

**RE-**

**INVENTING  
ABSTRACTION**

**1910-1920**

**HOW A RADICAL IDEA  
CHANGED  
MODERN ART**

Vasily Kandinsky, *Composition VII* (Composition VII), 1913. Oil on canvas, 6' 6 3/4" x 9' 10 1/8" (200 x 300 cm). The State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow  
Tibetan Temple Drum, Hand Painted Yak Skin  
China Dunhuang - hunting scene 386-634 AD  
Lascaux, Dordogne, France 15,000 - 10,000 BC

17th century, Tibetan, Five Deity Mandala  
Robert Delaunay, *Le Premier Disque* (The first disk), 1913. Oil on canvas, 52" (134.6 cm) diam. Private collection  
17th century Jain cosmological diagrams  
17th century Jain cosmological diagrams

Giacomo Balla, *Compenetrazione iridescente n. 7* (Iridescent interpenetration no. 7), 1912. Oil on canvas, with the artist's original frame, 32 11/16 x 32 11/16" (83 x 83 cm). GAM - Galleria d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Turin  
Islamic Tile Work  
Giacomo Balla, *Study for Compenetrazione iridescente* (Iridescent interpenetration), 1912. Pencil and watercolour on paper, 7 5/16 x 9 7/16" (18.5 x 24 cm). GAM - Galleria d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Turin  
Islamic mosaic tile art  
Uzbekistan, Bukhara, Kalon Mosque, Islamic Tile Work

Vasily Kandinsky, *Design for the installation at the Juryrie Kunstschau Berlin*, 1922. Gouache and white chalk on paper, 13 11/16 x 23 5/8" (34.7 x 60 cm) Musée national d'art moderne/ Centre de creation industrielle, Centre Pompidou, Paris. Gift of Mme Nina Kandinsky.

Arnhem Land's Mount Borradaile Indigenous rock art  
Aboriginal sand painting, Australia  
Gino Severini, *Danseuse = Helice = Mer* (Dancer = propeller = sea), 1915. Oil on canvas, 29 5/8 x 30 3/4" (75.2 x 78.1 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Alfred Stieglitz Collection.  
Navajo sand painting  
Navajo sand painting  
Navajo sand painting

Cycladic Head. Originally carved in marble during the third millennium B.C. Relica of original from the National Archaeological Museum Athens and the Museum of Cycladic Art Athens.

Venus of Monruz, 18mm in height. Neuchatel, Switzerland, Upper Paleolithic or beginning Epipaleolithic.

Constantin Brancusi, *Bird in Space*, 1923, Marble

Nafana Bedu Mask, Wood, pigment and iron nails, Cote d'Ivoire or Ghana, 19<sup>th</sup> - mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century

Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, *Birds Erect*, 1914. Limestone, 26 5/8 x 10 1/4 x 12 3/8" (67.6 x 26 x 31.4 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Mrs. W. Murray Crane.

Tin Mweleum (commissioned by Tain Mal), mid to late 1960s, Vanuatu, Ambrym Island, Ambrym, Wood, paint, H. 175 1/4 x W. 28 x D. 23 1/2 in. (445.1 x 71.1 x 59.7 cm), Rogers Fund, 1975, The MET

Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, *Portrait of Ezra Pound*, 1914. Wood, 28 3/4 x 6 3/4 x 3/4" (73 x 17.2 x 17.2 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven. Purchase Director's Fund

Tantric painting, egg tempera on scrap paper, India (upside down)

Kazimir Malevich, *Chetyreugol'nik* (Quadrilateral), 1915. Oil on canvas, 31 5/16 x 31 5/16" (79.5 x 79.5 cm). The State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

Kazimir Malevich, *Zhivopisnyi realizm mal'chika s rantssem - krasochnye massy v 4-m izmerenii* (Painterly realism of a boy with a knapsack - colour masses in the 4<sup>th</sup> dimension), 1915. Oil on canvas, 28 x 17 1/2" (71.1 x 44.5 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Tantric painting, egg tempera on scrap paper, India

Ivan Kllun, *Iskania v tsvete* (Studies in colour), C. 1917. Oil on cardboard, 11 11/16 x 8 13/16" (28.1 x 22.4 cm). State Museum of Contemporary Art - Costakis Collection, Thessaloniki

Cloth tunic, Inca, 1400-1532 AD, Lima Region, Peru

Ivan Kllun, *Iskania v tsvete* (Studies in colour), C. 1917. Oil on cardboard, 11 7/16 x 7 13/16" (29.1 x 19.9 cm). State Museum of Contemporary Art - Costakis Collection, Thessaloniki

Taikan Monju, 1766 - 1842. Round and perfect like vast space, nothing lacking, nothing in excess. Ink on paper.

Ungo Kivo, 1582 - 1657. True emptiness is without form, mistakenly we create something to grasp. Ink on paper.

Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Bespredmetnaia zhivopis' No80: chernoe na chernom* (Non-objective painting no. 80: black on black), 1918. Oil on canvas, 32 1/4 x 31 1/4" (81.9 x 79.4 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of the artist, through Jay Leyda

Piet Mondrian, *Composition with Yellow, Red, Black, Blue, and Gray*, 1920. Oil on canvas, 20 1/4 x 24" (51.5 x 61 cm). Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 2012 Mondrian/Holtzman Trust, c/o HCR International

All-T'ogapu tunic, Inka, 1450 - 1540 C.E. Camelid fiber and cotton, 35 7/8" x 30". Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collections, Pre-Columbian Collection, Washington, DC.

Piet Mondrian, *Tableau I*, with Red, Black, Blue, and Yellow, 1921. Oil on canvas, 40 9/16 x 39 3/8" (103 x 100 cm). Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, The Hague, 2012

Mondrian/Holtzman Trust, c/o HCR International

Yadupati, *Tantra diagram for computing astronomical periods, used for meditation*, 18<sup>th</sup> Century, India

Stained glass window

Frank Stella, *Moultonville II*, 1966. Fluorescent alkyd and epoxy paints on canvas, 124 x 86 x 4 in., Collection of MR. and Mrs. David Mirvish, Toronto., © 2010 Frank Stella/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo by Steven Sloman.

Kamal ud-Din Behzad, *Yusef vlucht voor Zuleykha* (Joseph and Zulaikha, (Joseph chased by Potiphar's wife), 1488

Theo Van Doesburg with Cornelis Van Eesteren, *Contra-Construction*, 1923. Pencil, gouache, and crayon on transparent paper, 14 3/16 x 14 15/16" (36 x 38 cm). Netherlands Architecture Institute, Rotterdam.

Theo Van Doesburg, *Colour Design for Amsterdam University Hall, View towards Staircase*, 1923. Project architect Cornelis van Eesteren. Pencil, gouache, and collage on paper, 24 7/16" x 56 11/16" (62 x 144 cm). Netherlands Architecture Institute, Rotterdam. Van Eesteren-Fluck & Van Lohuizen Stichting, The Hague

Mir Sayyid 'Ali, *Nighttime in a City*, Watercolour, gold and silver on paper, 1540

Helen Saunders, *Canon*, 1915. Graphite and gouache on wove paper. Collection of the David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago

Three Aspects of the Absolute, folio 1 from the Nath Charit, Bulaki, India, Rajasthan, Jodhpur, 1823 (Samvat 1880). Opaque watercolor, gold, and tin alloy on paper, Mehrangarh Museum Trust RJS 2399

Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Chisty i krasnyi tsvet, chisty i zheltiy tsvet, chisty i sinii tsvet* (Pure red colour, pure yellow colour, pure blue colour), 1921. Oil on canvas, three panels, each: 24 4/8 x 20 11/16" (62.5 x 52.5 cm). A. Rodchenko and V. Stephanova Archive, Moscow.

Yoni from Vong The, An Giang, with lingam from Rach Nui, Long An, both 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> century AD, sandstone - Museum of Vietnamese History - Ho Chi Minh City

Sophie Taeuber-Arp, *Untitled* (Dada Bowl), 1916. Black-lacquered turned wood, 8 1/16 x 5 7/8" (20.4 x 15 cm) Musee d'art moderne et contemporain de Strasbourg

Constantin Brancusi, *Endless Column* (version I), 1918. Oak, 6' 8" x 9' 7/8". The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Tlingit Totem from Alaska displayed in Pioneer Square Seattle

The K'alyaan Totem Pole of the Tlingit Kiks.adi Clan, erected at Sitka National Historical Park to commemorate the lives lost in the 1804 Battle of Sitka

Ying Yu-chien, "Haze Dispersing from around the Mountain Village", 1210-1280

Sesshu Touyou, Preface by Sesshu, praises by Gettō Shūkyō and other five monks (Detail), 1 hanging scroll, Ink on paper, 148.6x32.7, Muromachi period/Meiou 4(1495), Tokyo National Museum

Hans Arp, *Dada*, C. 1920. Ink and pencil on paper, 10 1/2 x 8 3/16" (26.7 x 20.8 cm). Stiftung Hans Arp and Sophie Taeuber-Arp e.V., Remagen-Rolandswerth

Sesshu Touyou, Preface by Sesshu, praises by Gettō Shūkyō and other five monks (Detail), 1 hanging scroll, Ink on paper, 148.6x32.7, Muromachi period/Meiou 4(1495), Tokyo National Museum

Franz Kline, *Butress*, 1956, The Panza Collection, MOCA

Selk'nam tribe body painting, Spiritual ceremony, Photograph by Martin Gusinde for "Culturas Tradicionales, Patagonia 12 Miradas sobre Selknam, Yaganes y Kawesqar" 1923, Laguna de Pescados, Isla Grande, Tierra del Fuego.

Henryk Berlewi, *Mechano-faktura bialo-czerwono-czarna* (White, red and black mechano-faktura), 1924. Gouache on paper, 38 9/16 x 31 7/8" (98 x 81 cm). Muzeum Sztuki, Lodz

Henryk Berlewi, *Mechano-faktura, Kontrasty dynamiczne* (Mechano-faktura, Dynamic contrasts), 1924. Gouache on paper, 32 11/16 x 42 15/16" (83 x 109 cm). Courtesy Galerie

Natalie Seroussi, Paris

Waclaw Szpakowski, *Z serii A:A9* (From the series A:A9), C. 1924. Ink on tracing paper, 8 3/4 x 14 3/4" (23.3 x 37.5 cm). Museum Sztuki, Lodz

Bessie Cogglesshell, *Black and White Red Mesa rug*, 24" x 17"

Waclaw Szpakowski, *Z serii B:B6* (From the series B:B6), C. 1924. Ink on tracing paper, 13 5/16 x 15 7/8" (33.8 x 40.3 cm) Museum Sztuki, Lodz

## FOREWORD

*Really?*  
**ABSTRACTION** may be modernism's greatest innovation. It is now so central to our conception of artistic practice that the time before the idea of an abstract artwork made sense has become hard to imagine, yet when those works first appeared—quite suddenly, around 100 years ago—they took many observers by surprise. Beginning in late 1911 and across the course of the next year, a series of artists including Vasily Kandinsky, Fernand Léger, Robert Delaunay, František Kupka, and Francis Picabia exhibited works that marked the beginning of something radically new: they dispensed with recognizable subject matter. The implications of these opening moves were registered with astonishing rapidity. Within five years, abstraction's practitioners included Hans Arp, Vanessa Bell, Sonia Delaunay-Terk, Arthur Dove, Natalia Goncharova, Marsden Hartley, Paul Klee, Mikhail Larionov, Kazimir Malevich, Franz Marc, Piet Mondrian, Hans Richter, Wyndham Lewis, and more.

*Inventing Abstraction* explores abstraction as both a historical idea and an emergent artistic practice. The story of its sudden flourishing may have something to tell us about the nature of innovation itself: abstraction was not the inspiration of a solitary genius but the product of network thinking—of ideas moving through a nexus of artists and intellectuals working in different media and in far-flung places. Its pioneers were more closely linked than is generally understood. From the start, abstraction was an international phenomenon, as artists and images moved quickly across borders, sharing in a new exhibition and media culture.

