

## Total Abstraction

It is difficult for us to see where an artist could get the inspiration to create a painting of just one colour, (let alone get the idea that they might get away with 'justifying' it as art!).

*IKB*, (International Klein Blue)

**Yves Klein**

1947 – 1962

An example of one of **Klein's** series of almost 200 **monochrome**, (**literally**, '**one colour**'), images based around this single, specific colour of blue. Klein registered this exact colour as IKB in 1957. Even now, nearly 60 years later, we think of this as an impossibly bold, new and challenging work of art. We are challenged because we don't know what is expected of us as viewers. What are we supposed to think, to say? What if we get it wrong and are missing something? Will we look stupid, uneducated. Isn't this just like the childrens' story of 'The Emperor's New Clothes'? If this is how we feel today, how must the public of 60 years ago have reacted?

The use of pure colour and the other basic **Visual Elements** in isolation have long been used in visual art. Most often they are used to describe something **spiritual**, something bigger than man alone, or even the physical world in which he lives.

*Utriusque Cosmi*

**Robert Fludd**

1671

The pure colour black in this image, by the English artist and mystic philosopher, is used to suggest the idea of 'infinity'. Difficult to imagine a more suitable description really?

So, this sort of thing is not exactly new, but then it did become more widespread and accepted as an artform in the early to mid- 20<sup>th</sup> century. Why?

More than any other one man, I think the influence of a Russian-born painter helps us to understand how and why this came about.

White...quote

Black...quote

These quotations are taken from **Wassily Kandinsky's** 1911 publication, "**On the Spiritual in Art**", released simultaneously in his native Russia and in Germany, a country which he adopted as home for some years.

**Kandinsky** refers to the spiritual life, (a topic that was very fashionable in the eastern reaches of Europe at the time – See ‘**Theosophy**’ or **Madame Helene Blavatsky** ), as a world of inner meanings that was easier to understand as the life of colours.

We begin to see with such quotes why it became increasingly easier for Kandinsky to lean more and more towards the use of pure colour in his painting, relying less on representing recognisable shapes, textures or anything else so commonplace.

With his countrymen opening up to such ideas, but refusing to reject their centuries-old dependence on the figure in art, **Kandinsky** finally quit Russia for good in 1920. He settled once again in Germany and by 1922 became a teacher at the increasingly influential **Bauhaus** school in southern Germany. Here his ideas, particularly on the importance of colour, were built into the **Basic Course** of the school’s curriculum and are the basis of the way colour theory is taught worldwide today, including here in Scotland.

Art was centred on copying ideal figure studies that dated from the days of the Greek and Roman empires. **Kandinsky** claimed this direction was doomed to always be ‘soulless’, as it is impossible for anyone to live and feel as people did then. A fair point.

**Paul Klee** was a younger student turned teacher at the **Bauhaus**. From 1923 he described himself as “**possessed by colour**”, and embarked on an exploration of what he called his ‘*Magic Squares*’ over the next nine years at the school. By the time he fled back to his native Switzerland in 1933 he had wholeheartedly embraced an abstract investigation of colour.

There were many others at the school who brought their own interpretation to this central idea.

So, all of this thinking was new, and pretty radical for 1922. It took hold though, and the fame and influence of the **Bauhaus** and its teachings grew. It quickly came to the attention of one **Adolf Hitler**. The challenging attitude and unconventional thinking was precisely what **Hitler** did not want from his model German citizen. So much so that in 1933, **Hitler** ordered the State Secret Police into the Bauhaus, now based in Berlin, to arrest 32 students and seize the building, closing the school down forever.

If **Kandinsky** began the spread of these radical artistic ideas, then **Hitler** can be credited with spreading them further than the Russian could ever have imagined possible. The **Bauhaus** teachers fled the Nazi persecution, many initially to the UK, and most, ultimately, to the USA.

The teachers and their ideas were embraced by the victorious allies, and promoted as witness to their triumph over the tyranny of the Nazi regime. Britain, France and the US were the dominant forces in world economics in the post WWII era and with their economic influence was spread the Bauhaus ideal.

With this in mind, are we less surprised to see **Yves Klein** wow Paris in 1947 with his monochrome Blue canvases? **Ben Nicholson** shock the UK with his brutally stark geometric coloured reliefs, (images that build up out of the picture on different layers)? **Joan Miro** taking this influence from France back to his native Spain?

An explosion of abstract experimentation rang out across the world and its aftershocks were to be felt for many years:

**Refugee Abstraction** in the USA was led by the persecuted Bauhaus immigrants and their followers.

**Abstract Surrealism** took hold strongly in Spain, (prior to Franco's crushing totalitarianism – think, Vladimir Romanov at Tynecastle).

**Soft edged Abstraction** of **Mark Rothko** in 1950s USA

**Hard edged Abstraction** of **Ben Nicholson** & the **St. Ives School** in UK

**Abstract Expressionism** of **Jackson Pollock** and **Willem de Kooning** in USA

**Post-Painterly Abstraction** of **Ellsworth Kelly**, **Clifford Still**, **Barnett Newman**, **Morris Louis** in USA.