

GUGGENHEIM BILBAO

Press release



Opening November 20

Kandinsky

Sponsored by

Fundación
BBVA

The BBVA Foundation is proud to sponsor this exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao which will examine the career of Vasily Kandinsky, an essential figure in abstraction and one of the leading exponents of 20th-century art.

In today's world, it is also extraordinarily satisfying for the BBVA Foundation to be able to contribute to restoring both economic and cultural activities. We want to revive the communal spaces that are part of our identity as a society. In this endeavor, museums are crucial platforms for sharing and bringing closer to the public significant cultural legacies which enable us to understand our nature and history.

This exhibition features an important selection of works by this Russian-born painter, who became an artist late, as he began to study painting in Munich in 1896, when he was already 30 years old. The different phases in his life—Kandinsky lived in Russia, Germany, and France, as well as through the two World Wars—and especially his contact with the different avant-garde movements in the countries where he lived, had a clear influence on his work.

Through the chronological organization of the exhibition, the public can immerse themselves in Kandinsky's oeuvre and witness how his painting evolved, from his early images, which contain an iconography with recognizable realism in the objects and scenes, to his wholehearted incursions into an abstraction which reflects his aspiration to capture the essential.

We encourage you to enjoy this unique opportunity to appreciate the works of a unique artist, and to see how colors and shapes take on a life of their own.

This show was made possible thanks to the effort and outstanding work of the entire Museum team and especially of the curator of the exhibition, Megan Fontanella.

Carlos Torres Vila
President of the BBVA Foundation

Kandinsky

- Dates: November 20, 2020–May 23, 2021
 - Curator: Megan Fontanella, Curator, Modern Art and Provenance, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum
 - Sponsored by: Fundación BBVA
-
- Drawn primarily from the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation's rich holdings, this comprehensive exhibition traces along four geographic sections the aesthetic evolution of Vasily Kandinsky, one of the foremost artistic innovators of the early twentieth century.
 - Kandinsky set out on a crusade against conventional aesthetic values and discovered a new subject matter based solely on the artist's "inner necessity," in a dream of a more spiritual future through the transformative powers of art.
 - As his calligraphic contours and rhythmic forms revealed scarcer traces of their representational origins, Kandinsky began to advance abstraction and elicit what he called the "hidden power of the palette."
 - For Kandinsky even the most abstract forms retained expressive, emotive content: the triangle embodied active and aggressive feelings; the square, peace and calm; and the circle, the spiritual and cosmic realm.

The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao presents *Kandinsky*, a comprehensive exhibition of paintings and works on paper of artist Vasily Kandinsky (b. 1866, Moscow; d. 1944, Neuilly-sur-Seine, France) drawn primarily from the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation's rich holdings. Sponsored by the BBVA Foundation, the exhibition traces the aesthetic evolution of a pioneer of abstraction, a renowned aesthetic theorist, and one of the foremost artistic innovators of the early twentieth century. In his endeavor to free painting from its ties to the natural world, Kandinsky discovered a new subject matter based solely on the artist's "inner necessity" that would remain his lifelong concern.

In Munich in the 1900s and early 1910s, Kandinsky began exploring the expressive possibilities of color and composition, but he was abruptly forced to leave Germany following the outbreak of World War I, in 1914. The artist eventually returned to his native Moscow, where his pictorial vocabulary began to reflect the utopian experiments of the Russian avant-garde, who emphasized geometric shapes in an effort to establish a universal aesthetic language. Kandinsky subsequently joined the faculty of the Bauhaus, a German school of art and applied design that shared his belief in art's ability to transform self and society. Compelled to abandon Germany again when the Bauhaus closed under Nazi pressure in 1933, Kandinsky settled outside Paris, where Surrealism and the natural sciences influenced his biomorphic imagery.