*Inventing Abstraction* accordingly takes a transnational perspective: surveying key episodes in abstraction's early history, it includes work made across Eastern and Western Europe and the United States.

The coming of these first abstract pictures was matched by extraordinary developments in other spheres. Sound poetry, non-narrative dance, and atonal music developed in parallel with pictures that no longer pictured; each jettisoned the weight of convention. These new forms of practice suggest how abstraction at its inception may be seen as a cross-media imperative. *Inventing Abstraction* explores the productive relationships among artists and composers, dancers and poets, in establishing a new modern language for the arts. It brings together a wide range of art forms—paintings, drawings, printed matter, books, sculpture, film, photography, sound recordings, music and dance footage—to draw a rich portrait of this watershed moment in which art was wholly reinvented.

Abstraction is a vital subject in The Museum of Modern Art's own history. An important touchstone for this project has been *Cubism and Abstract Art*, a landmark exhibition organized by the Museum's founding director, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., in 1936. The show surveyed the early history of abstraction at a moment when modernist artists were under real threat from totalitarianism in Europe. It had a lasting impact on MoMA's collection: many works were acquired directly from it, and others within the historical framework it shaped. As the Museum's first major exhibition on the early

development of abstraction in seventy-five years, *Inventing Abstraction* offers a chance to reflect on the legacy of MoMA's own practice.

We are grateful to Leah Dickerman, Curator in the Department of Painting and Sculpture, for the conception and organization of this exhibition and book. Masha Chlenova, Curatorial Assistant in the Department of Painting and Sculpture, was her essential partner.

We are especially grateful to the generous supporters of this project and of the Museum's programming in general. *Inventing Abstraction* is made possible by Hanjin Shipping. Major support is provided by the Anna-Maria and Stephen Kellen Foundation, the Mimi and Peter Haas Fund, the Blavatnik Family Foundation, Marie-Josée and Henry Kravis, and Sue and Edgar Wachenheim III, and the exhibition is also supported by an indemnity from the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities. The seminars bringing together scholars in a variety of disciplines in the exhibition's planning stages were made possible by MoMA's Wallis Annenberg Fund for Innovation in Contemporary Art through the Annenberg Foundation.

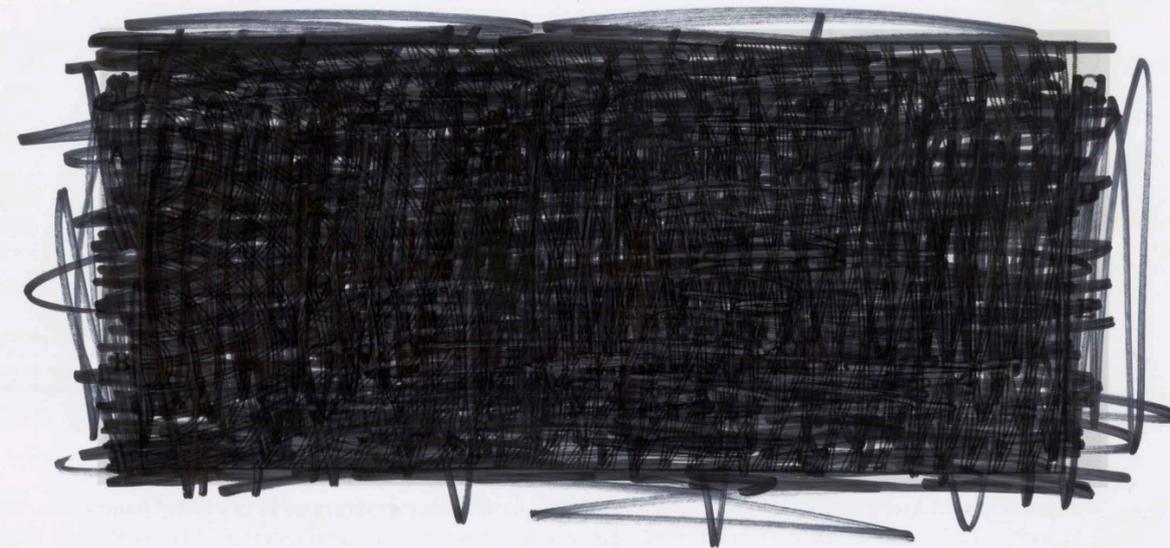
On behalf of the Trustees and staff of the Museum, I wish to acknowledge the lenders—private individuals and museum colleagues—who have entrusted us with the care of their works. Their generosity has in many cases allowed us to exhibit works that have not yet been seen in this country, and in others to provide a new perspective on familiar ones. They have our profound gratitude.

—GLENN D. LOWRY  
Director, The Museum of Modern Art

*It doesn't look far enough*

# RE-INVENTING ABSTRACTION

KOUR POUR



What about the rest of the world?

Is "pure" painting only attainable by Western painters?

Diagram of the pattern of wave interaction obtained by throwing two stones of equal size into a pond at the same instant. From *A Course of Lectures on Natural Philosophy and the Mechanical Arts* (London: Johnson, 1802).

Diagram of the pattern of wave interaction obtained by throwing two stones of equal size into a pond at the same instant. From *A Course of Lectures on Natural Philosophy and the Mechanical Arts* (London: Johnson, 1802).

ROUGHLY ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO, a series of precipitous shifts took place in the cultural sphere that in the end amounted to as great a rewriting of the rules of artistic production as had been seen since the Renaissance. That transformation would fundamentally shape artistic practice in the century that followed. Beginning in late 1911 and across the course of 1912, in several European and American cities, a handful of artists—Vasily Kandinsky, František Kupka, Francis Picabia, Robert Delaunay, Arthur Dove—presented paintings that differed from almost all of those that had preceded them in the long history of the medium in the Western tradition: shunning the depiction of objects in the world, they displayed works with no discernible subject matter. Indeed they abandoned the premise of making a picture of something. “Young painters of the extreme schools,” the poet and critic Guillaume Apollinaire wrote in February 1912, “want to make pure painting, an entirely new art form. It is only at its beginning, and not yet as abstract as it wants to be.”<sup>1</sup>

In the period immediately following, abstraction was proposed many times over, by different artists working in different places and with different philosophical foundations. Its pioneers included Hans Arp, Vanessa Bell, Sonia Delaunay-Terk, Natalia Goncharova, Marsden Hartley, Paul Klee, Mikhail Larionov, Fernand Léger, Kazimir Malevich, Franz Marc, Piet Mondrian, Hans Richter, and Wyndham Lewis. By the eve of World War I, artists producing abstract works could be counted in the dozens. This shift in the frontier of possibility moved so suddenly as to shake the foundations of art as it had been practiced. Observers spoke of the exhilaration and terror of leaping into unknown territory, where comparison with the past was impossible. This evacuation of the object world was, to be sure, hardly a silent disappearance, but rather was accompanied by a shower of celebratory manifestos, lectures, and criticism, a flood of words flung forth perhaps in compensation for their makers’ worry about how the meaning of these pictures might be established.

Scores of earlier images from other Western disciplines—chromatic studies, theological and mediumistic images, cosmogonic images, scientific images (fig. 1)—may resemble abstract art. But these are not art at all, for despite any formal similarity they

Bullshit!



were intended to produce meaning in other discursive frameworks. Within the sphere of modern art, J. M. W. Turner's seascapes (fig. 2), James McNeill Whistler's Nocturnes (fig. 3), Edgar Degas's landscape monoprints, Gustave Moreau's ink drawings and watercolor sketches, and Hermann Obrist's theater sets, among other images, have been held up as important forms of proto-abstraction. But these works do not declare a break with subject matter, even though, in so rigorously defining it in terms of atmospheric and experiential qualities that it is all but obscured, they provide an important foundation for the emergence of abstraction in the twentieth century. (Landscape above all, wrote the art historian Henri Zerner, was "a laboratory for abstract art."<sup>2</sup> This exhibition and book, however, do not, as several previous studies of abstraction have done, attempt to inventory such precedents for abstraction *avant la lettre*, though of course they have bearing on the story being told.<sup>3</sup>

Before December 1911, when Kandinsky exhibited *Komposition V* (Composition V; plate 18) in Munich, in the first exhibition of the *Blaue Reiter*, the artists' group he had co-founded, it seems to have been impossible for artists to step away from a long-held tenet of artistic practice: that paintings describe things in a real or imaginary world. In the years preceding, there was some sense of building consternation around this issue, of possibilities tested and rejected and of ideas yet unrealized, but it was only in the annus mirabilis that followed Kandinsky's showing of *Komposition V* that abstract pictures began to be exhibited publicly as art, and their philosophical justification developed in treatises and criticism. It was only then, one could say, that the idea of an abstract artwork began to make sense. And for some artists and intellectuals, abstraction not only began to seem plausible but took on the character of an imperative.

**TWO STORIES** from the years immediately preceding 1912 convey some sense of how difficult it was to arrive at the novel idea of an abstract picture.

In 1910, while Pablo Picasso was summering at Cadaqués, Spain, he made a small group of strange pictures that looked unlike any that had preceded them. Leaving behind the hillsides of reversible cubes that he had made the previous year in Horta, he now worked

Japanese Ukiyo-e Prints

Tantric art

Chinese landscape painting

NO SHIT...



in an idiom that seemed closer to a diagram (plates 3, 4). His new paintings featured angled planes defined by linear scaffolding that shifted across the work's surface. Only the faintest traces of the structure of the female figure or still life named in the pictures' titles were discernible within. "The Cadaqués images are so difficult to decipher," wrote Picasso's biographer John Richardson, "that even the artist sometimes forgot what a particular image represented."<sup>4</sup> These works seem abstract in all but name.

Picasso's dealer Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler could not reconcile himself, it seems, to the terrifying novelty of these new works: he declared them "unfinished."<sup>5</sup> The Picasso scholar Pierre Daix has noted that while Kahnweiler had the right of first refusal of Picasso's paintings, these particular works went to a rival dealer, Ambroise Vollard—suggesting that Kahnweiler had rejected them.<sup>6</sup> And it seems that Picasso himself—the most nimble-minded, radically innovative artist of the first decade of the twentieth century—also struggled with the implications of these works. In a later conversation reported by his wife Françoise Gilot, Picasso asserted that these "pure" pictures required supplements to function as painting. Referring to the fragmented forms of bodies, musical instruments, and words that began to appear in the Cubist pictures he made immediately after his sojourn in Cadaqués (plates 1, 5), he explained, "I painted them in afterwards. I call them 'attributes.' At that period I was doing painting for its own sake. It was really pure painting, and the composition was done as composition. It was only towards the end... that I brought in the attributes."<sup>7</sup> In the works that followed those almost abstract images made in Cadaqués, Picasso incorporated the shattered forms of representation as if to tether his paintings securely to the world of things. Failure to do so, it seems, threatened painting itself. He would later declare that abstraction was impossible: "There is no abstract art. You always have to begin with something. Afterwards you can remove all appearances of reality, but there is no danger then, anyway, because the idea of the object will have left an indelible mark."<sup>8</sup>

Writing to Marc in October 1911, Kandinsky described Picasso's pictures, which he had seen in photographs sent to him by Kahnweiler, as "split[ting] the subject up and scatter[ing] bits of it all over the picture," an effect that was "frankly false" but nonetheless an auspicious "sign of the enormous struggle toward the immaterial."<sup>9</sup> While Picasso in 1910 could paint a picture approaching abstraction but could not embrace it philosophically, Kandinsky conversely could develop a theoretical rationale for abstraction but could not make the final break. The sheer difficulty of thinking such a radically new idea—thinking within a new paradigm—is evident in the publication history of Kandinsky's hugely influential tract *On the Spiritual in Art* (plate 10).<sup>10</sup> The manuscript existed in draft form as early as 1909. In the first two published editions, which appeared in December 1911 and May 1912 respectively, Kandinsky sets abstraction as a goal, clearly and effectively advocating a practice that would advance "deeper... into this territory."<sup>11</sup> He nonetheless balks in embracing in the present day an art that breaks "the tie that binds us to nature."<sup>12</sup> "Today," he writes, "the artist cannot manage exclusively with purely abstract forms."<sup>13</sup> Indeed, in his paintings of that date, referential form is almost but not quite effaced. But his opinion changed in the next two years (as did his painting), and by 1914, in a manuscript for a planned fourth edition of *On the Spiritual in Art* that was forestalled by World War I, he edited this paragraph to allow for the possibility of a fully abstract art. "Today," the new phrasing read, "only a few artists can manage with purely abstract forms."<sup>14</sup> In a lecture written (but never delivered) some years later, the artist commented on the difficulty of this intellectual passage: "As yet, objects did not want to—and were not to—disappear altogether from my pictures. First, it is impossible to conjure up maturity artificially at any particular time... I myself was not yet sufficiently mature to be able to experience purely abstract form without bridging the gap by means of objects."<sup>15</sup>

Let's not over exaggerate

IN 1911, HOWEVER, THE ASSAULT WAS LAUNCHED.

