perceptual, and even on the
physical level – because even his simple, bodily experience of space has been inflected with
religious experience.

This sacred space is comparable to the spatial solutions Kandinsky used in his abstract
paintings. Just as Kandinsky’s work was created to open the viewer to the spiritual
dimension, for people of faith icons representing the prototypes are the windows to the
spiritual world beyond. Therefore iconostases provide a stage where what is human and what
is divine are fused. Just as Kandinsky’s Compositions are hard to penetrate for those for
whom “[t]he awakening soul is still deeply under the influence of the [materialistic]
nightmare”21; similarly, for those without faith, iconostasis is just a golden barrier adorned with images.

In June of 1911, when Münter took the Ainmillerstraße photograph, Kandinsky’s 45-year engagement with the iconostasis was about to be reversed. The photograph captures the artist at a critical moment in his relationship to the Orthodox spectacle. He would become an artist, high priest and mystic who would attempt to reveal higher spheres of existence. His work would deny viewers an unobstructed vision of the world of the Spirit and introduce distortions almost as cryptic as a curtain of smoke rising from the thurible22 of the Orthodox priest. Kandinsky veils to provoke, to mobilize, to make the act of spiritual awakening to the higher spheres of human condition real and rewarding. The boundary of the iconostasis will find its profound embodiment in his non-objective Compositions. Compositions V, VI and VII will become the sites of Kandinsky’s greatest quest into the depths of the human spirit.

The meaning of the components that played an important part in Kandinsky’s breakthrough into abstraction becomes apparent when we analyze his “iconostasis” more closely. Placing it under scrutiny, we realize that its seemingly diverse elements share a common substratum. The Gothic figurine in Münter’s photograph seems remote, in cultural context and in visual form, from the Russian folklore print, but this distance is deceptive. If the figurine and the folk print are juxtaposed as in Kandinsky’s assemblage, they underscore the artist’s understanding of a hidden, but deeply rooted, relationship between German Gothic art and Russian medieval art. Kandinsky’s artistic iconostasis displays lubki that today can be seen at the Bibliotheque Kandinsky at the Centre Pompidou in Paris and at the Lenbachhaus Museum in Munich.

21 Kandinsky, On the Spiritual in Art, 128.
22 Russian Кадилница, kadilnitsa, orthodox incense burner
The fact that the painter did not part with them in his lifetime suggests their likely significance. On the wall in front of the painter’s desk hang folk prints on a popular theme of Russian Orthodox Church iconography, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*; a well-liked military subject, *The Conquest of Adrianopol by the Count Dibitch-Zabalkanski*; and a print representing a widely admired mythical creature – *The Bird of Paradise, Alkanost*. These themes correspond to the mainstream topics of popular Russian folk prints (*lubki* or *narodniye kartinki*) that inform Kandinsky’s abstract painting. The suggestion of iconostasis is even more pronounced in another photograph from the same apartment. All the *hinterglasbild* pieces in this new arrangement are religious in content and their display here reflects a traditional organization common to Russian iconostases. The icon of Christ was always in the center. Over the long history of Orthodox iconostases a single image of Christ evolved into a triptych of the Savior, Holy Virgin and John the Baptist. The program of iconostases also became more complex over time. First, the figures of the archangels Michael and Gabriel became common, and then the patron saints, local saints, regional saints and
national patron saints crowded into the array. At the peak of its development, some iconostases had four or more rows of icons framed by elaborate, usually gold, casing.

Fig. 4 Wall with glass paintings in Kandinsky and Münter’s apartment, 36 Ainmillerstraße, ca.1913 (Guggenheim Catalogue, pp.29)

Kandinsky’s wall loosely follows this tradition – the crucifixion is in the very center of the composition, to its right is the icon of the Holy Virgin and to its left, slightly below, is the small icon of a sitting John the Baptist. Further away, we see scenes from the life of the Holy Family, a portrait of St. Martin and other figures from the Christian pantheon that are hard to identify. A central part of this personal arrangement imitates the main section of the traditional iconostasis, the so-called Deësis. The architectural scheme of iconostasis is dictated by Christian symbolism. “At the basis of this symbolism lies the teaching of the Church on the redeeming sacrifice of Christ and its ultimate aim, which constitutes the very essence of Christianity – the future transfiguration of man and through him, of the whole world.”

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This particular symbolism reflected Kandinsky’s own conviction that such a transfiguration was already in progress. In the conclusion of *On the Spiritual in Art*, the artist unambiguously proclaimed: “We see already before us an age of purposeful creation, and the spirit in painting stands in a direct, organic relationship to the creation of the new spiritual realm that is already beginning, for this spirit is the soul of the epoch of the great spiritual.”

Kandinsky was not alone in this belief. As has been well documented by historians of the period, and was well understood by the artists of the *fin de siècle* and the first decade of the 20th century, Europe was a place of intellectual and artistic ferment driven by a sense that the expressive forms of the past were exhausted. Tonal music and figurative art, for example, had already been pushed to their limits, making them obsolete as modes of expression. Similarly, Europeans sensed the coming collapse of their empires, and some sections of society were actively seeking to overthrow them by terroristic means. The overall zeitgeist was one of apocalyptic fears and yearnings. The principal intent behind the first mature abstractions like *Composition V* was to awaken those who were still asleep, to alert and transform society, or at least those mature and ready to make such a radical leap toward the *Age of the Spirit*. Kandinsky felt strongly that humanity was at the breaking point and needed “the other type of art…capable of further development, [which] has its roots in its own spiritual period, but also has an awakening prophetic power, which can have widespread and profound effect.”

There is no doubt that the painter thought that something radical had to be done. *On the Spiritual in Art* is infused with a desperate cry for a renewal that would leave the “whole nightmare of the materialistic attitude” behind once and for all.

In his influential book *The Esthetic Face of Being. Art in the Theology of Pavel Florensky*, Russian art historian Victor Bychkov finds it “necessary to note how profoundly

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24 Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art*, 219 (the spacing here is Kandinsky’s).
26 Ibid., 128.
the final conclusion of Orthodox aesthetics, nourished by Neoplatonism and patristics as well as by the spiritual experience of Byzantine and ancient Russian artistic practice, suddenly coincided with the notions of European art following Cezanne, most fully formulated in the second decade of [20th] century by the painter Vassily Kandinsky in his book, *On the Spiritual in Art* (1911).”27 In Kandinsky’s turn towards the spiritual in art is, according to Bychkov, nothing unusual, “since as a spiritual being he was shaped in Russia, not without the strong influence of ancient Russian art.”28

28 Ibid.
Chapter 1: Breakthrough into Abstraction

As Kandinsky experimented and searched for optimal artistic expression, he gradually developed a procedure of obfuscating, disfiguring and stripping figurative elements. “He saw this process of concealing as uniquely suitable for communicating higher truths of cosmological order.” Reflecting on the results of his path toward abstraction, Kandinsky established a coherent framework of thought supporting his work, a superstructure integrating philosophy, poetry, mystical theology, and the perspective of Byzantine esthetics. He “realized that the visual language of abstract painting had to have its own laws of construction, grammar, syntax and vocabulary. His theoretical writings were attempts to formulate these.” Additionally, in his Cologne Lectures the artist admits: “Apart from my innumerable experiments, I also spent much time in reflection, wishing to solve many things by way of logic.”

It was after a pivotal visit to Moscow in 1910, to be explored in a later chapter, that Kandinsky realized that his national artistic heritage provided a pictorial base for his work. In particular, the subject of the Apocalypse, common in Russian Orthodox frescoes and popular prints, would form the basis of Kandinsky’s push toward abstraction.

Once the artist decided to move in this direction, he advanced in a scrupulous manner. Paintings were sometimes completed only after dozens of preparatory sketches, diagrams and studies. The artist executed these in diverse media: ink on paper, pencil on paper, watercolor on paper, watercolor and India ink on paper mounted on cardboard, India ink on paper, oil on canvas, and others. The preparatory works usually represent a mixture of details at various stages of development towards the finished work. Kandinsky’s studies never developed in a linear manner.

29 Dabrowski, 35.
31 Kandinsky, Cologne Lecture, 393-394.
In the summer of 1911, the painter was still not sure where this new path of expression would take him, but by 1914 he had come to the conclusion that he could not remain within the language of figurative art. That three year-period of intense exploration convinced him that “if one physical realm is destroyed for the sake of pictorial necessity, then the artist has the artistic right and the artistic duty to negate the other physical realms as well.”

Kandinsky’s break into a sphere of art freed from the constraints of figurative depiction resulted from a realization of the urgency of finding a new image-based vocabulary. In his theoretical treatise *On the Spiritual in Art*, first published in 1911 he was declared with certainty that the new, challenging times demanded an equally innovative language. This language would reflect the accelerating changes in the fields of philosophy, science, technology, spirituality, psychology and, most critically, abstract art. His would be an art of modernist iconostasis. The new art would propose a hidden construction that consists of “forms apparently scattered at random upon the canvas, which – again, apparently – have no relationship one to another: the external absence of any such relationship … constitutes its internal presence.”

Just as iconostasis represents a tightly organized arrangement of images, Kandinsky’s new abstract language although “externally … loosened has internally been fused into a single unity.”

Kandinsky’s exposure to nonfigurative art dates back to 1889, when he was sent to do ethnographic research in northeastern Russia. There the artist had a feeling, as recorded in his *Reminiscences* of 1913 that he “was journeying to another planet.” In the same memoir he recalls:

> There I saw farmhouses completely covered with painting – nonrepresentational – inside. Ornaments, furniture, crockery, everything painted. I had the impression I was stepping into painting that “narrated” nothing. A few years later, I saw a large Impressionist exhibition in Moscow, some of which aroused a good deal of controversy, because the painters “treated objects carelessly.” But I had the impression that *painting itself had come here to the fore*, and

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32 Kandinsky, *Cologne Lecture*, 396.
34 Ibid.
wondered whether one could go a long way further in this direction. Since then, I looked at Russian icon painting with new eyes, that is to say, I “acquired eyes” for the abstract element in this kind of painting.\footnote{Kandinsky, \textit{Interview with Karl Nierendorf} (1937), 806.}

When, in 1906, Kandinsky became familiar with the work of Henri Matisse, he asked himself “whether one might not [merely] reduce or ‘distort’ objects, but … do away with them altogether.”\footnote{Ibid., 806.} He envisioned a new, self-referential mode of expression that would be divorced from material reality and independent of its gravity. In the paragraph of the \textit{Reminiscences} briefly mentioned above, he wrote:

Much later, after my arrival in Munich, I was enchanted on one occasion by an unexpected spectacle that confronted me in my studio. It was the hour when dusk draws in. I returned home with my painting box having finished a study, still dreamy and absorbed in work I had completed, and suddenly saw an indescribably beautiful picture, pervaded by an inner glow. At first, I stopped short and then quickly approached this mysterious picture, on which I could discern only forms and colors and whose content was incomprehensible. At once, I discovered the key to the puzzle: it was a picture I had painted, standing on its side against the wall. The next day, I tried to re-create my impression of the picture from the previous evening by daylight. I only half succeeded, however; even on its side, I constantly recognized objects, and the fine bloom of dusk was missing. Now I could see clearly that objects harmed my pictures.

A terrifying abyss of all kinds of questions, a wealth of responsibilities stretched before me. And most important of all: What is to replace the missing object?\footnote{Kandinsky, \textit{Reminiscences}, 370.}

Kandinsky called this “new art” non-objective painting, and later, concrete painting. Describing it over 25 years later, he wrote: “concrete painting offers a parallel with symphonic music by possessing a purely artistic content. Purely pictorial means are alone responsible for this content.”\footnote{Kandinsky, \textit{The Value of a Concrete Work}, 821.} In 1937, in a letter to the collector Hilla Rebay, Kandinsky returned to the issue of his struggle for the New Art again: “[…] I could not immediately come to ‘pure abstraction’ because at that time I was all alone in the world. In spite of that, I
painted my first non-objective painting already in 1911. The artist felt “all alone” because by the end of that year even his closest colleagues had refused to accept Composition V, and he had been forced to resign his membership in the Munich New Artist's Association organization, which he had cofounded.

However, in 1912 (and even after he had completed Composition V) Kandinsky remained convinced that artists would not be able to succeed by using purely abstract forms. This fact indicates that Kandinsky’s first giant leap into pure abstraction was not fully conscious. Like Schoenberg composing the String Quartet No. 2 or Wagner after completing the overture to Tristan and Isolde, Kandinsky found it difficult to rationalize what he had painted. In Composition V, he broke through his own limits. He was surprised by his own creation. It took him many months before he realized Composition V's riskiness and audacity. He faced difficult questions. He had to ask himself how to maintain these new artistic heights, this spiritual intensity, and how to push the borders of abstraction even further. But first of all, he had to catch up intellectually with what he had produced.

After Kandinsky painted the next two Compositions, he shifted his view on abstraction. In the Kleine Änderungen zum “Geistigen,” written for a proposed fourth German edition to On the Spiritual in Art, he changed his mind about the necessity for art to connect to reality and accepted the possibility of purely non-objective art. He also reassessed and restructured his relationship with Russian sacred art and its folkloric representation. He

40 Kandinsky, In Memory of Wassily Kandinsky (Guggenheim, 1945), 98.
41 The Neue Künstlervereinigung München (NKVM) was formed in 1909.
42 Schoenberg’s and Kandinsky’s creative originality depend on a peculiar technique about which the composer wrote:
…to my astonishment I discovered that I was never more faithful to the poet than when, led as it were, by the first direct contact with the opening sounds, I felt instinctively all that must necessarily follow from these initial sounds. Then it became clear to me that it is with a work of art as with every perfect organism...It is so homogeneous in its constitution that it discloses in every detail its truest and inmost being. Thus I came to the full understanding … of Stefan George’s poems from their sounds alone... the external agreement between music and text – declamation, tempo, and tonal intensity – has little to do with inner meaning. – Craft, Robert. The Robert Craft Collection, The Music of Arnold Schoenberg, vol.2 CD. Naxos, New York, 2002.
43 “Small Changes to On the Spiritual.”
44 Never published because of the outbreak of World War I.
realized that without reconnecting with his Russian roots, with mystic and indefinable Russianness, the success of his artistic journey would be superficial and limited; it would feel like something borrowed and foreign – above all, like something not his own.

If one can point to a catalytic moment from which the alchemy of transformation followed, it would perhaps most tellingly be the writing, and publishing, of On The Spiritual In Art. It was in that work that Kandinsky clearly evoked the folklore tradition of lubki as the emerging conception of art that expresses not simply visual or formal values but also spiritual ones. The naïve lubki provided a new, independent, spiritually charged source untouched by the decadence of fin de siècle urban culture. Just as the Orthodox religious tradition infused Kandinsky’s work with spiritualism, so he hoped that his abstractions would open up a new visual vocabulary capable of resurrecting spirituality in modern life.
Chapter 2: Moscow 1910

1. Autumn Trip

In the fall of 1910, Kandinsky arrived in Moscow from Munich. It was by no means the first of Kandinsky’s trips back to his home country, but this trip to Russia was uncharacteristically long. The energy and enthusiasm the painter was exposed to in Moscow became a major force that accelerated his push toward abstraction and shaped his work in general for years to come. The iconographically complex paintings executed during the years immediately before World War I, especially his Compositions V, VI and VII, would most likely have looked very different had Kandinsky not been introduced to Dmitri A. Rovinsky’s (1824 -1895) seminal Anthology of the Russian Graphic Art, or to the folklore prints assembled by Ivan D. Sytin. Ultimately, the most important events for Kandinsky were personal encounters with the Moscow creative elite, with intellectuals and philosophers; direct exchanges of ideas during studio visits; and participation in exhibitions. For Kandinsky, a man of strong faith, participation in religious services and frequent trips to the Kremlin’s holiest shrines certainly enhanced his spiritual life.

2. Moscow and its Artistic Turmoil

In the autumn of 1911 as the idea of the Blue Rider Almanac was being conceived, Kandinsky came to believe that the creative energy that would shape the future of art would come from a wide range of manifestations characterized most of all by their authenticity of expression, including children’s art, Bavarian reversed glass painting, non-Western art, and a combined, but balanced, force of Russian folklore (especially popular prints) and of the artistic avant-garde. The painter was impressed by the vibrancy of Moscow artistic circles
and by its shared commitment to linking avant-garde art with the long heritage of Russian folklore. He met its most influential members: Natalya Goncharova, Mikhail Larionov, the brothers Vladimir and David Burliuk, Ilya Mashkov, Robert Falk, Pyotr Konchalovsky and others. This young, progressive group saw themselves as the true voice of the future manifested by an innovative use of Russian folklore combined with new artistic developments coming from Paris, Milan and Berlin. Perhaps most important to Kandinsky was the way they recast their own thousand-year-old Russian tradition. As early as 1909, they had formed a society called the Jack of Diamonds. Albeit invested in many different artistic currents (including Cubism and Futurism), between 1908 and 1913 members of the society were most interested in the aesthetics of Neo-primitivism. This short-lived but exceptionally influential movement projected an optimistic, affirmative energy especially observable when compared with the frequently morbid alienation of Symbolism. As the art historian John Bowlt has written, “in the bright colors, emphatic lines, intense stylization and general optimism of Russian peasant art, the new generation of artists found a barbaric energy and an artistic integrity which the standard professional easel-painting of their time lacked so patently.”

Although Kandinsky’s relationship with the group’s much younger leaders Goncharova and Larionov was erratic, the artist kept a relatively close contact with their circle. He might have seen Goncharova’s scandal-causing tetraptych Four Evangelists as a revaluation of the iconostasis by the Russian avant-garde. Its large and ambitious format (204 x 58 cm) was particularly reminiscent of the great iconostasis in the Kremlin’s Annunciation Cathedral and of the Russian model of Deësis.

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46 Also known as Knave of Diamonds (Бубновый валет)
The dynamics of the relationship between Kandinsky and Larionov, Goncharova, and the rest of the Moscow creative elite were complex. On the one hand, Kandinsky seemed to be elated while their friendship flourished; on the other hand, his letters to Münter show that he was unbearably patronizing, like a luminary descending to them from the heights of his experience. This must have been irritating, especially for Goncharova, who came from highest Russian aristocratic circles.

Despite Kandinsky’s participation in progressive Russian exhibitions, and despite his association with the Jack of Diamonds, despite his admiration for the art of certain members of the Russian avant-garde, not least Goncharova, Kandinsky was, as one reviewer wrote, ‘alone and alien’ and did not really belong with the ‘savages’ of Russia.\[48\]

Kandinsky’s spiritual, expressionistic ideas were never positively viewed by the younger generation. When in 1912 Larionov and Goncharova refused to participate in the second exhibition of the Jack of Diamonds\[49\] and accused its organizers of paying too much attention to the developments emerging from Paris and Munich, their break up with the pro-Western inclined artists was complete. They insisted that Russian artists must reassess their own roots and look for inspiration to the traditionally and uniquely Russian forms of art. During the conference held by Jack of Diamonds on February 12\(^{th}\), 1912 in Moscow, Goncharova proclaimed: “I condemn the position of the Knave of Diamonds without hesitation. It has replaced creative activity by theorizing. The creative genius of art has never used theory to go beyond practice; on the contrary its theory is constructed on the basis of earlier works.”\[50\]

Kandinsky, as a collaborator of the Jack of Diamonds and a close friend of David Burliuk, against whom Goncharova’s speech was directed, was also a target of her outrage. The conference began with Nikolai Kulbin’s lecture on Kandinsky. Keeping in mind that a Russian version of On the Spiritual in Art was read aloud to the Pan-Russian Congress of

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\[49\] A group of avant-garde artist founded in Moscow in 1910. Malevich, Goncharova and Larionov participated in its first exhibition.

Artists, which opened in St. Petersburg in December 1911,” and that the book was still fresh and currently discussed within artistic circles, Goncharova’s attack was also directed against Kandinsky’s theoretical and highly idiosyncratic treatise. After this memorable clash, Goncharova and Larionov severed all ties with Kandinsky.

Goncharova and Larionov's relatively virulent response to Kandinsky illuminated important divergences within the Russian avant-garde, particularly in Moscow. Two central conflicts were encapsulated in this moment: between those embracing a relationship with European painterly avant-gardes (particularly the Parisian) and those seeking a more "pure" Russian path; and between those who saw Russian folk art's value in its connection to universals, particularly spiritual universals, and those who reveled in its specificity, its materiality, and its nationality.

Both of these conflicts would escalate over the next decade, and they would become curiously intertwined in the aftermath of the Bolshevik revolution. Later, following the World War I a new wave of artists including Malevich, Tatlin, Nikolai Punin, Liubov Popova, Aleksandr Rodchenko, Ivan Kliun and El Lissitzky saw Kandinsky as someone who represented the obsolete languages of Symbolism and spiritually charged German Expressionism. “Fully representative of the antagonism towards Kandinsky and the widespread opinion that Kandinsky was anachronistic and even a dilettante was Nikolai Punin, one of the brilliant art critics of the avant-garde period. On several occasions Punin attacked Kandinsky for misunderstanding and misconstruing the aim of painting.” It is important to remember that Kandinsky belonged to the previous generation, associated with the Symbolism of the influential art journal ‘World of Art,’ and “in many ways this explains

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51 In Lindsay and Vergo note to the 2nd edition of On the Spiritual in Art, in Lindsay and Vergo, Kandinsky. Complete Writings on Art, 115.
the lack of sympathy for his ideas among the next generation of his fellow-countrymen.\textsuperscript{53} Kandinsky’s future within the Soviet Union was also marked by hostile comments made by the future Bolshevik Commissar of Education (who dealt with all cultural issues), Anatoly Lunacharsky, “a trusted friend of Lenin, one of the new society’s most eminent ideologists, a scientist, journalist, and outstanding public speaker, a dazzling erudite.”\textsuperscript{54} Already in 1911 Lunacharsky described Kandinsky’s art as the product of a man “obviously in the definitive stage of psychic degeneration.”\textsuperscript{55} For Lunacharsky, a well educated, well traveled man who had had substantial exposure to Western art, Kandinsky’s art represented a true enigma: “He scrawls, he scrawls some lines with the first paints that come to hand and signs them, the wretch – ‘Moscow,’ ‘Winter,’ and even ‘St. George.’ Why do they permit him to exhibit, really?”\textsuperscript{56}

During the turbulent years of post-revolutionary modernism (1918-1922), Kandinsky’s embrace of spirituality over materiality would alienate him further from the increasingly dominant forces of post-revolutionary Russian art. The consequences were not just limited to his reputation. The educational program Kandinsky proposed in 1920 for the Institute of Artistic Culture, Inkhuk, “was almost immediately turned down by a majority vote.”\textsuperscript{57} For the Constructivists, Kandinsky’s unscientific, intuitive process was unacceptable. “After much discussion, [among Inkhuk members] ‘pure painting’ was dismissed by everybody.”\textsuperscript{58} The authorities also abandoned the similar program of art instruction that the painter prepared for Department of Fine Arts in the Academy of Sciences.\textsuperscript{59}

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{57} Gray, 235.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid.
“In a letter to the Munich magazine *Ararat* in 1920 [the editor, journalist, and artist] Constantine Umansky commented on Kandinsky’s isolation in Russian art life… Umansky went as far as to compare Kandinsky with a type familiar from Russian novels, the passive idealists who lately had to come to be regarded in Russia as ‘superfluous persons’.”

Ironically, the painter is compared to a decadent hero of the type we find in *Without Dogma*, a novel by Henryk Sienkiewicz, whom Kandinsky had mentioned in the second chapter of *On the Spiritual in Art*. Umansky’s comments linked Kandinsky to the type of independently wealthy, well-educated intellectual who without struggle “against the forces dragging him down will surely sink.”

But back in 1910, during the painter’s visit to Moscow these future problems were still distant and hard to predict. During Kandinsky’s Moscow sojourn, he immersed himself not only in art, but also in the general intellectual ferment within the Neo-primitivist group. A letter to Münter dated October 29, 1910 provides insight into Kandinsky’s familiarity with the Muscovite artistic ambiance:

> Have just come from Letulov’s (the painter I turned down). Found his nice wife at home first. Then the painters kept dropping in: Konchalovsky (Le Fauconier’s friend), whom I will see again the day after tomorrow at Mashkov’s, Goncharova, Larionov, a few more painters & finally the man himself… Today, however, it came to light that they were having a meeting about the exhibition […] to which I and Jawl. (sic) are to have invitations sent to Munich.

In a later segment of the letter, Kandinsky gives us a sample of his daily schedule, which includes church: “Tomorrow first church, then lunch with the Hartmanns. Then Goncharova. Then go to an exhibition of toys… […] In the evening something theatrical. And now goodnight, my dear, my dearest.”

