



SCHOLASTIC

ART

DEC/JAN 1995-96

VOL. 26, No. 3

ISSN 1060-832X.

PUBLISHED IN COOPERATION
WITH THE NATIONAL
GALLERY OF ART,
FORMERLY ART & MAN

Kandinsky

WORKING WITH SHAPES

 SCHOLASTIC



Cover: Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944). *Blue Painting*, January, 1924. 19 7/8" x 19 1/2". Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, NY. Gift, Fuller Foundation, Inc. Photo: David Heald © Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, NY.

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POSTAL INFORMATION
Scholastic Art® (ISSN 1060-832X; in Canada, 2-c no. 9360) is published six times during the school year, Sept/Oct., Nov., Dec./Jan., Feb., Mar., Apr./May, by Scholastic Inc. Office of Publication: 2931 E. McCarty Street, P.O. Box 3710, Jefferson City, MO 65102-3710. Second-class postage paid at Jefferson City, MO 65101 and at additional offices. Postmaster: Send notice of address changes to SCHOLASTIC ART, 2931 East McCarty St. P.O. Box 3710 Jefferson City, MO 65102-3710.

PUBLISHING INFORMATION
U.S. prices: \$7.95 each per school year, for 10 or more subscriptions to the same address. 1-9 subscriptions, each \$18.00 student, \$31.80 Teacher's Edition, per school year. Single copy: \$1.90 student, \$2.95 Teacher's. (For Canadian pricing, write our Canadian office, address below.) Subscription communications should be addressed to SCHOLASTIC ART, Scholastic Inc., 2931 East McCarty Street, P.O. Box 3710, Jefferson City, MO 65102-3710 or by calling 1-800-631-1586. Communications relating to editorial matter should be addressed to Margaret Howlett, SCHOLASTIC ART, 555 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10012-3999. Canadian address: Scholastic-TAB Publications, Ltd., 123 Newkirk Rd., Richmond Hill, Ontario L4C 3G5. Available on microfilm through Xerox University Microfilms, Inc. 300 N. Zeeb Rd., Ann Arbor, MI 48106. Also available on microfiche through Bell & Howell Micro Photo Division, Old Mansfield Rd., Wooster, OH 44691. Copyright © 1996 by Scholastic Inc. All Rights Reserved. Material in this issue may not be reproduced in whole or in part in any form or format without special permission from the publisher.

Printed in U.S.A.

Painting States of Mind

“Paintings should represent a mood not illustrate an object.” —WASSILY KANDINSKY

W

hat do you see in the painting on the right? Can you find anything other than random streaks and blotches of paint? “What was wrong with this artist?” you might ask. “This painting doesn’t really look like anything!”

When you look at this work closely, a scene may begin to form. The lines and shapes in the lower right offer a clue—they look a little like cannons. The intense colors and jagged shapes suggest bombs or gunfire. Tall, tilted forms might be buildings; puffy, gray areas could be smoke or clouds. The clashing colors and exploding shapes suggest conflict. When you look at this painting—*Improvisation #30*—does it bring to mind anything in the recent news? Does it suggest a place under attack—maybe a place like the city of Sarajevo in Bosnia?

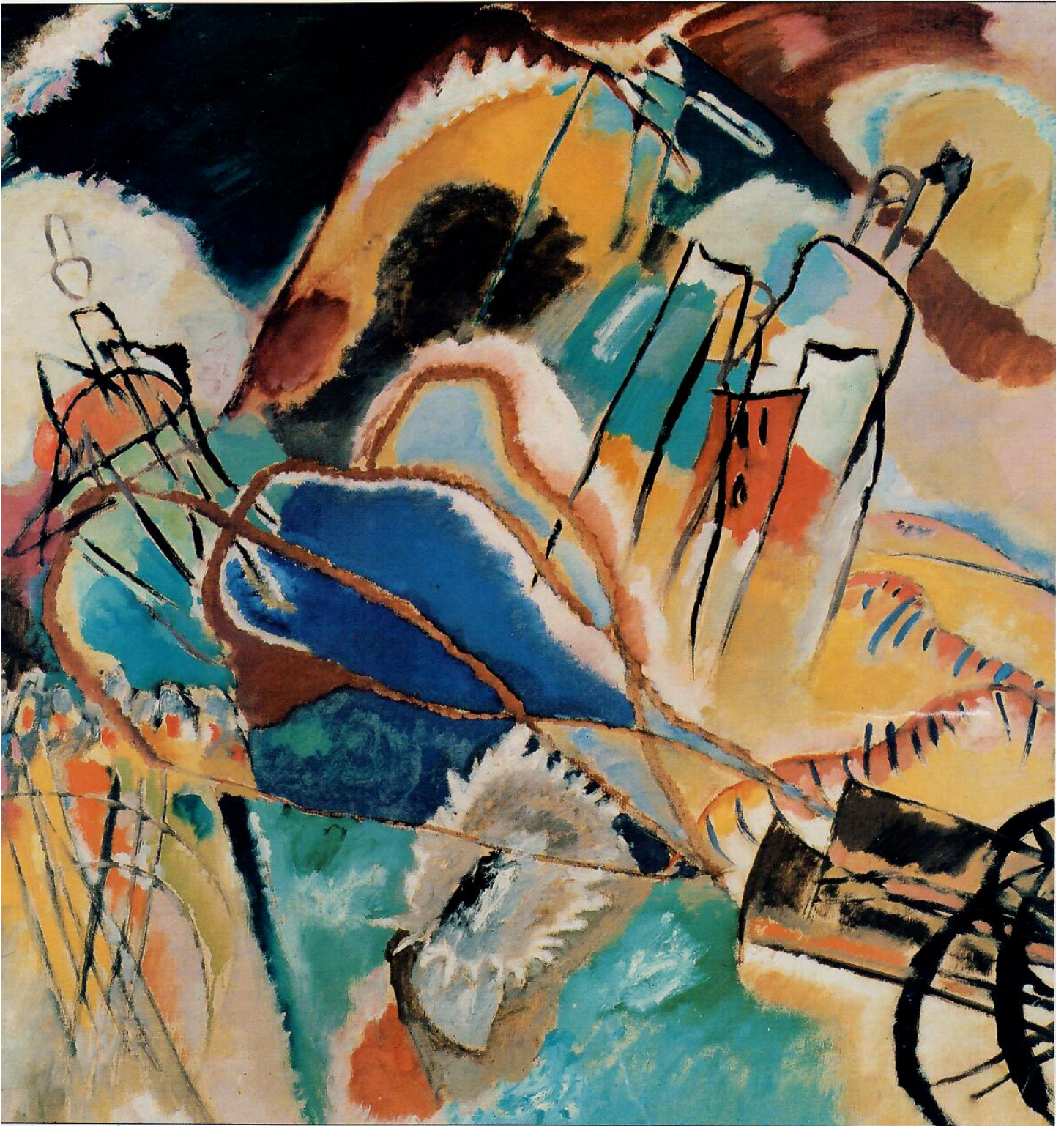
This painting was created in 1913 by a Russian artist named Wassily Kandinsky [Vah-SEE-lee Kan-DIN-skee]. Kandinsky painted it just before the outbreak of World War I in Europe. *Improvisation #30* is an abstract painting in that it suggests a subject without portraying it realistically. Rather than depicting real events from an actual war, *Improvisation #30* represents the idea of conflict and the emotions that accompany it. For Kandinsky, this painting probably represented his feelings about the unrest in Europe at the beginning of this century. The same painting today might remind us of a modern war like the one in Bosnia.