That December in Munich, Kandinsky exhibited *Komposition V*, a monumental manifesto for abstraction that maintained only the most inscrutable traces of figural references. That same month, he published *On the Spiritual in Art*, his loquacious paean to the ineffable. Three Kandinsky works—none quite so ambitious or so determined in their evacuation of referential content as *Komposition V*—were shown a few months later in Paris, at the Salon des Indépendants, in March-May of 1912.<sup>16</sup> Delaunay, who had been corresponding with Kandinsky since late 1911,<sup>17</sup> and had studied French translations of *On the Spiritual of Art* made by Sonia Delaunay-Terk and Elisabeth Epstein,<sup>18</sup> understood these works to herald the birth of abstraction.<sup>19</sup> “This inquiry into pure painting is the current problem,” wrote Delaunay to Kandinsky. “I do not know any painters in Paris who are truly seeking this ideal world.”<sup>20</sup> Soon afterward the French artist made his own near-abstract works, his *Fenêtres* (Windows) series (plates 31–33), and showed them in July 1912 in the *Ausstellung des Modernen Bundes*, in the *Kunsthhaus Zürich*, at the invitation of Bund co-founder Arp (who had in turn obtained his address from Kandinsky).<sup>21</sup> These works similarly announced a new form of picture-making to key viewers in German-speaking realms. The Swiss artist Klee, who saw the Zurich show, proclaimed in a review that Delaunay “has created the type of autonomous picture, which leads, without motifs from nature, to a completely abstract life form. A structure of plastic life, *nota bene*, almost as far removed as a Bach fugue is from a carpet.”<sup>22</sup>

And then in October of that year, at the Salon d'Automne in Paris, a traditional forum for scandalous artistic gestures, the Czech painter Kupka dispensed with all lingering hesitations, displaying two paintings, *Amorpha, chromatique chaude* (*Amorpha*, warm chromatic) and a second, more monumental one called *Amorpha, fugue à deux couleurs* (*Amorpha*, fugue in two colors; plate 24), that declared independence from traditional subject matter. The paintings were filmed for Gaumont newsreels and shown across Europe and the United States.<sup>23</sup> For some critics these works only offered proof of the dangers of such a departure: Gustave Kahn called them “games which are not within everyone’s reach,” and Louis Arnould Grémilly asked, “With their clear musical titles, don’t they demonstrate the difficulty with titles and the worry of escaping from painting for painting?”<sup>24</sup>

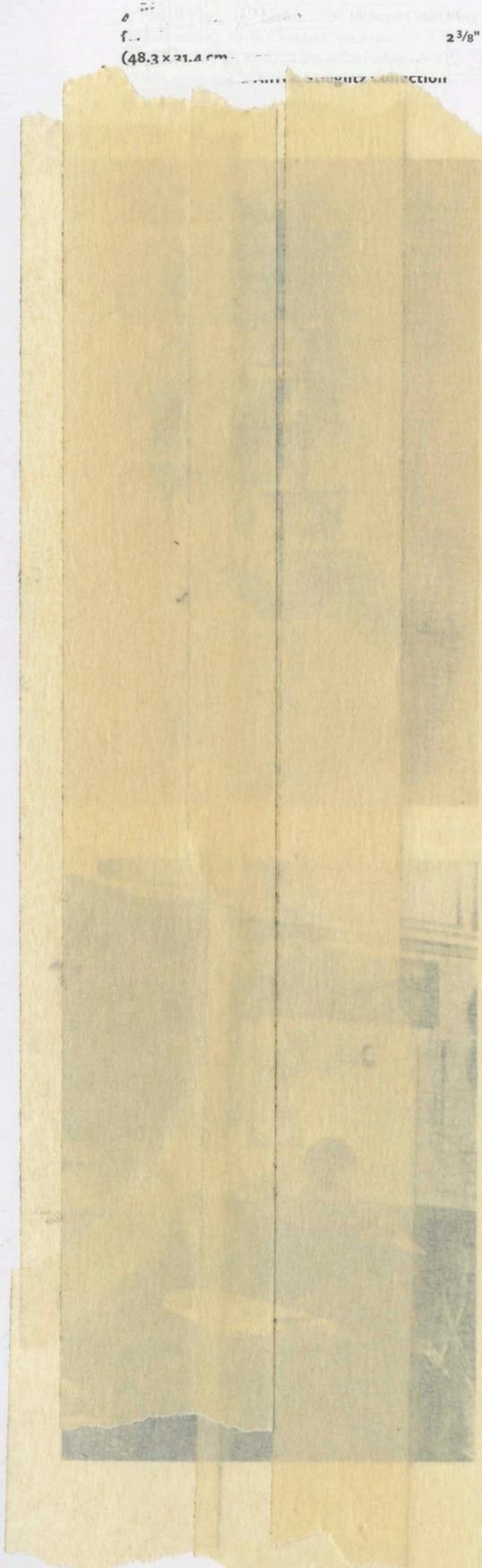
In considering Kupka’s role as the one who took this particularly public step in breaching convention, it may be relevant that he was something of an outsider in the sphere in which he worked: he was trained in Prague and Vienna in a heady Symbolist milieu. Yet in Paris, far from being an isolated émigré figure he is frequently portrayed as in the literature, he was a member of artistic circles in which some of the most experimental ideas about avant-garde practice were discussed (giving him an insider/outsider status that seems particularly fertile for paradigm-shifting thought): he lived next door to Raymond Duchamp-Villon, and during 1911 and 1912 was a sometime guest in the Sunday salons held at Jacques Villon’s house in Puteaux, frequented by a changing cast of characters including Marcel Duchamp (Duchamp-Villon’s and Villon’s brother), the Delaunays, Picabia, Léger, Apollinaire, Gino Severini, Albert Gleizes, Emile Le Fauconnier, and Jean Metzinger.<sup>25</sup> Although those who gathered there have often been labeled the “Puteaux group,” and identified with the rigid second-generation Cubism of Gleizes and Metzinger, something else was clearly also in the conversational mix: a core group of participants in these Sunday salons were to play important roles in abstraction’s early history.<sup>26</sup>

This was a misunderstanding

Try India

Autonomous?

Is this even possible?



5...  
th...  
(48.3 x 21.4 cm) 2 3/8"  
which Kupka's *Amorpha*...  
The work's...  
Westport, Connecticut...  
European modernism...  
Pica...  
thing...  
bleu...  
show...  
the...  
on.



Seems that way

They should have backdated them a couple hundred years

white westerners

**THE INVENTION OF ABSTRACTION** is usually told through stories about individual actors, stories contained in discrete narrative silos, each with some claim to priority. One example is Kandinsky's famous reminiscence, often repeated in the literature: he tells of seeing one of his own paintings leaning on its side, at dusk, sometime after his arrival in Munich in 1896. Incapable of discerning its content, he was nonetheless captivated by the forms and colors of this mysterious work—an event prompting the realization “that objects harmed my pictures.”<sup>36</sup> Yet despite the epiphanic quality of this story, it took Kandinsky years more to produce an abstract picture himself. And it is perhaps more significant that he recounted the tale in 1913, just as abstraction had become a public fact.

It was this drive to speak of individual priority in invention that led the makers of so many of the early works in this exhibition and catalogue to backdate them, sometimes to several years earlier than they were actually made (plates 22, 30, 35, 129, 135, 136, 310).<sup>37</sup> Indeed, there is something else misleading about speaking of the invention of abstraction through stories of solitary protagonists: what we have already heard here suggests that abstraction was incubated, with a momentum that builds up and accelerates, through a relay of ideas and acts among a nexus of players, those who make these artistic gestures and those who recognize and proclaim their significance to a broader audience. It was an invention with multiple first steps, multiple creators, multiple heralds, and multiple rationales.

In its emergence within a rich social network, abstraction resembles many other intellectual developments studied by sociologists. In his book *The Sociology of Philosophies*, Randall Collins looks at the social dimension of innovation, countering the Romantic ideal of the genius as an inspired loner. Instead, he argues, innovation is found in groups: it arises out of social interaction—conversation, sharing ideas, validation and competition. Moreover, the right sort of group, Collins suggests, can radicalize intellectual innovation, prompting individuals to take positions far more extreme, far more convention defying, than they would alone.<sup>38</sup> This sort of productive sociability may also lead to multiple, almost simultaneous inventions of the same or related things: many investigators converging on the same finding is a common pattern of scientific discovery, as the sociologist of science Robert K. Merton has suggested.<sup>39</sup> Abstraction, with almost simultaneous “first” pictures appearing in a scattering of places, would seem to follow this model. The answer to the question “How do you think a truly radical thought?” seems to be: you think it through a network.

Abstraction's pioneers, despite being far flung, are far more interconnected than is generally acknowledged. Certain recognized points of contact suggest this: the revelatory exhibition of Italian Futurism organized by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti at the Bernheim-Jeune gallery, Paris, in 1912, whose visitors included Duchamp, Picabia, the Russian artist Aleksandra Ekster, and the American artist Joseph Stella, even before the show traveled to London and then around Europe; the huge *International Exhibition of Modern Art* held at the New York Armory on Lexington Avenue in 1913, which mixed European and American artists and pulled in the crowds; Vladimir Tatlin's visit to Picasso's Paris studio in March 1914, where he saw the Spanish artist's constructed sculptures and then returned home to display “assemblages of materials” of his own in his studio in May, more than a year before exhibiting his famous *Uglovye kontr-reliefy* (Corner counter-reliefs; fig. 16, plate 219) at the *0.10* exhibition in Petrograd in December 1915; the arrival of Marinetti in Russia in 1914, to simultaneous acclaim and disparagement so divisive as to precipitate the dissolution of Russian Cubo-Futurism and the formation of its radically innovative successor movements;<sup>40</sup> and later,



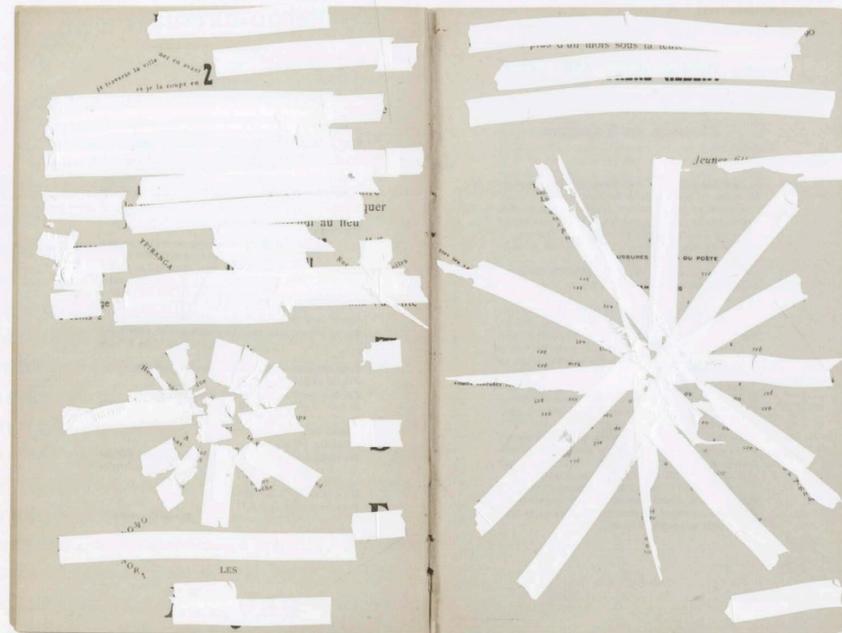
Proof that artists of this time period had access to other cultures + histories

in 1922, the *Erste Russische Kunstausstellung* (First Russian art exhibition) at the Van Diemen gallery in Berlin, organized by David Shterenberg and El Lissitzky, which introduced a Western audience to the Soviet avant-garde after the borders had been closed to the cultural products of the new Bolshevik state in the years since the Russian Revolution of 1917.

