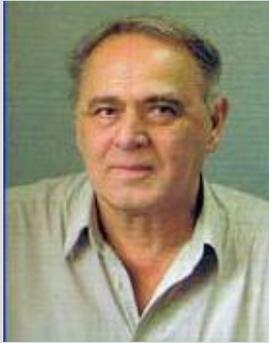


VALERY TURCHIN

## Kandinsky and Technique. Craftsmanship and Virtuosity



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The question as to techniques used by Kandinsky the painter have not been widely discussed by the experts. Research carried out within museums, if any such work was undertaken, remains inaccessible to outsiders (they would be for in-house use only). Moreover, the attention of those who have written about Kandinsky's work remained focused on questions connected with the interpretation of his work, which was often a complex undertaking and not only in relation to abstract compositions, but also to those which contained what were clearly figurative elements. Indeed, where were the horsemen galloping to, why was the earth being convulsed by some sort of catastrophe, and why were currents of coloured energy swirling in vibrating space?<sup>1</sup> Questions, questions, yet again questions. They continue to intrigue the beholder, as the creator of these works himself would have wished.

Yet it is perfectly clear that in order for Kandinsky to bring his ideas to life effectively he needed to have an intimate knowledge of his craft and to manifest artistic virtuosity when painting each of his works. Despite the fact that we have some sort of concept of Kandinsky's "style" and we come forward with confident conjectures as to the manner of his painting, it is important to remember that Kandinsky's work was always evolving and changing not only in the sense that the experience he gleaned was opening up ever wider opportunities to him, but also because each work demanded its own artistic solution, sometimes different from that used in other works, even works that were being created at one and the same time. Moreover, the ways in which Kandinsky executed his works dating from one and the same period might be markedly different and often the

manner used in a particular painting might not link in with others of a similar period. Sometimes, too, the work in question might seem to have spun into a completely different orbit outside the range of ideas the beholder had formed of the artist's work based on what he had seen of it previously. There are works such as *Nude* or *Sunday Walk* dating from 1911 which are quite "dissimilar" to the "real Kandinsky". It is more than likely that the occasional art historian on first encountering such works might have asked himself, "Is that really Kandinsky?". Similar hypothetical doubts could well arise in relation to many other works by this painter. Diversity while retaining a certain degree of integrity – these are the general traits intrinsic to Kandinsky's art.

Throughout the whole of his creative life, Kandinsky devoted considerable attention to concrete questions concerned with the actual transmission of his ideas on to canvas. He was always interested in questions regarding the technique of painting. Although it might appear that after arriving in Munich Kandinsky was concerned above all with perfecting his drawing, questions of technique in painting remained among those of significant if not predominant interest to him. As has emerged from recently discovered publications of Kandinsky's early articles written shortly after he arrived in the Bavarian capital, his attention was caught by the nature of painting in tempera, as he writes in his articles of art criticism dating from 1899.<sup>2</sup> He felt that oils give rise to a "comparative ease of technique" and that tempera recipes had been forgotten. As well as that "forgotten technique", the painter starting out on his career was also attracted by the use of gouache. It seemed important to him that these techniques made possible special effects because surfaces executed in such media

did not shine and also enabled the painter to use large patches of colour. It is clear that in connection with the various styles to be found in his work, Kandinsky would vary the techniques he used. While tempera or gouache might be more appropriate for works in a style close to that of Art Nouveau, he would prefer to execute small studies of scenes from nature in oils (“the colourist seeks material convenient for expressing his aspirations”).<sup>3</sup>

In his early articles Kandinsky noted on more than one occasion his lasting predilection for painting small studies from Nature: indeed to certain exhibitions he submitted such “studies” exclusively. He focused a good deal of attention on such works, particularly after 1901. Usually Kandinsky would use a painter’s pochade box for such studies, something of a size he could rest on his lap. He would often use canvases attached to a cardboard backing which made them firmer but did not require any kind of stretcher. His painting was sometimes characterised as “impressionistic”, although his was an “impressionism without Impressionism”, very different from any French models. By this time, Kandinsky was using a manner widespread among the artists of his day, painting with “free daubs” of colour in *plein aire*. Colours used were generally brightly lit and daubs of paint were differentiated depending upon whether they were used for details or large planes of colour. It emerges clearly how Kandinsky’s manner of painting was being perfected all the