Kandinsky is considered one of the “inventors” of abstract painting. He began by painting realistically, but felt limited by this form of artistic expression. He believed in what he called the “psychological and spiritual effects of color,” developing an art form in which shapes and colors alone became the important qualities.

A musician expresses emotions by combining rhythms and tones. Kandinsky wanted to do the same thing through painting. Music conveys a mood through contrasts of loud/soft and fast/slow. Kandinsky contrasted light/dark tones and warm/cool colors to portray emotions visually. He developed a system of “pure painting” that did not rely on realistic images.

When Kandinsky first exhibited his abstractions, some critics called them “the work of a madman.” But, when a London art critic saw *Improvisation #30* in 1913, he called it “pure visual music.” He felt Kandinsky had awakened “vibrations in the soul.”





Kandinsky at work in 1936.

Photo by Lucia Moholy, Zurich
Text by Suzanne Bilyeu
All Kandinsky paintings in this issue
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“In highly sensitive people, any impression communicates itself directly to the soul, and from there to all the other senses.”—Wassily Kandinsky

Improvisation #30, (Cannons), 1913. Art Institute of Chicago. Arthur Jerome Eddy Memorial Collection. Photo © 1994. The Art Institute of Chicago. All rights reserved.

A New Way of Seeing

“Ask yourself if a work of art has taken you away into a world you’ve never known before. If so, what more can you ask for?”

—WASSILY KANDINSKY

In 1908, Wassily Kandinsky had an experience that changed his life and art. He wrote, “I was returning to my studio lost in thought. When I opened the door, I found myself gazing at the most beautiful picture I had ever seen. It had no subject, but was entirely composed of bright color patches. I came closer and saw what it was—my own painting standing on its side.”



The picture Kandinsky was referring to might have been one he painted early in his career, *Couple Riding* (below). If you turn this work on its side, can you still tell what it is? Or does it become an abstract composition made up of lines, shapes, and colors? Seen on its side, this painting is as nonrepresentational as the work on the right, *Composition II*. The artist did these two works only four years apart. What made him see the world so differently?

Kandinsky was born in the Russian city of Moscow in 1866. He was an only child; his parents divorced when he was 5 and he lived with his aunt. To escape the loneliness in his life, Kandinsky retreated into a world of fantasy—reading Russian fairy tales, drawing, and listening to music.

The artist studied law at Moscow University, but continued to paint. In 1889, he went to a rural province to study Russian peasant laws and was struck by the



How did Kandinsky transform the elements in the realistic painting on the left into the abstract masterpiece above.

Couple Riding, 1906. 21 5/8" x 19 7/8".
Städtische Galerie, Munich.



brightly colored houses, furniture, and costumes. This trip strongly influenced the art that Kandinsky would later create.

In 1896, several events awoke feelings that Kandinsky—now a Doctor of Law, economist, and university lecturer—had always had about life and art. One was a show of French Impressionist paintings—bright, colorful scenes done in a way no one had ever seen before. Another was hearing an opera by the new German composer Richard Wagner. The unique orchestral sounds affected Kandinsky deeply. The discovery of radioactivity—which turned the scientific world of 1896 upside down—also had

a profound effect on Kandinsky. Art became a way for him to cope with discoveries that were changing the way people viewed the universe. At the end of the year, Kandinsky left Moscow to study art in Germany. Here he found many other artists who were also experimenting with new ways of interpreting the world.

Compare Kandinsky's *Composition II*, painted in 1910, with his 1906 *Couple Riding*. Can you find any similarities? Both contain horses and riders, buildings with Russian domes, trees, and clouds. In which work are these objects realistically "spelled out"? In which are they simply suggested and reduced to their essence?

"When I had typhoid fever, I saw a wonderful painting. But it disappeared as soon as I was better. In *Composition II*, I have finally been able to express my feverish vision."

—Wassily Kandinsky

Sketch for Composition II, 1909-10. Guggenheim 38 3/8" x 51 3/8". Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, NY. Photo: David Heald © Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, NY.