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62 It is obvious that Kandinsky had no idea that he found himself in the preparatory exhibition meeting. This letter tells us that the painter was completely removed from the decision-making Moscow artistic elite.
63 Alexei Jawlensky
64 Hoberg, 76.
65 Thomas von Hartmann composed the music for stage composition written by Kandinsky, *The Yellow Sound*.
66 Hoberg, 76.
of the Russian Orthodox Church, attended Sunday services regularly. The casual way he mentions the church visit suggests that Münter expects him to do just that, especially in Moscow, whose churches he admired. The letter conveys that Kandinsky had maintained the habit of churchgoing; evidence from other sources close to Kandinsky suggests that his faith and religious convictions did not weaken, even after fourteen years abroad. The letter also confirms that he maintained a reciprocal friendship with the Hartmanns and demonstrates that contact with Goncharova was not limited to isolated, sporadic meetings. Finally, the letter shows that for Kandinsky the world of toys represented a rich inspirational source.

Yet, even if Kandinsky was relatively active among Moscow’s creative elite, he certainly wasn’t “one of them.” However close Kandinsky was to the Jack of Diamonds group, there was one fundamental distinction – he retained aspects of Symbolism they rejected. As the prominent Kandinsky scholar John E. Bowlt states:

> in borrowing from the lubok and icon painters (and after 1909, from the Bavarian glass painters), in drawing upon the methods of the Fauves, Kandinsky was attempting to express the “inner sound”; for the Burliuks, Goncharova, Larionov and, to some extent Malevich, this essentially Symbolist attitude was alien and their application of vivid colors, inverted perspective, etc. was part of their diligent endeavor to create a new formal system…

Although Kandinsky’s roots were in many respects indeed Symbolist, he realized that Neo-primitivism had something real to offer – to him personally and, perhaps more significantly, to the larger sphere of emerging European modernism. As letters and comments from Kandinsky attest, the painter was increasingly convinced that this original, truly revitalized national movement provided a genuine alternative to the constantly changing and increasingly short-lived artistic trends in the West. In Moscow of the autumn of 1910, after extensive experimentation with abstraction during the earlier period of that year, the painter encountered native art rooted in ancient Russia with which he could identify and

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which he recognized as his idiom. Kandinsky’s post-1910 works are the best proof that, during this visit, the painter realized that these roots could infuse his work with freshness and authenticity.

Kandinsky arrived in Moscow in 1910 already open to understanding folk art as critical to his avant-garde aspirations. How else can we explain the suddenness of his conversion while in Moscow? Kandinsky’s painting was still developing and he saw in the Moscow Neo-primitivist movement openness and readiness to experiment. He responded to the enthusiasm and ferment of the Neo-primitivist community and this experience transformed him in crucial ways. Despite his years in the West, he was still a Russian; he remained under the spiritual sway of the Eastern Orthodox Church, with its rituals, its saints and its rich iconography. What changed in Moscow was not the mere discovery of the lubki, but rather a fundamental change in Kandinsky’s understanding of them. During the 1910 visit, Kandinsky stopped seeing the lubki as quaint objects divorced from long-established pictorial heritage or cultural meaning. Instead, he recognized them as vessels of tradition and spiritual purity. He also saw their rich cultural and spiritual heritage as iconographical, even iconic, sources to be mined: works that drew from them would capture and hold similar energy.

3. **Lubki, Children’s Drawings and Toys**

While Goncharova continued her dialogue with the sacred tradition, producing wonderful pictorial “quotations,” her close friend and future husband, Larionov, explored the world of secular folk art with equal success. Lubki and sign painters particularly inspired him. In 1913, together with Goncharova, he organized an exhibition that had an important impact on the way artists, connoisseurs and most of the general public perceived these
popular folk prints. \(^68\) This show drastically altered not only the way people looked at lubki, but also general attitudes toward mass-produced folk art. So-called “primitive” art ceased to be viewed as primitive. The Moscow and St. Petersburg avant-garde of the late 19\(^{th}\) and early 20\(^{th}\) centuries became convinced of the unique value of folk art prints and began to see them in a different light. These simple, often technically crude woodcuts and copperplates printed on low-quality paper had become fashionable collectors’ items by the end of the 19\(^{th}\) century. They were widely available not only at the markets of Moscow and Saint Petersburg, but also at countryside markets throughout the empire.

Lubki were also drawn and painted by hand; such lubki were created by Old Believers in centers north of Moscow. The Old Believers were a sect who had separated from the Russian Orthodox Church in 1566 following Patriarch Nikon’s introduction of liberalizing reforms. These reforms were born out of the conviction that the Muscovite service-books were not in accordance with established Orthodox doctrine. More importantly for this narrative, the icons in use before the reforms differed significantly from ancient Byzantine models; Nikon saw this as a flaw, and the reforms aimed to correct it. Old Believers rejected the reforms, preferring to maintain the old liturgical practices that predated these reforms. They were persecuted by the state until the beginning of the 20\(^{th}\) century. The style and iconography of their art did not share the folkloric, often humoristic topics of other folk art, the primary focus being instead religious, didactic content. Because Old Believers were officially outlawed and had no access to government-regulated printing facilities, their lubki were mostly hand-painted. They are distinguished from printed lubki by their superior quality and their source, which is neither incunabula nor frescoes, but rather the opulent tradition of illuminated manuscripts.

\(^68\) Vystavka ikonopisykh podlinnikov i lubkov organizovannaya M. F. Larionovy (Exhibition of lubki organized by M.F. Larionov)
Kandinsky’s extensive exposure to popular printed images began during his journey through the northern region of Vologda in 1889. It was there that he experienced lubki for the first time in their original context. I. Boguslavskaya in her essay *The Avant-Garde and Folk Art Exhibition* states that “[t]he artistic searchings of Wassily Kandinsky were the most mediated of all the creative quests. They addressed the very principles of folk art, rather than its external forms.”69 In his memoirs the artist recalled “[f]olk pictures on the walls: a symbolic representation of a hero, a battle, a painted folk song. The ‘red’ corner (so called because it is adorned with icons -- the word ‘red’ is the same as the word ‘beautiful’ in Russian) thickly, completely covered with painted and printed pictures of the saints…”70 Kandinsky compared the feeling of being within these humble spaces with the feelings that enveloped him inside Russian Orthodox cathedrals: “The same feeling had previously lain dormant within me, quite unconsciously, when I had been in the Moscow churches, and especially in the main cathedrals of the Kremlin.”71

During the 1910 visit, Kandinsky also quickly caught “lubki fever”72 and browsed street markets with Larionov. This relationship with a younger and rebellious artist was essential to Kandinsky’s progress. The two had grown up in the same area of southern Russia and shared a similar cultural environment during childhood. In a letter to Münter written on November 27, 1910, Kandinsky gave an account of one of the “lubki hunting” escapades: “Went to the street market today on my own in the end (Larionov has barrack theatricals; Hartmann has a cold). It was cold…! 12 below 0 & very windy to boot. So I couldn’t stay longer than 1 ½ hours & only bought 2 icons (1 in three sections & brilliant) for 4 R.73

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71 Ibid.
72 Today Bibliotéque Kandinsky in Paris alone has over hundred fifty lubki.
73 Rubles – Russian currency
altogether. There are some nice things to be had there.”

We can infer that Kandinsky, submerged at the time in a flood of “primitive” art, developed a taste for it and routinely combed local markets for lubki, icons and sculptures. Larionov’s intense absorption in the sphere of folklore and the subsequent revitalization of his artistic language greatly impressed Kandinsky. The initially affectionate relationship between the painters explains the frequent and detailed mention of Larionov’s name in Kandinsky’s correspondence with Münter. “Yesterday I got [a] marvelous present from Larionov. After the ‘Valet’ exhibition he is sending me this picture & the Goncharova one. They were both very warm and friendly. At the end when we parted he said, ‘Sometimes I am so coarse! No? Friends however we will remain. Won’t we? And… I should so like to give you a farewell kiss.’ And we kissed each other very nicely.”

During this Moscow sojourn, Kandinsky purchased a number of single broadsheets, as well as Ivan Sytin’s album, The Collection of Lubki, which quickly proved to be very influential, if not crucial, for his subsequent progress.

Fig. 5 Ivan Sytin, Album

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74 Hoberg, 90.
75 Ibid., 91.
76 Ibid., 92.
The impact of lubki on Kandinsky’s work and publishing initiatives became apparent almost immediately after he returned to Munich. He included seven images from Sytin’s book in the Blue Rider Almanac, which was already in an advanced preparatory stage by the summer of the next year. And, as we will see, this collection was one of the main inspirational sources for Composition IV.

However powerful the Moscow experience was, the maturation of such an intense exposure would have to take some time. By the time of his short stay in Odessa, en route back to Munich, Kandinsky had begun to digest the experience.

If he did not immediately comprehend what had happened during that 1910 trip, he knew himself well enough to realize that something important had taken place. On December 1st, just after he left Moscow, he wrote to Münter from Odessa: “I am now in a fragile mood, all shaken up by Moscow impressions. I simply let things ferment inside me, something is bound to come out of it…” 77 Then, one week later, he wrote again: “Did three sketches this

Fig. 6 Russian Woodcut from Sytin Album included in the Blue Rider Almanac

77 Ibid., 92.
morning. Painted them all in the afternoon – one twice over, so that’s 4. I’m beginning to ‘sense’ something again – (to pick up a scent) …”\(^78\) With increasing clarity, Kandinsky was realizing how he would be able to internalize the impact of Moscow Neo-primitivism. The painter intuitively sensed what John Bowlt perceptively articulated: that just as “[i]n a wider context Neo-primitivism confronted the decaying values of an ingrown society with a viable and creative alternative, so that by reverting to their indigenous traditions the first artists of Russia's avant-garde discovered a firm aesthetic conviction and an essential inner strength,”\(^79\) Kandinsky began to realize how he could use the lubki and especially Vasily Koren’s woodcuts for his 17th century Bible to invigorate and direct his own practice.

By the end of 1910, the impact of the lubki prints was reinforced by the painstakingly published images that the artist found in the comprehensive, multivolume edition of lubki compiled by the distinguished lawyer and folk-art collector Dmitry A. Rovinsky. Kandinsky’s direct contact with Rovinsky’s work is still awaiting documentation, although in 1895 the painter worked for a prestigious Moscow printing company and must have been aware of Rovinsky’s towering publication. Even if he did not diligently follow the world of printing at the time, contact with the massive emergence of folk art, as a main driving force of Russian Neo-primitivism, which surfaced between the two Revolutions of 1905 and 1917, was inescapable. Today, most scholars generally accept the influence of the prints included in Rovinsky’s Atlas\(^80\) on Kandinsky. We can detect the presence of the Rovinsky’s lubki in the painter’s works as early as 1908. Kandinsky’s oil painting The Elephant is reminiscent of a lubok print found in Rovinsky’s Atlas.

\(^{78}\) Ibid., 97.


\(^{80}\) H.K. Roethel, P. Verge, J. Hahl-Koch, Dabrowski, Rose-Carol Washton Long.
The underlying similarity of the two images is strengthened by the elephant side view adorned by the elaborate pattern and the location of three figures in front of the animal just above its head. This example suggests that the painter was stimulated by the content of the Atlas and used some of the pictorial ideas he found there before 1910. We can trace Russian depictions of the elephant all the way back to Koren’s 1696 Book of Genesis and to the popular woodcut of first half of the 18th century, The Elephant from Persia. Elephants, lions and other exotic animals stirred the Russian imagination before they were ever seen in actuality. “When Moscow saw its first elephant from Persia, the enterprising publisher
printed two broadsides to commemorate the event, one a woodcut and the other (a number of years later) a copper engraving replete with an elephant ‘biography’ and a moralizing poem.”

Kandinsky’s work represents an extension of this tradition.

Fig. 9 The Elephant from Persia. Woodcut. First half 18th c.

Kandinsky substantially transformed everything he worked on by making the sources of his inspiration look more radical, playful and colorful. He knew how to modify his work so that the “unsophisticated” aspect of his paintings became even less sophisticated than the originals – thus they became confrontational. Additionally, “Kandinsky excerpted extensively from drawings of children in his collection for his ‘abstractions’ of 1908 through 1914.”

The drawing of the elephant from his and Münter’s collection was one of these inspirational sources.

Kandinsky’s interpretations of lubki and children’s drawings are marked by “an effort to extract the general principles […] that would help move the entirety of his pictorial language toward a more intuitive and universal legibility.”\(^8^3\) The naïve aspect of lubki and children’s drawings certainly situate them in the same category of raw, direct and immediate modes of communicating with the viewer.

Another effective illustration of how Kandinsky processed lubki images is a sequence that leads from the popular broadsheet based on a pun, “He’s Flown up the Chimney,”\(^8^4\) through the surreal, almost Chagall like, three versions of the painting Dame/Lady in Moscow, which were finally distilled into the highly abstracted Black Spot I.

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\(^8^3\) Ibid.

\(^8^4\) “To fly up the chimney” means ‘to go bankrupt.’
Fig. 11  Sytin Album, “He’s Flown up the Chimney.”

Fig. 12  Kandinsky, *Dame of Moscow*, 1912
It seems only natural that someone flying out of the chimney in the lubok broadsheet would first be depicted literally as a figure, which then in the process of abstraction would become a black oval floating against the cityscape and, in its final alteration, would turn into a completely abstract black spot. “In Black Spot, one of the last woodcuts created for the album Sounds, the black appears in a large oval in the center of the image surrounded by a
texture of undulating and straight lines. In contrast to his early woodcuts, Kandinsky worked
the woodblock in such a way that only thin bars of the ground surface remain, which results
in fine printed lines. As a result, the flat black spot seems to float in the space,” in the
similar way as a black oval does in the *Dame in Moscow*.

The succession from the literal *lubok* to fully abstract woodcut makes additional sense
when we realize that in the artist’s House Catalogue *Dame/Lady in Moscow* carries the
number 152 and is followed by the oil *Black Spot I*, which carries number 153. It seems
that Kandinsky almost wanted to guide us thorough his creative process. Otherwise, why
paint an almost totally figurative work within the context of works that were increasingly
abstract? Although Ringbom had no doubt that *Dame of Moscow* “openly reveals
Kandinsky’s interest in the ‘thoughts-forms,’” his forced and sometimes overpowering
drive to see the painter’s output in the theosophical light is well known. The atypical location
of *Dame in Moscow* and *Cow in Moscow*, which are seemingly artificially inserted in a
coherently developing line of abstractions, suggests that the source of such completely
unexpected, uniquely original paintings is not theosophical, spiritual, or even surreal, but that
the ideas came directly from a funny, proverbial *lubok* from Sytin’s book that by then had
been in Kandinsky’s hands for some time. It is thought-provoking to notice how the
humorous, proverbial depiction of a “bankrupt” reality in a *lubok* could easily stand for the
bankrupt world of materialism. In its abstracted form, as *Black Spot I*, which came
immediately after the oil version of *Dame in Moscow*, the subject matter manifests as a
gloomy and almost apocalyptic scene in which we can identify the ascending chariot of
Elijah, scenes of the Deluge, a magic triangle, a medieval walled city (Heavenly Jerusalem),
and other initial pictographs of Kandinsky’s regular graphic alphabet.

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85 Friedel, 27.
86 Ringbom, 100.
87 The title of Annie Besant and C.W. Leadbeater’s illustrated book on the higher bodied of man.
88 Ringbom, 102
89 Ringbom, 99.
Although my opinion differs from Ringbom’s on what inspired this sequence of paintings, I must agree that “[d]espite differences in style the two paintings [Dame in Moscow and Black Spot I] stand out as fundamentally related in their common preoccupation with themes of struggling light and darkness and the position of man in between.”

Additionally, as Jonathan Fineberg points out, within The Black Spot I Kandinsky retained “the general principles from children’s drawings that would help him move the entirety of his pictorial language toward a more intuitive and universal legibility.” Some of the glyphs employed in the painting, like Chariot of Elijah for example, look almost like direct quotes from Kandinsky’s and Münter’s collection of children’s drawings.

Another important element of the painter’s vocabulary was the influence of toys. At the beginning of the 20th century, toys enjoyed a small renaissance among artists, and this resonated with Kandinsky. By the end of the 19th century, Russian artisans routinely translated popular equestrian lubki to three-dimensional toys. In the hands of Larionov and Kandinsky, this process was reversed. In some cases, we can trace the original lubok to its toy quotation, which then conversely moved from the three-dimensional toy to the two-dimensional image. A menagerie of toys - clay whistles, porcelain dogs, religious figures made of gypsum, wooden figurines of a fiddler, a beggar, and a traveling bard (perhaps a lubki salesman, actor and magician-in-one -person) - were a part of the collection shared by Kandinsky and Münter.

Lubki often served as inspirations for wooden figurines and wooden children’s toys, which subsequently provided ideas for Neo-primitivist painters. Sergiev Posad, a city located relatively close to Moscow, was and remains a center of Russian folk toy production. According to popular legend, the medieval saint St. Sergius, who is buried in the city that bears his name, carved horses and birds out of lime wood for local children.

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90 Ibid.,102.
91 Fineberg, 50.
Fig. 15 Larionov, *Soldier on a Horse*, 1911

Fig. 16 Wooden Toy

Fig. 17 Kandinsky, *Two Landscapes with Figures* (detail), 1907
The horses from Larionov’s oil painting and Kandinsky’s watercolor and the period wooden toy look very similar in pose and surface pattern. Both artists loved themes that involved soldiers, horses and children’s games.

4. Dmitry A. Rovinsky’s *Anthology of the Russian Graphic Arts*

   In 1881, Dmitry A. Rovinsky, a Russian legal expert and collector of the lubki, published the first comprehensive survey of Russian vernacular visual arts in a century. The anthology contains the five volumes of the catalogue (without illustrations) and four illustrated volumes of the Atlas. As a publisher, Rovinsky made sure that the albums, which contain primarily works from his private collection, met the highest printing standards and employed the latest reproduction technology available.

   The establishment of the relationship between Kandinsky and Rovinsky’s Atlas is essential since it was in the Atlas that Kandinsky came across very high-quality reproductions of some folios of the Koren Bible. The large size of each illustrated volume allowed some reproductions to be the same size as their originals. Additionally, woodcuts were often reproduced simultaneously as both a plain black and white version and a hand-painted twin. Although the reproductions in Rovinsky’s Atlas possess a near-facsimile quality, the combination of the “raw” and the painted pages is a stimulating one, since the hand-painted woodcuts were not identical with the original folios of the Koren Bible. Interestingly, the painted versions ‘bleed’ to the verso side of the pages in a way similar to that of the originals.
Rovinsky and Kandinsky shared a passion for the graphic arts and for ancient Russian peasant law. In many ways, the flexibility, freedom and individualistic character of both of these distant fields reflect a unique Russianness. Russian gravures, and especially lubki, took considerable liberties in quoting both Western and Byzantine sources. Similarly, the elasticity of Russian common law – which differed according to the case and the person involved – often eluded anyone schooled in the iron logic of Roman law. Rovinsky, a prominent lawyer, and Kandinsky, who studied law, ethnography, and economy, shared an understanding of these distinctively Russian phenomena. Rovinsky’s anthology is still the best and most complete collection of pre-1881 Russian graphic art. He was one of the first collectors to recognize the unique value of Russkiye Narodnyie Kartinki. For him, lubki represented a distinctively Russian esthetic combining a peasant sense of humor, folkloric liveliness, charming simplicity, directness and disarming, colorful playfulness. Lubki were also a part of everyday life in Russia – they were present at every major or minor public
event, market or festival. As religious objects, they were hung as “paper icons” in the houses of poor provincial peasants. In poor villages, “paper icons” were used to decorate something as important and sacred as the iconostases. *Lubki* also served as informational posters and as advertising for traveling theatre troupes. They carried news of current events during the Napoleonic War and during other conflicts, especially those involving victorious campaigns against the Ottoman Empire. *Lubki* were also part of the highly theatrical performances held during folk festivals and church holidays; traveling bards and sellers of *lubki* loudly read the text, usually placed at the bottom of the sheet, to the mostly illiterate crowd. The more convincing, engaging and entertaining a traveling *lubki* artist, the more *lubki* he sold. *Lubki* were thus a type of 19th century installation art that involved image, acting and music. By the end of the century, *lubki* influenced professional theatre, operas like Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov’s *The Golden Cockerel* with stage sets by Ivan Bilibin, and Serge Diaghilev’s productions of Russian-themed ballets with the music of Igor Stravinsky and sets by significant artists like Alexander Benois, Leon Bakst, and Goncharova.

The quality of *lubki* prints varies. “The term ‘*lubok*’ implied a derogatory assessment of the common man’s art by a more educated society, a contrast between the popular and professional, ‘learned’ art. In the 19th century, ‘*lubok*’ was a synonym for anything coarse, cheap, slipshod and devoid of taste.”92 The mass-produced *lubok* engravings were sometimes of careless craftsmanship, printed in black on low-quality gray paper and then hand-painted by country women, usually during the winter, in a crude manner often oblivious to the woodcut outlines. Sometimes they used color illogically and independently of the printed image, in the arbitrary and free style of children’s art. Their paints were diluted tempera or pigment in homemade, sticky, organic glues. The paints could be mistaken for watercolors. Their intensity and depth often depended on the amount of paint available. Sometimes

various parts of a *lubok* print barely had any signs of color because the artist had so thoroughly watered down the pigment or simply run out of paint. “The drawing was simple and expressive, the main features were brought out by size and color: figures were magnified and shifted toward the foreground and there was usually no middle ground. Rules of perspective and proportion were not always observed. With childlike simplicity, the artist portrayed only what he liked or needed at one particular moment – the principle on which children draw and paint.”

It is significant, for a variety of reasons that I will elaborate in what follows, that *lubki* “originated and circulated more often at the Old-Believers monasteries, northern villages and settlements of the Moscow area, guarding the old Russian tradition of icon painting and writing manuscripts.”

Rovinsky’s anthology brought together a string of true jewels of the *lubki* genre. Although most of the images “accumulated the spiritual life of the people and showed their cognition of the world and artistic aspiration,” Kandinsky however was also impressed by *lubki* in which the loose treatment of line and color was particularly explicit.

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93 Sytova, 8.
94 E.I. Itkina. *Lubok – Russian popular Prints from the Late 18th - early 20th Centuries. From Collection of the State Historical Museum Moscow* (Moscow: Russkaya Kniga, 1992), 45.
95 Ibid., 44.

Fig. 19 *Emperor Alexander II, Sytin Album*
The independence of such lubki from officially accepted art was apparent. They possessed an unrestrained freshness, free of the yoke of academic rules. The lubki were full of spontaneity and, as would have been unthinkable for academic works, a silly, often coarse, sense of humor. There are also lubki that are not easy to understand; their interpretation is as complex as human nature. The lubok Love Is Strong As Death from Rovinsky’s anthology is a good example of this.

Fig. 20 Love Is Strong As Death

Derived from the “Song of Solomon” in the Old Testament, this lubok might have been shown to the public by a wandering actor-salesman who was reading or singing the entire song from memory:

Set me as a seal upon your heart,  
as a seal upon your arm;  
for love is strong as death,  
passion fierce as the grave.  
Its flashes are flashes of fire,  
a raging flame.  

The title of this *lubok* was immediately recognizable by the public, at least by its more perceptive members. *Lubki* of this caliber were a good reminder to Kandinsky that popular art could reach unexpected depth.

Furthermore, as with Koren’s woodcuts, Kandinsky’s work was influenced by the folk art of the northern Volga region, especially by its wooden sculpture, wooden reliefs, friezes and widespread architectural ornamentation (still practiced today).

![Fig. 21 House from Suzdal, 2011](image)

In a 1937 interview with the collector Karl Nierendorf, Kandinsky was asked “How [he] arrived at the idea of ‘abstract’ painting?” The painter’s answer made use of the story familiar from his *Reminiscences*: he was sent to “to the province of Vologda … to undertake juristic and ethnographic research. There [he] saw farmhouses completely covered with painting – nonrepresentational – inside. Ornaments, furniture, crockery, everything painted. [He] had the impression [he] was stepping *into* painting ‘narrated’ nothing.”

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97 Kandinsky, *Interview with Karl Nierendorf* (1937), 806.
6. Gury Nikitin Kineshemtsev and the Koren Bible

The Koren Bible combines elements that reflect the medieval and folk art of the Volga region, but it is at the same time strongly influenced by the iconography and style of the European Renaissance. The Bible represents a mixture of the old and the new, the local and the international, the naïve and the sophisticated, Russian Orthodoxy and European Reformation. In short, it represents the same diversity of sources as Kandinsky’s art.

The Koren Bible is the Russian version of the Bible for the Poor, the so-called Pauper Bible. It was intended for an uneducated, illiterate class of people living mostly in the rural areas of the Volga region. It contains only the first and the last books of the Bible: Genesis and the Book of Revelation. Although Vasily Koren cut the wooden blocks of the Bible, it is believed that the true author of its designs was Gury Nikitin Kineshemtsev of Kostroma, one of the greatest Russian fresco painters of the 17th century. It is now established that “the original Koren Bible came from the Yaroslavl-Kostroma fresco school, as suggested by its style, subject matter, genre, and iconographic idea (flying angel as creator of the world), compositional patterns, iconographic details, and, in particular, the spelling and handwriting.”

According to the Russian scholar A.G. Sakovich, it cannot “be ruled out that Nikitin’s original designs [after he died in 1691] were traced onto the printing blocks by his teammate Grigory Grigoryev.”