More so than any other artist, Kandinsky is intertwined with the history of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, established in New York in 1937. Industrialist and museum founder Solomon R. Guggenheim began collecting Kandinsky's work in 1929 and met him at the Dessau Bauhaus the following year. This exhibition illustrates the full arc of Kandinsky's seminal career. Divided into four geographical sections displayed throughout three galleries, the exhibition follows Kandinsky through critical periods of his artistic development.

Beginnings: Munich

Kandinsky spent his childhood in his birthplace of Moscow and Odessa, Russia (now Ukraine), where his family encouraged an appreciation for art and music. He studied law and economics before changing course in 1895 to become a manager in the Moscow printing firm Kushnerev. One year later, after having been inspired by a French Impressionist exhibition and the opera *Lohengrin* by Richard Wagner, he left for Munich to pursue art. Recollections of Russia, such as the brightly decorated furniture and votive pictures from peasants' homes, as well as romantic historicism, lyric poetry, folklore, and fantasy, informed his early work.

Kandinsky and his partner, the German artist Gabriele Münter, traveled extensively in Europe and North Africa between 1904 and 1907, before settling in Munich again in 1908. Compositional elements found in printmaking, such as clearly delineated forms and flattened perspective, pervade Kandinsky's multicolor Bavarian landscapes of 1908–09. These paintings differ remarkably from his previous exercises in Neo-Impressionism, in which he built up works through small dabs of color.

By 1909, Kandinsky embraced an increasingly expressionistic style and shifted from portraying natural scenes toward depicting apocalyptic narratives. Recurring motifs such as the horse and rider symbolized his crusade against conventional aesthetic values and his dream of a more spiritual future through the transformative powers of art. Continuing to push against figurative norms, Kandinsky believed color, shape, and line could translate an artist's "inner necessity" into universally accessible statements, offering a regenerative vision of the future.

While in Munich, Kandinsky alternately helmed the city's leading avant-garde groups, including Phalanx and Neue Künstlervereinigung München (New Artists' Association of Munich), and published several seminal treatises, such as *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (*On the Spiritual in Art*). In 1911 he and Franz Marc founded Der Blaue Reiter (The Blue Rider), a loose association of artists interested in the expressive potential of color and the symbolic—often spiritual—resonance of forms.

By 1913, Kandinsky's recurrent subjects—including the horse and rider, rolling hills, towers, and trees—had become subsidiary to line and color. As his calligraphic contours and rhythmic forms revealed scarcer traces of their representational origins, Kandinsky began to advance abstraction and elicit what he called the "hidden power of the palette."

Cosmic Realms: Russia to the Bauhaus

In 1914, after the outbreak of World War I, Kandinsky was forced to leave Germany due to his Russian nationality. He eventually settled in his native Moscow, where the avant-garde sought to establish a universal aesthetic language through geometric forms. Having ended his generative relationships with Gabriele Münter and other German associates, Kandinsky observed his Russian contemporaries' experiments but found his artistic pursuit of spirituality did not align with their detached, production-based approach.

Kandinsky returned with his wife, Nina, to Germany and in 1922 began teaching at the Bauhaus, the state-sponsored school of art and applied design founded by the architect Walter Gropius. Kandinsky discovered there an environment sympathetic to his belief in art's ability to transform self and society. He further investigated the correspondence between colors and forms and their psychological and spiritual effects. Geometric shapes came to dominate Kandinsky's pictorial vocabulary, and he used overlapping, flat planes. This change was due, in part, to the ongoing influence of the work he had encountered in Russia. Kandinsky continued to distance himself, however, from what he considered the "mechanistic" art of the Constructivists and the "pure" art of Suprematists, such as Kazimir Malevich, insisting that even his most abstract forms retained expressive, emotive content. For Kandinsky, the triangle embodied active and aggressive feelings; the square, peace and calm; and the circle, the spiritual and cosmic realm.