Visual Music

“Color is the keyboard, the shapes are the notes, and the artist is the hand that plays, creating vibrations in the soul.”

—WASSILY KANDINSKY



In 1914, Kandinsky returned to Russia, where he taught and wrote about abstract art. After the 1917 Russian Revolution, the new Soviet government disapproved of his art, so the artist moved to Berlin. There he joined the Bauhaus [BOW-house], a new arts college that brought together architects, engineers, and artists to exchange ideas. Kandinsky studied the psychology and symbolism of shapes and colors, and the circle began to take on a special meaning for him. As he put it, “The circle is the shape closest to the fourth dimension. It suggests time and space.” As you can see here and on the next two pages, this shape appeared in more and more of his paintings.

Kandinsky reduced his visual vocabulary to a few basic geometric elements: **circles, semicircles, angles, straight and curved lines.** These were the “notes” the artist used to compose “visual music” like *Several Circles* (right) and *Three Sounds* (far right). In both, circles grow from a central source, floating like transparent color bubbles. In *Three Sounds*, circles contrast with visual “sounds” such as lines and angles. The large circle in *Several Circles* covers a bright light, suggesting a natural event like an eclipse of the sun.

In the 1930s, Kandinsky had to leave yet another country because of his art. In Germany during the years before World War II, Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party opposed any free exchange of ideas. Kandinsky escaped to Paris and his paintings were removed from German museums. In Paris, he lived in a small studio, painting and writing about art until his death in 1944.

In *Around the Circle* (pages 8-9), fantastic creatures in quiltlike colors swirl around a bright-red circle. Set in a dark blue space, the colorful forms seem to leap and dance—as if to fast Russian ballet music. Can you pick out the same domelike shapes, dots, and color combinations you saw in Kandinsky’s early painting on page 2?

In this work (left), to what kind of world do these cool, floating, monochromatic shapes look like they belong?

Untitled (No. 715), 1941. 18 7/8" x 12 3/8". Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, NY. Hilla Rebay Collection.

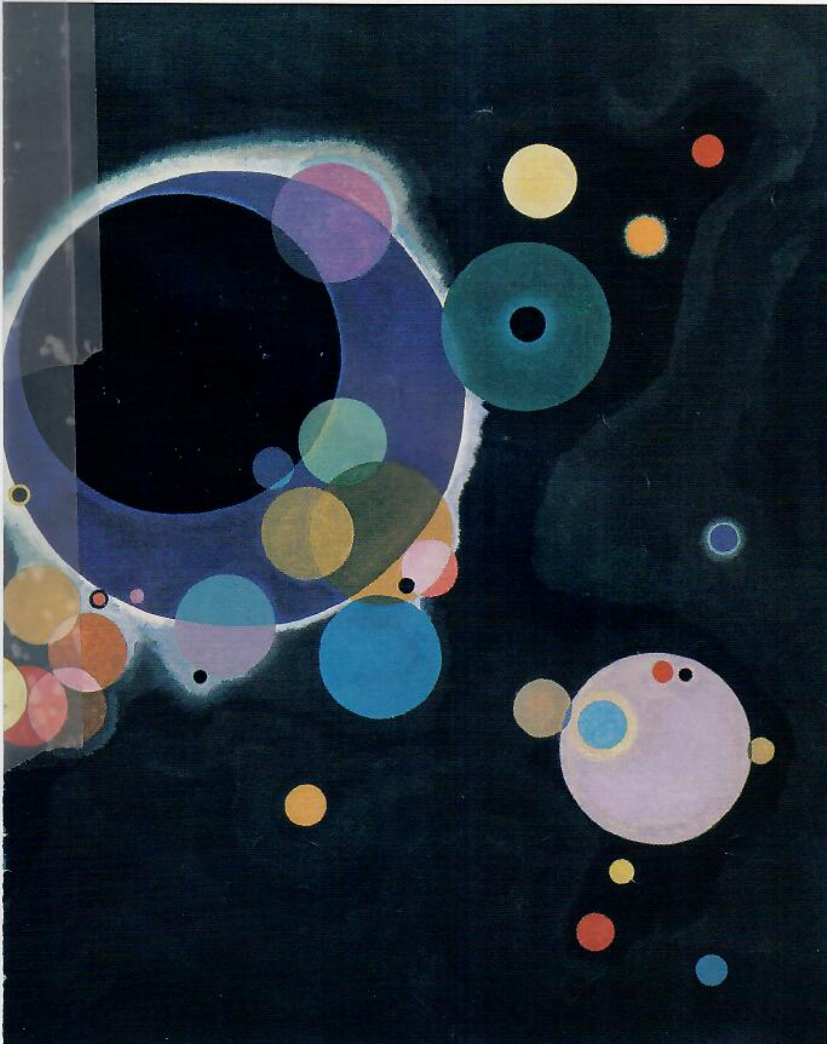


**MASTERPIECE OF
THE MONTH**

Preview

In the work on the left, what kind of music is suggested by the soft - transparent shapes floating around and through each other and lit by a round, moonlike shape?

Dreamy, August 1932. 15 1/2" x 22 5/8". Hilla Von Rebay Foundation, NY.



How many sets of three can you find in the work above? What kinds of sounds do the triangles make; the arrows; the semicircles; the big red circle?

Three Sounds, August 1926. 23 5/8" x 23 1/2". Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, NY.

What shape did Kandinsky repeat over and over to create the picture on the left? Pick out a soft, simple "visual melody" and contrast it with an area of loud, dark, and complex "orchestral textures."