The immediate cause for the appearance of the Bible’s engraved variant was the dissolution of Gury Nikitin’s team upon his death, when most of the masters were left without work; the capture of Azov, regarded at that time as a crusade of Russian Orthodoxy against the “Christ-hating agarians” (Turks or Tartars), and the planned resettlement near Azov of three thousand families from Volga towns. Settling in the places where there were as yet no churches, Russian people wanted to take along their people’s Bible to remind them of the frescoes of their native land.

98 A.G. Sakovich, Narodnaya Gravirovannaya Kniga Vasily Korena, 1692-1696, trans. of Summary and List of Illustrations, Boris Meerovich (Moscow: Iskustvo, 1983), 166.
99 Ibid.
100 Ibid.
One of the greatest military achievements of Peter the Great was the takeover of the city of Azov from the Ottoman Empire, which had momentous consequences for the entire region. Today Azov, which is located at the eastern tip of the Sea of Azov, is an insignificant town, but at the end of the 17th century it controlled the trade in the entire region. Its capture meant the revitalization of the Cossack trade routes between the river Don, which flows into the Sea of Azov, and the two large rivers, the Dnieper and the Dniester, that flow into the Black Sea. This victory marked the beginning of Russian expansion in the region, which, during the reign of Catherine the Great, became a bright jewel in the Imperial Crown.

In this vast new territory, which had neither monasteries nor any “educational infrastructure,” a book such as the Koren Bible was an important didactic tool. Apart from its portability, other factors played an equally important role. Its artistic uniqueness relates to the moment of its emergence:

Koren’s popular Bible for the Poor, which appeared after the disintegration of the Church’s unity, at a time of national religious disarray, is one of the rarest precisely dated monuments of household Orthodoxy, which, similar to the spiritual verse and apocryphal legend, gives voice to its personal, epochal and specifically Russian interpretation of the beginning and the end of the world. The book presents a new and underivative image of the Creator of the World – a creator in the sweat of his brow (an Angel of the Grand Council in flight or sleeping after his labours), in tune with Russian iconography, the Petrine epoch and the folklore of the day. ¹⁰¹

Central to this narrative is that:

The Koren Bible asserts also the medieval system of the universe, also apparently, to counterpoise Copernicus’ heliocentric theory of the world, and [a] personal conception is given of the life of the first people on earth. ¹⁰²

For Kandinsky the iconography of Koren’s Book of Revelation had a distinctively Russian Orthodox flavor. Koren’s version of the book opposes the traditional account of the Last Judgment by Western Christianity insofar as it projects a sense of “victory of good over evil, its triumph on Earth.”¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Ibid.
¹⁰² Ibid.
¹⁰³ Ibid.
The expressive power of Koren’s work resides in its simplicity. As has been mentioned, it contains only two parts, the first and last books of the Bible. The ancient Jewish scripture, the Pentateuch, provides the Old Testament basis for Koren’s Genesis. The New Testament, which has Christian origins, provides the subject for the woodblocks depicting the Book of Revelation. The sole surviving copy of the Koren Bible contains 20 folios for the Book of Genesis and 16 for the Book of Revelation. The iconography of Koren’s Genesis is influenced by medieval Eastern Orthodox dogma. In contrast, the Book of Revelation shows the deep, although highly altered by the Russian context, influence of Protestant sources.

During the Petrine Era (1686-1725), printed bibles, books, maps and single prints began to flood Russian markets. Koren’s book reflects the transformational times in which it was created. Throughout the reign of Peter the Great, Russia underwent profound cultural, political and religious changes. The end of the 17th and the beginning of the 18th centuries in Russia are often compared to Western Europe’s shift from the medieval age to the Renaissance. Koren’s Bible mirrors this evolution. On the one hand, the Book of Genesis is iconographically conservative, stylistically old-fashioned and of essentially Russian origin. Conversely, the Book of Revelation freely borrowed new, often controversial, material from foreign sources.

This juxtaposition in a way mirrors Kandinsky’s internal dilemma. He was a traditionalist who looked deeply into the magnificent past of the Russian icon, but since his entire artistic career took place in the West, he was also influenced by his Western surroundings. It is possible that the painter recognized in the Koren Bible this rather apparent East-West tension, a tension typically felt by most of the Russian intelligentsia at the turn of the century.
Nikitin’s designs used by Koren correspond to his frescoes and reflect the same dilemma. Although still essentially Russian, they are inspired by the contemporaneous Dutch editions of the Piscator Bible (1650 and 1674) as well as the much older Luther Bible editions of the 1520s. These contain Lucas Cranach’s woodcuts, which unavoidably owe their existence to the Köln Bible (1478) and to the enormously popular Apocalypse (1498) designs by the great German Renaissance master Albrecht Dürer.

Kandinsky studied these woodcuts and other incunabula diligently in Munich and must have recognized the Western roots of Koren’s folios. The Koren Bible became for him an example of how these two seemingly different pictorial traditions could be merged to produce a new form.

Russian artists were profoundly influenced by the wealth of Western graphic art suddenly available to them beginning in the 17th century. For a fresco painter like Nikitin, the thick volume of the Piscator Bible served as an invaluable source. Dozens of images (277 engravings by Dutch, German and Flemish artists) provided ample material with which he covered many of the walls and porches of the cathedrals in Yaroslavl, Kostroma, and Suzdal. A comparison of Nikitin’s frescoes from Kostroma and Yaroslavl with a selection of Piscator Bible engravings demonstrates just how valuable a resource this was.

The concept of plagiarism was foreign to the Renaissance, and to the medieval mindset. No one minded or cared about frequent and well-known copying by great artists. Like the great bards of the past, “Russian artists utilized Western gravure creatively, proceeding as with any other compositional canon. They developed their own type of iconography and their own scheme of themes that involved a wide variety of Russian Apocrypha and included accents appropriate to the period. “A canon is not a template; a translation is not a copy.” 104

104 Sakovich, 14 (my translation).
Nikitin’s intellectual horizons and aesthetic awareness overlapped both the Medieval Era and the Renaissance. In Russian art, his status is comparable to that of Fra Angelico within the art of the Early Italian Renaissance. Nikitin’s work belonged to a completely new, westernized esthetic sensibility. Although some of his works are rooted in the past, his art is not a bridge between Byzantium and modernized Russia. Nikitin’s art belongs to the new era of openness to the West created during the reign of Peter the Great. This aspect of his work connects him with Kandinsky, whose painting, despite belonging entirely to the 20th century, deliberately connects to the past.

How many Western elements or entire themes Nikitin adapted in his frescoes and icons varied. For example, figures of peasants were often redressed to look undeniably Russian, and the clothing, either Russian or Western, was mostly contemporary. Stylistically, Nikitin ushered in an enormous change in compositional density. Scenes were now flooded with details unthinkable a generation before. Scenes adapted from real life, which had been banned or restricted from having a central role in icons or “grand style” murals of the previous century, were now re-established. Nikitin’s new approach to the formal aspects of the pictorial plane diverges from the compositional experiments introduced by Russia’s last great medieval painter, Dionysius (1440-1502). The scale with which Nikitin employed these images was also unprecedented. His frescoes filled every single space on walls, ceilings and domes. They adorned pillars, pilasters, and staircases leading to bell towers. They covered every single alcove, window niche and even the darkest corners. These paintings created a totally engulfing experience, anticipating what Kandinsky would describe in his Reminiscences as a painting experience that one could enter, walk about in, and be entirely surrounded by.
Nikitin was invited to Moscow to paint the frescoes at the great Kremlin cathedral of the Archangel Michael, which Kandinsky certainly knew. The painter would likely have recognized Nikitin’s hand when he saw reproductions of the Koren Bible in Rovinsky’s atlas.

The elaborate narratives contained in Nikitin’s frescoes often started at floor level. They were crowned at the center of the dome by images that were consistent and iconographically in keeping with the thematic concept of the entire church. Entrance spaces like porches or corridors were covered with elaborate successions of scenes, which often followed the chronological sequence of the Bible. One such immense project is the group of carpet murals painted by Nikitin in the Church of Elijah the Prophet in Yaroslavl. The frescoes from this church and from the Church of Nikolai Nadein (located just a block away) are significant because they relate closely in style and iconography to the Koren Bible’s *Genesis*, to lubki, and hence to Kandinsky’s breakthrough to abstraction in the *Compositions*.

The size of Nikitin’s frescoes had an antecedent in the standard Dutch baroque bible format. The Bible images were magnified into much larger frescoes. Ironically, as Nikitin’s style developed, the frescoes became increasingly smaller. This tendency was the result of a trend within Russian Orthodox art to illustrate the stories of the Old and New Testament as precisely as possible, converting the narrative into an increasing number of scenes. The natural consequences were a growing constriction of space, an abandonment of large-scale figures and a neglect of the open pictorial field. Each scene reflected a struggle to include comparatively small and novel elements, which were mostly of Western origin. Fresco scenes became entangled by the sheer number of components and overloaded with Western curiosities, exotic animals, and so on. The Byzantine, and then Kievan Rus style, based on a small number of monumental figures painted in two or three tiers during the mid-17th century, became obsolete. At the end of this miniaturizing process the reduction of the
frescoes’ cartoons to designs of a size that could be used by the woodcutter was relatively easy to do.

The treatment of line was gradually stripped of the quality associated with the graceful fluency of late medieval painting. Nikitin began to employ a dramatically widened palette. His team of more than a dozen painters from Kostroma and Yaroslavl used a greatly enriched, but somewhat subdued, assortment of colors. The narrow but powerful gamut of colors that had been preferred in the past completely disappeared. The distinctive chromatic and linear lyricism traceable to the art of Andrei Rublev was now buried under a new esthetics of abundance. Compositions filled with strangely positioned, disfigured animals and multi-figure scenes overshadowed the restrained elegance of the past. These new developments need not be seen in a negative light, but the birth of a new style often produces unjustifiably negative reactions. For many, this new approach to pictorial space bordered on sacrilege. Some of Nikitin’s magnificent compositional gatherings are so dense as to suggest that the artist had an irrational fear of empty space. The totality of this compressed universe creates the sensation of being overwhelmed. The single scenes produce an impression of blocking the viewer’s eye and spill into the viewer’s space.

Similarly, the density of Kandinsky’s Compositions generates a sense of impenetrability. The spectator has no means of access; he/she is blocked from crossing the threshold of the pictorial plane. The avalanche of the painting’s compacted forms overcomes the viewer and explodes into his/her space. This impinging on, and overwhelming of the viewer is consistent with the notion that “Revelation is a divine action, it is a movement which does not proceed from man, but one which comes to him.”

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105 Emil Brunner, George I. Mavrodes and Stuart C. Hackett editors, Problems and Perspectives in the Philosophy of Religion (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1967), 213.
After Nikitin’s death, his fresco cartoons had a critical impact on the creation of Koren’s Bible. Most likely, a member of his workshop\textsuperscript{106} inherited the cartoons and converted them to a size that could be used by the woodcutter.

The Koren Bible could have had particular value for Kandinsky because its overall program represents the victory of Good over Evil. One of last folios of its *Genesis* shows Adam and Eve exonerated and wearing halos, rather than depicting their fall from grace as is more common in the West. The bearded Adam looks like a classical Greek philosopher as he sits wearing a crown made from olive branches. Conceivably the crown serves here as a prefiguration of Christ's crown of thorns.

\textsuperscript{106} Probably Grigory Grigoryev, since his abbreviated name appears on one of the folios of the Koren Apocalypse.
This optimistic tone continuous in the last folio of the *Book of Revelation* we see the devil chained and conquered. The apocalyptic nightmare is over; the horsemen are making a space for the New Order and the Kingdom of God prevails. The Koren Bible projects the conviction that a transition from a world consumed by materialism to a world of the spirit is possible.
Chapter 3: The Journey into the Unknown

1. The Cover Design of *On the Spiritual in Art*

Fig. 24 *The Cover of On the Spiritual in Art*, first edition, 1911

With an apocalyptic vision in mind during the summer of 1911, Kandinsky launched his radical response to European modernism. The woodcut the artist made to serve as the cover illustration of his theoretical manifesto *On the Spiritual in Art* became its touchstone; it provides a key to the hidden meanings of the works in which Kandinsky broke through into abstraction. We can detect the presence of this image in all seven of the pre-World War I *Compositions*.

Kandinsky extracted the rudimentary design of the cover woodcut for *On the Spiritual in Art* from a larger woodcut - *The Great Resurrection*, a work he made for his innovative poetry book, *Sounds*. 

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In the cover Kandinsky used the motif of the city with falling towers. This theme is iconographically associated with the Fall of Babylon\textsuperscript{107} and was used by the painter throughout his eschatological phase.

The output framed by the Great Resurrection woodcut (between the late June and the beginning of August 1911)\textsuperscript{108} and Composition VII (late November 1913) defines the essential features of the period, in which Kandinsky’s relationship with the pictorial heritage of the icons, frescoes and lubki was the strongest. It was during that relatively brief two-year period that Kandinsky reduced his language to essential components, using recurring images as leitmotifs.

The painter saw a handful of apocalyptic themes as an alphabet, a toolbox of the spiritual search, in particular in sketches that explored the themes of Resurrection, Deluge and Earthly Paradise.

\textsuperscript{107} Rev. 17.1 – 18.24.
\textsuperscript{108} Melanie Horst in Helmut Friedel, Kandinsky Complete Prints (Munich: Wienand Verlag, 2009), 25.
Between 1910 and 1912 the majority of Kandinsky’s oil paintings were abstractions from figurative themes; they do not become completely non-objective until 1913. There are familiar symbols which appear again and again in the works of this period. The most insistent and important is the leaping horseman which ...[became] gradually abstracted to a hieroglyphic configuration of black lines. ... Other recurring symbols are castles on hills, mountains, boats with long rows of oars like Viking ships, soldiers holding spears and horse-drawn sledges (troikas). These symbolic images are increasingly simplified to configurations of black lines, to hieroglyphs which must be read within the total context of the painting.  

“From about 1910 the repetition of themes becomes a major technique of [Kandinsky’s] abstraction: the representational patterns are simplified and conventionalized into abbreviated pictographs and the ‘inner construction’ is laid bare.” The decision to stay within a relatively narrow formal vocabulary was inspired mainly by various developments within music at this time. Especially influential were the experiments of Richard Wagner. The composer’s inventive manipulation of leitmotifs most likely had a decisive impact on Kandinsky’s direction. The “operas by him (e.g., Tristan, The Ring) still held my critical faculties in thrall for many a long year by their power and uniqueness of expression” – wrote Kandinsky in the Stupeni, the Russian version of the Reminiscences. This conscious choice and focus on a limited iconographical field liberated Kandinsky from his endless iconographical explorations. From this point on he could shift his attention to form, color, and the dynamics of “inner necessity.” Kandinsky defines this concept of “the inner need” in On the Spiritual in Art:

The adaptability of forms, their organic but inward variations, their motion in the picture, their inclination to material or abstract, their mutual relations, either individually or as parts of a whole; further, the concord or discord of the various elements of a picture, the handling of groups, the combinations of veiled and openly expressed appeals, the use of rhythmical or unrhythmical, of geometrical or non-geometrical forms, their contiguity or separation—all these things are the material for counterpoint in painting. But so long as colour is excluded, such counterpoint is confined to black and white. Colour provides a whole wealth of possibilities of her own, and when combined with form, yet a further series of possibilities. And all these will be expressions of the inner need.

109 Overy, 62.
110 Ringbom, 151.
111 Lindsay and Vergo, Editors’ Notes, 889.
Kandinsky’s remark in *On The Spiritual in Art* helps explain the unshakable persistence with which he repeated the same motifs and shorthand patterns in his paintings of the period: “repetition of the same appeal thickens the spiritual atmosphere which is necessary for the maturing of the finest feelings, in the same way as the hot air of a greenhouse is necessary for the ripening of certain fruit,” he wrote later in the book. When the *Compositions* of 1910 – 1913 were being created Kandinsky saw himself as a composer who continually retells the story of annihilation and rebirth, for whom the process of repetition functions as an independent and powerful instrument of expression.

The prewar *Compositions* emanate a sense of prophetic mission. It seems that Kandinsky saw himself as embodying the struggles and temptations of *St. Anthony in the Wilderness* – an image of which he placed directly above his desk on the wall of his Ainmillerstraße studio.

2. **The Great Resurrection woodcut and the reverse-glass painting of 1911**

Fig. 26 Kandinsky, *Resurrection (Large Version)*, 1911

113 Ibid, (Kindle Locations 830-832).
Sixten Ringbom suggested that the structures on top of the hill in Kandinsky’s two 1911 compositions for the Resurrection glass painting and the woodcut done after it are a collapsing city. In the context of the Great Resurrection and its apocalyptic framework, a collapsing city suggests the Fall of Babylon, one of the most famous and graphically explored scenes from The Book of Revelations. Its apocalyptic subject matter is supported by the existence of the preparatory watercolor for the reverse-glass painting Large Resurrection, a study known as the Sound of Trumpets. On the left side of this work, Kandinsky inserted its unambiguous title in the Russian language.114

The practice of text inclusion is borrowed from Koren’s Book of Genesis, in which the cutter often placed text on the side of the panels. The “sound of trumpets” in Christian iconography is directly associated with the trumpets of the Apocalypse. Rose-Carol Washton Long suggests that “for developments of these motifs, Kandinsky turned to Russian lubok depictions of the apocalypse and illustrations from German Bibles of the 15th century…”115 To illustrate her point, Washton Long provides a detail of a single image from the apocalypse section of the Koren Bible – the scene of the Ascension of Elijah and Enoch in which the towers are falling in the upper right section. But there is an even clearer source: the second image in the Koren Bible (folio 35), which depicts The Fall of Babylon and points directly to Kandinsky’s woodcut.

114 звуки труб
Fig. 27 Koren Bible, *Ascent of Prophet Elijah and Enoch*

Fig. 28 Koren Bible, *The Fall of Babylon*
The cover of *On the Spiritual in Art* features a walled city in front of which stands a white horse. If, as I have argued, we embrace an apocalyptic reading of the image, the horse must be the first horse to appear in *The Book of Revelation*: “I looked and there was a white horse! Its rider had a bow; a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering and to conquer.” The horse symbolizes a force that no one can resist. The motif of the white horse and the archer re-appears in other Kandinsky woodcuts and paintings. In this concrete context, the white horse symbolizes a war against materialism, which the painter is about to unleash on the pages of the very treatise for which this woodcut served as visual introduction.

Ringbom suggests that for the cover of *On the Spiritual in Art*, “Kandinsky had originally planned to use a triangle, the mystical triangle of spiritual development, but eventually he chose the city on the hill as a pictorial motto for his treatise.” In the chapter on “the movement of the triangle” Kandinsky states that “[t]he life of the spirit may be fairly represented in diagram as a large acute-angled triangle divided horizontally into unequal parts with the narrowest segment uppermost. The lower the segment the greater it is in breadth, depth, and area.” At the apex of this triangle, according to the painter’s elaborate theory, stands “often one man, and only one. His joyful vision cloaks a vast sorrow. Even those who are nearest to him in sympathy do not understand him. Angrily they abuse him as charlatan or madman.” In Kandinsky’s set of iconographical tools the motif of the triangle played an important part; it survived all the spiritual, philosophical and stylistic metamorphosis of his artistic development.

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117 Ringbom, ?
118 Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (Kindle Locations 240-242).
119 Ibid., (Kindle Locations 244-246).
The image of the hill on the cover of the treatise had a distinct set of spiritual precedents in lubki. In Rovinsky’s collection of lubki, Kandinsky could find a number of hills with monasteries on top. The shape of the hills from the lubok The View of Novgorod (Fig.) perhaps most closely mirrors the profile of the cover.

As in the other instances from the same period, the treatment of the hill seems closely connected to the children’s drawings from the artist’s collection.

Fig. 29 Kandinsky, Study for Cover of On the Spiritual in Art, c.1910

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120 Hinterglasbild, With Sun, Small Pleasures, 1913

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Fig. 30 View of Novgorod, Rovinsky Atlas
This relation is especially apparent when a sketch by Münter’s niece is juxtaposed with the drawing of the *Mountain with Citadel and Two Figures* from 1909. When reversed, the top section of the *Sketch for Citadel* in many ways (in particular, the cloud of smoke from the burning city) parallels the design of the cover page.
It is reasonable to deduce that the cover page for the *On the Spiritual in Art* was partially inspired by the children’s drawing; that its initial “innocent” source reached, via a number of transformations, the state that fulfilled the representative requirements dictated by the content of the book.

In the *Great Resurrection* woodcut, the hill depicted is framed in the upper corners by a pair of trumpeting angels. Here, Kandinsky absorbs Nikitin’s model, which used this type of composition in two folios representing parts of paragraphs Rev. 8.8 and 8.10 of the *Book of Revelation*, which describe the actions of the Second and Third Angel. (below)
In two other folios, the Koren Bible/Nikitin employed single, dynamic figures of trumpeting angels. When their trumpets point downward, they always signify destruction. In the context of the Koren Bible, though, this destruction must be seen as a necessary purification after which *The Era of the Spirit* will reign.

The flying figures in the *Great Resurrection* woodcut are innovative transplants of the angels from Koren’s *Book of Genesis*. The image of the trumpeting fifth angel of the *Book of Revelations* is almost identical with the angel from the fifth day of creation of the *Book of Genesis* and represents a remarkable illustration of thought-out symmetry.
This pair (Fig. and Fig. ) is an example of a reversal of fortune: on the fifth day of creation God created “every living creature that moves,” ¹²¹ but when in the Book of Revelation the fifth angel blows his trumpet, “came locusts on earth and they were given authority like the authority of the scorpions on the earth. […] And in those days people will seek death but will not find it; they will long to die, but death will flee from them.”¹²² Trumpeting angels are unmistakable heralds of the Apocalypse; their violent sounds create a ball of fire in the sky. Perhaps the red, comet-like formation immediately behind the broken tower of the Great Resurrection is the “great star [that] fell from heaven, blazing like a torch…”¹²³ Another interpretation that comes to mind is the ascension of Elijah to heaven in the chariot of fire. Kandinsky painted trumpeting angels repeatedly; all five trumpets appear in Composition V.

¹²¹ Gen. 1.20
¹²² Rev. 9.1-9.12
¹²³ Rev. 8.10
Christians believe that angels are spiritual beings; they become visible as humans only in time of need, when humankind has to be made aware of cataclysmic events. Iconoclasts were convinced that since angels are invisible they cannot be depicted. The argument of the passionate defender of the Iconophile faction, John of Damascus, came to the Iconophiles’ rescue. “In his Third Oration, [he] writes; ‘An angel… when compared with God does have a body, but when…compared with material bodies, they are bodiless.’”\(^\text{124}\) He continues: “God allows us to see bodiless creatures by clothing them in forms and images analogues to our nature. It is by means of this apprehension by the intellect that we are able to make images and representations of the cherubim.”\(^\text{125}\)

There are many other elements linking popular prints with Kandinsky’s abstracts. “In both, the lubok and the German woodcut, the arrangement of clouds in small curlicues behind


\(^{125}\) Ibid.
the towers helps to explain the particular stylization of clouds next to Kandinsky’s walled city. Kandinsky’s choice of zigzag lines to represent lightning (emanating from the cloud and from below the mountain) may also have been based on stylizations of lightning found in the lubki."

The bird motif is an example of another important element used by the painter throughout his prolific prewar period. In the Sound of Trumpets the bird on the left just below the angel represents Sirin, Bird of Paradise. According to the “apocryphal versions of the interpretation of literary sources […] Sirin is afraid of loud sounds and in order to frighten it people ring the bells, fire guns and blow the trumpets.” The dramatic way Sirin is diving makes him look terrified, which is adequate to the apocalyptic program of the woodcut. Kandinsky loved myths and fairy tales and had lubki of the Birds of Paradise in his personal collection. The Birds of Paradise were very popular as wooden house ornaments in the northern region of Vologda. During his ethnographic journey the artist certainly saw them.

![Image](image_url)

Fig. 39 Suzdal, Russia, 2011

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126 Koren’s Bible, folio 32
128 E. I. Itkina, *Lubok – Russian popular Prints from the Late 18th - early 20th Centuries. From Collection of the State Historical Museum Moscow.* (Moscow: Russkaya Kniga,1992)
In the lower left corner of the *Sound of Trumpets* are the choppy waters of the deluge, with a single sailboat fighting against the storm. Just below the turbulent waters, jammed into the lower left corner, a lonely flower recalls the cornflower from *Twilight*, Kandinsky’s early romantic work from 1901. The art historian Peg Weiss proposed that “the Russian name for cornflower, ‘vasilek,’ suggests… a hidden signature.”\footnote{Peg Weiss, *Kandinsky and Old Russia. The Artist as Ethnographer and Shaman* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), 35.} If Weiss’s reading is correct, this emblem of the artist represents him as a witness to the Resurrection after which the new *Epoch of the Spirit* will rule (on this reading, Kandinsky’s “signature” belongs to the same tradition in which patrons whose images were included in Italian and Flemish Renaissance paintings were represented as having witnessed the holy events depicted in the paintings).