There are also many less-well-rehearsed examples of the dissemination of ideas in the history of early abstraction. The Russian literary scholar Aleksandr Smirnov, for example, an old friend and distant cousin of Delaunay-Terk's from her native St. Petersburg, visited the Delaunays in France during the summers of 1912 and 1913, spending time at their country house in Louveciennes. Returning to St. Petersburg, Smirnov spread the word of the new art he had seen in France, lecturing in July 1913 at the Brodiachia Sobaka (Stray dog), an avant-garde gathering place in the years before the Revolution, on Robert and Sonia Delaunay's work and the theory of simultaneous contrasts. “Poster-poems” by Delaunay-Terk, which combined bright arcs of color with an array of verbal fragments, hung on the walls,<sup>41</sup> and Smirnov showed a copy of *La Prose du Transsibérien et de la petite Jehanne de France* (Prose of the Trans-Siberian and of little Joan of France, 1913; plate 41) that he had brought with him.<sup>42</sup> Some nonmeetings had a charged significance too: Mondrian, it seems, was so eager to avoid Picasso's charismatic influence—and insistence that painting represent things—that he would recall taking pains to avoid meeting the Spanish artist in the years 1912–14, when he lived in Paris. “Let them call it too abstract,” he wrote of his work in a letter to Theo van Doesburg, his defiance belying the strength of his feelings on the subject.<sup>43</sup> It is a distinctly modern interconnectedness that emerges here—one that is decidedly international, facilitating intellectual dialogue between established cultural capitals like Paris, host to an international community of intellectuals, and centers in Central and Eastern Europe and the United States.

Abstraction's network was fostered in the years immediately before World War I by a new modern culture of connectivity. In trains, automobiles, and steamships, people were travelling internationally in numbers far greater than ever before. National boundaries became porous as people crossed them with new ease—and until the outbreak of World War I, most European countries had minimal passport requirements.<sup>44</sup> Telegraphs, telephones, and radio relayed news of events quickly across the globe. The sinking of the *Titanic* in 1912, thanks to wireless telegraphy, was not only followed achingly by those on ships just out of reach of the ocean liner but was also one of the first news stories to be reported virtually simultaneously with the event. These same communication technologies allowed for the synchronization of times and clocks across distance, which facilitated the establishment of coordinated international markets and set the stage for the vertiginous growth of a modern speculative economy and commodity culture.<sup>45</sup> In Paris in 1912, Henri Poincaré hosted an international conference that established a method for transmitting accurate radio time signals around the world, and on July 1, 1913, the first time signal to be broadcast globally was sent from the Eiffel Tower, a key step in adopting a universal standard time.<sup>46</sup> All of this fed a more international, global sense of one's world. The network of sociability built by transit pathways, the proliferation of print media, and new forms of communication allowed for the movement of ideas and images across a broad terrain, a development crucial in abstraction's incubation.

Within the art world specifically, the idea of a transnational avant-garde was fostered by the rampant proliferation of journals. Art historian David Cottington estimates that there were approximately 200 “little reviews” of art and culture in Paris alone in the decade preceding World War I.<sup>47</sup> Certain forums were particularly significant, one such being the *Blaue Reiter* almanac (fig. 6), founded by Kandinsky and Marc and first published in Munich in May 1912, then again in a widely distributed second edition in 1914. Marc wrote in the prospectus for the publication that it would “show the latest movements in French, German and Russian painting. Subtle connections are revealed between modern and Gothic and



primitive art, connections with Africa and the vast Orient, with the highly expressive, spontaneous folk and children's art, and especially with the most recent musical developments in Europe and the new ideas for theater of our time."<sup>48</sup> In its very conception, then, the almanac aimed at a dissolution of boundaries—between national schools, temporal realms, and media. Kandinsky declared it his goal to “show that something was happening everywhere.”<sup>49</sup> An emergent modern exhibition culture—for this was the dawn of international loan shows—played a parallel function: pictures moved across borders to new audiences; images were distributed through print media; people took off in trains and cars. Kandinsky and Marc conceived the *Blaue Reiter* this way, with almanac and exhibiting society as complements to each other. By September 1911, Kandinsky was corresponding with artists in cities throughout Europe, soliciting both pictures for exhibitions and essays and images for publication.

In bringing people into contact, some figures play a disproportionate role. The author Malcolm Gladwell uses the term “connectors” to describe charismatic, socially adept people with contacts dispersed among many different social pools, and he stresses their importance in understanding how certain ideas may become suddenly, precipitously popular.<sup>50</sup> Connectors do the social work of many, facilitating relays of ideas among their broad acquaintance. One key actor in the development of abstraction was Kandinsky himself; another was certainly Apollinaire. The poet began to publish art criticism in 1910, following a long line of French writers who had done so, including Stendhal, Honoré de Balzac, Stéphane Mallarmé, and the brothers Edmond and Jules de Goncourt. Apollinaire quickly established himself as a formidable master of the new print-media world. In the period from 1910 to 1914, he wrote a column that appeared most days in *L'Intransigeant*, a paper with a daily print run of about 50,000 copies; and another for *Paris-Journal*, with a daily run of 40,000 copies.<sup>51</sup> In 1912, with friends, he launched a review of his own, *Les Soirées de Paris*,<sup>52</sup> which published poetry and cultural commentary of all sorts—reviews, feuilletons, and Apollinaire's polemical pieces on the direction of painting.

With these combined forums, Apollinaire played a key role in publicizing the incremental developments in the new modes of artistic abstraction. And in some respects he may have precipitated them: in the Francophone context, even before Kupka's and Picabia's audacious showings in the fall of 1912, it was Apollinaire who threw down the gauntlet, declaring in the first, February 1912 issue of *Les Soirées de Paris* that “the new painters paint



pictures which no longer have any real subject matter” (*sujet véritable*).<sup>53</sup> On the subject of Apollinaire, Delaunay wrote coyly to Kandinsky in a letter of April 3, 1912, “I will speak to you sometime about the subject in painting, about an exciting conversation at the home of Apollinaire, who has begun to believe in us.”<sup>54</sup>

For all Apollinaire's media savvy, his personal social reach was perhaps more remarkable. Picabia's wife, Gabrielle Buffet, considered Apollinaire “the most social, the most well-known, the most far-reaching man of his time.”<sup>55</sup> He was a close friend of Picasso's, the one who introduced him to Georges Braque in 1907.<sup>56</sup> He recommended that Kupka read the color theory of Paul Signac.<sup>57</sup> He often accompanied Picabia on road trips in one of the latter's magnificent fleet of cars, and Buffet recalls the pair's endless discussions of abstraction.<sup>58</sup> He lived for a while with the Delaunays in late 1912, a key moment for our topic, and it was he, too, who introduced Sonia Delaunay-Terk to the poet Blaise Cendrars, an encounter that would result in their collaboration on *La Prose du Transsibérien* (plate 41).<sup>59</sup> In January 1913, he traveled with Robert Delaunay to Germany for the painter's show there at the Sturm gallery in Berlin, where he held court with the German Expressionists and gave an influential lecture on modern painting;<sup>60</sup> for the occasion, the duo published a catalogue of Delaunay's paintings, prefaced with a dedication (reproduced in the present volume on the half title page) and a poem, “*Les Fenêtres*” (The windows), by Apollinaire. When a delegation of Italian Futurists made an extended visit to Paris, he put up the poet-painter Carlo Carrà in his offices at *Les Soirées de Paris*, and the two saw each other almost daily,<sup>61</sup> then produced graphically innovative free verse in quick succession—Apollinaire the first *calligramme* (fig. 7), Carrà *parole in libertà* (plate 112).<sup>62</sup> (He even managed to broker a gallery contract between the Italian and Kahnweiler.)<sup>63</sup> Through Picabia, Apollinaire met the Mexican artist Marius de Zayas, who was scouting for Stieglitz in Paris in 1914, and whose rapturous report of the meeting prompted Stieglitz to begin an exchange of journals with Apollinaire through the mail. Not surprisingly, Stieglitz's journal 291 (fig. 8), appearing in 1915, was modeled in part on *Les Soirées de Paris* (fig. 7).<sup>64</sup>

The network through which the idea of abstraction spread is suggested in this book in a diagram (front endpapers), made with a tip of the hat to the famous chart that graced the cover of Alfred H. Barr, Jr.'s catalogue for his *Cubism and Abstract Art* exhibition, at The Museum of Modern Art in 1936 (plate 452). Vectors link individuals who knew each other, suggesting the unexpected density of contacts among abstraction's pioneers. Key

connectors can be discerned: they appear at the center of a burst of rays and include Kandinsky, Apollinaire, Stieglitz, Marinetti, and Tristan Tzara. Perhaps not surprisingly, at least on reflection, what many of these individuals have in common is the fact that they served, among their other roles, as editors of little reviews, building a network in their cross-border correspondence, commissioning manuscripts, requesting reproductions, and soliciting support.

## IV

APOLLINAIRE WAS PERHAPS THE FIRST to give a name to this new phenomenon, distinguishing it from a generalized Cubism just weeks after Kupka displayed his *Amorpha* paintings at the Salon d'Automne, though he did not mention Kupka by name. The term he bestowed—Orphism—was both awkward and decidedly anachronistic: it paid homage to the mythical Greek poet/musician Orpheus, who had appeared in one of Apollinaire's poems of 1911 as an avatar of "pure poetry."<sup>65</sup> Evoking too the Orphic cults and the Alexandrians, the writers of the classical period who fascinated Apollinaire, it suggested a fusing of ancient mystery and modern image.<sup>66</sup> A spate of appellations for this new form of picture-making soon followed: pure painting (Apollinaire, Delaunay, Kandinsky, and the critic Maurice Raynal), new pictorial realism and variations thereof (Delaunay, Léger, Malevich, and Mondrian), objectless painting (Klee and Malevich in German and Russian respectively)—each indicative of subtle shifts in philosophical orientation.<sup>67</sup> The artists pursuing nonrepresentational painting splintered into an array of grouplets with neologistic self-nominations like "Rayism," "Synchronism," "Suprematism," "Unism," and so forth. Even so, as abstract pictures began to appear, the difficulty that observers and participants apparently had in finding a suitable name for them suggests how they continued to defy easy categorization.

The word that we have come to use as shorthand for painting that jettisons the depiction of things, the one that I use here—abstraction—had been in existence long before this moment. Georges Roque and Jean-Claude Lebensztejn have recently traced its evolution from early senses as a verbal act meaning "to remove," "to isolate."<sup>68</sup> By the sixteenth century, the word had the sense of "considering in isolation," of "separating accident from substance" (Lebensztejn), so that one might, for example, begin to define the "abstract sciences" as those removed from practical application or empirical study—that is, from real-world concerns. Here abstraction functions as an operation, the act of abstracting one thing from another, and this understanding is still present in early abstract works in which traces of descriptive subject matter abound. At times the figure seems to be aggressively effaced, layered under paint applied in a different mode (Kupka's *Mme Kupka dans les verticales* [Mme. Kupka among verticals, 1910–11; plate 25] or Léger's *Femme en bleu*); at others, shattered fragments of recognizable elements emerge as if to maintain ties between the artwork and things in the world (Delaunay's *Fenêtres* or Kandinsky's *Komposition V*), or vestiges of a natural or figurative motif seem to provide an armature for a new type of painting (Picabia's *Source*, Morton Schamberg's *Figure (Geometric Patterns)* [1913; plate 80], Mondrian's "The Trees" [1912; plate 252]). These elements are common enough to suggest that evacuating all ties to the natural world was not key to the models of abstraction first proposed around 1912.