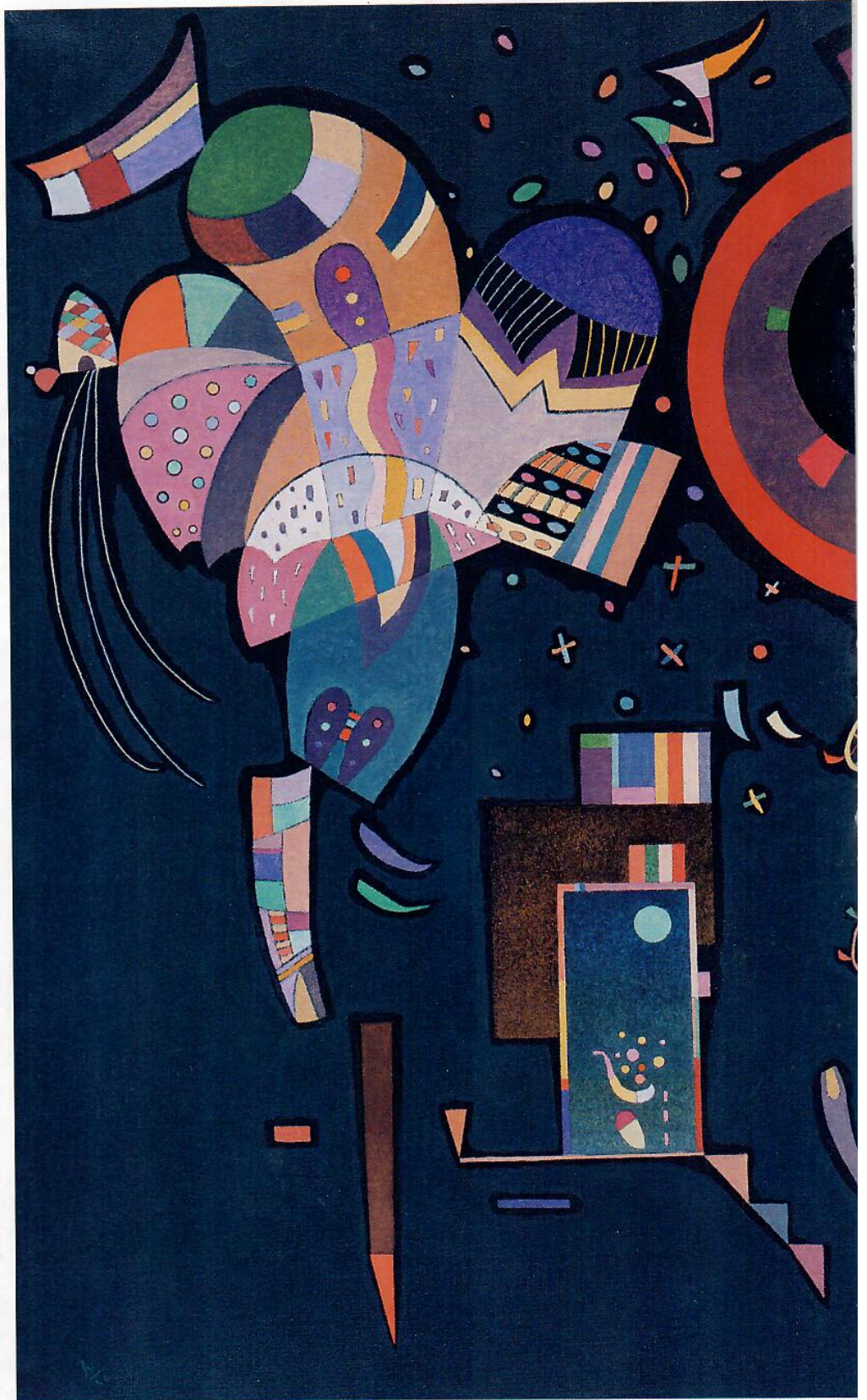
Several Circles, Jan./Feb. 1926. 55 1/4" x 55 3/8". Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, NY.

All photos: David Heald © Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, NY.

MASTERPIECE
OF THE
MONTH #3

Around the Circle

SCHOLASTIC
ART



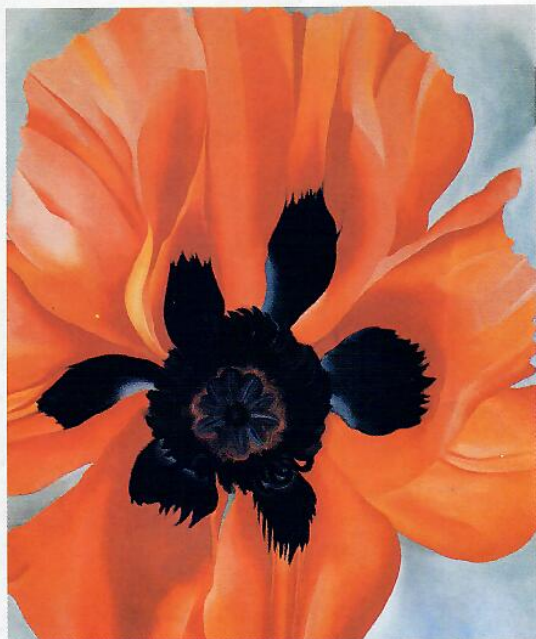
by Wassily
Kandinsky



Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944). *Around the Circle*, May-August 1940. 38 1/8" x 57 1/2". Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, NY. Photo: David Heald © Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, NY.

MOVING SHAPES

Three artists who have used abstract shapes to express dynamic ideas.



Nature Up Close

Kandinsky was one of the first artists to use nonrepresentational shapes and colors. Do the shapes in the painting on the left—a circular black shape surrounded by a large red area—look realistic or familiar?

At first, this work by 20th-century American Georgia O'Keeffe might look completely abstract. But reading the title makes it clear the artist had a common, everyday object in mind. O'Keeffe is best known for her paintings based on enlarged, abstracted details of

ordinary flowers. She painted the flower from an **unusual point of view**, changed its **scale** by **selecting a detail**, **blew up** the detail, and **cropped** the image until it became almost unrecognizable. She **simplified** and **flattened** the shapes, **intensifying** (brightening) the colors until the final image looked nothing like the original.