Fig. 40 Kandinsky, *Great Resurrection*, woodcut, detail

Fig. 41 Kandinsky, *Twilight*, 1901
If, as Kandinsky declared, “the origin of [his] abstract painting essentially ought to be looked for in the Russian icon painters of the tenth to fourteenth centuries,” it is necessary to ask what this statement communicates. It must be remembered that the Russians had only become Christianized at the end of the 10th century and that their art had been derived from the highly advanced Byzantine culture. It was from the Byzantines that Kievan Rus took the elements of law, their constitution and art. The art of 11th century Byzantium was very sophisticated. The mosaics created for the St. Sophia Cathedral in Kiev by the masters invited from Constantinople (and their Russian craftsmen/apprentices) comprise the largest complex of 11th century Byzantine mosaics in the world.

Fig. 42 *Virgin Holding the Skein*, Saint Sophia Cathedral, Kiev, 11th century
Since the acceptance of Christianity from Byzantium in 988, Russian heads of state had been importing the best talent that Constantinople had to offer. Almost simultaneously with the plastic arts appeared (translated to Old Church Slavonic) the philosophical treatises of the Fathers of the Orthodox Church.\textsuperscript{130} The works of John of Damascus, the main figure behind the defeat of the iconoclasm during the 7\textsuperscript{th} Ecumenical Council, were known in Russia since 1073.\textsuperscript{131} The theological treatises of Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite and Maximus the Confessor were filled with aesthetic concepts and reached Russia in the 14\textsuperscript{th} century. Byzantine philosophy, which inherited Greek thought, wove its achievements into the texture of the philosophy of the Christian West. From the Fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Empire, the Byzantine tradition was preserved and continued to flourish in Russia. As the historian of philosophy Emile Brehier perceptively noticed,\textsuperscript{132} after the Byzantine mystic Platonism thrived between the 11\textsuperscript{th} and the middle 15\textsuperscript{th} century,\textsuperscript{133} for “the final inheritors of Byzantium one should seek … in the ecumenical movement of which Russia had so many representatives around 1900.”\textsuperscript{134}

The generation of Russian philosophers that reached their maturity during the opening decades of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century derived their thought, in one way or another, from the foundations of Christian philosophy laid by Vladimir Soloviev (1853-1900). Soloviev had a pivotal impact on philosophers like Bulgakov and Florensky, who themselves were essential for Kandinsky’s development, and whom he knew well. Even if it is true, as Rowan Williams\textsuperscript{135} said, “that later Russian metaphysics is largely a series of footnotes to Soloviev, this should

\textsuperscript{130} Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory Nazianzus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen of Alexandria, John Chrysostom and others.
\textsuperscript{131} Mikołaj Łosski, \textit{History of Russian Philosophy} (Istoria russkoj filosofii; Historia filozofii rosyjskiej). (Kęty: Wydawnictwo Antyk, 2000), 6.
\textsuperscript{133} Beginning with Michael Psellus (1018-1078) and ended with Gemistos Plethon (1360-1453).
\textsuperscript{134} Tatakis, ix.
\textsuperscript{135} Rowan Williams edited and introduced texts for Sergei Bulgakov’s \textit{Towards a Russian Political Theology}. 
not be understood as implying an uncritical reception.”

Soloviev’s writings created an enormous response not only among mystic philosophers, but also among the second generation of Symbolist poets, composers and avant-garde painters.

While the West was dominated by scholastic thought, less pragmatic Byzantium, infused with Hellenistic intuition, searched for the place of human beings in the universe. Eastern Orthodox thought was always more speculative and abstract than Western thought. The crucial difference between East and West is perhaps most eloquently described by C. Swietlinsky: “In the West catholic means that the Church extends to all people and to all countries in the world; catholic has therefore a quantitative significance, it refers to universal diffusion. By contrast, in the East catholic has a qualitative sense that means union with everything.”

Influenced by the teachings of Plotinus (ca. 204/5–270 CE) and the theological treatises of Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite (ca. 650–725 CE) and John of Damascus (ca. 675–749), Byzantine thought laid the conceptual basis for Russian Orthodox icon painting. After the Second Council of Nicaea (787 AD), which restored the use and veneration of icons, Neoplatonic philosophical and mystical notions dominated the style of icons, frescoes and mosaics. This spiritually charged, mystical modus operandi molded the medieval Russian icon and, consequently, the environment in which Kandinsky grew up. We can thus perceive Compositions as a powerful fusion of philosophical principles of that tradition, reassessed by the painter’s syntax.

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136 Sergei Bulgakov, Towards a Russian Political Theology (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999).


138 Also recognized as the 7th Ecumenical Council.
Kandinsky’s interest in abstraction and his search for the hidden aspect of the material world has its roots in the deeply ingrown suspicion of the Eastern Church that any illusion produced by painting could be deceptive and therefore should be concealed. For Neo-Platonists, the entire material world – human beings included – was an illusion, so the question was obvious: Why depict illusions of illusion? Why further falsify something that is already corrupted? When this type of logic is applied to sacred images, the concept of deception becomes amplified. There was a strong suspicion that the veneration of icons might become idolatrous. Distortion or veiling represented a conscious manipulation whose goal was to eliminate any signs of illusionistic contamination. The Eastern Orthodox mentality, shaped by Plato’s mistrust of making images, perceived the deceptive qualities of matter as dangerous. To protect holy images from the harmful impact of illusion was seen as a responsible reaction to this danger.

While the late medieval West struggled to recreate an impression of depth and a sense of coherent perspective, the East labored in the opposite direction. Byzantine artists in search of celestial ideals felt a need to distort nature by avoiding mathematical perspective. For them, such a perspective made sense only if applied locally, as a part of a larger compositional program. Even after the laws of linear perspective became common knowledge, Russian icon painters were rarely tempted to apply them.

In the Compositions Kandinsky adhered to the Russian propositions; he followed an “inner perspective” liberated from mathematical laws and the sense of illusion. In Compositions V, VI and VII he almost completely rejected the Western mimetic visual

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139 There is a famous anecdote about Plotinus’s portrait: “When one of his students asked his permission to have a portrait made of him, he refused outright. He gave the following explanation: ‘Isn’t it enough that I have to bear this image with which Nature has covered us? Must I also consent to leaving behind me an image of that image – this one even longer-lasting – as if it were an image of something worth seeing?’” in Pierre Hadot, Plotinus or The Simplicity of Vision, 20.

140 Plato, Phaedrus (Kindle Locations 1627-1628). Public Domain Books. Kindle Edition. “SOCRATES: I cannot help feeling, Phaedrus, that writing is unfortunately like painting; for the creations of the painter have the attitude of life, and yet if you ask them a question they preserve a solemn silence.” From the allusions Kandinsky made in his Reminiscences we know that he read this dialogue.
tradition, with its goal the imitation of reality. For the painter, veiling was a matter of an “inner necessity;” his intention was to reveal the divine by denying access, to expose by hiding, to uncover by destroying the image of ultimate apocalyptic obliteration. The tension between what was hidden and what was manifested was to generate in the spectator a psychological response that would reveal to him the essence of the eschatological interpretation of history.

Kandinsky’s approach parallels a statement of Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite from Letter Ten to John the Evangelist: “The visible is truly the plain image of invisible.”\(^{141}\) We can trace Areopagite’s thought all the way back to the pre-Socratic thought and the gnomic Fragments of Heraclitus. “For him it is a question of seeing material things as signs which make the absent present and the invisible visible.”\(^{142}\) If we follow this logic, even a depiction of abstracted or non-objective forms serves as a portal to a concealed and, perhaps because of that, more profound spiritual sphere. The Book of Revelation provided the ideal, iconographically relevant and mysterious subject matter. “Revelation always means that something hidden is made known, that a mystery is unveiled. But the Biblical revelation is the absolute manifestation of something that had been absolutely concealed. Hence, it is a way of acquiring knowledge that is absolutely and essentially – and not only relatively – opposite to the usual human method of acquiring knowledge, by means of observation, research, and thought.”\(^{143}\)

The neoplatonizing thought of Pseudo-Dionysius that is also typical of patristic thought and most of the medieval mystics substantially shaped medieval esthetics in general. The medieval theory of beauty came directly from Neoplatonic thought. An understanding of its intuitive, but astute, pictorial universe found outstanding expression in Kandinsky’s

\(^{142}\) Kenneth Parry, Depicting the Word: Byzantine Iconophile Thought of the Eight and Ninth Centuries (Leiden, New York, Koln: Brill, 1996), 34.
\(^{143}\) Emil Brunner, 205.
Compositions. From a 1912 letter from Michael Sadler\textsuperscript{144} to his wife, written when he visited Kandinsky and Münter in Murnau, we learn that the painter “was inclined (though not at all obtrusively) to talk about religious things, and [was] interested in mystic books and the lives of the saints.”\textsuperscript{145} The painter’s objective was to create a language based on a formal vocabulary and syntax that would appeal to the “inner soul” or “inner sound” of viewers, freeing their emotional and spiritual reactions. His non-objective and highly transformed abstracted language thus would have its counterpart in the metamorphosis of the viewer’s inner perception. The mystical texts that Kandinsky read at this time, which aimed to raise the reader’s awareness of an ultimate reality, Oneness or spiritual truth through intuition and direct experience, certainly stimulated his imagination and, consequently, his work.

To reach his goal, Kandinsky designed a system of approaches to abstraction. The unambiguous distinctions between an Impression, Improvisation and Composition were an important aspect of the method. In the conclusion of On the Spiritual in Art, Kandinsky indicated clear differences between these three types of pictorial approaches:

(1) The direct impression of ‘external nature,’ expressed in linear-painterly form. I call these pictures an ‘Impression.’
(2) Chiefly unconscious, for most part suddenly arising expressions of events of an inner character, hence impressions of ‘internal nature.’ I call this type ‘Improvisation.’
(3) The expressions of feelings that have been forming within me in a similar way (but over a very long period of time), which after preliminary sketches, I have slowly and almost pedantically examined and worked out. This kind of picture I call a ‘Composition. Here, reason, the conscious, the deliberate, and the purposeful play a preponderant role. Except that I always decide in favor of feeling rather than calculation.’\textsuperscript{146}

Kandinsky’s output during the prolific period between 1910 and 1914 was dominated by this complex symphonic approach. The artist’s first seven Compositions contain a plethora of themes, symbols, leitmotifs, and highly abstracted or condensed iconographical signs. In

\textsuperscript{144} Kandinsky’s English collector whose son M.T.H. Sadler was the first English translator of the On the Spiritual in Art.
\textsuperscript{145} Quoted in Paul Overy’s, Kandinsky. The Language of the Eye (London: Elek Books Limited, 1969), 20.
\textsuperscript{146} Kandinsky, On the Spiritual in Art, 218.
such a symphonic composition, each part was subordinate to another. The relationship between line, volume and color represents a complex unified entity. The totality of the entire work was evaluated in the context of the frame, which involved making important decisions about its compositional limits. This grand symphonic attitude was opposed by the Composition’s melodic character, that is, the character of a

[s]imple composition, which is regulated according to an obvious and simple form. […] If, in considering an example of melodic composition, one forgets the material aspect and probes down into the artistic reason of the whole, one finds primitive geometrical forms or an arrangement of simple lines which help toward a common motion. This common motion is echoed by various sections and may be varied by a single line or form.147

In many respects, this model adapts the esthetics inherited by Thomas Aquinas from the earlier medieval Neoplatonic thought, whereby the composition, dominated by a simple form which Kandinsky called ‘melodic,’ would stand for integritas (integrity of each particular form or detail). The complex symphonic forms would fulfill the requirements of the consonantia (wholeness in the way each part relates to the others and to the frame) and the “inner radiance” or “inner vibrations” of the composition would express the claritas.

St. Thomas knew the esthetics and concepts of light of Pseudo-Dionysius148 through the translation of John the Scotus Eriugena and respected them. Aquinas “had [the] ability … ‘to shift the points of emphasis and counterpoise mysticism with scholasticism’ in a synthesis of perfect balance.”149

Kandinsky’s understanding of the issues and subtleties of composition are directly connected to early medieval aesthetics. His compositional concepts are underscored by the chain of influences that leads from ideas of Russian philosophers like Pavel Florensky and

147 Ibid.
148 In his writings Aquinas quoted Pseudo-Dionysius over thousand times.
Sergei Bulgakov, through Russian and Western Symbolism, all the way back to Pseudo-Dionysius and Plotinus and therefore to Byzantine aesthetics.

According to the French philosopher Pierre Hadot,\textsuperscript{150} “[t]he trajectory of the Plotinian self is to raise itself to the level of divine Intellect, to participate in the presence of the Spirit.”\textsuperscript{151} Such a path stays in close proximity to Kandinsky’s ambitions. Plotinus’s ideas about the position of the artist coincide with Kandinsky’s. He was convinced that “the artist, like nature, gives a form to matter, [and] [t]he artistic idea wrests matter from its nothingness and leads it on the path to the One, as far as it is able.”\textsuperscript{152} It is not accidental that this view stands at the foundation of non-objective painting and is identical with Kandinsky’s own philosophical breakthrough – his coming to the view that art and nature represent two fundamentally different, separate realms. For the painter the compositional manner of a work “springs mainly or exclusively from ‘out of the artist,’ as has been the case for centuries in music. In this respect, painting has caught up with music, and both assume an ever-increasing tendency to create ‘absolute’ works, i.e., completely objective works, [which] come onto existence ‘of their own accord,’ as the product of natural laws, as independent beings.”\textsuperscript{153}

When we read Enneades, Plotinus’s \textit{opus magnum}, his influence on late medieval aesthetics (through the Areopagite and his translator and commentator Eriugena) becomes apparent. “Ten centuries of the Middle Ages, though knowing nothing of the Enneads of Plotinus, remained paradoxically enough, if only through the meditation of St. Augustine and the Pseudo-Dionysius, closely dependent upon his thought. Of St. Thomas Aquinas Dean Inge\textsuperscript{154} could write, […] with some plausibility, that he was nearer to Plotinus than to the real

\textsuperscript{150} Pierre Hadot is also a historian of philosophy who specializes in ancient philosophy.


\textsuperscript{153} Kandinsky \textit{Reminiscences}, 379.

\textsuperscript{154} English author, professor of divinity and Dean of St Paul's Cathedral.
Aristotle." In his *Sixth Tractate on Beauty*, Plotinus declares that “the symmetry of parts toward each other and toward the whole, with, besides, a certain charm of color, constitutes the beauty recognized by the eye, that in visible things, as indeed in all else, universally, the beautiful thing is essentially symmetrical, patterned.” And then Plotinus adds: “Only a compound can be beautiful, never anything devoid of parts, and only a whole; the several parts will have beauty, not in themselves, but only as working together to give a comely total. Yet beauty in an aggregate demands beauty in details: it can not be constructed out of ugliness; its law must run throughout.”

Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite born a few centuries after Plotinus and his great inheritor, also had a substantial (and well-documented) influence on Aquinas’s theory of beauty. Within a century after his death, Areopagite’s writings had been reintroduced by Maximus Confessor (c.580 – 662), and had served to restore “the balance between Neo-Platonism and Christian orthodoxy in a Christocentric piety whose roots lie deep in the Cappadocian tradition of Basil and the two Gregories. Dionysius’s importance is essential, since his treatises aligned vibrant and influential Hellenic thought with the two fundamental Christian dogmas of Trinity and the Incarnation.

Fusing the doctrines of Plotinus […] with the creeds and beliefs of Christianity, Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite – whose “negative theology,” defining the Superessential One as eternal darkness and eternal silence, and thus identifying ultimate knowledge with ultimate ignorance, […] combined the Neo-Platonic conviction of the fundamental oneness and luminous aliveness of the world with Christian dogma of the triune God, original sin and redemption. According to Pseudo-Areopagite, the universe is created, animated and unified by the perpetual self-realization of what Plotinus had called “the One,” what the Bible had called “the Lord,” and what he calls “the superessential Light” or even “invisible Sun – with God the Father designated as “the Father of the light (*Pater luminum*)” and Christ (in an allusion to

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157 Ibid.
159 St. Gregory of Nazianzus and St. Gregory of Nyssa.
John 3:19 and 8:12) as the “first radiance” (claritas) which “has revealed the Father to the world ("Patrem clarificavit mundo").

Areopagite argues that the Good and the Beautiful are the cause of everything:

[F]rom it come the small, the equal, and the great in nature, the measure and the proportion of all things, the mixtures, the totalities, and the parts of things, the universal one and the perfection of wholes. From it come quality, quantity, magnitude and infinity, conglomeration and distinction, the limitless and the limited, boundaries, orders and super achievements, elements and forms, all being, power, and activity, all states, perception and expression, all conception, apprehension, understanding, all union.

Areopagite’s views on the essence of Beauty were not his only influences on Kandinsky. His writings on positive and negative theology are revealing when recruited to the study of Kandinsky’s approach to abstraction in general. An analysis of Pseudo-Dionysius’ treatise, The Mystical Theology, makes Kandinsky’s process of veiling, reducing or obliterating more understandable and easier to explain. The Areopagite’s method of affirmative and negative theology mirrors the painter’s manner of first using and subsequently eradicating confirmatory emblems of Christian iconography. When we realize that cataphatic or positive, affirmative theology and apophatic or negative theology are central to the whole theological tradition of the Eastern Church, both the tradition of icon painting upon which Kandinsky built, and Kandinsky's method more directly can be understood as visual applications of the dogma.

According to Pseudo-Dionysius, the first cataphatic way “leads us to some knowledge of God, but is an imperfect way. The perfect way, the only way which is fitting in regard to God, who is in his very nature unknowable, is the second”

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162 Pseudo-Dionysius, 79.
According to the logic proposed by Pseudo-Dionysius, which is applicable to the process of veiling and the variety of artistic manipulations practiced by Kandinsky

[all knowledge has as its object that which is. Now God is beyond all that exists. In order to approach Him it is necessary to deny all that is inferior to Him, that is to say, all that which is. If in seeing God one can know what one sees, then one has not seen God in Himself but something intelligible, something that is inferior to Him. It is by unknowing that one may know Him who is above every possible object of knowledge. Proceeding by negations one ascends from the inferior degrees of being to the highest, by progressive setting aside all that can be known, in order to draw near to the Unknown in the darkness of absolute ignorance. For even as light, and especially abundance of light, renders darkness invisible; even so knowledge of created things, and especially excess of knowledge, destroys the ignorance which is the only way by which one can attain to God in Himself.]

We can apply the Dionysian philosophy of denying to the Kandinsky’s system of hiding of any recognizable features of the material world. Kandinsky implemented this system in order to achieve an inner spiritual essence of things and an awareness of absolute truth. The similarity between Dionysius’ philosophy and Kandinsky’s method of saying and veiling is readily apparent.

Any saying (even negative saying) demands a correcting proposition, an unsaying. But that correcting proposition, which unsays previous proposition, is in itself a “saying” that must be “unsaid” in turn. It is in the tension between the two proposition that the discourse becomes meaningful. That tension is momentary. It must be continually re-earned by ever new linguistic acts of unsaying.

When Kandinsky takes a certain theme as a subject and then veils its features, he engages in an act of apophatic discourse. The only difference between his act and the one described above is that Kandinsky's unsaying takes a graphic form. The linguistic descriptions of, say, Resurrection, are unsaid through the elaborate graphic process of veiling. The visual

164 In the West Nicolas of Cusa, under the influence of patristic writings, also tackled this issue in his De docta ignorantia (1440), which could be translated as “learned ignorance.”
165 Lossky, 25.
consequences of such discourse are that its sole existential base is always anchored to its original, often figurative, source. Once in a finished state, the work of art becomes “it,” a something that was said instantly produces a reaction to negate and undo something done, which undone will be done again and again. Kandinsky unveils the spiritual content of his paintings through the veiling that unveils. “At the high end of the scale of the performative intensity are passages, … in which mystical discourse turns back relentlessly upon its own propositions and generates distinctive paradoxes that include within themselves a large number of radical transformations, particularly in the area of temporal and spatial relationships.”

It is also striking that Pseudo-Dionysius’ text begins with an appeal to the Holy Trinity, which could also serve as the painter’s condensed poetic manifesto.

It is not known if Kandinsky read the works of Pseudo-Dionysius directly. But the circumstantial evidence is strong: beginning in 1911, Kandinsky's close friend and intellectual confidante Sergei Bulgakov was immersed in the work of Dionysius for some time, as he prepared his book Unfading Light. Given Kandinsky's Trinitarian convictions... one can imagine that such an invocation would make the text of The Mystical Theology exceptionally appealing. The lofty character of the introduction to On the Spiritual in Art is quite similar in both its substance and its elevated tone to this medieval text:

The spiritual life, to which art belongs and of which she is one of the mightiest elements, is a complicated but definite and easily definable movement forwards and upwards. This movement is the movement of experience. It may take different forms, but it holds at bottom to the same inner thought and purpose. Veiled in obscurity are the causes of this need to move ever upwards and forwards, by sweat of the brow, through sufferings and fears. When one stage has been accomplished, and many evil stones cleared from the road, some unseen and wicked hand scatters new obstacles in the way, so that the path often seems blocked and totally obliterated. But there never fails to come to the rescue some human being, like ourselves in everything except that he has in him a secret power of vision.

He sees and points the way. The power to do this he would sometimes fain lay aside, for it is a bitter cross to bear.

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167 Ibid.
168 Although Areopagite’s works were discussed in detail by Kandinsky’s close friend Sergei Bulgakov in his book Unfading Light, on which the author worked since 1911. The painter certainly could have acces to its content.
Given that Kandinsky studied theology for many years in gymnasiu
m and received for it the best grade possible, as attested by his diploma, it is hard to imagine that he was unaware of the canon of writings by the Fathers of the Orthodox Church to which Areopagite belongs. The painter also knew Ancient Greek and Latin. His Classical Gymnasium readings included, among others, Homer, Herodotus, Demosthenes, Sophocles, most of Plato’s dialogues, Cicero, Livy, Horace and Virgil.\footnote{Gorbunov editor. Программы, учебные планы (утвержденныя 20 июля 1890 года). Мужскихъ гимназий и прогимназий. (Curriculum and Courses for Gymnasium and Pro-gymnasium) (Moscow: A.G. Kolchugina,1893), 126 and 135.}

Pseudo-Dionysius’s The Celestial Hierarchy, which is filled with ideas about how divine and heavenly things should be revealed through obscure methods, suggests that reasons exist “for creating types for the typeless, for giving shape to what is actually without shape.”\footnote{Ibid.} Pseudo-Dionysius then adds a sentence which corresponds to the methods Kandinsky used in Compositions: “We need our own uplivings that come naturally to us and which can raise before us permitted forms of the marvelous and unformed sights. [That] it is most fitting to the mysterious passages of scriptures that the sacred and hidden truth about celestial intelligences be concealed through the inexpressible and the sacred and be inaccessible to the hoi polloi. Not everyone is sacred, and, as scripture says, knowledge is not for everyone.”\footnote{Ibid.} This conviction reflects the intellectual process through which the artist approached scriptural, apocalyptic subject matter and also describes the technique of concealment he employed. Dionysius repeatedly reminds us regarding symbolic language that “there is the scriptural device of praising the deity by presenting it in utterly dissimilar revelations. He is described as invisible, infinite, ungraspable, and other things that show not what he is but what in fact he is not;”\footnote{Ibid.} that we can get closer to the truth by practicing “a
manifestation through dissimilar shapes [which are] more correctly to be applied to the invisible.”

In the second chapter of The Celestial Hierarchy there is a continuous list of similarly striking statements. According to Areopagite, a veiling of the scriptural themes – in other words, making access to them challenging – should be a modus operandi for the arts depicting holy subject matter.

Kandinsky’s works are inspired by the mystic writings; they are result of this philosophical approach that permutated Byzantine aesthetics. It is apparent that for Kandinsky, as for Pseudo-Dionysius, works of art should not be immediately accessible. Full access to the hidden reality is reserved for “those who know” – those at the top of the mystic triangle, whom the painter described in his introduction to On the Spiritual in Art.

Between 1910 and 1914, Kandinsky produced about three-dozen Improvisations, all of his six Impressions, and seven Compositions. The first three Compositions, which were destroyed during World War II, were painted in 1910. Composition IV and Composition V were completed in 1911, and Compositions VI and VII were finished by the end of November of 1913. Although the artist later asserted that Compositions I, II and III, all painted before the critical visit to Moscow in the fall of 1910, did not have any particular subject matter, it is apparent that the themes of the Apocalypse, Resurrection of the Dead, the Last Judgment and All Saints, and the Garden of Love provided the foundations for their iconography and compositional structures.

As far as style is concerned, in the first four Compositions the color is still subordinate to the line and substantially fills the outline. The thick contour lines remind us of medieval woodcuts and gothic vitrage. The technique of woodcut was familiar to Kandinsky from his employment as artistic director in one of the prominent Moscow printing houses immediately prior to his departure for Munich. He created two-thirds of all the woodcuts

174 Ibid., 150.
before the end of 1910. As a cutter of his own wooden blocks, Kandinsky had an intimate understanding of the materials and tools used. When, for example, he looked at the detailed work of 16th century German woodcutters, he was able to recognize that he had in front of him a model of superb craftsmanship. In his *Cologne Lecture*, Kandinsky confessed that he had ‘become closely acquainted’ with medieval prints. Most likely he also saw “[o]ne of the most influential Western European illustrated publications [which] was undoubtedly the Dutch ‘Piscator’ Bible, first published by Claus Hans Visscher in Amsterdam in 1650. It is well-established that engravings from this work inspired some of the seventeenth-century frescoes in Yaroslavl churches painted by Nikitin’s team.”

