Art Review | 'Kandinsky'

The Angel in the Architecture

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By [ROBERTA SMITH](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/s/roberta_smith/index.html?inline=nyt-per)

Published: September 17, 2009

The [Guggenheim Museum](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/organizations/g/guggenheim_solomon_r_museum/index.html?inline=nyt-org) is not exactly thinking outside the spiral with its sleek Kandinsky retrospective. But maybe that’s as it should be.

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Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris

Surrealist biomorphism: “Capricious Forms” (1937), a work from Kandinsky’s Paris period, is part of a retrospective at the Guggenheim.

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Georgian National Museum, Tbilisi

"Picture With a Circle" (1911), part of a major retrospective of this Russian visionary that fills the rotunda of the Guggenheim.

The Russian avant-gardist Wassily Kandinsky — who dressed like the college professor he had trained to be and sounded like a mystic when he wasn’t thinking like a scientist — is the central god in the Guggenheim pantheon and genesis myth. The museum owns more of his work than of any other major Modernist and mounts some form of full-dress Kandinsky show like clockwork every 20 years or so.

It’s that time again. The Guggenheim’s last excursion into Kandinsky occurred in the early 1980s with three context-heavy exhibitions that examined his activities in all mediums, including his Art Nouveau embroidery and works by contemporary artists and designers. This one takes the opposite tack. It distills Kandinsky’s momentous career to about 100 paintings, with a large side order of works on paper displayed in an adjacent gallery. The canvases and almost nothing else fill [Frank Lloyd Wright](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/w/frank_lloyd_wright/index.html?inline=nyt-per)’s great rotunda from bottom to top, sometimes at the magisterial rate of one painting per bay.

This looks sensational. Organized with the Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus in Munich and the Pompidou Center in Paris — sites of the world’s other major Kandinsky collections — it contains stupendous loans from all over.

The 1911 “Picture With a Circle” from the Georgian National Museum in Tbilisi has never been in this country. A big, gorgeous blur of resonant blues, greens and purples electrified by a few black lines across the top, it is said to be the artist’s first completely abstract painting. But this is only relative: Kandinsky is so pertinent to the present because he tended to ignore the distinctions between abstraction and representation.

In all, this show is the perfect cap to the Guggenheim’s yearlong birthday celebration of Wright’s building, which opened 50 years ago on Oct. 21.

Lots of museums have foundational artists. The Museum of Modern Art has [Picasso](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/p/pablo_picasso/index.html?inline=nyt-per) and [Matisse](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/m/henri_matisse/index.html?inline=nyt-per); the [Whitney Museum of American Art](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/organizations/w/whitney_museum_of_american_art/index.html?inline=nyt-org), [Edward Hopper](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/h/edward_hopper/index.html?inline=nyt-per). But Kandinsky is the angel in the architecture at the Guggenheim; he’s part of the bedrock. The circling ramp of Wright’s rotunda was surely designed with that Russian’s swirling, unanchored abstractions in mind. Kandinsky’s precarious, ever-moving compositions suggest that he never met a diagonal he didn’t like; Wright obliged with a museum on a perpetual tilt.

Wright might deny the connection, but he was chosen by Hilla Rebay, a German painter and the museum’s founding director, and she had Kandinsky on the brain. Solomon R. Guggenheim, her patron, caught the fever, and between 1929 and his death in 1949, he acquired scores of works by the artist. All were given to the Museum of Non-Objective Painting, which he and Rebay founded in 1937. (It was renamed in Guggenheim’s honor in 1952.)

The purity of the present show limits Kandinsky’s immensity a bit. It simplifies a vision that held music, painting and language as part of a continuum and relegates his activities as theoretician, essayist, poet and (arts) community organizer to the show’s informative, discreetly placed wall texts. In both of his best-known books — “Concerning the Spiritual in Art” (1912) and “Point and Line to Plane” (1926) — he displays a remarkable ability to reconcile the redemptive power of art’s “inner pulsations,” meant to be experienced “with all one’s senses” and exacting diagrams of the formal effect of different colors, shapes and lines, each of which he felt had a distinct sound. There are formalist possibilities in these pages that Clement Greenberg never imagined.

The impact of his thought on his contemporaries was tremendous. It is always startling to learn, for example, that Hugo Ball and the Zurich Dadaists revered Kandinsky, included his paintings in their exhibitions and read his poetry at their soirees. Some of these poems are virtual prescriptions for performance art. For example, “Not,” in his collection “Sounds” (1912), describes a “jumping man” who “dug a small very round depression” in the ground and “jumped over it without stopping every day from 4 o’clock to 5.” More than a few gallery receptionists of the moment have witnessed things like that.

Kandinsky was alternately propelled by ambition and history itself. By 1901, barely six years after the combined experiences of a [Monet](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/m/claude_monet/index.html?inline=nyt-per) “Haystack” and Wagner’s “Lohengrin” jolted him, at 30, to leave Russia for art study in Munich, he had rebelled against the academy and organized like-minded colleagues into the Phalanx. He would go on to become the founding president of the New Artists Association in Munich in 1909. Two years later, when that body chafed at his abstract tendencies, he left to form the Blue Rider group with, among others, the painters Franz Marc, Alexej von Jawlensky and Gabriele Münter, for whom he had left his first wife in 1907.

The outbreak of World War I forced him back to Russia, where he joined the Constructivist experiment, as well as the government bureaucracy. In 1921 he and his new wife, Nina, repaired to Berlin, pushed by physical privation and the rejection of Kandinsky’s teaching ideas. By 1922, he was teaching at the Bauhaus and living next door to his great friend [Paul Klee](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/k/paul_klee/index.html?inline=nyt-per). But this idyll ended when the Nazis closed the school in 1933. Then it was on to Paris, the last stop, where he worked, despite increasingly scant art supplies, until his death in 1944.

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*“Kandinsky” opens on Friday and continues through Jan. 13 at the Guggenheim Museum, 1071 Fifth Avenue, at 89th Street; (212) 423-3500, guggenheim.org.*