Compare this work to *Vega Nor*. One image depicts a whole universe, while the other shows a tiny flower. Which artist used shapes more effectively and why?

"My paintings look completely real to me. But the world calls them abstractions since no one else sees what I see."—Georgia O'Keeffe

Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986). *Red Poppy No. VI*. 1928. © Estate of Georgia O'Keeffe.

Shapes From the Past

To most people, the work on the right looks like a purely abstract arrangement of shapes. But the artist, African-American Sam Gilliam, sees *Open Cylinder* as a personal expression based on his African heritage and childhood memories.

Gilliam is best known for his "draped canvasses"—stained pieces of canvas that he suspends from ceilings. These abstract sculptural paintings have made his work famous throughout the world.

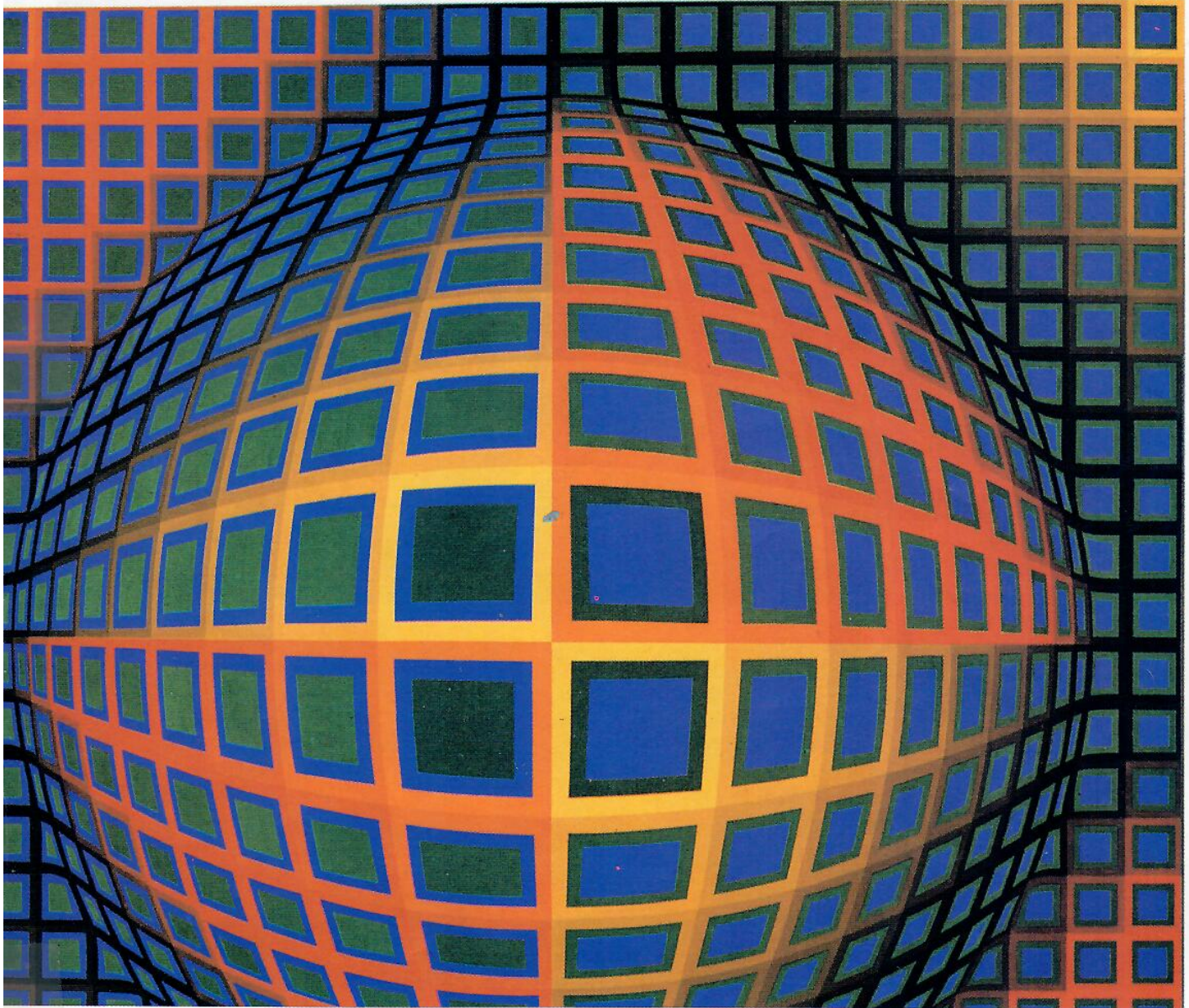
The artist is currently creating a series of "quilted" paintings by

raking thick layers of paint on canvas pieces, cutting them up, and arranging the shapes into **abstract compositions**. These works were inspired by African textiles and the artist's recollections of the "crazy quilts" made by Southern African-American women. The many shapes and textures in these paintings suggest buried layers of memory, giving them a haunting, mysterious feeling.

"Whether I'm teaching or making art, the process is the same—I am creating."—Sam Gilliam

Sam Gilliam, b. 1933. *Open Cylinder*, 1979. National Museum of American Art, Washington, DC. Photo, Art Resource, NY.





Exploding Squares

What do you see when you look at the work above by 20th-century Hungarian artist Victor Vasarely? In fact, try looking at this painting, *Vega-Nor*, and not see it bulging out at you!