When Kandinsky came across the folios engraved by Koren, their naïve simplicity must have impressed him. He must have noticed the intricate perfectionism of the engraved text, which was an integral part of each panel. Similarly, the number of compositional solutions and themes employed by Nikitin/Koren, which were typical of the Northern Volga region, must have been instantly familiar to Kandinsky.

The three *Compositions* painted before the significant Moscow trip were early stabs at a synthesis of elements that the Moscow trip would catalyze, and that would then fully present themselves in the later works. Perhaps one way to characterize them is as comparatively timid; the color stays within the line, the line itself is drawn from a clear historical precedent in the woodcut and pays homage to that medium’s craftsmanship, and the iconography nods to medieval religious illustration. What is missing, as we will see, is the daring, the energy, the willingness to incorporate primitive sources, and the fervor of religiosity that came after the Moscow trip. Kandinsky’s immersion in folk traditions, in Symbolist ferment, and in Neo-primitivism, although short-lived, came to be extremely

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influential for him. All these factors dominated his early Compositions, which demand attention in themselves; they are, after all, the introduction to radical abstraction.

For Kandinsky, they were also members of a family of works that was distinctive in the very symphonic complexity that formed the basis for his later radicalism. He discovered this radicalism at the seminal moment in January 2, 1911 when, just after returning from Moscow, he heard Arnold Schoenberg’s atonal music. The painter instantly understood that a correlation between abstraction and figurative art mirrors the one that exists between atonal music and music based on the major/minor scale. But, even more importantly, Kandinsky realized that he was not alone in his cruciate in the name of Unnamed; other artists, all over the Western hemisphere, had -- independently from one another -- begun to think like him.

1. Compositions I, January 1910

Most of the works that lead to the first three compositions contain numerous compositional and iconographical characteristics of the final work. Although the painter inexplicably maintained that there was none, the iconographical content of Composition I is rather straightforward. Its apocalyptic subject matter reflects the pre-1911 influence of Steiner’s interpretation of the Revelation According to St. John, and its iconographical sources can be found along the all-important backward path I have been tracing: from the contemporary folk arts back to their historical sources in medieval religious art. Additionally, Kandinsky’s iconography is interwoven with ideas from the head of the German branch of the Theosophical Society, Rudolf Steiner, as well as ideas of Martin Luther and the Italian

\[\text{Note:}\] The famous Munich concert during which Kandinsky heard for the first time Schoenberg’s two string quartets (in D op.7 and in F-sharp minor op.10), Five Songs (Fünf Lieder) and Three Piano Pieces op.11. During that performance, the painter instantly recognized the kernels of his own artistic struggle in the structural complexity of this new, groundbreaking music. An analysis of the pieces performed on that January evening of 1911 suggests that the painter was especially awed by the most inventive composition on the program, the String Quartet No.2, in F-sharp minor, Op.10.

\[\text{Note:}\] Study for a Woodcut After Composition I, a Woodcut for Composition II and a Drawing for Composition III.
medieval mystic Joachim da Fiore, whose thoughts about the upcoming *Age of the Spirit* are clearly present in *On the Spiritual in Art*.

The influence of Steiner is reinforced by the subtitle *Painting with Riders (White)*, which Gabriele Münter attached to *Composition I*. According to Vivian Endicott Barnett, *Composition I* “includes three riders on horseback, foreground figures, foliage and mountains with domed buildings and towers in the background.”\(^{178}\) This “three horsemen reading” is supported by a small *Study for Composition I* (1909-1910), in which Kandinsky attached colors to only three horses: on left horse: gray; on right horse: yellow; on foreground horse: red. The number of the horsemen points directly toward Steiner’s interpretation of the vision of the *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*. This difference is significant, since it indicates that Steiner was a key influence. Washton Long’s reading suggests that the number three agrees with Steiner’s idea that in the new upcoming spiritual era, the fourth pale horse signifying death should be exchanged for another symbol. Washton Long argues “Steiner de-emphasized the fourth horse […] because he believed Christ conquered death in the ‘fourth age.’”\(^{179}\) According to Barnett’s monographic catalogue, Kandinsky began to work on *Study for Composition I* sometime in 1909, that is, at the time when Steiner’s lectures had their strongest influence on him. Although Kandinsky had already used Steineresque motifs like walled cities, mountains, riders on horseback and reclining figures before his completion of *Composition I*, with this work he moved from fairytale themes, saintly knights, medieval dragons and princesses to the more challenging and substantial iconographic ground of man’s destiny.

The structure of *Composition I* is influenced by the Cologne Bible and by Lucas Cranach’s illustrations for different versions of Luther’s Bible. The influence of the Cologne

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Bible is especially apparent in the preference for a horizontal layout and for movement from left to right. Kandinsky simply adjusted the traditional composition of four horsemen by eliminating the fourth horse, which symbolizes death, for the sake of consistency with Steiner’s vision of upcoming *Epoch of the Spirit.*

Fig. 43  Kandinsky *Composition I*, 1910

Fig. 44 *Cologne Bible*
The folio of Koren’s *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* is influenced, although less directly, by the same sources. Koren’s work is based on Nikitin’s design for the fresco of the same subject designated for the porch of the Church of Prophet Elijah in Yaroslavl. When Kandinsky saw Koren’s woodcuts in late 1910, with *Composition I* still in his system, he would likely have recognized their common origins.
As to the visual work by Steiner himself—the well-preserved blackboard drawings could have, to some degree, influenced Kandinsky’s visual thinking. No direct comparison has been made between these blackboard drawings and the sketches with studies Kandinsky made around this time. Yet, certain patterns, dynamics and tension seem to be born from the same esthetic and similar compositional proclivities. The characteristic sketchiness, gesture-oriented expressive line, high color contrast, the speed of execution and the combination of image and text in the two sets of works are similar.

And then there is the influence of Steiner himself, both his ideas and his visualizations of those ideas, both of which Kandinsky witnessed. As Lawrence Rinder has noted, “Artists such as Mondrian, Kandinsky, and Jawlensky attended Steiner's lectures and were influenced (to varying degrees) by his theories, yet not one of them left any written commentary on the remarkable images and diagrams they saw Steiner draw.”\(^{180}\) The well-preserved blackboard drawings might well have influenced Kandinsky's visual thinking.

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Kandinsky’s immersion in Steiner’s Theosophy was only one of a string of excursions into spiritualism on the artist’s part. One of the most influential was that of the medieval theologian Joachim da Fiore; it was in Kandinsky’s discovery of Joachim that we can find important precedents for his emerging interpretations of Trinitarianism, which themselves became both theme and form in the first non-objective paintings, the Compositions of the 1910s. Sixten Ringbom was first to come to the conclusion that the artist must have been strongly influenced by the ideas of the 12th century abbot from Fiore. Ringbom suggests that Kandinsky’s familiarity with this obscure prophetic writer was a result of his careful studies of works by Russian novelist, poet and religious thinker D.S. Merezhkovsky — an important and respected author admired by the painter. “There is little doubt but that Kandinsky knew Merezhkovsky’s writings and concepts before 1910 or 1913, when they are reflected in his own essay and a book.” Quite possibly his attention was drawn to them again during his trip to Russia in 1910.”

The tree analogy, which Kandinsky used in Reminiscences, provides a perfect example of just how familiar the painter was with Joachite writings; the similarity to

181 On the Spiritual in Art.
183 “The new branch does not render the tree trunk superfluous: the trunk determines the possibility of the branch. Would the new testament have been possible without the old? Would our epoch, the threshold of the ‘third’ revelation, have been conceived without the second? It is simply the further replication of the original tree trunk, where ‘everything begins.’ And this replication, further growth, and complexity, which often appear confusing and disheartening, are the necessary stages the lead to the mighty crown; the stages that lead ultimately to the creation of the green tree.”
da Fiore’s use of the same analogy is so close that Ringbom suggests that Kandinsky must have encountered Fiore’s ideas in German philosophy and the works of Russian Symbolists influenced by da Fiore.

We can also trace many details that show the direct influence of the Luther Bible woodcuts, executed by Lucas Cranach, on works by Nikitin/Koren and Kandinsky. A good example is the introduction of the figure of the Prophet Elijah into Kandinsky’s vocabulary. The painter’s interest in the tightly connected figures of Elijah and Luther finds a rational explanation in their strong millennial\textsuperscript{184} associations, which were popular within Anthroposophy. For Steiner, who was convinced that the \textit{Revelation of Saint John} provided the key to the proper interpretation of the future, Luther must have been a key figure. Hence, an analysis of the woodcuts by Cranach, prepared while Luther was staying in Wartburg and approved by Luther, could serve as a guiding model of how to depict a prophetic vision. Kandinsky saw himself as continuing in this prophetic tradition. As a member of Steiner’s circle, he viewed himself as one of a small group of people who possessed a deep knowledge of history and the universe. Kandinsky was convinced that, through the veiling of apocalyptic messages in his art, he was delivering a prophetic proclamation whose “inner vibration” would bring the world to salvation and liberation from the ballast of matter. Paradoxically, he obscured what was revealed during the \textit{Revelation}. As I have been arguing, he veiled the revelation in order to penetrate the viewer’s inner soul and to free it from the disturbing, illusory experience of figurative art.

Although only a black-and-white image of \textit{Composition I} has survived, we can detect in it a sense of violence of cataclysmic proportions. The typical division of the composition into three parts is clear. The upper part is the most abstract and cosmic. The middle section contains the galloping riders of the Apocalypse. Punished humankind occupies the bottom

\textsuperscript{184} Millennialism – a Christian doctrine based on expectation of the Second Coming and the establishment of a Kingdom of God on Earth. According to an interpretation of prophecies in the Revelation of John, this kingdom of God on Earth will last a thousand years.
register. The structure of *Composition I* and its multilevel arrangement reflect a treatment similar to that found in the wide range of works that influenced Kandinsky in this period, from early manuscripts and icons to 17th century frescoes.

2. *Composition II, 1910*

*Composition II* is more complex and more abstract. With themes from both the Old and New Testaments, it is grander and iconographically and formally more ambitious. Because the visual complexity of this large (200 by 275 cm) canvas is significant, most critics and art historians originally tended to discuss its formal aspects. This choice can be seen as justified if we take into account Kandinsky’s own recollections on this painting, written years later in the Russian version of *Reminiscences*:

Once, in the throes of typhoid fever, I saw with great clarity an entire picture, which, however, somehow dissipated itself within me when I recovered. Over a number of years, at various intervals, I painted *The Arrival of the Merchants*, then *Colorful Life*; finally after many years succeeded in expressing in *Composition 2* the very essence of that delirious vision – something I realized, however only recently… And ever since it has pained me to see how frivolously is often treated. I allow myself complete freedom when painting studies, even submitting to the “whims” of my inner voice.¹⁸⁵

Immediate opinions about the content of “that delirious vision” were mixed. Both critics and the painter’s friends from NKVM found the painting difficult. Although in Kandinsky’s view *Composition II* achieved a new quality of visual depth, it is strangely its supposedly tapestry-like flatness that struck the critics and many fellow artists most of all.¹⁸⁶ Especially significant is an analogy noticed by David and Vladimir Burliuks, who saw *Composition II* shortly after the painting was finished in early 1910, as an extension of the *lubki*, the icon and

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¹⁸⁵ Lindsey, 890. Translated from the Russian version of *Reminiscences, Stupeni* published in Moscow in 1918.

¹⁸⁶ Dabrowski, 29.
church frescoes. These close friends of Kandinsky, who grew up in Russia and lived for some time in Odessa, instantly recognized that the essential features of color employed in Composition II originate in Russian icons. The Burliuk brothers saw that the secret of Composition II’s chromatic complexity has its origin in a long tradition initiated by the Byzantine masters and their immediate Russian successors of the 10th to 14th century.

For the Burliuk brothers, the influence of lubki was probably most evident in Kandinsky’s line treatment. The painter experimented for some time with the rough, uneven lines as a dominant painterly factor. Kandinsky explains this and other aspects of the process of painting of this particular work in his Cologne Lecture. He describes solving problems posed by the linear part of the picture first, then applying color. He employed the same process during the production of the painted broadsheets. The diverse volumes of the colors resulted in a quality very similar to the one achieved by lubki, especially the lubki of “lower” quality in which homemade, highly diluted paints, were applied on a low quality paper. In the Cologne Lecture of 1913 the painter clarifies the goal of this technique:

“The colors, which I employed later, lie as if upon one and the same plane, while their inner weights are different. Thus, the collaboration of different spheres entered into my pictures of its own accord. By this means I also avoided the elements of flatness in painting, which can easily lead and has already so often led to the ornamental. This difference between the inner planes gave my pictures a depth that more than compensated for the earlier, perspective depth.”

The painter’s statement is not surprising if one takes into consideration Russian artists’ historical distaste for mathematical perspective. By using a native Russian method practiced among lubki peasant colorists for centuries, Kandinsky introduced into this work an aesthetically fresh component.

188 Kandinsky, Cologne Lecture, 397.
The Burliuk brothers’ statement about Composition II is especially accurate within the context of Russian 17th century frescoes. Kandinsky grew up among frescoes. Since his early childhood, the large murals of Moscow’s Kremlin had surrounded him. He certainly saw 17th century frescoes during his one-man ethnographic expedition to the northeastern territories. Vologda’s Hagia Sophia Cathedral is decorated with a monumental set of so-called stolpovoi style frescoes. The large scale of Composition II provides a similar sense of monumentality and dynamism. The multiplicity of themes used by the painter in Composition II points toward the equally complex pictorial programs of the late 17th and early 18th century frescoes.

The iconographical program of Composition II is not clear. It is generally accepted that Kandinsky employed eschatological themes. A large white form divides the canvas. Its left side contains sinister apocalyptic motifs. Its right side is saturated with a sunnier, even playful atmosphere.

Fig. 49 Kandinsky, Composition II, 1910
Although *Composition II* was lost during World War II, a large study survives. A number of horsemen occupy its center. Jelena Hahl-Koch sees in it “two horsemen in combat leaping toward each other,” whereas Washton Long sees three horsemen, as does Vivian Endicott Barnett and the German scholar Will Grohmann. I must agree with Jonathan Fineberg who sees four horsemen, one on a blue horse facing left from the bottom center, a second on a white horse cutting directly across the path of the lower one, and two riders behind this second one, one with a red cape and gold capped white head and at the back another with a red cape and blue head. If these are the riders of the Apocalypse there should be of course four. Perhaps other art historians took into account that at the time Kandinsky was still under influence of Steiner’s apocalyptic ideas then the three-horse interpretation was very tempting.

The apocalyptic content is reinforced by the figure with an outstretched arm at the extreme bottom left of the *Study for Composition II*, which represents Saint John, in a pose

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189 Hahl-Koch, 163.
taken from the Cologne Bible scene of the *Dragon thrown into the Bottomless Pit*. We know how conversant Kandinsky was with the imagery of the *Cologne Bible* because he used exactly the same woodcut as an illustration for his stage composition *The Yellow Sound*, published as a part of the *Blue Rider Almanac*.

In the *Blue Rider Almanac* Saint John points to the Savior coming down from the heavens. In Kandinsky’s *Study for Composition II*, the figure of St. John has a halo around his head and experiences the revelation with a book in his hands as in the Cologne Bible. This fact is
important because this bible served as an inspiration for Nikitin’s frescoes with apocalyptic themes and thus is connected with the Koren Bible.

In Composition II the figure with both arms outstretched, standing in a purple boat in the upper left center, represents the crucifixion in the midst of the violent stormy waters and the falling towers of the world. Above it, the dark clouds and zigzagging lightning emerge from the outside of the frame as if coming as punishment from the world beyond. All these motifs suggest both the theme of Deluge and components commonly used in lubki to depict war, destruction and death.

That the four figures standing together in the lower left-hand section are the four evangelists is open to debate. They seem to be facing the right-hand side, the utopian side. Each figure is painted in a different color, suggesting that they have a symbolic meaning. They are all the same height and seem humble and motionless like the rows of saints Kandinsky knew from Russian frescoes. On the right-hand side children play with a ball and a person sleeps under a willow tree. In the lower right two reclining figures symbolize the Garden of Love, a motif frequently used by Kandinsky during the 1908-1914 period. The row of saints and the figure with outstretched arms bring to mind also Improvisation XIX, 1910.

The Composition II incorporates the themes of Apocalypse and Arcadian paradise and reflects the universal problem of the struggle between Good and Evil so commonly used in lubki. Kandinsky’s particular “delirious vision” has a collective substratum similar to that intended by Nikitin and folk makers of popular broadsheets.

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191 According to the Russian Church, the color gold is used during the Feast of Lord Jesus; purple symbolizes the Cross of Our Lord; red, the Feast of Martyrs; green is used during Palm Sunday and Pentecost; light blue represents Annunciation.
3. Composition III – September 15, 1910

Fig. 54 Kandinsky, Composition III, 1910
Kandinsky painted *Composition III* in the autumn of 1910. This was his last work from the series of *Compositions* before his mid-October trip to Moscow. As was mentioned before, the apocalyptic program of the first three *Compositions* was inspired by the writings of Steiner, by the ideas of Symbolism and the overall intellectual *zeitgeist* of the era.

*Composition III* was destroyed during the bombardment of Berlin at the end of World War II and all that remains is a low-quality photograph and a number of studies. According to Grohmann, the painting contained “two figures at the bottom and…the horse at the left….It is a composition which confirms Kandinsky’s observation about the tragic element in his art; we are also reminded of Franz Marc’s *Animal Destinies* of 1913: a tremor runs through the work, suggestive of a mood of catastrophe.”\(^{192}\) The preserved studies support Grohmann’s opinion. These untitled drawings suggest that *Composition III* was conceived as a continuation of the apocalyptic sequence opened by the previous two compositions.

\(^{192}\) Grohmann, 121.
For example, the two horses crossing in the lower right echo the similar arrangement that Kandinsky used in *Composition II*. The depiction of a person above these horses with outstretched arms brings to mind the rider from *Composition I*. The color markings are important, but not necessarily authoritative, since Kandinsky often changed his color configuration from day to day. More useful is Kandinsky’s diagram (dated by Münter September 14, 1910) for *Composition III*, which was attached to the back of a sketch for *Improvisation 14*.
If we compare *Improvisation 14* with *Composition III*, their main forms, the large blue boulder like shape and the tree shape to the side of the composition, although reversed, look similar. Two additional studies executed in a form unusual for the artist, in blue pencil, are almost identical with the final oil painting. At the bottom left, two riders gallop outside the painting. From the bottom center, two figures are emerging. As art historians Klaus Brisch and Washon Long hypothesize, the blue of the large oval, as in *Improvisation 14*, may suggest that *Deluge* is its main theme.¹⁹³

¹⁹³ Dabrowski, 30.
Whatever the exact iconographical significance of *Composition III* may be, its formal concerns are pronounced with confidence. The painter devoted even more attention than previously to the line treatment, which is robust, decisive and energetic. Compositional interests accentuate powerful, thick curving lines. If the bottom register is occupied with action-packed earthly struggles, the top register abandons the material dimension for an austere, distilled style. The right side of *Composition III* is framed by a number of curved lines, which are counteracted by a strong elongated shape that springs from the painting’s center. This central shape, defined by two lines, is subsequently opposed by the large oval wave. The top portion of the canvas represents a sequence of line and color dominated abstracted forms. The tension and interplay between the color field and the linear aspect of the composition denotes Kandinsky’s shift toward visual language cleansed of the burden of topical specificity.
4. *Composition IV, 1911*

![Fig. 61 Kandinsky, Cossacks, 1910–1911](image1)

![Fig. Kandinsky, Composition IV, 1911](image2)

Kandinsky began the preparatory drawings for *Composition IV* in early January 1911.\(^{194}\) “According to the Handlist by Gabriele Münter, *Composition IV* was executed at the end of February 1911 and was given an alternative title, *Battle (Schlacht).*\(^{195}\) Stylistically it still carried the esthetics of a traditional popular woodcut in its rather rough, thick black lines. In the letter from Odessa on December 1, 1910, as already quoted, Kandinsky wrote: “I…am now in a fragile mood, all shaken up by Moscow impressions. I simply let things ferment

\(^{194}\) Ibid., 347. The *Cossacks* canvas was finished on January 13, 1911.

\(^{195}\) Dabrowski, 31.
inside me, something is bound to come of it…” Evidently, by the age of forty-four Kandinsky had learned how to be patient and to wait for the maturation of the fermenting ideas inside him. *Composition IV* is a good example of how an initial idea evolved into a balanced work. It is filled with the dramatic diagonals of the turbulent landscape. The intense and chaotic accumulation of forms such as the rainbow, the Cossacks, the lances, and the horses leaping into one another reflect an intellectually and emotionally feverish, spiritually boiling state of mind. The massive blue oval shape used in *Composition III* and *Improvisation 14* dominates the center of the composition. The left, violent side, is balanced by the serene, Arcadian scene of the *Garden of Love*.

The preparations for each *Composition* were complex. Kandinsky worked on many aspects of the subject matter and form simultaneously and executed his ideas as drawings, woodcuts, etchings, watercolors, and oil paintings. Despite the wealth of documents attesting to Kandinsky’s thought process in this period, the complexity of that thought process makes it difficult to trace precisely.

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196 Hoberg, 92.
Some works are studies for detail, while others tackle composition in its entirety. In March 1911, Kandinsky wrote a neatly organized breakdown of *Composition IV*.

1. Concord of passive masses.
2. Passive movement principally to the right and upward.
3. Mainly acute movement to the left and upward.
4. Counter-movement in both directions (the movement to the right is contradicted by smaller forms that move toward the left, and so on).
5. Concord between masses and lines that simply recline.
6. Contrast between blurred and contoured forms (i.e., lines as itself (5), but also as contour, which itself had in addition the effect of pure line).
7. The running-over color beyond the boundaries of form.
8. The predominance of color over form.
9. Resolutions.

While the running-over color beyond the boundaries of form is not a totally new feature in the painter’s vocabulary, in *Composition IV* it reaches an unprecedented degree of commitment. This devotion to the liberation of color from the yoke of line was inspired by the similar treatment of color and form practiced among lubki colorists. As has been mentioned, Kandinsky purchased Sytin’s album in 1910 and encountered there a number of prints painted with total disregard for the relation of line and color. Sytin’s book may have prompted an epiphany in Kandinsky’s thoughts on the handling of color. Just how frequently Kandinsky referred to his copy of Sytin’s album is graphically illustrated by an odd but

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telling detail. He wore out the pages with lubki showing equestrian warriors to such an extent that he had to repair these pages using stickers from Berlin’s Der Sturm Gallery.

The lubki broadsheets published in Rovinsky’s albums were printed and painted with diligence; the color neatly filled in the outlines. The color in Sytin’s compilation, on the other hand, often spilled over, even disregarding the lines.

Fig. 65 Verso of the page from Sytin Album

Fig. 66 Rovinsky Atlas
The esthetic of Sytin’s album is in evidence elsewhere in Kandinsky’s oeuvre as well. In *Sounds* (*Klänge*, published in 1912), for example, Kandinsky juxtaposed poems and woodcuts without any apparent correlation. This method of granting the independence of different media -- poem and woodcut -- recalls the coloring of the lubki collected in Sytin’s album, in which color and line are granted independence. In the painter’s analysis of the nature of the relationship between color and line, he made a comparison between *Composition IV* and *Composition II*: “The juxtaposition of …bright-sweet-cold tone with angular movement (battle) is the principal contrast in the picture. It seems to me that this contrast is here, by comparison with *Composition 2*, more powerful, but at the same time harder (inwardly), clearer, the advantage of which is that it produces a more precise effect, the disadvantage being that this precision has too great a clarity.”

Sytin’s book of lubki contains many military scenes; drills, sieges, and bombardments filled with horses, muskets and bayonets. Such details appear in the highly abstracted battle

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scenes of *Composition IV*. A vivid example of the impact that Sytin’s collection had on Kandinsky over the years is *Improvisation 30 (Cannons)*. There are noticeable similarities between this work and a number of prints we find in Sytin’s set.\(^{199}\)

The left side of *Composition IV* is filled with a scene of a cavalry clash, scenes of fierce fighting and a besieged citadel. Motifs like bayonets and lances are taken from Sytin’s *lubki*.