When the term "abstraction" does appear in the sphere of art, in the nineteenth century, it was often deployed pejoratively to mean overly intellectual or theoretical. Charles Clément, for example, writing in 1868, described the work of the followers of Jacques-Louis David as characterized by "a tense style, an overspecialized search for shape which can only lead

to a kind of abstraction—to a coldness inevitable in conceptions which are determined by completely false and rigid pictorial ideas."<sup>69</sup> Yet in an essay of the same year, Charles Baudelaire broached a new sense of abstraction as a language separate from nature, humanly created and therefore essentially artificial: "In nature there is neither line nor color. Line and color have been created by man. They are abstractions. . . . The pleasures we derive in them are of a different sort, yet they are perfectly equal to and absolutely independent of the subject of the picture."<sup>70</sup> Wilhelm Worringer's book *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* (Abstraction and empathy), of 1908—actually written in 1906, as a doctoral thesis—reintroduced the term at a moment in which it resonated with conversations within the international avant-garde. Although Worringer did not speak of contemporary art, he described a "will to abstraction" in both primitive and modern societies, a common expression of anxiety and vulnerability in relation to an external world not confidently mastered. The "aim of abstraction"—here Worringer picked up on the meaning of the word as an isolating operation—was "to wrest the object of the external world out of its natural context, out of the unending flux of being, to purify it of all its dependence upon life, i.e. of everything about it that was arbitrary, to render it necessary and irrefragable, to approximate it to its absolute value."<sup>71</sup> The text had great impact, especially in German avant-garde circles around Berlin's Sturm gallery; its importance for Kandinsky is signaled in his declaration of "our sympathy, our understanding, our inner feeling for the primitives" on the opening page of *On the Spiritual in Art*,<sup>72</sup> and his use of the term "abstraction" in that essay probably also shows its influence. Some of the connotations Worringer found in the "will to abstraction"—separation from the world, purity, arbitrariness, ideas of the absolute—have likewise lingered.

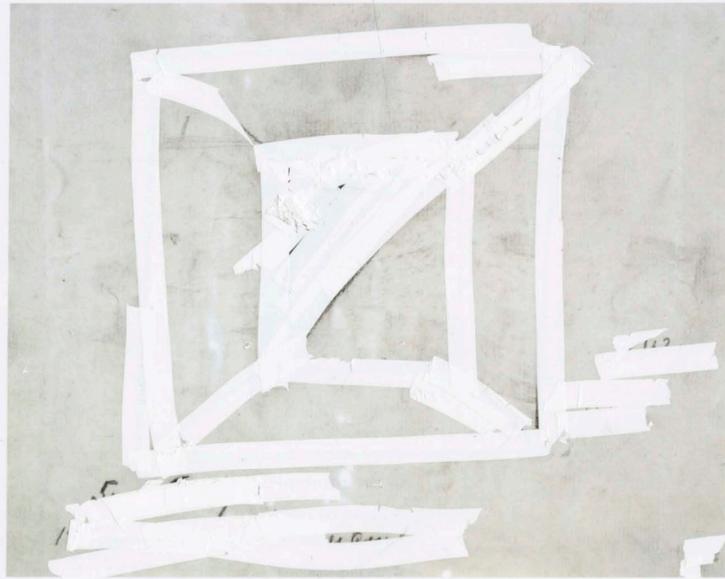
## V

THE PUBLIC APPEARANCE OF THE FIRST ABSTRACT PAINTINGS was matched by equally momentous developments in other spheres. New types of music celebrated sound, independent of compositional or harmonic development; Futurist *parole in libertà* (words in liberty), Russian *zaum* (transrational poetry), and Dadaist sound poetry privileged the graphic and aural quality of language over communicative comprehensibility; and dance abandoned its traditional grounding in costumed narrative to stress the kinesthetic movement of the body. Scholars have long noted the historical coincidence of these phenomena but not often the fact that they were deeply linked, not only through their similar challenges to the conventions of their respective genres but also through important relationships among key figures in these different disciplines, relationships that facilitated the movement of ideas across media.

Marc tells a famous story about Kandinsky's embrace of abstraction.<sup>73</sup> He first met the Russian artist in Munich, at a New Year's Eve party celebrating the incoming year of 1911. That night they began an intense and productive friendship that would include the cofounding of the *Blaue Reiter* group and the publication of the *Blaue Reiter* almanac. Two days later, on January 2, 1911, these new friends, along with Aleksei Jawlensky, Marianne Werefkin, and Kandinsky's companion, Gabriele Münter, attended a concert of music by the Viennese composer Arnold Schoenberg. The crowd was dumbfounded but the artists were dazzled; over drinks after the concert, they excitedly discussed the congruence they recognized between Schoenberg's music, his theories (his writing had been published in the program), and Kandinsky's painting. On January 14, in a letter to the artist August Macke, Marc wrote of the evening, "Can you imagine a music in which tonality (that is, the adherence

Sure was...





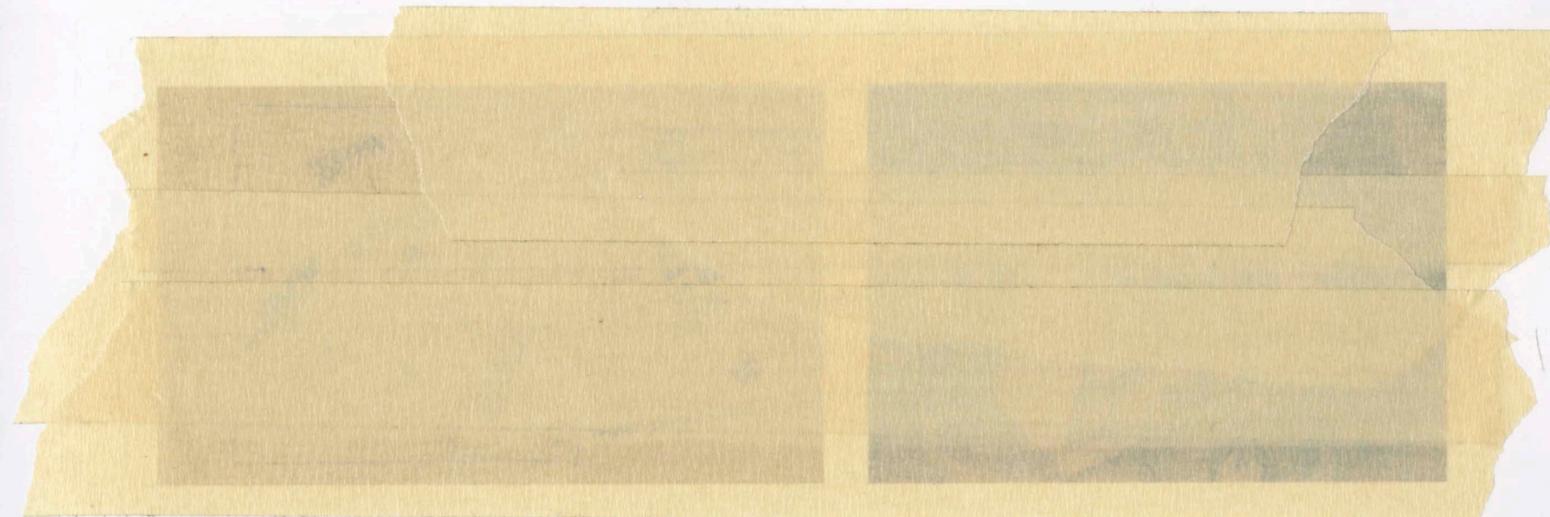
Music in particular was often invoked as a way of rationalizing abstraction to a public, as a way of explaining how it might be understood. When a *New York Times* correspondent covering the “latest of painting cults” visited Kupka’s Neuilly studio in October 1913, the artist explained, “Music is the only art of sounds that are not in nature and almost entirely created. . . . [Man] created writings, he created the aeroplane and the locomotive. Therefore, why may he not create in painting and sculpture independently of the forms and colors of the world about him?”<sup>84</sup>

Actual structural borrowings from music occur less frequently in the art of these years than analogies between music and art do in critical explanations of abstraction; yet at a moment when no rules for this new form of picture-making had yet been established, music played a key role for several of the first-generation abstract artists in suggesting how an abstract picture might be organized.<sup>85</sup> Knowing the importance of Richard Wagner for Kandinsky,<sup>86</sup> for example, it is easy to imagine that the *informe* idiom making its debut in *Komposition V*, where unbounded patches of color are loosely held together by whiplash lines, took its cue from the composer’s punctuation of melting forms with repeating leitmotifs.<sup>87</sup> Klee, himself a gifted musician for whom Bach was central, gravitated to grid forms that present the artwork as pattern, a nonhierarchical matrix of discrete units: here, repetitions, inversions, mirrorings, and intervals resonate with the structure of a fugue (plate 369).

Poetry likewise offered insights. It is far more than coincidence that so many of abstraction’s pioneers wrote experimental or sound poetry: the list includes Kandinsky, Arp, Lewis, Picabia, Malevich, Van Doesburg, Kurt Schwitters, and Olga Rozanova. Malevich collaborated with avant-garde poets from 1909 on, and the period shortly before and after his invention of Suprematism in June 1915 was a time of particularly intense poetic experimentation for him.<sup>88</sup> In one hand-drawn visual poem, likely made in 1916, with the inscription “*prografachnik*” (graph-drawing),<sup>89</sup> he arrayed word fragments across a sheet of graph paper, containing them within a square frame that evoked pictorial space (fig. 13). Underscoring the congruence between this and other poems and both music and painting, he wrote to Matiushin, in a letter enclosing an example, that he had created “notes-letters [that] express masses of sound” and had “distributed them freely in space just like in painterly Suprematism.”<sup>90</sup> The image begins to suggest that he was thinking of poetry when he plotted his new paintings: the sonic properties of phonemes, the graphic appearance of letters, and pictorial form began to take on a kind of interchangeability. Tatlin directed and designed the sets for Klebnikov’s play *Zangezi* in 1923 (fig. 14), and spoke of the playwright’s shattered syntax as a motivating model: “The performance of *Zangezi* is based

Islamic art →

Vladimir MATIUSHIN. Stage design for acts 1 and 2 of the opera *Pobeda nad solntsem* (Victory over the Sun), 1913. Pencil on paper. 21.5 x 27.5 cm. St. Petersburg, Russian Museum of Music and Music.



on the principle: the word is the building unit, the material is the unit of organized space. . . . Parallel to his word construction I decided to introduce a material construction.”<sup>91</sup> The approach in each case is different, but all of these artists used poetic experimentation as a way of pushing the boundaries of communication, testing the elasticity of representation, and creating links between verbal play and visual practice.

## VI

**WHAT CHANGES?** Why is an abstract picture conceptually impossible in 1910, then by 1912 embraced by a handful of protagonists? What accounts for this historical shift?

Of course it is difficult to establish truly causal relationships between historical events and cultural phenomena, though it is plausible to say that social, political, and economic shifts established the terrain in which abstraction might thrive. And it’s a good cocktail-party game to ask students of modernism why abstraction happened at this moment in time. The answers are vastly different, inherently partial, and revealing of the proclivities of one’s respondents. Cars, photography, relativity, and the death of god haunt scholarly explanations of the emergence of abstraction, and together reveal a broader sense of modern culture in dramatic transformation.