2 • V. Kandinsky, *Wicker Beach Chairs in Holland*, 1904  
Oil on canvas stretched on cardboard, 24 x 32.6 cm.  
Stadlische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich

Apart from small soft brushes, Kandinsky enjoyed every now and again turning to a spatula, sometimes “hammering out” large daubs of colour and turning them into something resembling grooves. This approach is to be found particularly frequently in his handling of foregrounds. Kandinsky would select a fine-weave canvas of the kind he would show a preference for later on as well. It was clear how he had thought through a particular texture and the rhythm of daubs and traces of his spatula would give rise to a rhythmic structure for the finished canvas. Over time, his colours became brighter and sometimes Kandinsky would use a pointillist technique (*Wicker Beach Chairs in Holland*, 1904, 2). Sometimes individual daubs of colour would be positioned separately from each other so that a “pause” remained between them, i.e., areas of bare canvas without paint. This technique first appeared in late works by Cézanne to whom it seemed that it was impossible to realise his ideas to the full and therefore his works would be left incomplete. Painters of the next generation after Cézanne - first and foremost the Fauves in France such as André Derain - adopted this technique. Kandinsky of course knew nothing of their early work and arrived at such a technique independently. Pointillism made it possible to manipulate colour without changing the colours themselves. In other words, to position colours in such a way that by bringing them closer together or moving them farther apart the intensity of colour in a certain area of a composition might be heightened or, on the contrary, reduced (Kandinsky may have been familiar with techniques of this kind from the work of Paul Signac). The actual “gaps” between patches of colour allowed the tone of the canvas itself to come into play, adding “undertones” of texture to the overall impression created.

Thanks to the fact that Kandinsky’s Munich letters of 1900 to his “external” student, Andrei Pappe, from Odessa



1 • V. Kandinsky, *Murnau – Landscape with Church* 1910.  
Oil on canvas, 64.7 x 50.2 cm.  
Stadlische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich.

[see previous article, “On Painting Techniques”] have survived purely by chance, we are able to form a fairly detailed picture of Kandinsky’s own painter’s “kitchen”, since the advice sent to this young novice painter was clearly drawn from his own experience.<sup>4</sup> Kandinsky writes that a canvas should first be primed with joiner’s glue and subsequently be covered with a layer of chalk solution. Then work with pigments begins which need to be laid out in a specific order on the palette (“You need to know the outward appearance of your palette like a musician knows his keyboard”). Furthermore, “you should look at Nature all the time, at your canvas some of the time, and never at your palette”; “squeeze out plenty of paint so that you can have a rich, full brush”; “you need plenty of brushes to hand”. Later, Kandinsky went on to write: “Take pure colour whenever possible and apply it to the canvas, and then another colour just as pure and so on”, “you should never spend a long time mixing colours on your palette; long mixing will lead to dirty colours and reduced impact”.

Finally there follows a whole passage on colour: “Seek light, strength, colours. For nothing in Nature is bereft of colour, there is no white or black, colour is burning and shining everywhere and God save us from ignoring that. Nature is the best teacher in this respect. Understand Nature as you will but take what you can of her riches and revelations. In my opinion, when studying pigments you need to go from the simple to the complex. Nowadays factories make hundreds of varieties enough to make our heads spin (endless “permutations” and “combinations”!). At first your palette needs to be as simple as possible, but as time goes on our eyes grow dulled and start demanding refined delicacies, but the longer it is simple the better. To start with buy – white: zinc white; greens: chromium oxide and permanent; blues: cobalt and ultramarine blue; reds: English, Turkish, and dark madder lake, and red lead; yellows: light ochre, natural terra di Siena, light and orange cadmium; probably Indian yellow as well; browns: burnt terra di Siena; you don’t need any black mummy”. In the last of these letters known to us, Kandinsky advises: “In painting we must above all seek contrast, i.e., apply the whole force of your palette to create an abyss between light and shade. Half-tones, half-shades, and all kinds of variations in light and shade, all of this comes later. Otherwise you will waste a lot of time on difficult studies. When studying nature (I mean becoming acquainted with her), the first thing is to convey her strength, as far as the palette allows. This is achieved through extreme contrasts between light and shade (especially in the sun). Don’t think that the more white you use the more light there will be in the painting. On the contrary! White kills light. Try to convey it using other light colours and, most important, by contrast with shade.”

