

The (Difficult) Birth of Abstraction

Bauhaus Influence on Fine Art

We have examined in detail, previously, the effect that the **Bauhaus School of Art & Design** had on the disciplines of design. It's forward thinking sought to break down the barriers between traditionally separate Fine Art and Design disciplines. Much of the innovation and **modernist thinking** that flourished in Architecture, Furniture and Product Design in the German school also informed the developments in things like painting, sculpture and printmaking.

As we have noted, Europe in the early 20th Century was a region in the grip of exciting change. Optimism about a positive future in this fresh, technologically advanced century was widespread and artists all over the region were capturing this excitement and energy in their work.

The Great War halted this quite dramatically in 1914. At its close in 1918, the changed Europe that emerged was forced to look forward. The free, spirited experimentation and excess of pre-war artists took on a more serious, focussed edge and studies became more formalised. Nowhere was this seen more clearly than in the Bauhaus school.

Late 19th century experiments in colour theory by the Frenchman **Chevreil**, (Inventor of the colour wheel) and other such structured ways of breaking down the artists craft became very popular and were quickly absorbed into the way that the artists of the future were taught.

Each element of an art work was carefully isolated and examined, its importance celebrated. Teachers at the school began to talk of "**Visual Elements**" and describe how these were carefully and cleverly combined to make 'art'.

As this happened, the early experiments that we saw in pre-war painting and sculpture, (*Picasso's Cubism, Italian Futurism, German Expressionism*), were taken a step further.

If it had been exciting to distort and play about with reality in artworks, how far can the artist justifiably push this experiment? Could they do away with reality altogether?

Remember **Wassily Kandinsky**? Russian Expressionist painter; moved to Germany in early 1900s and became one of Der Blau Riter, (The Blue Rider) group of German Expressionist painters? Dabbled in semi abstraction with Landscape-like paintings that had a musical quality to them, (even had titles like "*Improvisation VII*"). Well, he became a teacher, (Bauhausmeister) in the Bauhaus school in 1922

Kandinsky had begun to experiment with abstraction, growing in confidence having seen the work of Monet. He had, however been massively discouraged by the reluctance of his native Russian and adopted German countrymen to the radical change that a move to abstraction represented.

The open environment of the Bauhaus, where modernist thinking was encouraged, was where Kandinsky's own creative abstraction flourished. It was also where his position as teacher was able to influence many others.

Looking at the pre Bauhaus paintings, such as:

Improvisation VII, 1910 (Semi-abstract Landscape)

Improvisation IV, 1911, (Semi-Abstract Figure Composition)

It is easy to see how audiences were beginning to wonder quite what Kandinsky thought he was doing. The level of abstraction is almost complete, but it is still possible to make out images as Landscapes or Figure Compositions. What we increasingly notice in discussions of works like these is that the descriptions of what individuals can see becomes very open to interpretation. This was something that the conservative gallery going classes felt quite uncomfortable with. Kandinsky, however, realised that this was a positive. It tied in very much with the artists' stated intention of appealing to the 'spiritual' side of his audience, (In 1912, Kandinsky wrote a book entitled, "***Concerning the Spiritual in Art***").

Emboldened by the brave steps he was taking, Kandinsky, in the secure setting of the Bauhaus, took the final steps into complete abstraction. Remember the types of exercises the Bauhaus promoted, - breaking visual art down into its constituent visual elements, (**Line, Tone, Colour, Pattern, Texture, Shape, Form**) and giving these elements as much weight as traditional artists had given to a photographic representation of 'realism'.

Bear this in mind when you look at examples such as:

On White II, 1923 (Abstract)

Yellow, Red, Blue, 1925 (Abstract)

Gone are any hints at representations of reality. In its place are crisp, clean lines, distinct, balanced areas of colour, texture, pattern and form. When an individuals look on these images, you can almost not help drifting off and projecting your own interpretation onto the composition. Kandinsky had cracked it!

Abstraction was complete and total.