Around this time Kandinsky's work came to the attention of collector Solomon R. Guggenheim. Guggenheim, his wife Irene, and his art advisor Hilla Rebay visited Kandinsky at his Dessau Bauhaus studio in 1930 and purchased the monumental *Composition 8* (1923) and other works. Kandinsky taught at the Bauhaus until 1933, when the school was closed due to pressure from the Nazi government.

Miniscule Worlds: Paris

Kandinsky spent the last eleven years of his life in Neuilly-sur-Seine, a suburb of Paris. He came to France in December 1933 from Nazi Germany, following the close of the Berlin Bauhaus, where he had been a teacher. During this phase, Kandinsky was highly creative despite political turmoil and, later, deprivation. The artist experimented with materials—for instance, combining sand with pigment—and his formal vocabulary featured a softer palette and biomorphic forms. Although Kandinsky had collected organic specimens and scientific encyclopedias while at the Bauhaus, he only introduced related imagery into his work in 1934. His intricate compositions from this period resemble miniscule worlds of living organisms, clearly informed by his contact with Surrealism, including the art of Jean Arp and Joan Miró, and his interest in the natural sciences, particularly embryology, zoology, and botany. Kandinsky also came to favor pastel hues—pink, violet, turquoise, and gold—reminiscent of the colors of his Russian origins.

In this later period, Kandinsky synthesized elements from his early career, his time at the Bauhaus, and the practice of his contemporaries. He worked in a large-scale format and used dark backgrounds reminiscent of his expressionistic and Russian-folktale canvases. He also incorporated motifs that allude to his former colleague Paul Klee and to the Surrealists active in Paris—despite Kandinsky’s resistance to associating with the latter. In *Around the Circle* (1940), this manifests in the intricate, vibrant composition of playful biomorphic forms. By mid-1942 wartime shortages led Kandinsky to make small-scale works on board, a stark departure from the large canvases of his earlier Paris-period paintings. He nonetheless persisted in producing inventive compositions that increasingly reflected his engagement with the sciences, drawing from journals and encyclopedias that featured biological imagery.

During World War II, German authorities confiscated the work of Kandinsky and other modernists, declaring it “degenerate,” and Stalinists in the Soviet Union closed museums, sending his paintings into storage. Kandinsky died in 1944 at age seventy-eight, nevertheless leaving behind an expansive oeuvre.

Industrialist and museum founder Solomon R. Guggenheim began collecting Kandinsky’s work in 1929, and his enthusiasm for modern art led to the opening of New York’s Museum of Non-Objective Painting, forerunner of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, in 1939. Today the Guggenheim Foundation holds over one hundred fifty pieces by this pivotal artist.

DIDAKTIKA: KANDINSKY. PERSISTENT STATE OF DISCOVERY

As part of the Didaktika project, the Museum designs didactic spaces, online contents, and special activities that complement each exhibition, providing tools and resources to facilitate appreciation of the works on display.

The educational space in the hallway near the galleries now reveals the figure of an artist in a persistent state of discovery. His zeal for experimenting and discovering new ways of understanding art and putting it into practice, which he shared through texts and essays like *On the Spiritual in Art* are explained in this section. It is also available online in the *Did you know that...?* section on the website, along with his interest in teaching, interdisciplinary collaborations, and his pioneering role in developing abstraction in the early 20th century.

Activities associated with the exhibition:

Talk about Kandinsky and the Guggenheims (date to be confirmed)

Megan Fontanella, curator at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York and curator of this exhibition, will discuss the relevance of the works in the show and Vasily Kandinsky’s particular bond with the Guggenheim family.

Shared reflections

Unique tours led by professionals from the Museum's Curatorial and Education areas who share different vantage points on the contents of the new exhibitions.

- Curatorial vision (date to be confirmed): Megan Fontanella, Curator of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York and curator of this exhibition, will lead a tour of the most important works in the show.
- Key concepts (date to be confirmed): Marta Arzak, Associate Director for Education and Interpretation, will talk with participants about the general and didactic keys to the works.

*Sponsored by the Fundación Vizcaína Aguirre.