During the 1960s, a group of artists wanted to totally involve the viewer in their work. By arranging shapes on a flat surface so the surface seemed to

ripple, flow, and move toward us, Vasarely and other **Optical artists** made us think about the way we see things. Op artists used **abstract shapes** rather than realistic ones to focus our attention on optical effects. *Vega-Nor* isn't just a scene that includes a moving object. The work is constructed so the images in the painting appear to move and

change right in front of our eyes.

Vasarely considers the square to be the "basic architectural unit." But the **focal point** of *Vega-Nor* is a giant, exploding circle. Can you find any circles in this work? How many differ-

ent kinds of **geometric shapes** can you find? How did Vasarely create the impression of a circle using only squares? How does changing the **value** (lightness and darkness) of the squares add to the feeling of motion?

"Vega is a distant star—this composition expresses the expansion of the universe."—Victor Vasarely

Victor Vasarely, b. 1908. *Vega-Nor*, 1969. Albright-Knox Gallery, Buffalo, NY.



Lindsey Gatlin: SHAPES THAT GROW

Many of Kandinsky's paintings were done spontaneously, and 16-year-old Lindsey Gatlin created the Scholastic Art Award-winning abstraction (right) in just the same way—from her imagination.

Lindsey is in the 10th grade at APAC Visual Arts in Jackson, Mississippi, and hasn't yet decided what she wants to do after graduation. She says, "Art lets me have fun. I would hate to have to *make* myself do it."

We select our Artist of the Month from among Scholastic Award winners. To enter, ask your teacher to write to the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards, 555 Broadway, New York, NY 10012-3999 for entry deadlines and rules books. *Scholastic Art* magazine does not have a separate competition.

■ **How did you first become interested in art?**

I've always doodled and drawn. Then, in eighth grade, my parents convinced me to try out for APAC Art. APAC stands for Academic and Performing Arts Complex. The classes are more intense than regular art and they're held at the Mississippi Museum of Art. Our school budget can't afford the projects we do in APAC—oil painting, printmaking, or photography. To get in I submitted a portfolio of my work, drew a still life, and wrote a paper on how I'd benefit from being in APAC art. I hate to try out for stuff, but I wanted to go there because I felt it would offer me more. The classes are hard, but they're helping me and making me appreciate all kinds of art.

■ **How did you come to do this award-winning abstraction?**

My class was doing a still life. I finished mine early so I decided to do something else, some-

thing fun. I started out with no idea at all and this painting is what I ended up with.

■ **Where do you think your images came from?**

I like to do little swirly things, combine different images that just come into my head. When I'm bored in class or just sitting, I'm always making little designs on a piece of paper. This painting was an outgrowth of just that—my doodling skills.

■ **Did you want to communicate an emotional feeling in this painting?**

I was doing it, I guess, just to be free. Painting a still life is very disciplined. You have to get everything—lines, shadows, highlights, dark areas—just right. I did them, but I didn't enjoy it much. My friend and I were sharing a palette and I had some extra time, so I started using the oil paint in a different, free way. I was just playing around, having fun.

■ **Why did you use the shapes that you did?**

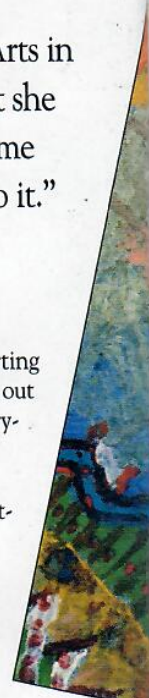
I love spirals. I like starting at a point and drawing out from it. As I draw, everything seems to grow in symmetrical patterns. But they're never exactly the same on each side. If I draw a circle and six squares on one, I'll put an arch on a square and a few small shapes on the other.

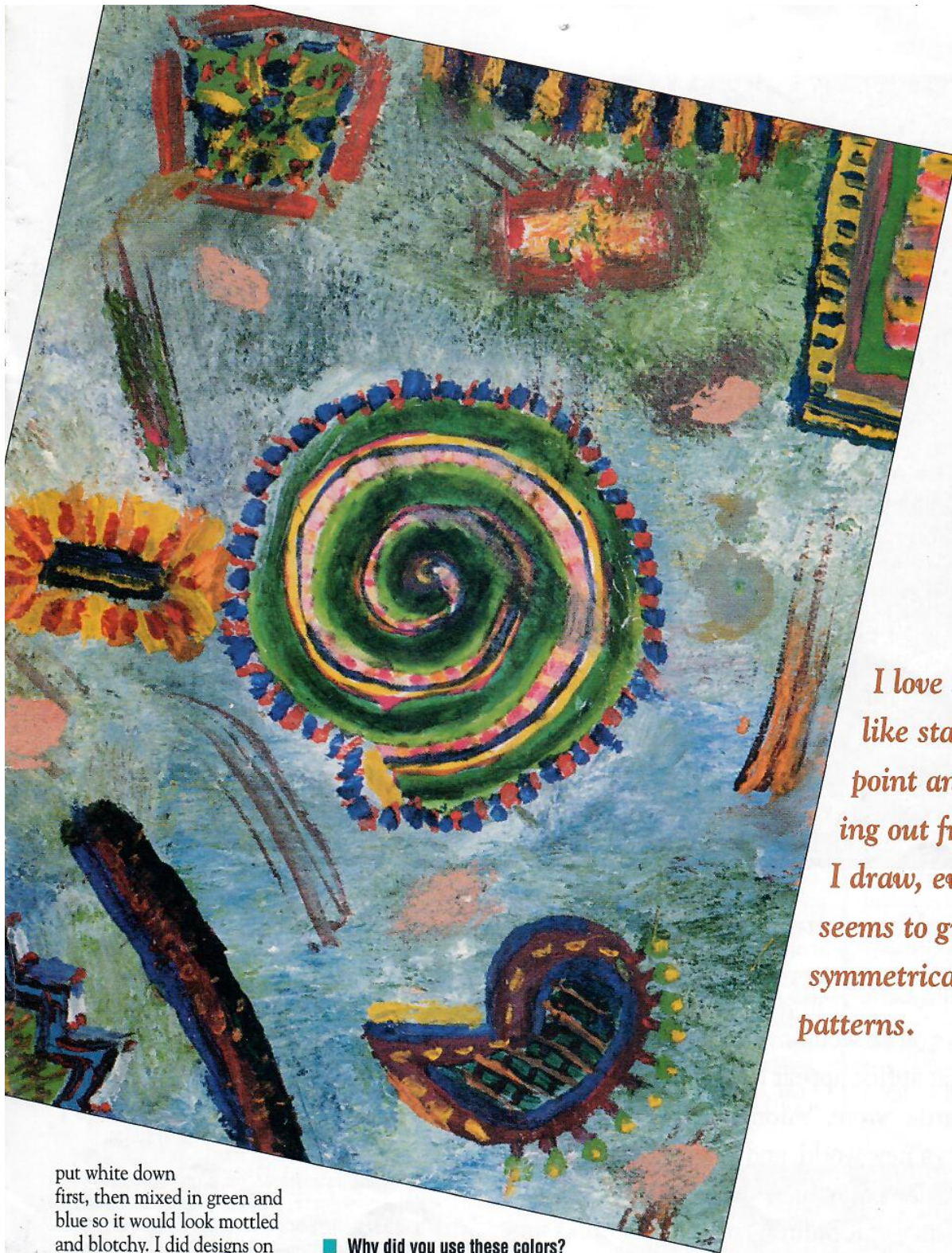
■ **Does nature inspire your designs in any way?**