In advice of this kind given to the novice we can trace

out the method Kandinsky himself used in his work. It is worth adding that it is difficult today to say from which specific factories he bought the paints he used, bearing in mind that – to use his own words – there were hundreds of them. Surviving catalogues of specific firms are not enough to give us an idea of when certain colours appeared on the market, when certain colours began to be mass produced, or the qualities which served to distinguish one product from another. It is interesting to note that Kandinsky did not rule out using decorator’s paints which were “much less expensive and will do at the beginning.” It is revealing that later on in Soviet Russia, when Kandinsky found himself without the art materials he was used to, he had to start using cheap paints of whatever kind was available. Moreover, some art historians wonder whether the young Kandinsky could have used titanium white which, according to the catalogues of certain Western companies, became widely used only in the 1910s. It became well-known as a paint used by craftsmen and in industry from the 1880s (so painters could have



3 • V. Kandinsky, *Night*, 1907  
Tempera on cardboard, 29.9 x 49.8 cm.  
Stadlische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich

known about it as well), so that certain small factories would have been able to bring out experimental series of such paint for purely artistic purposes in the first decade of the 1900s.

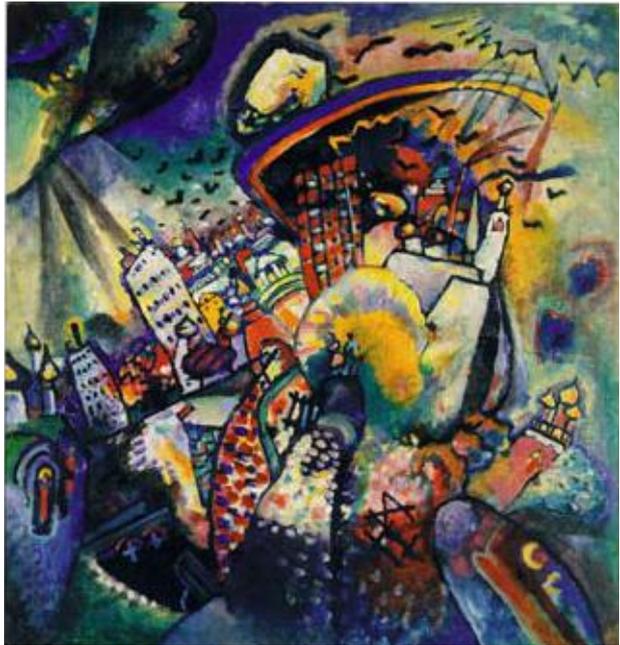
Up until 1907 Kandinsky made enthusiastic use of tempera – *Night* (3), *The Funeral*, *Colourful Life*, *Morning*. While his studies in oils were being painted on pale primed canvas (white or cream in colour), works in tempera – sometimes of a considerable size – were painted on dark cardboard or cardboard deliberately painted black. If in the first case Kandinsky’s main aim was to emphasise the general impression that a study had been painted out in the open, in the second he sought to present his depiction (in accordance with the Symbolist principle) as emerging from darkness, manifesting itself to the beholder. Finally, after acquainting himself in Paris with the very latest trends in art, where he had been impressed most of all by the pictures of Henri Matisse, Kandinsky returned to Germany and, after taking up residence in Murnau, not only changed the colourist

structure of his works but he started to use a renewed (renewed as far as he was concerned) technique – painting in oils. Although this period of Kandinsky’s work is generally characterised as one in which he used oils exclusively, there were several occasions when he combined oils and tempera so we would have to speak of a combined technique in this instance. At times, paint was applied extremely thickly particularly when Kandinsky was using only oils, as was often the case in his works of 1909-1910. Later, after Kandinsky had begun to paint a good deal in watercolour, he was able to assess the effect produced by fine layers of colour which can achieve greater intensity of colour on white sheets of paper. Naturally, primed canvases could produce a similar effect when thinner layers of oil paints were used. From 1912 Kandinsky was painting his pictures in this way, using fine-woven canvas. He went on doing so until 1914, although this subtle manner of painting was not always the dominant one and his interest in thickly “daubed” textures had not disappeared for good.