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\(^{199}\) As suggested by Fineberg, the space and scale solution in *Improvisation 30* is also influenced by children’s drawings.
Fig. 69 Detail of the print from Sytin Album

Fig 70 Sytin Album
The rainbow motif in Composition IV shows the influence of the traditional biblical illustrations of the Book of Revelation, which the Koren Bible also followed. The element bridging two warring sides in Composition IV refers to the Book of Revelation: “And I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven, wrapped in a cloud, with a rainbow over his head; his face was like the sun, and his legs like pillars of fire.” The yellow-gold half circle inserted in Composition IV just below the rainbow stands for the face “like the sun.” This particular folio of the Koren Bible shows a kneeling St. John the Evangelist. The saint, who played a prophetic role in Composition II, reappears in Composition IV via motif of the rainbow commonly associated with the scene of The Angel with the Little Book as a figure central to the message of spiritual transformation. Although we can trace the sources of the details employed by Kandinsky, in general “Composition IV is not a rendering of a specific scene, rather it is a work that embodies Kandinsky’s pictorial, philosophical and spiritual concerns… They reflect Kandinsky’s complex interests in the philosophy of Schopenhauer; the music of Wagner; his preoccupation with theosophy, spiritualism, and Christianity; as

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*Rev. 10*
well as his profound Russianness and knowledge of old Russian myth.” Kandinsky’s interest in Schopenhauer, whose works were at the time his bedside reading, was not limited to his optical studies of color. Perhaps most important for Kandinsky was the fact that the philosopher’s thought was analogous to the Neoplatonist philosophy that had been crucial for the development of Byzantine aesthetics. Schopenhauer “claimed that the world is only a secondary representation, an illusory double and an objectification of the true reality of Being. This non-objectifiable, inner and hidden reality is what he calls the Will, and it is only another name for life.” The similarity between the “inner and hidden Will” and the veiled spiritual universe of Kandinsky is considerable.

5. Composition V

Fig. 72 Kandinsky, Composition V, 1911

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201 Dabrowski, 31.
202 Stimulated by friendship with Goethe and his Theory of Color.
203 Michel Henry, Seeing the Invisible (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2005), 113.
“... I calmly chose the Resurrection as the theme for Composition 5”, Kandinsky explained, later narrating his career, “and the Deluge for the sixth. One needs a certain daring if one is to take such outworn themes as the starting point for pure painting. It was for me a trial of strength.” 204 The Cologne Lecture explains his approach toward Composition V as a painter, as a philosopher and as a keen observer of the process in which the “abstract forms gained the upper hand and softly but surely crowded out those forms that are of representational origin.” 205

Since his groundbreaking discovery of the “great silence” within the color white and of the “undreamed-of possibilities this primordial color conceals within itself,” 206 Kandinsky began to paint even more obscure, highly condensed forms. The painter realized that he

had been afraid of the reckless quality of its [white color] inner strength. This discovery was of enormous importance... [He] felt, with an exactitude [he] had never experienced, that the principal tone, the innate, inner character of a color can be redefined *ad infinitum* by its different uses, that, e.g., the indifferent can become more expressive than what is thought of as the most highly expressive. This revelation turned the whole of painting upside-down and opened up before it a realm in which one had previously been unable to believe... tore open before [the painter] the gates of the realm of absolute art.” 207

Kandinsky saw that “the highest tragedy clothed itself in the greatest coolness, that is to say, [he] saw that the greatest coolness is the highest tragedy. This is that cosmic tragedy in which the human element is only one sound, only a single voice, whose focus is transposed to within a sphere that approaches the divine.” 208 In the next paragraph of the Cologne Lecture Kandinsky added: “It was in this spirit, as far as I personally am concerned, that I painted many pictures (*Picture with Zig Zag, Composition 5 and 6, etc.*). I was, however, certain that

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204 Kandinsky, Cologne Lecture, 399.
205 Ibid.
206 Ibid., 397.
207 Ibid., 398.
208 Ibid.
if I lived long enough, I should enter into the realm I saw before my eyes. Just as one sees the
summit of the mountain from below."

Just back from the explorations of Moscow’s lubki markets, Kandinsky had also
developed a taste for naïve forms. He “became more and more strongly attracted by the
unskilled. [He] abbreviated the expressive element by lack of expression...[he] would
emphasize an element that was in itself not very clear in its expression. [He]
deprived...colors of their clarity of tone, dampening them on the surface and allowing their
purity and true nature to glow forth, as if through frosted glass. Improvisation 22 and
Composition 5 are painted in this way, as well as, for the most part, Composition 6. ”

A number of reversed-glass paintings, Resurrection (1911), All Saints Day II (1911),
and The Angel of the Last Judgment (1911), all share the same iconography and
compositional structure with Composition V. This important painting introduced many
stylistic changes, but the apocalyptic motifs of the Resurrection and the design of the Sound
of Trumpets dominate its organization.

I must explicate here that, although Kandinsky named his work simply Resurrection,
it is apparent that he had in mind Resurrection of the Dead. To be in tune with the third
Epoch of the Spirit, he had to look into the iconography that suggested the closure of the
Epoch of the Grace represented by Christ. To express an “organic relationship to the creation
of a new spiritual realm that [was] already beginning,” the painter sought a definite
finalization of the past that would clear the way forward. It may be useful here to remind the
reader that in Russian Orthodox iconography, unlike in the West, the themes of the
Resurrection of the Dead and the Last Judgment are almost interchangeable. The
Resurrection of the Dead is unavoidably connected with the Second Coming and the Last

209 Ibid.
210 Ibid.
211 Kandinsky, On the Spiritual in Art, 219.
Judgment. Perhaps the best illustration of this sequence is a fresco from Yaroslavl’s Saint Elijah Cathedral.

This large, multi-scene composition combines the Resurrection and the Last Judgment. Seemingly without interruption, the one scene flows into the next, which appears as its natural consequence. This Resurrection before the Last Judgment must be seen in the sense of resurrection communio sanctorum, i.e. a resurrection of the commune of saints and the fellowship of the all Christian believers living and dead. This busy painting, built around the classic structure of the separated segments, incorporates most of the iconographical elements required by the canon, including the Serpent of Tribulations.

In the Composition V Kandinsky introduced for the first time an unprecedented degree of abstraction, veiling, disfiguring, dissolving and stripping. The serpent that meanders from the upper right corner to the center of the canvas became its most provocative -- and a literally divisive -- element.
a) The Serpent

*Composition V* was controversial from the moment it was introduced to Kandinsky’s friends and to the public. The jury of the third exhibition of the New Artists’ Association of Munich (NKVM) scheduled for December 1911 argued about whether *Composition V* should be shown and ultimately did not accept it. Although the panel officially opposed the painting on the grounds that it exceeded the acceptable size, “which in any case had never been strictly observed,”²¹² it was obvious that the “pure painting” that *Composition V* represented was too pure for the conservative members of NKVM.²¹³ The revolutionary, uncompromising and unconventional character of the painting challenged the artistic establishment of NKVM to such a degree that it actually triggered the breakup of the NKVM.²¹⁴ “Within the NKV itself differences had been developing, some personal and others aesthetic. These reached a head in the jurying of the third NKV exhibition in 1911 with a split into two groups, one led by Kandinsky and Marc, the other by [Adolf] Erbsloh²¹⁵ (the secretary) and [Alexander] Kanoldt.²¹⁶ Kandinsky’s increasing nonobjectivism seems to have been the issue, and he left the organization accompanied by Marc and Gabriele Münter, while Jawlensky and Werefkin sympathized with him openly.”²¹⁷

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²¹² Weiss, 67.
²¹³ The rejection of Kandinsky’s work took place within an atmosphere charged by the pamphlet *Protest deutscher Kunstler*, a separatist document concerning all foreign art. Ever since its publication in the spring of 1911, most of the NKVM’s progressive members had realized that their secession was unavoidable. The extra few centimeters of Kandinsky’s canvas were simply a convenient pretext for “cleaning up” the ranks of NKVM and ridding the organization of foreign elements.
²¹⁴ Peter Selz’s chapter “Breakup and Third Exhibition, 1911” discusses this issue in a relatively detailed way: “The true reason for the split ... was a great difference of esthetic ideology.” (Selz, 197)
²¹⁵ According to Peter Selz, “the most traditional member of the group developing most slowly and most carefully.” (Selz, 189)
²¹⁶ German magic realist painter and Erbsloh’s lifelong friend.
The work’s most controversial element was a black serpent-like motif, or as Grohmann put it, a “Chinese dragon.” Critics, collectors and the ordinary public did not know how to read this totally foreign element; how to interpret the strangely evocative, meandering, almost haunting form so unfamiliar to them.

Although some consider it to be a giant trumpet, if Kandinsky had in mind any type of instrument, this one is reminiscent of a prophetic Old Testament mountain horn. Washton Long sees it as “influenced by lubok depictions, attempt[ing] to suggest the terrible sound of the trumpet on Judgment Day by the thin black line which widens as it curves around the walled city into the center of the painting.”

In my opinion, this mysterious element, if disconnected from the grand-scale Orthodox iconography of The Serpent of Tribulations, and understood in the literal textual context of the New Testament’s Fifth Trumpet (Rev. 9.2), could be identified as a plume of smoke that rose from the shaft “like the smoke of a great furnace, and the sun and the air were darkened with the smoke from the shaft.” That would create an elegant symmetry and would support the concept of parallelism between the numbering of the Compositions and their apocalyptic textual equivalent.

Whenever eschatological subject matter was involved, the transformation of leitmotifs employed by the artist was inimitable. Composition V is one of the best examples of his multilayered veiling method. Although the genesis of this painting is deeply submerged within the artist’s childhood, its more immediate origins are in the recently rediscovered world of lubki. In a letter dated December 8, 1911, a year after the return from his long Russian trip, Kandinsky wrote to the Saint Petersburg artist and exhibition organizer Nikolai Kulbin about his desire to own another Last Judgment lubok:

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218 Long, 116.
219 Rev. 9.2
May I ask you a personal favor? I have long dreamed of owning the lubok called Last Judgment, if possible, an antique and primitive one (the one with the serpent, devil, clergy, etc.). If you come across one at the Apraksin Market or the various kiosks, could you buy it and send it to me? Really, I would be eternally grateful. But, of course, only if this wouldn’t cause you too much trouble. I really hope that we’ll have a chance to talk without pen and paper. Best wishes. Kandinsky.  

It is apparent that the painter was familiar with places where one could purchase lubki. He had most likely come to know them during his trip to Saint Petersburg a year before. Purchasing the Last Judgment print must have had some special meaning, since his letter was addressed to someone he had never met in person. It is an unusual request since Kandinsky was extremely formal and reserved, even with the closest friends. This letter proves that even after the completion of Composition V he was still under the spell of the meandering serpent form and the subject of the Last Judgment.

The artist finished painting Composition V on November 17, 1911. This powerful and obscure work reduces representational components to a minimum. Its central serpent motif could be recognized and properly evaluated only by someone with knowledge of Russian Orthodox iconography and the subject of the Resurrection and the Last Judgment. The National Library in Saint Petersburg had one of the richest collections of Resurrection of the Dead or Last Judgment prints in its possession. The library is conveniently located in the center of the city, on the main avenue of Nevsky Prospect; it would be utterly in character for Kandinsky to have made the trip, and examined this opulent compilation during his visit in 1910. He must also have been excited to see the sumptuous assortment of lubki prints and unique collection of hand-drawn lubki in this prestigious public library. The painter would have recalled them from his ethnographic expedition to Vologda province decades earlier.

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221 Roathel, 385.
It is also hard to imagine that the artist, on the same visit to the capital city, did not examine the only surviving copy of the Koren Bible, which until then he knew only from Rovinsky’s Atlas.

Fig. 74 Last Judgment from Rovinsky’s Atlas.

The serpent shape that dominates Composition V was, and still is today, commonly associated with the depiction of the Resurrection of the Dead and Last Judgment. It was unimaginable for the conservative and religious painter to paint this fundamental scene without its central motif, which usually stretched from the throne of the Savior all the way down into the abyss of Hell.
“One of the two mouths of the beast of hell (with Satan on top) disgorges the serpent, who
tries to bite Adam’s heel, but in vain: Adam is safe with Eve under the throne of Christ. The
serpents coils represent the trials (telonia, matarstwa) that human souls must pass in order to
redeem themselves from sin and ascent into heaven.”

The Serpent of Tribulations in Orthodox iconography is not associated exclusively
with the original sin as it is in the West. The genesis of this motif is unclear. The Serpent of
Tribulations, which remains at the core of Orthodox depictions of the Last Judgement, is a
purely Russian phenomenon that appeared for the first time in northern icons in the 15th
century. In the Russian language, the Last Judgment is called Strashnyi Sud, a name that
accentuates its horrifying nature rather than the fact that it is the final judgment. “To the
serpent’s body [usually] are attached a series of circles, on each of which is written the name
of one of the potential sins with which the court may indict the deceased. These circles
represent the tribulations or ‘toll-houses,’ a series of gateways through which a soul must
pass on its way to judgment. The sins are placed in order of increasing gravity, with the least
serious located far from the mouth of Hell and the more damning ones closest to Hell.”

Although the subject of the Resurrection of the Dead/Last Judgment was popular
among icon painters and has a strong presence in the lubki tradition, its most prominent
location was on the western wall of Eastern Orthodox churches. While in prayer, every
member of the congregation faced the iconostasis and could feel behind him the snake’s
hideous presence. When leaving the temple, with their backs to the iconostasis, everyone
could look up at the fresco of the Last Judgment and be reminded that their sins would be
punished. In the Eastern Orthodox faith, there is no comfortable option of Purgatory, a
concept the Roman Catholic Church developed and officially introduced at the Second
Council of Lyon (1274). Within Eastern Orthodox Church dogma the need for a transitional

222 Alfredo Tradigo, Icons and Saints of the Eastern Orthodox Church (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty
223 Boris K Knorre, Icon of the Last Judgment: A Detailed Analysis (Moscow: Vysokopetrovskij Monastery,
2013), 13.
state is served not by Purgatory, but by belief in the efficacy of prayer for the dead.

In Russian sacral architecture, which typically has no side aisles, and is usually based on a central plan, the western wall is often the largest, tallest and most immense. The feeling of being surrounded by paintings on all sides “lain dormant within [the painter], quite unconsciously, when [he] had been in the Moscow churches, and especially in the main cathedral of the Kremlin.” Kandinsky, who loved the Kremlin’s Archangel Cathedral and especially the Dormition Cathedral, saw the terrifying serpents on the walls of these cathedrals from his early childhood. The value of the childhood experience cannot be overestimated; the “hidden ‘child within’ …exercises potent influences on the entire range of the adult’s behavior, all the more so when buried beyond recognition in the adult unconscious where one cannot easily reach it to address and modify its energy.” When Kandinsky visited these churches during his frequent returns home, he always felt enfolded by the frescoes that completely covered the walls of these churches.

Fig. 75 The Archangel Cathedral, Kremlin; The Last Judgment

224 Kandinsky, Reminiscences, 369.
225 Fineberg, 23.
Since the ethnographic trip to the northeastern territories had made such an unforgettable impression on Kandinsky, he certainly remembered the remarkable frescoes of the Last Judgment located in Hagia Sophia Cathedral in Vologda.\footnote{The enveloping sensation Kandinsky felt in cathedrals was recreated when he found himself in richly adorned peasant houses during the 1889 ethnographic expedition to the northeastern Vologda region. The future artist was impressed by the vividly painted interiors. The idea that color can overpower an image and become liberated had a profound effect on him. In Composition V the emancipation of line from the color ground is almost fully exercised. The thick, black outlines become released from the duty or yoke of figurative association. It is not incidental that, to a certain degree, the artist harvested the fruits of that experience two decades after the legendary expedition. To fully understand what he had seen as a young student, he had to develop the intellectual ability to grasp the potential of folk art; he had to mature in order to acquire a new level of insight. It was not until Kandinsky gained the capacity to convert the emotional response of a young man into a concrete visual language that he was ready to tackle the issue of abstraction.} It is significant that Vologda’s frescoes are closely related to the work of Nikitin, since the team that executed them came from the Yaroslavl/Kostroma, the same region where the great fresco master was born. The style and iconography of Vologda Cathedral’s frescoes and Nikitin’s frescoes are similar. “Of the many hundreds of figures and events of the Vologda fresco depicting this world cataclysm, the painters stressed the theme of the angels summoning the righteous and the sinners to the Last Judgment.”\footnote{Gerold Vzdornov, \textit{Art of Ancient Vologda}, trans. Natasha Johnstone (Leningrad: Aurora Publishers, 1978), 22.} The monumentality of the angels and their golden trumpets dominate the Vologda Cathedral’s masterpiece. The same motifs, to a certain degree, control the structure of Composition V.
Art historian Noemi Smolik noted that “Kandinsky’s imagery is surprisingly close to that of Russian Orthodox icons, as seen, for instance, in the frescoes in the 18th century Church of the Prophet Elijah in Jaroslawl (sic) on the River Volga.” The congregation of the St. Elijah Cathedral in Yaroslavl, on its way in or out of the cathedral, had to pass through the narrow porch frescoed by Nikitin, which is entirely covered with the monstrosities of the Apocalypse. Most entry/exit corridors in the Eastern Orthodox Church were covered with scenes from the Apocalypse. This theme is perhaps the most frequent iconographically exploited and graphically-developed topic in the entire Volga region.

228 And 17th century since Nikitin died in 1691.
Having been exposed to eschatological themes and symbols from an early age, Kandinsky had absorbed them as a part of an iconographic heritage. For a deeply religious, and in many ways conservative, man like Kandinsky, it was natural to tackle the subject of the Resurrection with the serpent as its principal motif. He had this key iconographical and compositional image in mind from the very beginning. Without it, the primary theme itself would lose its validity. Because Composition V was well developed in Kandinsky’s mind, instead of the usual massive number of preparatory drawings, aquarelles etc., all we have is two diagrams on a single sheet of paper and a single oil sketch. The structure of the Resurrection, despite Kandinsky’s ambitions to create a pure painting, was in many respects established by the thousand-year old fresco and icon tradition.
“The two small diagrams indicate general movement of the masses (top) and define different parts of the compositional scheme inscribed with color notations in German (bottom). In the bottom diagram, despite its small scale, one can also distinguish quite clearly forms that appear in the final oil; for instance, the shape of an angel’s head, wings, and trumpet in the upper right. Even the central oval from the little diagram seems to carry over into the final canvas, though in a more amorphous shape.”230 The Sketch for Composition V, besides the fact that “is about half the size of the final canvas [also] resolves most of the problems of the finished picture.”231

Fig. 80 Kandinsky, Sketch for Composition V, 1911

Changes in the Orthodox tradition and the strict rules of icon painting – constrained as they were by an endless number of official regulations – were slow and minimal. For Kandinsky, the serpent held the unique compositional value it had for previous generations.

230 Dabrowski, 34.
231 Ibid.
At this post-1910 moment of his career, he decided to employ the full force of Orthodox tradition.

b) The Mystic Triangle

Another hard-to-define object is the Mystic Triangle. Magdalena Dabrowski, the Kandinsky scholar and author of a book about Compositions, called it a “prominent double triangle,” without further explanation of its meaning. Yet it is perplexing that this geometric, abstract symbol is floating in the midst of an ocean of organic forms, curved structures, baroque folds and grotesque biomorphic shapes. The motif of the mystic triangle reappears in Kandinsky’s writings. The painter sees the coexistence of organic and abstract forms as sublimation. Kandinsky sees the juxtaposition of these two realms, organic and abstract, as an essential part of pure artistic composition. In one of the footnotes to Chapter VI, The Language of Forms and Colors, in On the Spiritual of Art he literally mentions “the mystical triangle” in the course of describing what purely pictorial composition requires.

Although in Composition V Kandinsky is using the triangle as a single, isolated motif, its inclusion suggests that in Composition V the painter saw the mystical triangle as a necessary, abstract accompaniment to the avalanche of organic forms.

At one time, the image of a triangle was so important for the painter that he contemplated using it on the cover page of On the Spiritual in Art. “Kandinsky made this drawing on the back of the envelope postmarked 20 June 1909 and addressed to him in

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232 Ibid.
Murnau by an unknown person. Roethel proposed that the drawing was intended for an unexecuted title page and dated it to 1909-1910…”

Fig. 81 Kandinsky, *Untitled*, 1909

Sixten Ringbom, the author of *The Sounding Cosmos*, a seminal book on Kandinsky, was convinced that this design was conceived as a cover page for *On the Spiritual in Art*. Ultimately, Kandinsky decided to use the equally significant motif of the hill with the crumbling tower. Yet, I would suggest that his hesitation before choosing this image elevates rather than diminishes the potential importance of the meaning the triangle might have held for Kandinsky.

In the opening paragraph of Chapter II of *On the Spiritual in Art*, which discusses Movement, Kandinsky elaborated on the significance of the triangle:

“[t]he life of the spirit may be fairly represented in diagram as a large acute-angled triangle divided horizontally into unequal parts with the narrowest segment uppermost. The lower the segment the greater it is in breadth, depth, and area. The whole triangle is moving slowly, almost invisibly forwards and upwards. Where the apex was today the second segment is tomorrow; what today can be understood only by the apex and to the rest of the triangle is an incomprehensible gibberish, forms tomorrow the true thought and feeling of the second...

233 Barnett, 70.
234 According to Overy, “The castle on the hill is a kind of heavenly mansion on earth” (Overy, 62).
segment. At the apex of the top segment stands often one man, and only one. His joyful vision cloaks a vast sorrow. Even those who are nearest to him in sympathy do not understand him. Angrily they abuse him as charlatan or madman. So in his lifetime stood Beethoven, solitary and insulted.\textsuperscript{235}

After the word ‘tomorrow’ the painter added a footnote: “This ‘today’ and ‘tomorrow’ inwardly resemble the biblical ‘days’ of creation.”\textsuperscript{236} The footnote is perhaps more astonishing than the entire paragraph – it tells us how deeply enmeshed in Judeo-Christian tradition Kandinsky’s art was. The painter included a mystic triangle on the canvas of the Resurrection because for him it had historic, biblical significance. It indicated the movement of time and the essence of spirituality. For Kandinsky, the triangle represented a symbol of Trinitarian conviction and the motion that would eventually elevate mankind to the Epoch of the Great Spiritual. As Ringbom reminds us, Kandinsky “saw the whole spiritual development of mankind in terms of this geometrical figure.”\textsuperscript{237}

c) The Prophet Elijah

![Image of Prophet Elijah](image)

Fig. 82 Prophet Elijah, from Kandinsky’s collection

\textsuperscript{235} Kandinsky, Concerning the Spiritual in Art (Locations 242-246).
\textsuperscript{236} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{237} Ringbom, 113.
Although the Hebrew name Elijah literally means “My God is Yahweh,” for Greeks its pronunciation was essential, as it reminded them of Helios – the Sun God, who like the Old Testament prophet, drove the chariot of fire across the sky. In Russia, Elijah took the place of a pagan god of thunder called Perun. The motif of Elijah’s ascending chariot was one of Kandinsky’s favored themes. At the very top of Composition V, just above the middle of the black whiplash, filtered through abstraction, the figure of Elijah’s Chariot ascends to heaven.

Fig. 83 Kandinsky, *Composition V* (detail)

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The densely populated, ‘busy’ lubok (Fig. above), which Kandinsky must have seen in Rovinsky’s atlas, could have served as one of the painter’s inspirational sources. The combination of the bold diagonal, projected from the lower right corner across the entire print, and the location of Elijah’s chariot just above it, is similar to the compositional solution Kandinsky used in Composition V.
The use of the white background in Rovinsky’s lubok resembles the dynamic utilization of white color in the Koren Bible.²³⁹ In On the Spiritual in Art, Kandinsky sees white as “an impenetrable wall [which], shrouds its life from our understanding. White, therefore, has this harmony of silence, which works upon us negatively, like many pauses in music that break temporarily the melody. It is not a dead silence, but one pregnant with possibilities. White has the appeal of the nothingness that is before birth, of the world in the ice age.”²⁴⁰ This statement is reminiscent of situation of the artist “whose sensibilities have remained at an embryonic stage.”²⁴¹ Kandinsky’s search for pure painting may well take him to such a purified point.

d) The Trumpeting Angels

Besides the classic use of the trumpeting angels as a framing device in the upper corners of the painting, in Composition V Kandinsky added four more trumpets. Two cross each other at the center, almost as they would in a coat of arms. The fifth trumpet springs from the left side. It could be detected in mid-left section and is paralleled with the black swoosh. The angels in the upper corners are largely obscured. If not for the presences of the characteristic strings of hair they would be almost undetectable. The midsection trumpets are all alone, without any angels whatsoever. This fact could be explained be invisibility of the angels who, as Kandinsky believed, can be perceived only by those primed and prepared to receive and process the subtleties of the spiritual world. The incorporeal nature of the angles goes some way toward justifying Kandinsky’s highly abstract approach. Pseudo-Dionysius,

²³⁹ Stressed by Sakovich.
²⁴¹ Kandinsky, Cologne Lecture, 400.
who provided “the first comprehensive description of the angelic world” encouraged an approach that would depict the angels as dissimilar as possible. For Pseudo-Dionysius, as for Kandinsky “dissimilar images uplift the mind more than similar images, because the latter may lead us into the error of supposing that the intelligences are golden creatures, beautiful to behold and dressed in garments of light.”

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Fig. 86 Kandinsky, Composition V, detail

Fig. 87 Composition V (detail)

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242 Parry, 82.
243 Ibid., 83.
The upper register of Composition V, when compared to its rather relaxed bottom section represents a stirring, dense crescendo, which ends with the departure of Elijah into heaven.