At one level we might speak of broad epistemological shifts in the structure of modern thinking. The nature of perception was being redefined across many disciplines; by 1912, one’s ability to describe the world in terms of a firm correspondence between what was seen and what was known had been thoroughly shaken. New physiological theories of vision pointed to the fissure between the external world and our internal corporeal and psychological representations of it. In a related philosophical move, Edmund Husserl challenged the Cartesian idea that perception takes place in the mind of the observer, whose experience is universal, and argued instead that it is embedded in the relation between the perceiver and the thing perceived. Such theories herald the disappearance of the idea of an objective, detached observer who can watch phenomena unfold at a distance.

In science, empirical methodologies were supplemented by new, nonempirical ones, most notably the theory of relativity and quantum physics. As Peter Galison has described, non-Euclidean mathematics, which provided a foundation for Albert Einstein’s theories of relativity, suggest a model for these fundamental structural changes in modern thought.<sup>92</sup> Euclidean mathematics describe real or plausibly real objects in the world. Non-Euclidean mathematics no longer do so, but rather create a structure of relations articulated in a formula: one can speak, for example, of the twelfth dimension, a concept that is a mathematical progression rather than a descriptive tool. If the early twentieth century is the end of the era of substantive thinking, it is the beginning of an era of relational thought.

Oh please tell me why!

Vladimir MATIUSHIN. *Prografachnik* (graph-drawing), 1915. Pencil on graph paper. 6.5 x 16.5 cm. Kharkov, Ukraine, State Museum of Art and Culture.

Vladimir TATLIN. Stage design for Vellan Klebnikov’s play *Zangezi*, 1923. Charcoal on paper. 29 x 20 cm (11 1/4 x 7 7/8 in). The State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.

Similarly, the semiotic theories of language developed by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, and published posthumously by his students in 1916, offered a radical critique of the conception of language as an act of naming—applying one word to one thing, and assuming that there was a natural link between the two. For Saussure, the relationship between the component parts of the sign—the phonic or graphic signifier and the ideational signified—was arbitrary. He instead described language as a system: meaning was made in the relation between units. Russian formalist critics, whose work emerged from the artistic avant-garde as much as from academic disciplines, and who had great influence on the artists in their midst, developed congruent principles around literature, conceiving texts not as unmediated content but as formal systems structured by interdependent devices. The influence of these broad intellectual developments on the artists who would make abstract pictures was not necessarily direct, though they often showed keen interest in such topics. But such shifts in the structure of thinking offer some sense of why, in the second decade of the twentieth century, it may have seemed plausible that images would no longer be naturally linked to things in the world, but might operate instead as units within the system of a practice, or as statements within a larger discursive field—as “signs circulating without a ‘convertible’ base in the world of nature,” as Rosalind Krauss has put it.<sup>93</sup>

The emergent modern media culture heightened common awareness of the artificiality and pliability of codes of representation. Telegraphy produced a radical reduction of communication to binary system.<sup>94</sup> The gramophone transformed auditory experience, severing the voice from the body of the speaker, allowing the listener to hear a voice that could not hear in return, mixing music with ambient noise on an equivalent plane.<sup>95</sup> Cinematic effects put on exuberant display the malleability of time and space, reversing action by running film backward, using parallel editing to show simultaneous responses to an event, and moving inanimate objects through forms of pixilation. Photography was dramatically changing the way people represented and experienced both their personal and their collective history—indeed many commentators on the emergence of abstraction have focused on the permeation of the public sphere by photographic images during these years. The logic offered is a theory of displacement: since painting no longer had to do mimetic work, this function being usurped by the camera image, it was liberated for other tasks.<sup>96</sup> But mechanical reproduction may also have put the artifice of mimetic representation on full display, undermining it as a source of authority, certainty, and authenticity.

In the sphere of art itself, perhaps the key precipitating factor for the development of abstraction was Cubism. While Picasso himself refused to accept the idea of an abstract painting, for many painters and critics abstraction was the lesson of Cubism. Looking at pictures by Picasso and Braque on exhibit in London in the crucial year of 1912, the year in which the ground was ready, Roger Fry wrote, “They do not seek to imitate form, but to create form; not to imitate life, but to find an equivalent for life.... In fact, they aim not at illusion but at reality. The logical extreme of such a method would undoubtedly be the attempt to give up all resemblance to natural form, and to create a purely abstract language of form—a visual music; and the later works of Picasso show this clearly enough.”<sup>97</sup>

Mondrian’s understanding of the logical implications of Cubism provoked in him a form of oedipal disappointment with the Cubist artists’ inability to see the path forward as clearly as he did. “For a time I was much influenced by them,” he wrote. “Gradually I became aware that Cubism did not accept the logical consequences of its own discoveries; it was not developing abstraction toward its ultimate goal: the expression of pure reality.”<sup>98</sup> Yet among those who pioneered abstraction, Mondrian was hardly alone in saying that Cubism provided its conceptual foundation. For Malevich, Cubism clarified the arena for new work: “Regarding Cubism the brilliant solution to our problems, the liberation from objectness, we move into space, color and time,” he wrote. “It is with these three worlds that we will

I think it goes back much further than Cubism, but o.k.

So radical.....

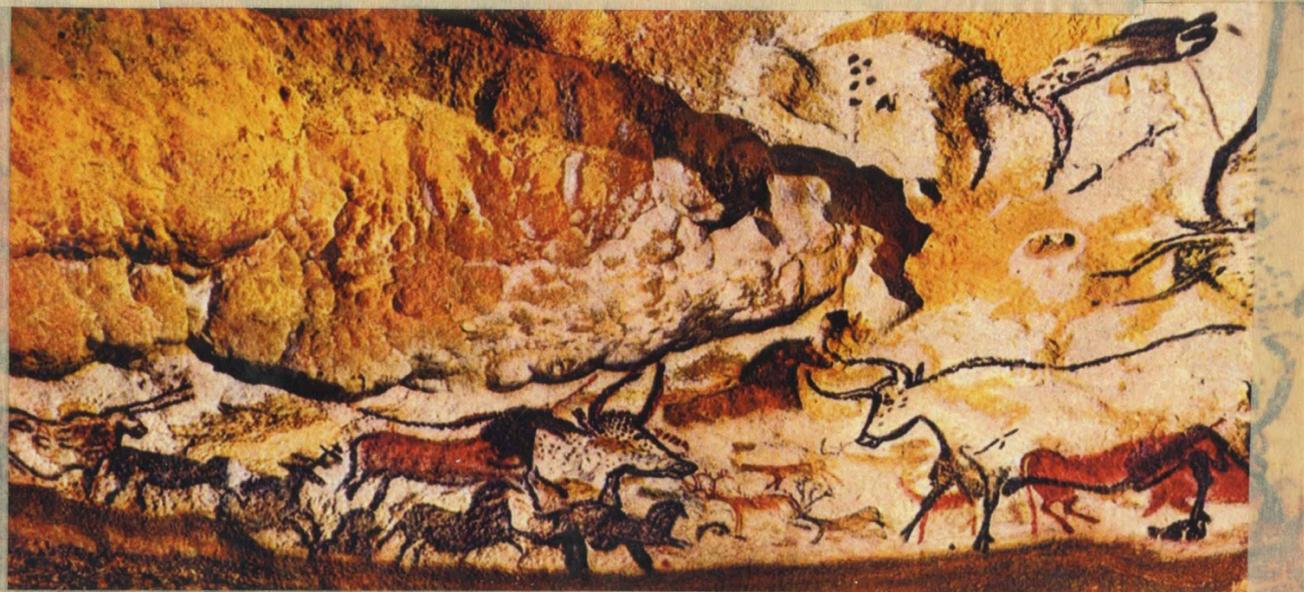
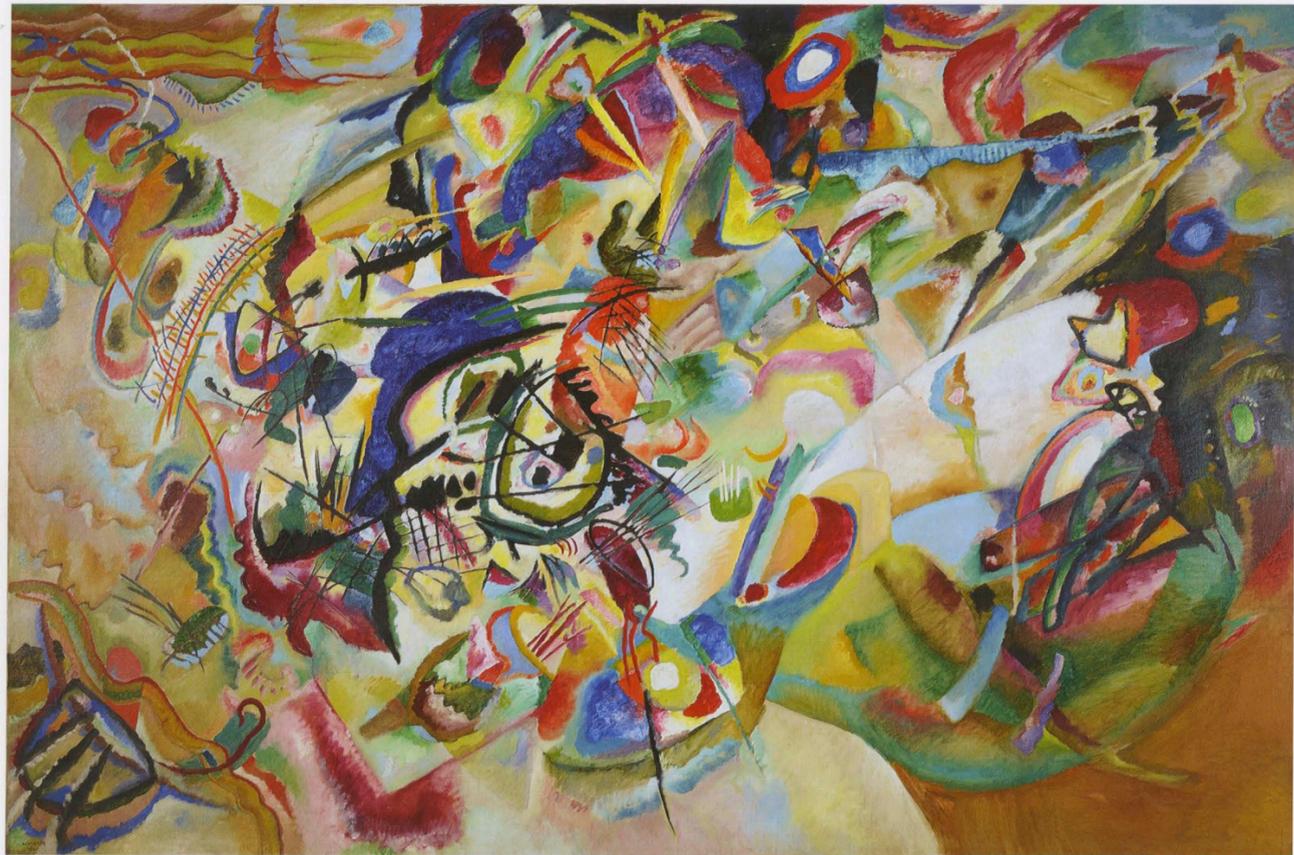
explore our new tasks.”<sup>99</sup> Other tributes to the legacy of Cubism came in pictorial form. A Klee work of 1914 is entitled *Hommage à Picasso* (Homage to Picasso; plate 365); its oval shape—it is one of many ovoid works in this show—declares its genetic link to Picasso’s and Braque’s Analytic Cubism. Yet the work resolves what Klee saw as the “inconsistencies” of Cubism<sup>100</sup>—its simultaneous indifference toward and promotion of the object—through abstraction: the scaffolding of Cubist works appears here transformed into a frank grid of colored squares, lacking referential content.