I never thought of it, but I remember once looking through a "bee's eye viewer," a glass that's like an insect's eye. If you look at an object through it, you see a hundred images of it, the way an insect would. I also like the moving patterns you see in a kaleidoscope.

■ **How did you do this painting?**

I started with the background. I





I love spirals. I like starting at a point and drawing out from it. As I draw, everything seems to grow in symmetrical patterns.

put white down first, then mixed in green and blue so it would look mottled and blotchy. I did designs on top of the wet oils with a pin tool—a wooden stick with a pin in it that you use for pottery. I put the colors on it and drew out my design, starting with the spiral in the middle then creating patterns from there. I used paintbrushes to do the big shapes and the dots.

■ **Why did you use these colors?**

I like to use either black and white or bright colors. I don't tend to do anything in between. Green, yellow, and red are my favorites, so I put them together here. The contrast between the dark shades and the bright colors makes the different shapes stand out.

■ **Do you often work abstractly?**

Half the time, I work realistically. But I like working abstractly. That way I don't have to worry about light and shadow, perspective, or if things are the right size. My work doesn't have to be perfect. In fact, in abstract art, it's better *not* to be perfect!

ABSTRACTING FROM NATURE



Prepared by Ned J. Nesti Jr., Art Instructor, Morrison (IL) High School. Photos by Larry Gregory.

Use natural shapes and some of Kandinsky's ideas to create your own abstract painting.

In this issue, you've seen how Kandinsky created paintings that at first appear to be completely abstract. The artist wrote, "Alongside the real world abstract art sets a new world, and both these worlds are subject to the laws of nature." It is no accident that many of the images Kandinsky used in his works suggest natural scenes or events such as underwater landscapes, planets floating in space, or creatures seen through a microscope.

In this workshop, you'll work with shapes found in nature and use watercolor paints to create your own abstract world.

Materials

- Watercolor paper or 80 lb. white construction paper (12" x 12" — 12" x 18")
- 16" x 22" heavy cardboard or drawing board
- Semi-moist watercolor, eight-color set
- Natural objects: leaves, plants, grasses, feathers, flowers
- Man-made objects: string, lace, cheese cloth, ribbon, cut fabric or paper. (All objects must be thin, flat, and absorbent.)
- Several round or flat watercolor brushes
- Scissors
- Scrap white paper
- School pencils
- Water container
- Several round or flat watercolor brushes
- Masking tape



Step 2

Use scrap paper to experiment with basic watercolor techniques—*flat and graded washes, painting on wet and dry surfaces, mixing colors, and building up color by overlapping transparent washes*. Brush on your colors but *do not overwork*. Colors turn muddy and paper surface tends to tear if watercolors are overworked.



Starting Out

1. Think about the titles of some of Kandinsky's best-known watercolors — *Small Dream in Red, Bright Sound, Cool Discourse, and Into the Dark*. Then consider what thought or idea you wish to express in your own painting. Select and arrange some of the objects you have collected into an interesting, balanced composition that visualizes this concept. You can stretch, fray, tear, or cut fabric into various shapes, but do not allow objects to overlap.

Step 3

Place a light to medium color wash over entire sheet of watercolor paper. Work quickly, applying color as evenly as possible so objects will stick to the paper while paint is wet. Mix enough to cover entire surface. Limit colors to one or two. Colors should be either **warm**

or **cool**, in keeping with the concept you wish to express. Immediately after putting down the wash, carefully transfer your arrangement of objects to the paper. Gently press objects into the surface so they will stick to the paper while the paint is wet. Holding objects down, paint carefully over and around their shapes. For another effect, wait for paint to partially dry, then overpaint in a slightly different color. You can use "accidents"—*colors that run, color settling to the bottom of a wash, areas that bleed together*. Allow painting to dry completely, then carefully remove objects. Images and areas of texture should remain. Examine composition, looking for hidden images you can develop and build on. Use **textural areas, negative spaces, lines, and shapes** you didn't see before.