Kandinsky read Apocalypse carefully. Consequently, the five trumpets employed in Composition V and the entire section of the Rev. 9.1-9.12 most likely relate to each other. The unusually dark palette of the Composition V reflects the atmosphere of “the sun and the air [which] were darkened.” Composition V seems to remain in agreement with its scriptural source, as well with the iconographic tradition of Russian Orthodox Church. The somewhat matte, subdued effect created by the damped paints technique parallels the terrifying and gloomy scenery described in the Apocalypse.

e) The Cephalophoric Figure

It has been suggested that the beheaded figure holding his head on the right in All Saints II depicts John the Baptist who “represents the belief in the guarantee of resurrection through baptism.” In the mid-lower section of Composition V Kandinsky repeats the same motif. Additionally, the headless figure used so often by the painter in his woodcuts, glass paintings, aquarelles etc. directs our attention to the paragraph from the Revelation 20.4: “Then I saw thrones, and those seated on them were given authority to judge. I also saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and for the word of God. … They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years.” Knowing Kandinsky’s intimate acquaintance with the text of the Revelation, this paragraph had to be influential in the inclusion of the headless individual in the toolbox of repeatedly used motifs.

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244 Rev. 9.2
Another tempting interpretation that comes to mind is a pantheon of the cephalophoric (headless) martyrs. Probably the most famous of them is Saint Denis of Paris, confused for many centuries with Dionysius Areopagite, the bishop of Athens²⁴⁷ and a biblical disciple of St. Paul,²⁴⁸ who was in turn mistakenly entangled with the prolific Syrian saint Pseudo-Dionysius, erroneously called Areopagite, who wrote in the late 5th/early 6th century. Kandinsky, like everyone who has spent some time in Paris, must have been familiar with the story of St. Denis’ martyrdom. According to Jacobus de Voragine’s *The Golden Legend*, after the decapitation “the body of Saint Dionysius stood up, took his head in his arms, and, with an angel and a heavenly light leading the way, marched two miles, from the place called Montmartre, the hill of martyrs, the place where, by his own choice and God’s providence, he rests in peace.”²⁴⁹ It is tempting to maintain this particular reading because, as we know, abbot Suger of St. Denis, according to Erwin Panofsky, decided while reading Pseudo-Dionysius’s writings²⁵⁰ to employ the saint’s principles concerning light in architecture and remodeled the west façade of the Abbey Church of St. Denis. This fact marks the beginning of the Gothic style in art and architecture and makes Suger’s name synonymous with it. This was, and still is, a popular story – one of which Kandinsky must have been aware. If the painter’s inclusion of St. Dionysius in his work is intentional, this would prove that he had at least a general idea of Areopagite’s esthetic concepts.

²⁴⁷ According to Dionysius of Corinth.
²⁴⁸ Acts 17.34., “But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite.”
²⁵⁰ Most likely *Celestial Hierarchy*
f) Saint Christopher

On the lower right-hand side of the composition, St. Christopher – who is clearly distinguishable in *The Great Resurrection* woodcut, on the right-hand side in *All Saints II* and in *The Sounds of Trumpets* – is here reduced to a little triangle with a dot as an eye.

Fig. 88 Kandinsky, *All Saints II*, 1911

There can be no doubt that the figure of the saint comes from Orthodox iconography, which depicts this saint as a warrior cynocephalus, a dog-headed man. “According to one legend, St Christopher had been baptized in an especially miraculous way. His battles to establish Christianity are as legendary as his ultimate martyrdom.”

251 The same arrangement of the figures of St. Christopher and St. Dionysius/St. John the Baptist and the chariot of the prophet Elijah were preserved by Kandinsky in *Composition V*, although in that painting the figures are more remote from one another. Kandinsky “adopts these saints as key figures in

251 Smolik, 148.
Russian icon painting. As was typical for the artist, he combined characters from the Old and the New Testaments. In the canvas titled *Resurrection*, this makes particular sense since the ascension of Elijah prefigures the resurrection and ascension of Christ.

Fig. 89 St. Stephan and St. Christopher, 17th century

Fig. 90 *Composition V* (detail of lower right side)

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252 Ibid.
On the left-hand side of Composition V, instead of the usual sailboat, Kandinsky introduced a rowboat with three oars. Conceivably, this decision was influenced by the lubok, The White Sea Whale, 1760.
Inside the rowboat we can see three individuals – orange, yellow and blue. The boat is almost submerged by the turbulent waters of Deluge. Its semicircular shape is very unusual, and it is placed in exactly the same location as in the White Sea Whale lubok – at the bottom left-hand corner. “The many-oared boat suggests human endeavor and persistence.”253

Fig. 93 Composition V (detail lower left side)

The other parts of Composition V evolve along a classic line, but with more abstracted components. Some good examples are the motifs of the walled medieval city with tumbling towers in the upper center and the person whose identity is uncertain. To the right of the decapitated head and the two intercrossed trumpets we notice burning candles, which are traditionally used, especially in Catholic Bavaria, on gravesites during All Saints’ Day (November 1). In the Sound of Trumpets, Great Resurrection woodcut we can clearly see the same candles above the resurrected heads emerging from underground.

253 Overy, 62.
Composition V reached an unprecedented level of abstraction. In his search for pure painting, Kandinsky achieved a new standard only barely connected with the past.

6. Composition VI, 1913

Between […] two centers is a third (nearer to the left), which one only recognizes subsequently as being a center, but is, in the end, the principal center. Here the pink and the white seethe in such a way that they seem to lie neither upon the surface of the canvas nor upon any ideal surface. Rather, they appear as if hovering in the air, as if surrounded by steam. This apparent absence of surface, the same uncertainty as to distance can, e.g., be observed in Russian steam baths. A man standing in the steam is neither close nor far away; he is just somewhere. This feeling of ‘somewhere’ about principal center determines the inner sound of the whole picture.²⁵⁴

²⁵⁴ Kandinsky, Reminiscences, 387.
The enigmatic and highly poetic tone of this paragraph from *Reminiscences* suggests that the painter’s search for the mysterious had reached a new level. *Composition VI*, which was gestating within Kandinsky for a year and half, represents an even richer understanding of abstraction. The painter realized that to make progress and achieve success he had to eliminate the object altogether – not only from the canvas, but also from his mind. This new level of awareness was a milestone in his development. *Composition VI* marks the important step forward in a long and exasperating struggle for non-objective art and for that mystical “somewhere,” which at the beginning of the search the artist could sense only faintly.

**a) The Word Deluge**

When Kandinsky stepped into the realm of undetermined non-objective reality, he had no idea where this exploration would take him. In a January 16th, 1937, letter to Hilla Rebay, the painter explains that he “could not immediately come to ‘pure abstraction’ because at that time [he] was all alone in the world.” Ultimately, *Composition VI* depicts a confrontation with the Unknown. Even when Kandinsky’s mind became clear on a conceptual level, the final phase of the actual painting process was still full of struggle. In his essay, he confessed: “in a number of sketches I dissolved the corporeal forms, in others I sought to achieve the impression by purely abstract means. But it didn’t work. This happened because I was still obedient to the expression of the Deluge, instead of heeding the expression of the word ‘Deluge.’ I was ruled not by the inner sound, but by the external impression.” The habitual image-based associations that words produce had to be suppressed. In order to hear “the inner sound” Kandinsky had to generate a purely intellectual and imageless relationship with the

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255 Kandinsky, Guggenheim Foundation, 98.
256 Lindsay, 385.
word “Deluge.” To get to the “inner sound” of the word Kandinsky had to reexamine the famous opening line of St. John’s Gospel: “In the beginning was the Word.” This Biblical Word or Logos, as annotations to the Oxford Bible explain “is more than speech; it is God in action, creating, revealing, redeeming.” In a way, we can say that with the final three prewar Compositions Kandinsky fully matured as an intellectual, as an artist, and as an intensely spiritual person; he reached a point where all aspects of his artistic life merged. The artist experienced a personal revelation: the profound meaning of The Book of Revelation cannot be truly comprehended without a full understanding of The Gospel According to John. He realized that he had to depart from the external world of impressions. After all, impressions are literally something impressed, purely external and too shallow to contain ‘inner vibrations.’ The painter began to understand and experience the true meaning of an apophatic search for an Ideal. He seemed to realize that through the complete eradication of ‘self,’ he would be able to approach Creation from the unadulterated black cloud of “pure ignorance.” Intuitively he knew that “[p]receding by negations one ascends from the inferior degrees of being to the highest, by progressively setting aside all that can be known, in order to draw near to the Unknown in the darkness of absolute ignorance.” Kandinsky believed that this perspective would provide a bridge into the reality of spiritual “inner vibrations,” the ephemeral aspect of inner truth that had never before been prescribed as a treatment of abstract material. It seems logical that around the same time, Kandinsky recognized that intuition and reason are equally essential during the process of creation.

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257 The original revelations of such reknowned mystics as Joachim da Fiore, Meister Eckhart, and Nicolas of Cusa were imageless.
258 NRSV, 125. Some new translations go even further and say that: Before the beginning was the Word.
259 Ibid.
260 Vladimir Lossky, 25.
Not surprisingly, Kandinsky’s revelation about the power of the Word has much in common with onomatodoxy\textsuperscript{261}, or Imiaslavie,\textsuperscript{262} an idea around of which a theological controversy that was raging within the Orthodox Church at the time (1913).\textsuperscript{263} This “monastic teaching … consciously based itself upon the teachings of the great fourteenth century theologian and mystic Gregory Palamas (1296-1359), in claiming that the invocation of the name of Jesus in prayer effected the presence of the divine Person, since the active reality of the Person subsists in the name.”\textsuperscript{264} Kandinsky must have had intimate knowledge of the debate surrounding onomatodoxy, since the scandal caused international controversy and was widely discussed in Europe at the time. Here, it is important to realize that Bulgakov was a great supporter of Imiaslavie. Additionally, his best friend and mentor Florensky wrote, although anonymously, an introduction to the Antonii Bulatovich’s book \textit{An Apologia for Belief in the Name of God and the name of Jesus} (1913). Bulatovich’s book was one of the most contentious efforts promoting this movement. During the year the \textit{Composition VI} was painted, both Florensky and Bulgakov wrote well-known essays on the subject of the “name worshipers.” Kandinsky, following Bulgakov, was convinced that the names “are not magic words dropped from heaven, but neither are they convenient denotations in human conceptual system. [That] they are spoken only in the context of the communication of God’s life, and their truthfulness is to do with the way in which they are effective media of that life.”\textsuperscript{265} This newly rediscovered meaningfulness of words must have influenced Kandinsky’s thinking during what was, for him, an otherwise difficult creative silence. After long months of “painter’s block,” the realization that he had made a mistake by being obedient to the traditional associations that the word \textit{Deluge} generates liberated him from the burden of the

\textsuperscript{261} A dogmatic movement that asserts that the Name of God is God Himself. The followers of this movement were also called “Name Worshipers.”
\textsuperscript{262} In some literature on this subject, the name of the Imiaslavie movement is translated as “Name-Worshipers.”
\textsuperscript{263} The controversy was ignited by the book \textit{On the Caucasus Mountains} (1907), written by a little-known monk from Mount Athos named Ilarion.
\textsuperscript{264} Bulgakov, \textit{Towards a Russian Political Theology}, 8.
\textsuperscript{265} Bulgakov, \textit{Towards a Russian Political Theology}, 12.
past. The technique of exclusive concentration on a “word” and its mantra-like repetition practiced by the name-worshipers was essential to the experience that finally enabled the painter to free himself from “that element which was foreign to [his] inner picture of that catastrophe called the Deluge.” Kandinsky understood that he had been ruled not by inner sound, but by the endless number of associations that the word Deluge normally generates.

Perhaps the most revealing example of this new approach we can find in Reminiscences: “I was searching half consciously, half unconsciously, for the compositional. I was inwardly moved by the word composition and later made it my aim in life to paint a ‘composition.’ The word itself affected me like a prayer.” According to Bulgakov, the Word is also directly connected with the notion of Icon: for him “the sanctification of icons is associated with their naming … the holy icon is also Divine icon in word … a verbal icon.”

Once this became clear, Kandinsky was ready to tackle the subject of the Deluge. He recalled in Reminiscences: “Finally, the day came and a well-known, tranquil, inner tension made me fully certain. I at once made, almost without corrections, the final design, which in general pleased me very much.”

Martin Heidegger summarized the problem Kandinsky faced thus:

Truth, as the clearing and concealing of what is, happens in being composed, as a poet composes a poem. All art, as the letting happen of the advent of the truth of what is, is, as such, essentially poetry. The nature of art, on which both the art work and the artist depend, is the setting-into-work of truth. It is due to art’s poetic nature that, in the midst of what is, art breaks open an open place, in whose openness everything is other than usual. […] everything ordinary and hitherto existing becomes an unbeing. This unbeing has lost the capacity to give and keep being as measure.

266 Kandinsky, Reminiscences, 386.
267 Ibid., 367.
269 Ibid.
269 Grohmann, 134.
The function of reality becomes reversed. It is what “breaks open” that truly exists because it has the capacity to function in a new field of awareness. Grohmann seems to agree: “Kandinsky’s conception of the deluge is not based on the image or idea of it, but on evocative connotations of the word, which for him contains virtually all possibilities of Becoming, or, as Franz Marc would have said, ‘re-emergence at another place.’” 271

What sets Composition VI apart from the previous Compositions is the fact that it was based on a glass-painting which the artist painted for his own satisfaction. Although we have only an old black and white photograph of it, this playful, humorous image is suffused with a circus-like atmosphere and offers an insight into the artist of a kind that one hardly ever has a chance to experience.

Fig. 95 Deluge, Hinterglasbild, 1911 reproduced from an old photograph

Here, an apocalyptic catastrophe turns into something that borders on the world of dream and hallucination. The entire composition spins around in an unknown, self-ruled mysterious motion. The rotating world is a hyperbolically grotesque danse macabre. The domain of the subconscious presents a cluster of suddenly unchained instincts, a realm of hidden eroticism and a tale that can change into a nightmare at any time. In this glass painting, the waves of the Deluge have faces. They seem to be characters in a cartoonish,
carnivalesque and delightful fairytale. For the waves and floating characters, an apocalyptic storm provides an occasion for interaction and carefree play. We can detect the influence of humor we so often see in Russian folk prints. In particular, the charming dolphin-like character at the bottom of the glass-painting is reminiscent of the well-known color *lubok Chudo*.

The nude on the left side of the reverse-glass also seems to be floating in the air in a state of inertia and ecstasy. She seems airborne, as if caught at the height of an upward leap. Kandinsky combined serious forms with comical characters: nudes, grotesque anthropomorphic waves, and figures apparently taken from children’s books. In some sketches we see nudes, elephants, cats, horses, toys, dancers and an angel. Perhaps the painter wanted to include all the living creatures, large and small, from the Old Testament and the New Testament.
The glass-painting *Deluge* generated ideas that inspired the artist to treat them on the grand scale of his *Compositions*. Beside the influence of the hinterglasbild *Deluge*, the program of *Composition VI* is also connected with the folk prints Kandinsky saw in Moscow. He probably also revisited Rovinsky’s catalogue in the Munich library, a collection that had contained a copy since the first publication of the catalogue in the 1880s. The impact of the Koren woodcuts on *Composition VI* illustrating the moment when Second Angel blew his trumpet is evident.\(^{272}\)

\(^{272}\) *Rev.* 8:7 “The second angel blew his trumpet, and something like a great mountain burning with fire, was thrown into the sea.”
The *Revelation* folios influenced the organization and the tempestuous spirit of *Composition VI*. The bottom right of the painting corresponds most closely to Koren’s *Riders of the Apocalypse*. At the same time, as Dabrowski has pointed out, “*Composition VI* reflects Kandinsky’s spiritual vision of color and the process of dematerialization of form evolved into intensely spiritual work conveyed through almost entirely abstract language.” The depiction of the slashing, diagonal torrents of rain entering the white-and-pink abyss of one of the painting’s centers, together with the zigzagging lightning, creates an impression of chaos and destruction. The strong and colorful parallel lines borrow their form from Koren’s panels. Kandinsky also duplicates the patch of white to the left of center of Koren’s Folio 27, which in *Composition VI* takes on the function of one of the two centers. In both cases, the use of white is pivotal. What German-American painter Hans Hofmann, and subsequently Clement Greenberg, called “the pockets with holes,” is here manifested in a tour-de-force

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Dabrowski, 40.
example of how to handle this difficult, often deceiving non-color. The space is resolved in a
totally distinctive way, which is hard to understand for minds molded by linear perspective.

b) Reversed Perspective

In the Composition VI Kandinsky intentionally used so-called reversed perspective – a
perspective that floods the real, physical space of the spectator. The accumulation of shapes,
lines, diagonals, and dramatic curves creates a wall that is impossible to penetrate. We have
the sensation that it floods our space. We have an almost physical feeling of being submerged
by the violent and relentless deluge of compositional fury. Kandinsky’s Sintflut stands for
something that actually takes place in front of and around us, as something that triggers our
real bodily experience. Composition VI represents the embodiment of John 1.14: “And the
Word became flesh…”274 The painter succeeds: the border between the imagined and matter
become indistinguishable. The highly compressed environment of Composition VI functions
like “the golden or colored background of the icon [that] prevents the viewer from moving
inward into the image and reinforces the outward thrust of the image itself into the space of
the viewer. The achieved effect of this outward thrust is to emphasize the viewer’s
relationship and communication with the [theme] represented.”275

Pavel Florensky’s essay on reversed perspective explains the function of multi-
centeredness in terms that evoke the three-centered structure of Kandinsky’s Composition VI:

[i]the closest dissemination of the methods of reversed perspective to be noted is the use of
polycentredness in representations: the composition is constructed as if the eye were looking
at different parts of it, while changing its position. So, for example, some parts of the
buildings are drawn more or less in line with the demands of ordinary linear perspective, but
each one from its own particular point of view, with its own particular perspectival centre; and

274 NRSV, 125.
275 John Hendrix and Liana de Girolami Cheney Editors. Neoplatonic Aesthetics. Music, Literature, & the
sometimes also with its own particular horizon, while the other parts are, in addition, shown using reverse perspective. At the time, few were prepared for such a reversal of rules and optics. Kandinsky had dismantled the viewer’s centuries-old comfort zone. He invaded the viewer’s space, flooding it and forcing a reaction. If we recall that the German word *Sintflut* unambiguously stands for the biblical term for the “eternal flood,” its cataclysmic connotations bind *Composition VI* with the flood of the Old Testament and the *Book of Revelation*. By using reversed perspective and multicenter composition, Kandinsky set the observer in motion. The spectator did not have to stand frozen in one place to have a perfect view. The mixed perspectives, multiple horizons and polycentredness infused *Composition VI* with new and vivid dynamics that ideally served its subject matter.

In *Composition VI* of 1913, [Kandinsky’s] preoccupation with the pictorial structure bore mature fruit. Illusionistic space is given way to the autonomous non-perspective pictorial space worked out by the Cubists, a system of imbricated layers, of superimposed and interpenetrating planes. But Kandinsky introduces an extreme and highly expressive tension into this relatively rational system by means of irrational thrusts reaching out through space, toward the infinite. Kinetic symbols introduce the space-time factor. Thus the orchestration embraces the widest tensions – the rational and the irrational, the limited and the unlimited, the static and the dynamic.

Haftmann’s sensitive evaluation of ‘irrational thrusts reaching out through space’ seems to support the claim that Kandinsky’s application of reversed perspective was intentional and effective. Here, it is useful to recall what reversed perspective does not demonstrate:

The space in the icon does not follow Euclidian laws (first premise). There is no absolute point of view of the beholder (second premise). The various viewpoints represent different aspects of the object and of reality at large. Further, reverse perspective takes into consideration the double view produced by the two eyes, a fact disregarded by linear perspective (third premise). The beholder is no longer assumed to occupy a fixed position (fourth premise). The items in the picture are not necessary characterized by immobility.

and optical fixity (fifth premise). The images do not exclude the psycho-physiological process of memory and spirituality (sixth premise).\textsuperscript{278}

What seems to be especially important in Kandinsky’s art is his inclusion of the spiritual-synthetic aspect of the process in his creative practice. Kandinsky’s mature \textit{Compositions} are infused with spirituality. The painter apparently understood that reversed perspective “takes account of an inner, psychological factor (mainly centering on the process of memory), which influences perception.”\textsuperscript{279} In essence, the reversibility of Kandinsky’s images dwells within their intense spiritual, emotional, even physiological projection.

In \textit{Composition VI}, Kandinsky transformed the waves of the \textit{Deluge} into embryonic creatures. Blue and green masses of matte color create an impression of organic pulp. Only a semicircular and unstable rowboat offers an anchor to the real world. The swamped vessel is the only recognizable object, a place where the eye can find a moment of rest. The instability of Kandinsky’s boat mirrors the equally desperate state of the fleet in Koren’s Folio 27. The painting depicts a clash of hammering waters and fire. Forms and colors collide within ambiguous space and disintegrate in front of the spectator. We soon realize that the force of the catastrophe is so violent and relentless that the painting cannot maintain its rage. Slowly, the spectator begins to sense the end of the cataclysm. We are forced to look beyond destruction and search for meaning. Kandinsky’s thoughts on \textit{Composition VI} are clear: “What thus appears a mighty collapse in objective terms is, when one isolates its sound, a living paean of praise, the hymn of the new creation that follows upon the destruction of the world.”\textsuperscript{280}


\textsuperscript{279} Ibid., 404.

\textsuperscript{280} Kandinsky, \textit{Reminiscences}, 388.
7. *Composition VII, 1913*

*Composition VII* explodes out of its background. Kandinsky developed a new pictorial universe in which his colorful Slavic roots are mixed with the dignity of Eastern imagery. As a painter, an intellectual, and a person of strong Christian faith, Kandinsky was prepared to sacrifice everything for a reward in the future *Age of the Spirit*. Abstraction, as the painter understood it, was able to produce a new sound, a new tonal key, in which East and West do not collide. Instead they coexist and stimulate each other. In 1913 Kandinsky simultaneously attempted to frame the present and to look deep into the future. His canvas overwhelms the spectator, much as the interiors of the Kremlin’s cathedrals do. In *Composition VII* Kandinsky utilized many of the eschatological motifs he had explored previously and gave birth to a dematerialized world.

In the…*Composition VII* of 1913, and the pictures of 1914, a Dionysian furioso bursts forth in this new independent pictorial cosmos: mightily flowing masses of colour, from which precious, minutely sub-divided jewel-like forms emerge, swiping arcs that find a response in glittering, vibrant concentrations of graphic detail, a colour ranging from sharpest yellow to fiery purple and spiritual blue and glowing with inwardness of eastern mysticism. The sound is that of a Russian choir – sharp ethereal sopranos and then the deep organ tones of the basses. Only with the utmost strain does the framework of the picture withstand the stormy incursion of musical, Dionysian, and mystical force.  

The art historian Werner Haftmann’s reading spins around bursting, swiping, flowing, glittering motions, which suggest outward movement, as in reversed perspective. The only inwardness, which Haftmann senses, has a purely spiritual value. It is a place the spectator’s eye cannot reach, where words and signs fail. Haftmann points out just how essential Kandinsky’s Russian nature was for the breakthrough. The artist’s Russianness “made it

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281 Haftmann, 140.
easier for him to depart from the material world and its visible figures. For the Russians with their mystical outlook had never regarded art as a reproduction of the visible world; they had always expressed their emotion in symbols on the abstract ground of the picture surface or used abstract means to create a mystical ‘atmosphere’ in the interiors of their churches or peasant houses. This was the source of the freedom with which Kandinsky moved away from the visible world”\(^{282}\). For Russians “[t]he whole icon is a name that has grown, that is clothed not only in the sounds of the word but also in different auxiliary resources, in colors, forms, images: the picture in the icon is a hieroglyph of the name…And the requirements of iconography become understandable if one takes into account this hieroglyphic character, this possible extinction of the personal and psychological, this objectification and schematization.”\(^{283}\)

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\(^{282}\) Ibid., 137.

\(^{283}\) Bulgakov, *Icons and the Name of God*, 120.
a) Influence of Brueghel

Washton Long compared Brueghel’s *Fall of the Rebel Angels* with *Composition V*. She suspects that this work, published in the prestigious Russian art magazine *Apollon* in 1911, to which Kandinsky was a contributor, had a decisive impact on the structure of *Composition V*. Georges Vantongerloo, “in his *L’art et son avenir* (1924) reproduced *Composition VI* next to Brueghel’s *Fall of the Angels* in the Brussels Museum and [according to Grohmann] it is amazing to see how similar the flat and pointed forms of the two paintings are when we disregard Brueghel’s naturalism and how closely related their structures and rhythms are.”

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Fig. 101 *Composition VII* with *Fall of the Rebel Angels*, Brueghel, 1562

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284 Grohmann, 136.
The juxtaposition of Brueghel’s *Fall of the Angels* with *Composition VII* is equally arresting. If we place Brueghel’s work on top of *Composition VII*, the two paintings seem like an organically unified vertical diptych. The extraordinary turmoil and furor of the Flemish master’s composition spills into Kandinsky’s work and boundaries seem to disappear. Like conjoined twins, they are fused into a single entity, as if the 350 years between them have vanished.