Kandinsky’s departure for Russia changed the situation abruptly. When leaving Germany in a hurry because of the outbreak of war, Kandinsky left all his painting equipment and, incidentally, all his pictures and books, in Murnau. It proved difficult to find art materials of good quality in Moscow since deliveries from abroad had become a thing of the past and Kandinsky had no reserves of his own in Moscow. Like many other artists, Kandinsky had to interrupt his successful work in oils and devote more attention to drawings and watercolours. Exceptions to this rule up until the Revolution of 1917 were extremely rare, although of course there were some. The pictures and studies painted in 1916 and early 1917 including *Moscow I*, often known as *Red Square*<sup>5</sup> (5), are of a different texture. They



4 • V. Kandinsky, *Improvisation 34*, 1913  
Oil on canvas, 120 x 139 cm.  
National Museum of Fine Arts of the Republic of Tatarstan, Kazan



5 • V. Kandinsky, *Moscow, Red Square*, 1916  
Oil on canvas, 51.5 x 49.5 cm.  
George Costakis Collection, Moscow  
State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

were painted in a more pastose way than those from the period immediately before Kandinsky’s departure from Germany. As for Kandinsky’s studies, some of them date from 1916 and these were views of Moscow painted from the windows of the artist’s studio, from his corner “tower” on Zubovsky Square and a little later in 1917 when he was working at his familiar base in Akhtyrka in the country, near Moscow, where he used to spend time with Nina and her sister Tatiana. Unlike the “theosophical icon” which his work *Moscow - View from the Apartment Window* represented and also his surviving sketches for panels destined for V. Abrikosov where there is special emphasis of the metaphorical-symbolic content of the work, Kandinsky’s *Akhtyrka* studies are once more – as before – simple landscapes. Kandinsky was able to go back to his “roots” when going through what for him were times of crisis – back to studies of nature. That was how he had started out as an artist, what he did during his sojourn in France, especially in Saint-Cloud and now again in Akhtyrka.

After the October Revolution the question as to how painters might make a living became a very desperate issue. Most of their number, apart from the leading lights among them, found themselves without pigments or canvas. Anatoly Lunacharsky, who was in charge of the People’s Commissariat for Enlightenment (Narkompros) which had a Department of Fine Arts (IZO), voiced his concerns in the press on a number of occasions regarding the desperate plight of Russia’s painters then unable to work and feed themselves and trying to leave for the provinces. There were no

paints and canvases to be had. Often those who wanted to work had to make do with makeshift materials. This all made itself felt in the workmanship of the day and in the rather coarse nature of the artistic solutions used. What more is there to say when we learn that the writer, Olga Forsh, brought a precious gift of a few cubes of watercolour to the artist V. Milashevsky? The recipient was so happy that he never forgot her kindness for the rest of his life.<sup>6</sup> It was only after he began working for the People's Commissariat for Enlightenment together with his wife, Nina, that Kandinsky was able to have access to official allocations of canvases and paints. This explains why he was able to work with oils, at least a little, between 1919 and 1921.

It was not until the end of 1921 that Kandinsky finally left for Germany, this time on a work assignment. He had been offered a post at the Bauhaus and was able once again to immerse himself in intensive work as a painter. The manner of his painting changed once again. (6) He began to paint in a more rigorous way, without emotional expression. On his canvases he was colouring in separate figures as it were, rather than drawing them with texture. Much had changed both in his style and his technique of painting. The urge to improvise was gone and together with that the freedom once intrinsic to his drawing, enabling him to omit certain details at the expense of others.



6 • V. Kandinsky, *Composition VIII*, 1923  
Oil on canvas, 140 x 201 cm.  
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum of Art, New York

## Footnotes

- [1] We have attempted to answer a number of these questions in my book, *Kandinsky in Russia*, Moscow, 2005.
- [2] *Ibid.*, pp. 419-420. [See extracts, below.]
- [3] *Ibid.*, pp. 420. Note by Kandinsky. [See extracts, below.]
- [4] Six letters from Vasily Kandinsky to Andrei Pappe published in *Kandinsky in Russia*, pp. 422-427. [Extracts are published in the preceding article, "On Painting Techniques". Editor].
- [5] This name stems from the last collector to have owned this picture before it was bequeathed to the museum, namely George Costakis. It is by no means definitive since the real name Kandinsky himself used is unknown. The picture, like several others of that period, was not referred to with a specific name in the artist's notebooks, which provided, as it were, a "catalogue for home use" with titles and dimensions of his works (and sometimes with schematic drawings of the works in question as well), since they were not intended for sale. The only works indicated in the "catalogue for home use" were those which the painter himself had sold.
- [6] V. Milashevsky, *Vcher pozavcher / Yesterday and the Day Before*, Moscow, 1986.

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