Micro-concerts near the works (November 21 and 28, and December 12 and 19)

A musical and visual experience near Kandinsky's works featuring Ensemble Kuraia. Kandinsky was an avid fan of experimenting with and stimulating the senses. He sought to activate the mind and spirit through sounds and colors by associating them and experimenting with musicians like Arnold Schonberg.

Talk on "Art, Sciences and Synesthesia" (December 15)

This session will examine the particular features of the human brain which can lead us to relate colors to sounds or smells. Kandinsky associated certain colors and shapes with specific emotions. Talk by Elena Vecino, Professor of Cell Biology and Histology.

Creative session "Kandinsky in a persistent state of discovery" (January 21)

In this workshop, the participants will discover the thinking behind the artist's personal concerns, such as his constant interest in experimenting, either alone or in collaboration with experts in other disciplines.

Workshop led by Aitziber Aguirre.

* **Activities subjected to changes. Masks must be worn at all times.**

CATALOGUE

In conjunction with this exhibition, a catalogue will be published by the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao featuring the exhibited works, along with an essay by Tracey Bashkoff and a few short entries by Karole P.B. Vail.

THE SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM FOUNDATION

The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation was established in 1937 and is dedicated to promoting the understanding and appreciation of modern and contemporary art through exhibitions, education programs, research initiatives, and publications. The international constellation of museums includes the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice; the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao; and the future Guggenheim Abu Dhabi. An architectural icon and "temple of spirit" where radical art and architecture meet, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum is now among a group of eight Frank Lloyd Wright structures in the United States recently designated as part of a UNESCO World Heritage site.

To learn more about the museum and the Guggenheim's activities around the world, visit guggenheim.org.

guggenheim-bilbao.eus/en/exhibitions/kandinsky

#KandinskyGuggenheimBilbao

Cover image:

Vasily Kandinsky

Black Lines (Schwarze Linien), December 1913

Oil on canvas

130.5 × 131.1 cm

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection, By gift 37.241

© Vasily Kandinsky, VEGAP, Bilbao, 2020

For more information:

Guggenheim Museum Bilbao

Marketing and Communications Department

Tel: +34 944 359 008

media@guggenheim-bilbao.eus

www.guggenheim-bilbao.eus

Images for press usage
Kandinsky
Guggenheim Bilbao Museoa

Online press image service

In the press area of the Museum's website (prensa.guggenheim-bilbao.es), you may register to download high-resolution images and videos of both the exhibitions and the building. If you do not yet have an account, you can register and download the material you need. If you are already a user, enter your username and password and you can access images directly.

- The images provided must be used solely for editorial advertising related to *Lee Krasner: Living Color* exhibition, which is open to the public at the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao from November 20, 2020 through May 23, 2021.
- They must be reproduced in their entirety, without trimming, overprinting, or manipulation. The reproductions must be accompanied by the name of the artist, the title and date of work, the owner credit line, the copyright holder and photo credit.
- The images published online must be protected by the appropriate electronic security measures.
- Any image may have a maximum resolution of 1,000 pixels on its largest side. The file in the online publication has to be inserted and non-downloadable.
- The images must not be transferred to a third party or to a database.

For more information, you can get in touch with the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao press area at tel. +34 944 359 008 or email media@guggenheim-bilbao.eus

Vasily Kandinsky

Church (Kirche), 1907

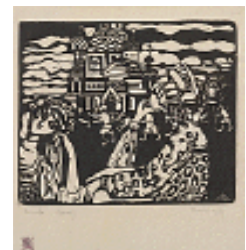
Woodcut, image

13.3 × 14.7 cm; sheet: 18.2 × 15.6 cm

The Hilla von Rebay Foundation, On extended loan to the Solomon R.