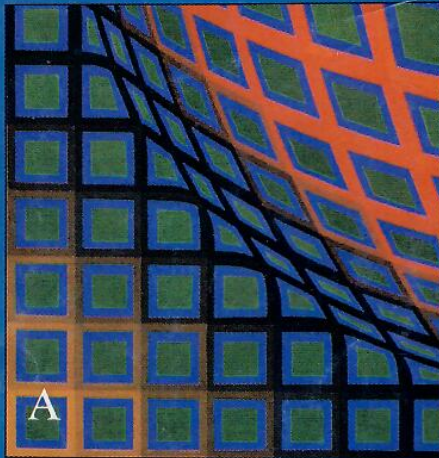
Some Solutions

Which artists used **organic shapes**, which used **geometric shapes**? Which watercolors show differences in **scale** (large/small shapes)? Who **repeated** the same shapes over and over? Which artist used shapes to **frame** his/her painting; which worked with **negative space**? Who used **lines** as an additional element? In which works are the colors applied in **thin transparent layers**; in which are the colors **spattered**? Did any of the artists create **symmetrical** (both sides are the same) compositions? Which artists used shapes and space to visually balance their **asymmetrical** compositions? What titles might you give to some of these works?



FIND THE SHAPE

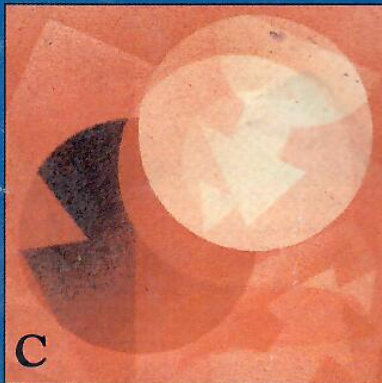
Where have you seen these shapes before?



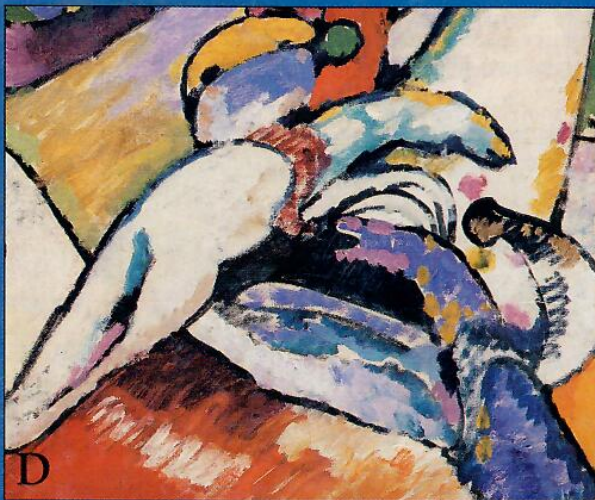
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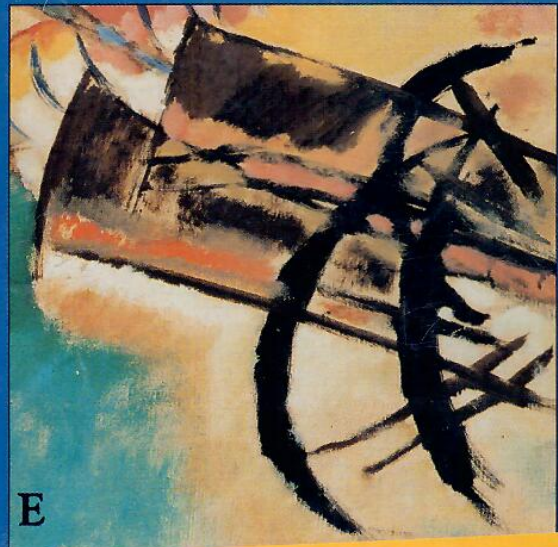
B



C



D



E

Can you find the work each of these details is from and write the page number?

A _____ B _____ C _____ D _____ E _____

Can you write down the letter of each image that is based on a "real" object? _____

Can you name the real objects? _____

Can you write down the letter of each image that is a pure abstraction? _____

Which artist created each of these paintings?

A _____ B _____ C _____
D _____ E _____

Can you find examples of the following types of shapes in each detail and write in the corresponding letter? (Hint: a shape is not limited to only one of these characteristics.)

- | | | |
|------------------|----------------|---------------|
| ____ Organic | ____ Circular | ____ Positive |
| ____ Geometric | ____ Angular | ____ Negative |
| ____ Flat | ____ Hard Edge | ____ Repeated |
| ____ Modeled | ____ Painterly | ____ Linear |
| ____ Textural | ____ Stylized | |
| ____ Transparent | ____ Optical | |

Statement of Ownership, Management and Circulation of SCHOLASTIC ART (as required by Title 39, United States Code). Date of Filing: October 1, 1995. Title of Publication: Scholastic Art. Frequency of Issue: Monthly: Feb., Mar., Nov.; Bi-monthly: Apr./May, Sep./Oct., Dec./Jan. Location of Known Office of Publication: 2931 East McCarty Street, Cole County, Jefferson City, MO 65101-4464. Location of the Headquarters of the Publishers: 555 Broadway, New York, NY 10012-3999. Publisher: M. Richard Robinson; Editor: Margaret Howlett (both of 555 Broadway, New York, NY 10012-3999). Owners: Scholastic Corporation, M. Richard Robinson, Trust under will of Maurice R. Robinson, Trust under will of Florence L. Robinson, all of 555 Broadway, New York, NY 10012-3999. During Preceding 12 Months Average Number of Copies: Printed each issue, 251,200; Paid Circulation, 235,373; Free Distribution, 13,389; Total Number of Copies Distributed, 248,762; Office Use, etc., 2,438; Total, 251,200. For Single Issue Nearest to Filing Date: Number of Copies Printed, 330,500; Paid Circulation, 182,818; Free Distribution, 64,283; Number of Copies Distributed, 247,101; Office Use, etc., 83,399; Total, 330,500.