Kandinsky’s *Letters from Munich* were frequently published in *Apollon*. He certainly saw Breughel’s work published there in 1911. The period of late Gothic art, to which the great Flemish painter belongs, was deeply respected by members of *Der Blaue Reiter* circle and promoted through their Almanac. If the substance of *Composition VII* represents a compilation of apocalyptic themes, the subject of the fallen angels developed by Brueghel from the *Book of Revelation* seemed ideal as its structural model. Brueghel, a brilliant colorist, impressed Kandinsky. The painter’s medieval menagerie of organic forms, an avalanche of corpses, shells and all types of hybrids, would have been inspiring to someone like Kandinsky who was profoundly attracted by eschatological themes. The powerful depiction of apocalyptic violence, conveyed by a staggering multitude of forms and colors, dominated by the unearthly and fragile figure of St. Michael, is reminiscent of the rebellious climate of *Composition VII*. The sound of Brueghel’s apocalyptic trumpets can be heard in Kandinsky’s work – their angelic fanfare is embedded in his cacophony of forms and colors.

In *Composition VII*, the elements Kandinsky used as an intellectual and spiritual platform are not of purely non-objective origins. Although Kandinsky, in his *Cologne Lectures*, proclaimed that “the pictures painted since [*Composition V* and *Composition VI*] have neither any themes as their point of departure, nor any forms of corporeal origin,” fragments of objects, narrative themes and symbols appear consistently. In essence, many of

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285 Rev. 12.3-12.9
286 Kandinsky, *Cologne Lecture*, 399.
them follow the literal definition of the word ‘abstract,’ which, after the Latin abstractus, describes something that is ‘drawn off.’ What is here ‘drawn off’ or extracted and set in motion is the very marrow of ideas and signs. Other forms found in the post-Composition VI period are the results of skillful simplification. Everything superfluous to the core meaning of painting has been removed. At this crucial stage, Kandinsky’s language shifted dramatically and operated through the use of blotches of primary colors, linear clashes and extraordinary collisions of compositional blocks. The spaces of the large compositions are organized around webs of black organic lines, reminiscent of the intricate armature of Gothic stained-glass windows.

Direct allusions to concrete objects, themes or symbols are rigorously veiled, distorted through an accumulation of intersecting forms or disturbed by an arbitrary distribution of color. This apocalyptic metamorphosis takes place in a profoundly violent space. Here, the eye of the viewer constantly wanders within a reality that seems to replicate a super-active, bursting pictorial crater. Indeed, vehemence and a wild, uncontrollable energy take over and become the main subject of this unusually large canvas (200 x 300 cm). The spectator has the sensation that the world thus depicted erupts out of its borders. Its energy has all the traits of all-out anarchy. It is not surprising that in such an amalgam of terror and chaos, Kandinsky’s contemporaries were unable to detect traces of the painting’s relationship with the world surrounding them.

In the following paragraphs of this chapter I will discuss some of the key elements used by the painter in Composition VII. The hidden iconographical content of Kandinsky’s paintings is still a fervently debated issue. In a cosmos of lines, zigzags, curves, geometric, biomorphic and anthropomorphic figures, scholars have been able to decode and interpret a large number of iconographic elements. Some of their findings are contradictory, and the meanings of these elements are still not clear. Interpretations cover a vast field. Some
proceed from a purely Theosophical point of view (Ringbom); others from an ethnographic perspective (Weiss). Still others prefer to see Kandinsky fundamentally as a Russian, and his Russianness as a dominant factor in his artistic life. As usual, most of these views overlap, support, or contradict each other.

b) The Trumpets

Fig. 102 Kandinsky Study for Composition VII, 1913

The trumpet was one of the painter’s favored motifs and appears in most of the preparatory studies for Composition VII. The diagonal organization of Composition VII reflects the fact that its presence had a consistently significant compositional impact. Kandinsky seemed to favor the St. Andrew Cross\textsuperscript{287} arrangement, which was frequently employed in Nikitin/Koren apocalypse renderings.

\textsuperscript{287} X- shaped cross.
If we trace the basic forms, lines and colors, we can see that the powerful diagonal scaffolding keeps their flow in a solid grip. In this regard, Kandinsky was very traditional. This was his method of maintaining control over the unfolding dramatic configuration – another *modus operandi* – or, to use the artist’s phrase, this was the way to “put a muzzle on it.”

The trumpets in the hands of the painter announced the coming of the apocalypse, but they also directed his search for signs of hope. Earlier applications of the trumpet motif from the watercolor sketch *Sound of Trumpets* of 1911 actually bear the words “Sound of Trumpets” written in Cyrillic. They represent a good example of the skillful engagement of signs from a variety of eschatological themes utilized in icon painting, in popular broadsheets, and in the Koren Bible. The angel blowing a trumpet, which announces the coming of the Last Judgment, can be found in the upper center of the *Composition VII*, and in its upper right corner.

c) The Rowboat

The rowboat, which is located at the bottom left corner, is the most recognizable element of *Composition VII*. Although it is present only in two pen and ink studies out of more than thirty preparatory works, Kandinsky was committed to it from the very beginning – from the first day of painting – as documented by the four photographs taken by Münter.

Fig. 104 Gabriele Münter, Photographs taken between November 25 and 28, 1913

Fig. 105 Kandinsky, *Improvisation XXVI (Rowing)*, 1912
The lower left corner is a designated location for the theme of the *Deluge*; we can trace its presence in the same spot in *Composition V* and *VI*, and in its sailboat transformation in works executed a few years earlier.

**d) The Lightning**

The zigzagged background of the Tunisian mosaic can be associated with the turbulent depictions of the *Deluge* in *Composition VII*, *in Composition VI*, watercolor *Sound of Trumpets* and in the *Great Resurrection* woodcut. A similar zigzagged pattern was routinely used to illustrate lightning and storms in *lubki*. When we search for a possible source of the zigzag lightning, we cannot exclude Steiner’s drawings. Kandinsky previously saw Steiner’s blackboard illustrations during the lectures he attended in 1908. Steiner’s comment on one of these drawings, titled *Cosmic Respiration*, is clear: “And what happens? There is lightning!”

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Fig. 106 Steiner, *Cosmic Respiration*, detail

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The introduction of electricity could also be a factor influencing the painter’s repeated use of zigzagged lines; a similar sign served as a common popular representation of electricity.

d) An Oval and Intersecting Trapezoid

Contrary to the clearly recognizable boat motif, which appeared only twice in preliminary studies, the two intersecting shapes of an oval and a trapezoid from the center of Composition VII appear consistently in most of the preliminary studies. Although they seem to have special significance, they have yet to be interpreted.

Fig. 107 Kandinsky, Watercolor with Red Spots for Composition VII, 1913

When Kandinsky employed a dominant central signature early in the process of creation, he usually assigned to it an extraordinary mission. For example, when he placed the head of the German Symbolist poet Stefan George as the axis of Impression III (1911), his intentions were relatively clear: the poet who had played a quintessential role in Schoenberg’s divorce with tonality in the Second String Quartet served as a mythical figure/vehicle, whose vision ended the reign of the tonal system and brought the world of music into a new and liberating future.
In the case of *Composition VII*, poetry also plays a significant role. The ideas of second-generation Russian Symbolists such as Bely, Ivanov and Blok, whom the painter knew well, included ideas about dematerialization as a method for purifying the world. His connection with the Munich wing of German Symbolism, led by Kandinsky’s friend Karl Wolfskehl, enriched the painter’s language with a German literary and graphic legacy. In this tradition, apocalyptic subjects were explored and posited as a means of destroying the positivist mindset of the previous century. The apocalyptic themes of Steiner’s lectures circulated the proposal that a turbulent, traumatic period would usher in the purification of humankind and a new era of spiritual renewal, which supplied the ambitious painter with a subject of cosmic significance.

The plan was for *Composition VII*’s enormous, multi-themed program to spin around an oval intersected by a trapezoid and crossed by two black lines. These lines end with miniature rectangles, which suggest they are oars or paddles.

The entire pictorial universe of *Composition VII* rotates around this difficult-to-understand form. Since no one has yet cracked its encoded origins, it successfully veils the artist’s intentions and remains open to a variety of interpretations. The aggressive trapezoid of the central motif cuts through the eye of the pictorial cyclone surrounded by the black oval framed by two green arches.

Fig. 108 Detail of the center, *Composition VII*
It is interesting to recall what the painter thinks about the color green:

green tint...checks both the horizontal and eccentric movement. The colour becomes sickly and unreal. The blue by its contrary movement acts as a brake on the yellow, and is hindered in its own movement, till the two together become stationary, and the result is green.

[...]
A well-balanced mixture of blue and yellow produces green. The horizontal movement ceases; likewise that from and towards the centre. The effect on the soul through the eye is therefore motionless. This is a fact recognized not only by opticians but by the world. Green is the most restful colour that exists.

[...]
In the hierarchy of colours green is the "bourgeoisie"-self-satisfied, immovable, narrow.

[...]
But active element is never so wholly absent as in deep green.  

The central motif seems simultaneously quiet and loaded with potential power. It could represent an abbreviated center of the prophesized apocalyptic catastrophe, after which a new era will begin. In Reminiscences, which the artist finished writing in 1913, he proclaimed

that [he] finally entered into the realm of art, which like nature, like science, like political institutions, is a realm in itself, regulated by its own laws peculiar to itself and which, together with all other realms, will ultimately constitute that mighty kingdom that we now only dimly conceive.

Today is the great day of one of the revelations of this kingdom. The affinities between these individual realms have been illuminated as if by a blast of lightening; unbidden, startling, heart-warming, they emerge from the darkness. Never have they been so closely linked, not so sharply divided. This lightening is the progeny of the darkening of the spiritual heavens that hang above us, black, stifling, and dead. Here begins the great period of the spiritual, the revelation of the spirit. Father – Son – Spirit.  

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290 Kandinsky, On the Spiritual in Art, 180.
The forthcoming *Great Epoch of the Spiritual* was supposed to be marked by the reign of the Holy Spirit; therefore it is conceivable that the central motif of *Composition VII* depicts the abstracted form of the Holy Spirit’s descent. It is impossible to ascertain the degree to which representations of the Holy Spirit in the scenes like *Annunciation* or *Pentecost* influenced Kandinsky. The icons portraying these events, especially a scene of *Annunciation*, used highly geometrical elements of a beam of light intersecting a circle of light surrounding a dove – a symbol of the Holy Spirit. The oval of *Composition VII*, which in some preparatory sketches stays in close proximity to a perfect circle, could correspond to a circle of light surrounding a dove.

There is a long tradition of such graphic visualization dating back to early medieval encaustic icons from the St. Catherine Monastery on the Sinai Peninsula. In the West, this theme was equally popular in works of early Italian Renaissance masters and the masters of the Flemish North.

The Koren Bible could also have inspired the arrangement of the central motif. In most of the folios that belong to its *Genesis* section, an oval ring of flames – an oval aureole, which represents a symbol of the fiery heavens -- surrounds the image of the *Creator of the World*. Folio 6, illustrating the *Creation of Adam*, captures a moment when “the Lord God formed man from dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.”\(^{292}\) Here the transfer of breath is conveyed by a sharp beam, which dissects the creator’s oval and the halo of Adam.

\(^{292}\) *Gen.* 2.7
In the context of Steiner’s teachings and Kandinsky’s views, the creation of the first man prefigures the creation of a new, rejuvenated mankind during the Epoch of the Great Spiritual. At the moment when Kandinsky painted Composition VII, this relationship between the two moments of creation, past and future, was one of his most urgent concerns. The central motif of Composition VII provides a strong pictographic base to justify such an interpretation.

The central trapezoidal element may also represent an extract of The Throne Prepared or Etimasia. Traditionally Etimasia occupied, as the trapezoid does in Composition VII, the center of the icon. The throne often took the shape of a simple table. Although the table is actually square, its “trapezoidal shape is the result of the ‘reverse perspective’ typical of many early icons. … The Throne Prepared symbolizes all in one image Christ’s Golgotha,
his Resurrection, and the Second Coming on the Day of the Last Judgment.”293 Such an iconographically rich symbol perfectly complements the ambitious, all-embracing, multi-themed program of Composition VII. “In the Last Judgment the throne is not just the symbol of Christ in general, but specifically the symbol of Christ in his role as the Judge who has exclusive power over the world, according to the vision of John the Theologian, who saw that ‘…a throne was set in heaven, and one sat on that throne’ (Rev. 4:2).”294

At the end of this elaboration on the meaning of the central intersecting sign, I would not exclude a sexual interpretation.

In light of Freud’s works demystifying human sexuality, the world of dreams, the explicit, often convoluted sensuality of Symbolism etc., and Kandinsky’s own flamboyant lifestyle, such a sexual association is not without basis. Art historian Clemena Antonova brings to our attention that “Alexei Siderov (1891-1978), a colleague and friend of Florensky’s at the Academy295 had spent time in Germany, where he had met Kandinsky.

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293 Knorre, 11.
294 Ibid.
295 RAKhN – Russian Academy of Artistic Sciences
Siderov and Kandinsky would attend debates on Freud at the Café Stefan in Munich.\textsuperscript{296}

Perhaps the universe of the cataclysmic \textit{Composition VII} is more intimate and closer to earth than we ever suspected.

e) The Garden of Love

![Image](Fig. 111 \textit{Study for Composition VII})

British art historian Shulamith Behr sees that the four photographs documenting the creation of \textit{Composition VII} are consistent through the four frames is the prominence of the boat and oars motif of the Deluge in the lower left corner, the arcs of the enigmatic center and, on the right hand side, the intersecting enclosed configurations representative of Paradise. Indeed, it is [Kandinsky’s] redemptive interpretation of eschatological texts that suggest a biographical reading of the composition; the intertwined oval shapes symbolizing the reclining couple in the Garden of Love. This motif was invested with Utopian associations, the physical union of the two lovers connoting the desire for transcendence and divine. It appears that as though it was in these significant creative ‘moments’ in the studio – witnessed and framed by Münter – that their partnership was at its most intense, transcending the tempest of their far from ideal relationship in the real world.\textsuperscript{297}

\textsuperscript{296} Clemena Antonova, \textit{Space, Time and Presence in the Icon. Seeing the World With the Eyes of God} (Farnham, Surrey, GBR: Ashgate Publishing Group, 2010), 18.

\textsuperscript{297} Hartwig Fischer and Sean Rainbird, \textit{Kandinsky. The Path to Abstraction}, 98.
It is possible that ‘[t]he right hand side, the intersecting enclosed configurations representative of Paradise’ were inspired by the reclining figures of Adam and Eve from the Koren Bible. The preliminary studies for *Composition VII* preserve the same diagonal orientation. The peculiar position of the head in Koren’s *Creation of Eve* woodcut brings to mind the deep relief from the Pergamon Altar of Zeus, now in Berlin.²⁹⁸

Fig 112. Koren Bible, *Creation of Eve*

Fig. 113 Pergamon Altar, fragment

²⁹⁸ Open in the beginning of the 20th century.
In the West, this unusual position of the turned-away head of the main figure was employed ever since Giotto’s Scrovegni Chapel frescoes. In the Orthodox tradition, a similar depiction was extremely rare. Koren’s *Creation of Eve* is a good example of Western and ancient influences on the of Russia’s 17th century painting. Kandinsky’s motif of *Earthly Paradise* could therefore represent a connection of the ancient classical models with the field of abstract art.

f) The Number Seven

It should be noted that it is hardly accidental that Kandinsky’s *Composition VII* is his most ambitious. In the *Book of Revelation* the number seven is repeatedly emphasized and its symbolic meaning is substantial. Kandinsky had listened to Steiner’s lectures in 1908 – that is, in the year Steiner developed his ideas on *The Gospel of St. John*, which is often followed by *The Book of Revelation*. Kandinsky was also well acquainted with the work of Blavatsky, whom he mentioned in *On the Spiritual in Art*. He kept her books in his library and was certainly aware of Blavatsky’s idea that the numbers can be used as symbols denoting something larger. The painter realized that

[a] deep significance was attached to numbers in hoary antiquity. There was not a people with anything like philosophy, but gave great prominence to numbers in their application to religious observances, the establishment of festival days, symbols, dogmas, and even the geographical distribution of empires. The mysterious numerical system of Pythagoras was nothing novel when it appeared far earlier than 600 years B.C. The occult meaning of figures and their combinations entered into the meditations of the sages of every people; and the day is not far off when, compelled by the eternal cyclic rotation of events, our now skeptical unbelieving West will have to admit that in that regular periodicity of ever recurring events there is something more than a mere blind chance.

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The number seven was the painter’s favorite number. It is attached to the eschatological themes with which the artist had worked. In the *Book of Revelations*, we notice seven churches, seven seals, seven thunders, seven angels, seven trumpets, seven golden lamp-stands, seven stars, seven spirits of God, seven horns and seven eyes. I would not exclude the possibility that Kandinsky found the apocalyptic base of this number inspiring and this number’s enigmatic quality prompted him to conceive his seventh composition as his *opus magnum*.

Finally, it is important to notice, in this apocalyptic context, that the number seven occupies an important place in Joachim da Fiore’s interpretation of the opening of the seventh seal (Rev. 8.1). In light of Kandinsky’s Trinitarian convictions, it is quite conceivable that Joachim influenced *Composition VII*. What makes Joachim’s reading of the *Book of Revelation* so unique, insightful and gifted is his exposition of the opening of the seventh seal:

When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. And I saw the seven angels who stood before God, and seven trumpets were given to them.\(^{300}\)

It is the half-hour window of silence to which the Calabrian monk from Fiore attached the exclusive meaning:

For Joachim this is a prime symbol of the Sabbath age of history, which he equates with the third *status* in his trinitarian pattern of history. A small detail in the sequence of *etas* reveals another aspect of Joachim’s thought: there is an *octava etas*\(^{301}\) beyond the seventh. This marks his clear distinction between apotheosis of history in the seventh age and the state of perfection beyond history. Within time everything must finally deteriorate, even in the third *status*: perfection lives only in eternity.\(^{302}\)

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\(^{300}\) *Rev. 8.1*

\(^{301}\) i.e. eighth age

Kandinsky specifically adopted Joachim’s image of the growing tree. “The Old Testament is that out of which the New has grown, and the Third Revelation presupposes the second. The Third Revelation is a new fork, and the further growth and bifurcation result in the mighty crown.” In essence, the *Third Revelation of the Spirit* does not destroy or ignore the rigid nature of the Old Testament or the teachings of the Son who had to leave to make room for the coming of the Holy Spirit. The Third Revelation just creates a space and an environment for the more elusive, refined, delicate branches and a full crown. Kandinsky understood the *Epoch of the Great Spiritual* as a development that grows organically out of its preceding stages of the Father and the Son. Once he applied this conviction to the field of art, its evolution into abstraction became as natural as organic growth. Abstract art became a logical consequence, a vehicle enabling civilization to go beyond the harshness of the Old Law and the Redemption of Christianity into the Realm of the Spirit.

Kandinsky used a variety of sources and borrowed from anyone who provided fuel for his apocalyptic vision. Like Schoenberg, the artist saw himself as a prophet, an apocalyptic prophet to be exact, who through the use of Christian iconography and pictorial tradition of Eastern Orthodox art was preparing the ground for fulfillment of the millennial and scriptural prediction of the Great *Epoch of the Spiritual*. The Millennialism and Trinitarian convictions of Joachim da Fiore that Kandinsky most likely absorbed from Merezhkovsky provided a firm scriptural inspiration and added momentum to advance the language of abstraction even further.

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303 Ringbom, 173.
Epilogue

The pulverizing experience of World War I and the “purifying” experiment of the October Revolution became Kandinsky’s own personal apocalypse. The Revolution took from him all his material wealth. The new reality that followed, and its unprecedented atrocities, were beyond nightmarish. With astonishing precision, Kandinsky’s apocalyptic Compositions prophesied the horror of the post-World War I era. During the period between 1910 and 1914, Kandinsky indeed became the prophet he had always wanted to become.

After the horror of the war, which cost millions of lives, the ideas of the Symbolists and Theosophists vanished from Kandinsky’s vocabulary. Art Historian Hans Belting is convinced that after the end of the war, Kandinsky’s [s]chematic drawings for the work became filled with annotations, whose language is telling. Kandinsky refers to ‘positive, i.e. reclining forms’ or to ‘forms gently dissolving with accompanying melodic tones’, but also of ‘soft forms, hard lines and dreamy hesitancies’. By writing in this way, he aroused the false hope that his pictorial language could be simply recorded in verbal language. His psychology of colors, too, had no basis in any objective science of colours. Years later Kandinsky saw his theory of forms dismissed in Moscow as pure ‘subjectivism’.

At this time it also became apparent that a theory of composition in the visual arts could not measure up to its equivalent in the realm of music. The concept did not deliver what it promised. Other concepts also soon proved to be no more than empty formulae. […] The Great War threw Kandinsky off course, and as the inventor of painterly abstraction he found himself in Russia caught in the front lines of the new generation that refused to follow him. So he eventually took refuge in the Bauhaus, where, seeking a congenial response, he taught a formal grammar reduced to the application of signs.304

In December of 1922, Kandinsky and his young wife left Russia for Berlin. Abandoned by his fellow artists and lacking the support of the Soviet culture tsar Lunacharsky, he had no other option.

Kandinsky’s post-war work seems “sterilized.” His style changed dramatically. The intensity and rampant struggle of his previous work vanished. He discovered the firm ground

of mathematical improvisation and geometrical solidity. He had been a leader; now he became the follower of a much younger generation. By 1929, Kandinsky felt as alienated in Germany as he had felt in Soviet Russia. In 1933, with Hitler in power, the Bauhaus was shut down and Kandinsky had to leave for France, where he lived for another eleven years.

Today, it can be argued that the artist’s perception of painting was too extreme in its prophetic mission and

let him into a wandering mysticism. No one sees Kandinsky’s paintings the way he insisted they should be seen: no one reads the occult personality of each color [and form] – the yellow that is ‘brash and importunate,’ that ‘stabs and upsets people,’ and has a ‘painful shrillness,’ or the delicate balance of orange, ‘like a man convinced of his powers’ – because if they did, there would be simply too much to attend to in any painting. Instead, we back away from his fanatical private symbolism and enjoy the paintings in other ways. […] Kandinsky spun elaborate stories, both for himself and his public, to explain what his pictures were doing with color and shape. But he always claimed to be producing order: to be making colors express certain ideas, or arranging shapes so they could communicate forces and motions.

The Compositions form a complex part of Kandinsky’s oeuvre. I have chosen them as the subject of this investigation because they represent a fundamental dilemma. If we accept that the artist veiled or obliterated the sources of his inspiration for the benefit of the viewer, to enable us to gain a unique access to ‘inner vibrations,’ it seems to follow that, if we attempt to uncover these sources, we act against the artist’s intentions. The intellectual and emotional unveiling of the secret sources of the paintings’ content is, in fact, an act of bifurcated deflowering: both of the painting and of the spectator. The secret, once-revealed, will never again be mysterious and the raison d’être of the work is betrayed. James Elkins identified the same problem, asking:

What exactly is happening to Kandinsky’s paintings when his methods are so traduced in order to explain the very paintings they were intended to create? Why is it not significant that Kandinsky himself apparently thought that the paintings worked better when the verstreckte Konstruktionen [hidden constructions] remained verstreckt? Are Kandinsky’s meanings so sturdy that they can be recovered even after the essential acts of camouflage have been revealed?

Such questions converge on the art historian’s interest in the archaeology of hidden forms. Why do cryptomorphs continue to be such a temptation for late twentieth-century [and early twenty-first-century] scholarship?

How harmful would it be to leave no stone unturned? Is Kandinsky’s work resilient enough to transmit “inner vibrations” even after painstaking vivisection? How immune is his art to the interference of “the archeology of hidden forms”?

Luckily some motifs remain that could only be identified by Kandinsky himself. Perhaps these last veiled bastions generate sufficient power to transport Kandinsky’s Compositions beyond the realm of science.

Indeed, my own task in exploring the sources and programs of the Compositions is not to reduce them to a sort of mathematical equation, but rather to underscore the urgency of Kandinsky’s own vocation which, I have argued here, was most importantly to redeem, within the realm of high, avant-garde art, the power and prophecy of the icon in its most genuine forms, whether they be found in the "primitive" lubki or in the most sophisticated of Orthodox religious mosaics.

We may, after all, return to that most personal of shrines, the iconostasis before which Kandinsky posed for his lover in June of 1911. If we consider the Compositions V, VI and VII to be his most concerted and sophisticated rendering of that iconostasis, then why is it so reticent, so abstracted, so finally hermetic? The answer, as I have tried to emphasize throughout this work of interpretation, must lie, finally, in Kandinsky's deep adherence to the Russian Orthodox religious attitude toward the icon, and his understanding of the process of veiling as essential to that doctrine. For it was only through veiling that the icon could move

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from the Western mimetic notion of immersion and instead operate as a form of intrusion, intrusion into the viewer-worshipper's own sealed bubble of identity, puncturing it with the arrows of reverse perspective and opening the self to the larger, the infinite experience of transcendence.


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