Guggenheim Museum, New York 1970.141

© Vasily Kandinsky, VEGAP, Bilbao, 2020



Vasily Kandinsky

Blue Mountain (Der blaue Berg), 1908–09

Oil on canvas

107.3 × 97.6 cm

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim
Founding Collection, By gift 41.505

© Vasily Kandinsky, VEGAP, Bilbao, 2020



Vasily Kandinsky

Landscape with Factory Chimney (Landschaft mit Fabrikschornstein), 1910

Oil on canvas, 66 × 81.9 cm

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim
Founding Collection, By gift 41.504

© Vasily Kandinsky, VEGAP, Bilbao, 2020



Vasily Kandinsky

Improvisation 28 (Second Version) (Improvisation 28 [zweite Fassung]), 1912

Oil on canvas

112.6 × 162.5 cm

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim
Founding Collection, By gift 37.239

© Vasily Kandinsky, VEGAP, Bilbao, 2020



Vasily Kandinsky

Black Lines (Schwarze Linien), December 1913

Oil on canvas

130.5 × 131.1 cm

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim
Founding Collection, By gift 37.241

© Vasily Kandinsky, VEGAP, Bilbao, 2020



Vasily Kandinsky

Painting with White Border (Bild mit weißem Rand), May 1913

Oil on canvas

140.3 × 200.3 cm

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim
Founding Collection, By gift 37.245

© Vasily Kandinsky, VEGAP, Bilbao, 2020



Vasily Kandinsky

Small Pleasures (Kleine Freuden), June 1913

Oil on canvas

110.5 × 120 cm

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim
Founding Collection 43.921

© Vasily Kandinsky, VEGAP, Bilbao, 2020



Vasily Kandinsky

Circles on Black (Kruge na chyornom; Kreise auf Schwarz), 1921

Oil on canvas

136.5 × 119.7 cm

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim
Founding Collection 46.1050

© Vasily Kandinsky, VEGAP, Bilbao, 2020



Vasily Kandinsky

In the Black Square (Im schwarzen Viereck), June 1923

Oil on canvas

97.5 × 93.3 cm

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim
Founding Collection, By gift 37.254

© Vasily Kandinsky, VEGAP, Bilbao, 2020



Vasily Kandinsky

Composition 8 (Komposition 8), July 1923

Oil on canvas

140.3 × 200.7 cm

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim
Founding Collection, By gift 37.262

© Vasily Kandinsky, VEGAP, Bilbao, 2020



Vasily Kandinsky

Several Circles (Einige Kreise), January–February 1926

Oil on canvas

140.7 × 140.3 cm

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim
Founding Collection, By gift 41.283

© Vasily Kandinsky, VEGAP, Bilbao, 2020



Vasily Kandinsky

Unshaken (Unerschüttert), February 1929

Watercolor and ink on paper

35.4 × 49.1 cm

The Hilla von Rebay Foundation, On extended loan to the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York 1970.94

© Vasily Kandinsky, VEGAP, Bilbao, 2020



Vasily Kandinsky

Striped (Rayé), November 1934

Oil with sand on canvas

81 × 100 cm

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection 46.1022

© Vasily Kandinsky, VEGAP, Bilbao, 2020



Vasily Kandinsky

Dominant Curve (Courbe dominante), April 1936

Oil on canvas, 129.2 × 194.3 cm

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection 45.989

© Vasily Kandinsky, VEGAP, Bilbao, 2020



Vasily Kandinsky

Around the Circle (Autour du cercle), May–August 1940

Oil and enamel on canvas

97.2 × 146.4 cm

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection 49.1222

© Vasily Kandinsky, VEGAP, Bilbao, 2020



Vasily Kandinsky

Fragments, May 1943

Oil and gouache on board

41.9 × 57.9 cm

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection 49.1224

© Vasily Kandinsky, VEGAP, Bilbao, 2020



Erfurth Hugo (1874-1948)

Portrait of Kandinsky

Paris, Centre Pompidou - Musée national d'art moderne - Centre de création industrielle

Photo (C) Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Guy Carrard

© Vasily Kandinsky, VEGAP, Bilbao, 2020