What did Cubism allow these critics and artists to see? It launched the most radical assault yet on the traditional relationships in painting between figure and surrounding space, solid and void, sky and ground plane—relationships fundamentally maintained even by the Fauves. It used an unnatural palette, evacuated of color, and a compressed space of shifting open planes, defined by burst contours and intermittent grids, in which fragments of naturalistic details barely emerge. Yet as Krauss has pointed out, the slight representational information Cubism provided was consistently read by contemporaries as giving more rather than less information about the world.<sup>101</sup> Gleizes’s and Metzinger’s *Du Cubisme*, for example, a prescriptive and influential book of 1912, sets Cubism’s “profound realism” of the mind against the “superficial realism” of the eye.<sup>102</sup> The radicality of Cubism was understood to derive from the premise that vision was no longer a reliable ground for pictorial realism; its gridded scaffolding of flickering references seemed to ask instead how we know an object. This turning away from the world as seen to the world as understood was revelatory for abstraction’s early practitioners. In undermining the criteria of resemblance in painting, Cubism served as a crucial step in painting’s rebirth, as idea around 1912. With few exceptions, abstraction’s pioneers worked through Cubism in developing their practices, absorbing its revelations and at the same time devising strategies to supersede it.

## VII

### AS ABSTRACTION EMERGED FROM CROSS-MEDIUM EXCHANGE,

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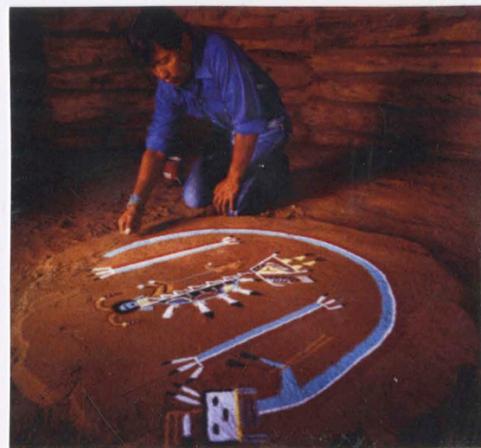
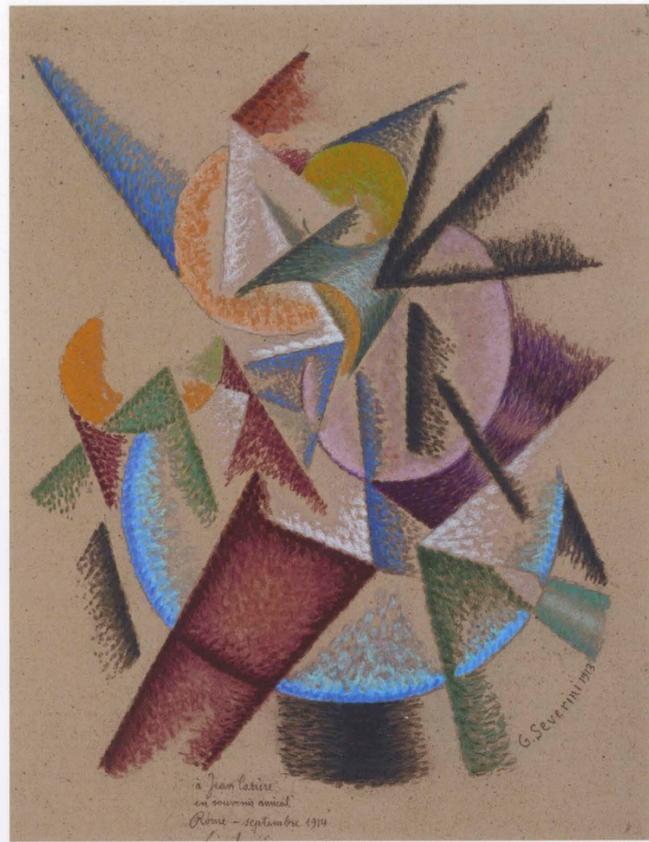
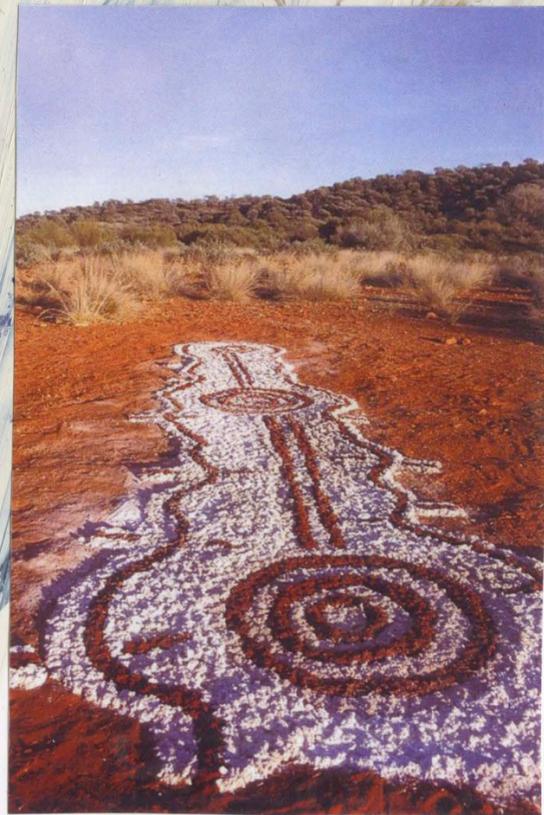


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(The first disk). 1913. Oil on canvas, 52" (134.6 cm) diam. Private collection

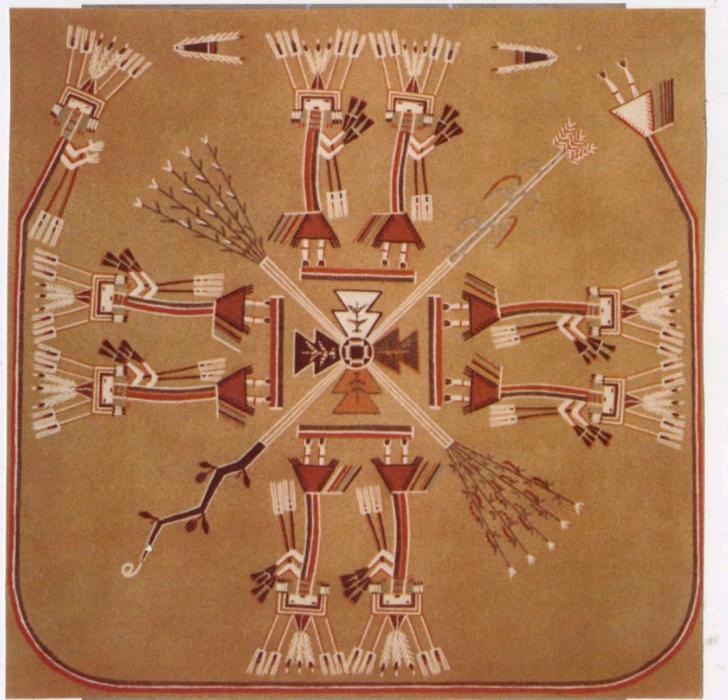


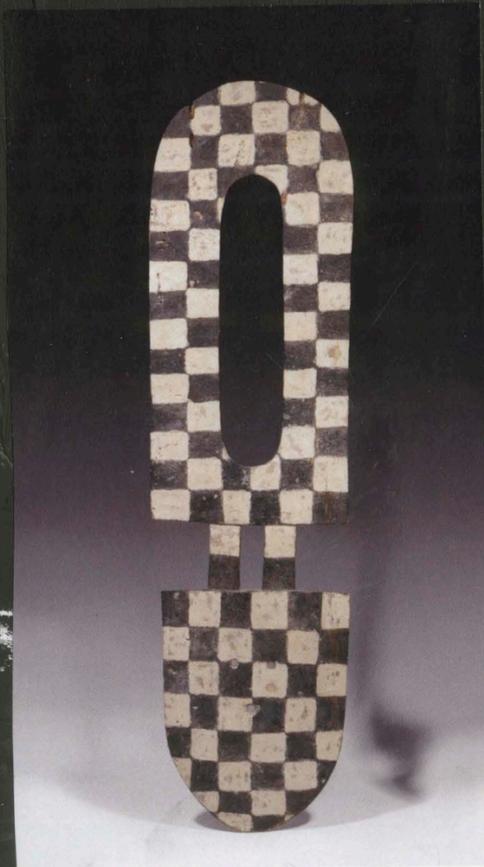


1914-15, *Mer* (Dancer), 1914-15, tempera and pastel on cardboard, 45.5 x 47 cm, Private collection

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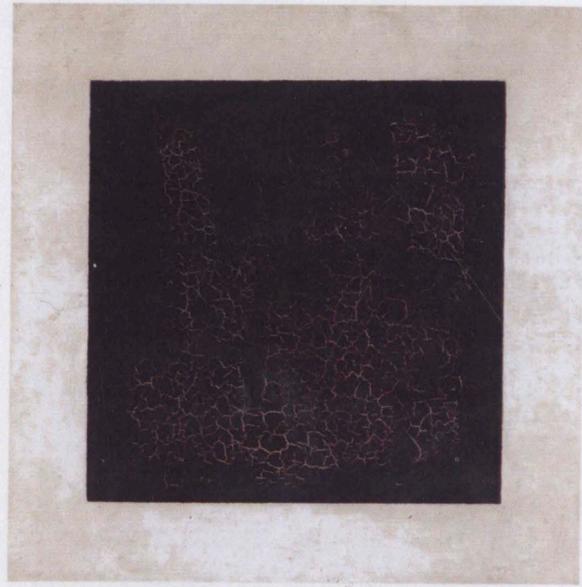
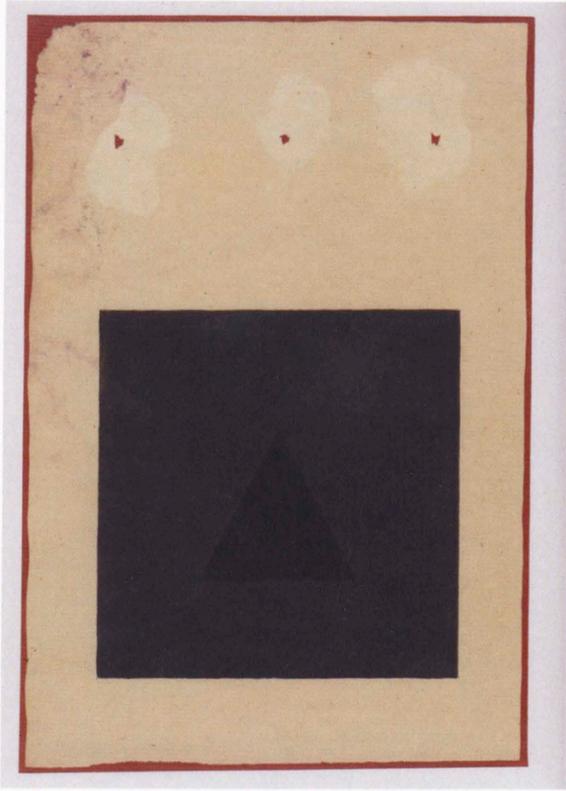