As always, similar discoveries were happening all around Europe. Look also at the steps taken by the French painting couple of **Sonia and Robert Delaunay**. Again, they opened the new century with an optimistic, modernist view,

embracing new technologies and social advances by capturing them in their paintings:

Robert Delaunay, ***Homage to Bleriot, 1914*** (Built Environment)

Husband of the team celebrates the first manned flight from London, across the English Channel to Paris by the French hero **Bleriot**. Although much of the painting is a whirl with movement and excitement that is not instantly easy to understand; the essential elements of the story being told are still clearly represented. Witness the Eiffel tower and Bleriot's box-section aeroplane to the right side of the composition. Like Kandinsky, Robert Delaunay has halted on the very brink of total abstraction. He was reluctant to scare off his audience, his customers, just as Kandinsky was. Indeed, Delaunay discussed this very matter in a letter to the Russian in 1912.

"I find what you sent in this year useful. As for our work, I think that surely the public will have to get used to it. The effort it will have to make comes slowly, because it is drowned in habits. On the other hand, the artist has much to do in the realm of color construction, which is so little explored and so obscure, and hardly dates back any farther than to the beginning of Impressionism. [Seurat](#) sought for the primary laws".

Robert's wife, **Sonia Delaunay**, herself a native of Russia like Kandinsky, embraced the innovations of the time herself. Paris was the first city in Europe to gain electric street lighting. Sonia captured this in her 1912 painting

Sonia Delaunay ***Electric Prisms , 1914*** (Built Environment)

The effect is even closer to total abstraction than her husband. And yet, with the background knowledge, I can see the effect of viewing white electric street lights through the prism of falling rain. The water can split the white light into circles, 'coronas' of coloured light. This is something that we have to stop and take the time to experience today, (try it!), but back then, the novelty of the lighting was so new that this daylight at nighttime was a marvel, a modern wonder to all who saw it. It took over, much in the way that Delaunay's bold, bright circles of colour take over the canvas.

Both the Delaunays found their feet in the world of abstraction, however, it was Sonia who capitalised on the way that the public eventually warmed to the innovations. Sonia not only painted, but was a celebrated Fashion designer, throwing her geometric colour balances into her designs to very strong and profitable effect.

Sonia Delaunay

Untitled Composition, 1925 (Abstract)

Untitled Composition, 1927 (Abstract)

Fabric Design, 1923 (Abstract)

For Kandinsky, and the rest of Europe, the Great War interrupted much of this experimentation. Many of the region's great artists were called up to serve their respective countries and quite a number did not survive the campaign, (**Italian Futurist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti; German Expressionists Gerhard Marcks and Franz Marc; Austrian Figure painter Egon Schiele, all claimed by the fighting**).

Only the neutral **Netherlands** continued their march towards modernism and the rejection of realistic representation during the period 1914 – 18.

The clearest example of the advantage this gave the Dutch can be seen in the development of **Piet Mondrian's** work. Possibly one of history's best known abstractionists, his works are instantly recognisable, and just as instantly confusing to any viewer. A brief look at the work that immediately preceded Mondrian's inter-war leap into full abstraction gives us clues as to where his inspiration came from.

Grey Tree, 1911, (Landscape)

Composition No.11: Composition in Line and Colour, 1913 (Semi-Abstract Landscape)

The structures in nature are formalised and made more geometric to become

Composition in Red, Blue and Grey, 1920. (Abstract)

The headstart that the neutral Dutch painters had is apparent when we look at this image, a whole two years before Kandinsky even joined the Bauhaus and felt relaxed enough to advance his own experiments.

The whole notion of abstract art being the result of talentless artists 'cheating' the public with lazy, sloppy images that deliberately tried to confuse is really just the result of ill-informed, lazy public not taking the time to understand the progression of art as it moved through a period of intense experimentation. Remember that painters in particular were now, more than ever, having to compete with photography; a craze that was becoming more sophisticated, accurate, available and affordable.