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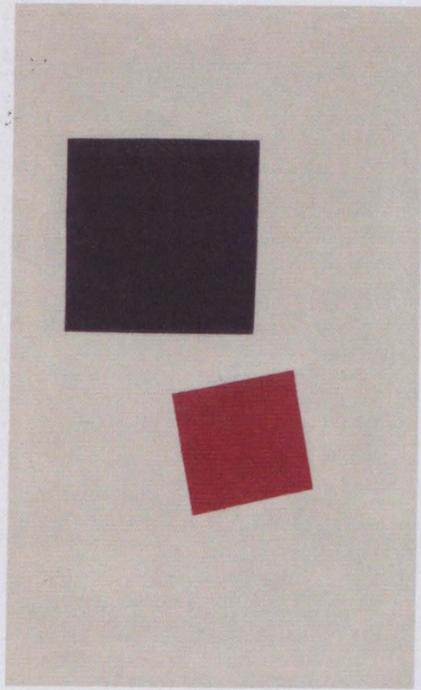
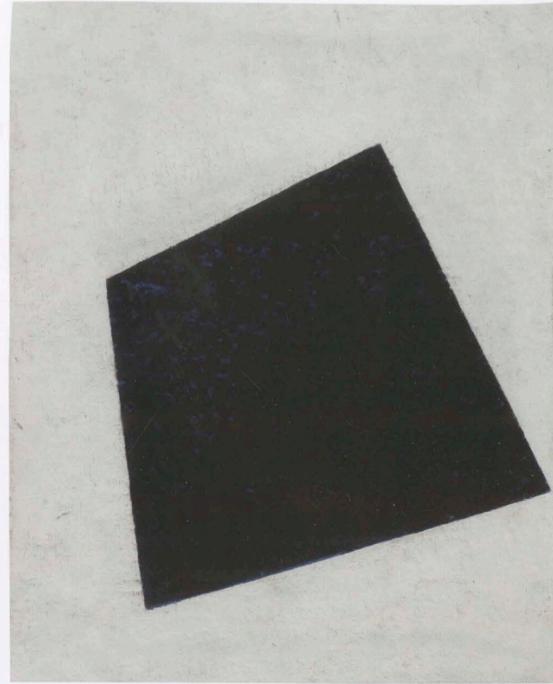


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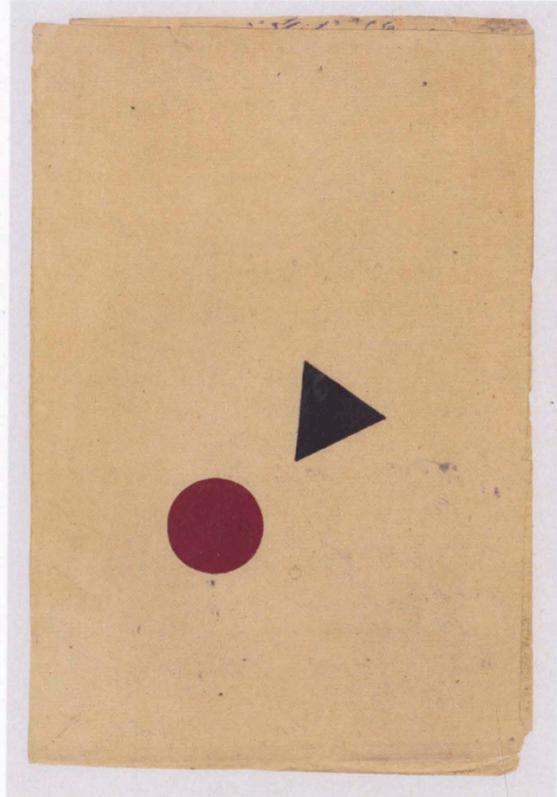
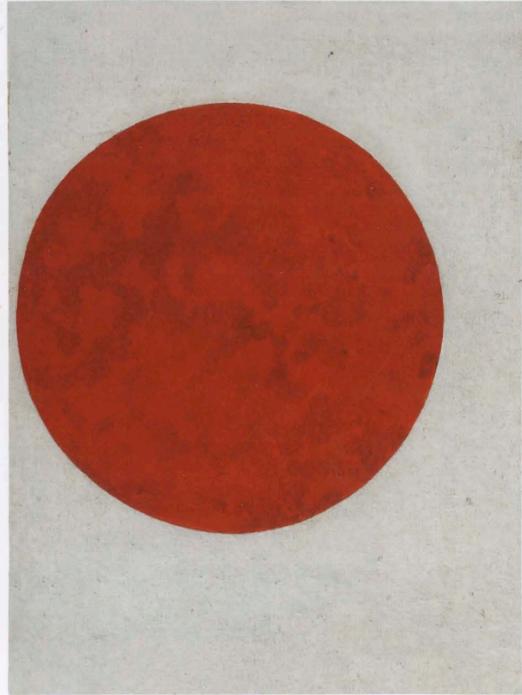
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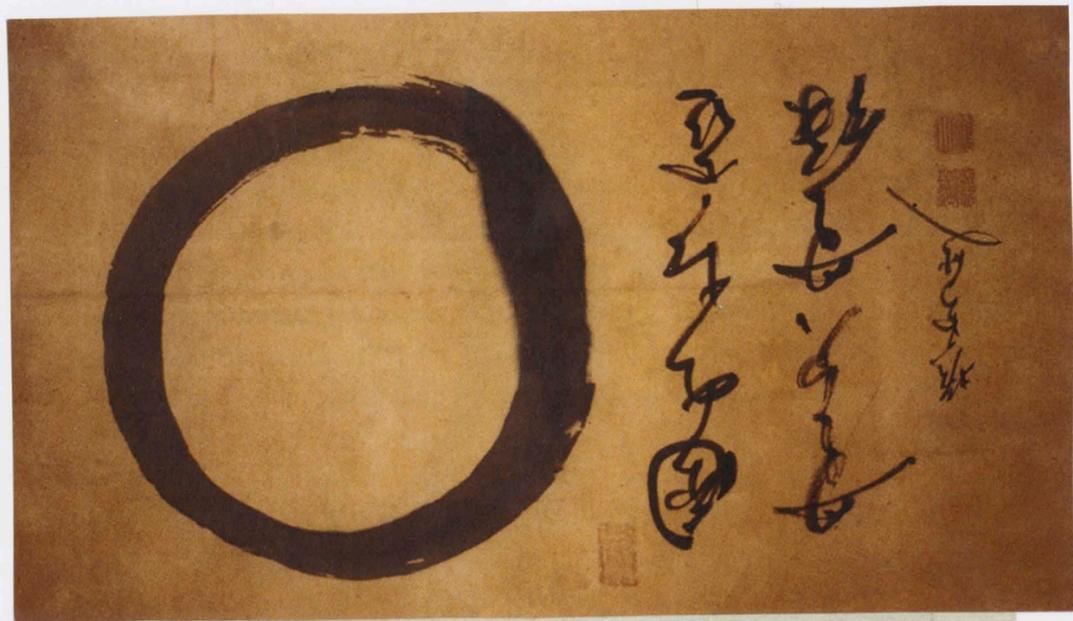


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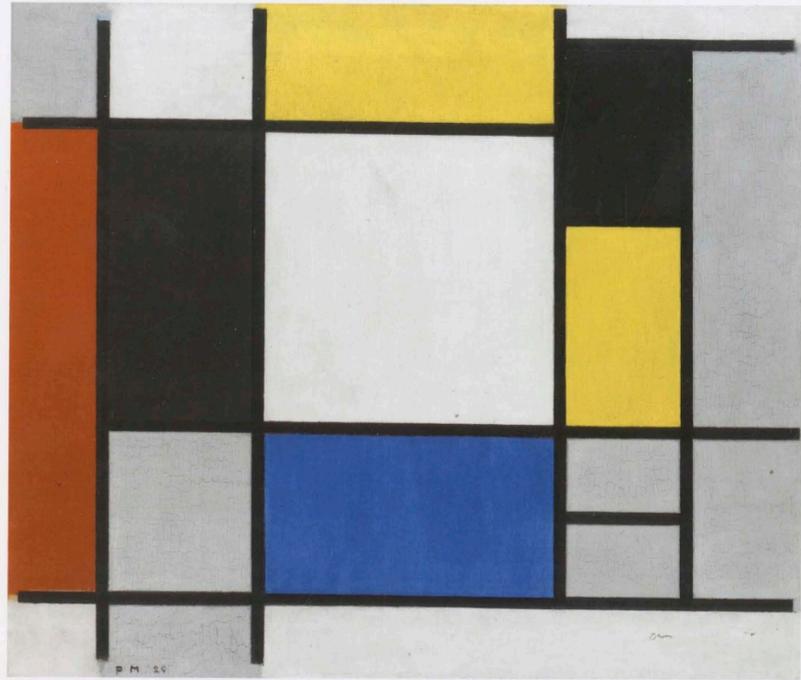


247. KAZIMIR MALEVICH. *Suprematicheskaja kompozitsija: belo na belo* (Suprematist composition: white on white), 1919. Oil on canvas, 31 1/4 x 31 1/4" (79.4 x 79.4 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. 1935 Acquisition confirmed in 1999 by agreement with the Estate of Kazimir Malevich and made possible with funds from the Mrs. John Hay Whitney Bequest (by exchange)



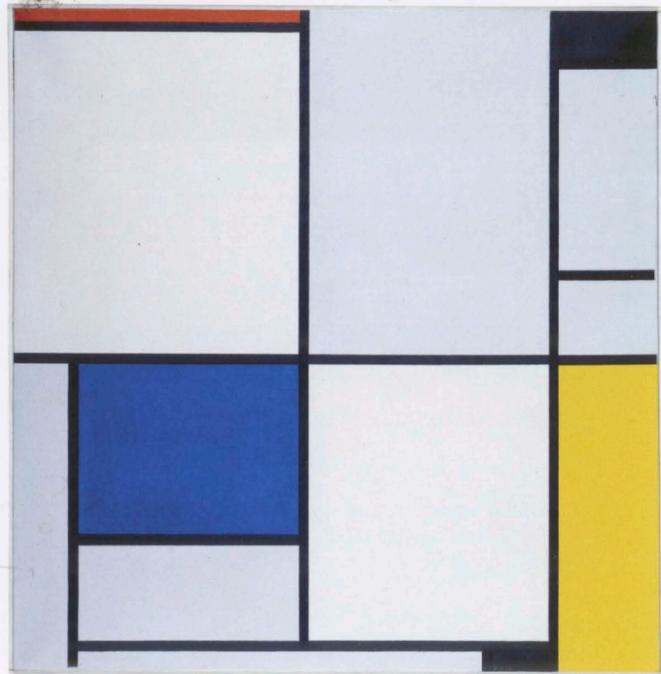
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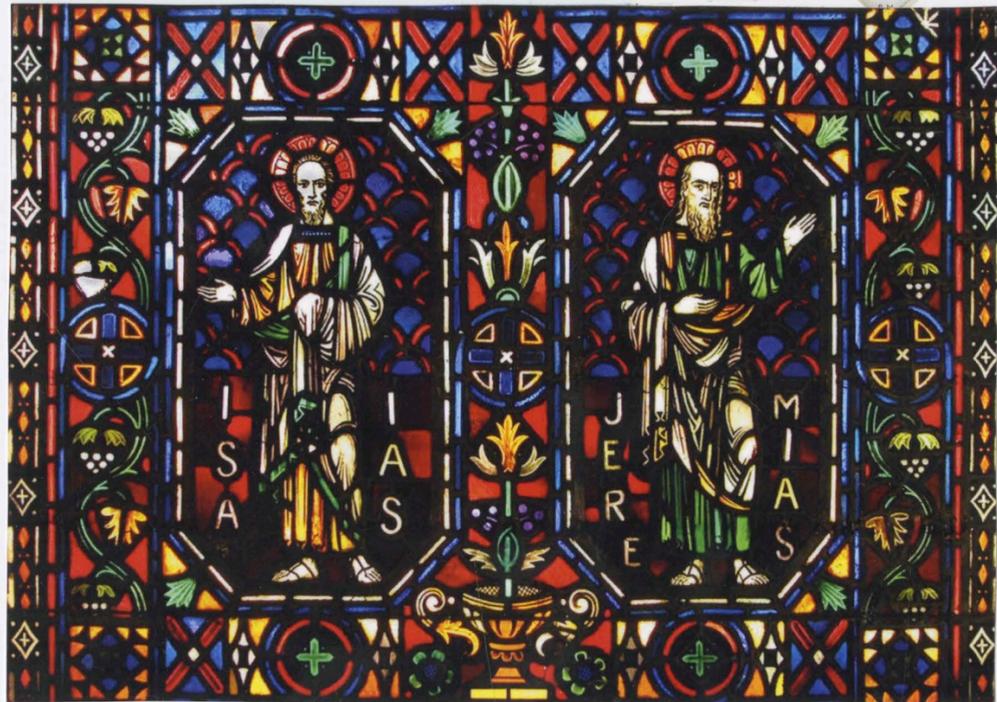
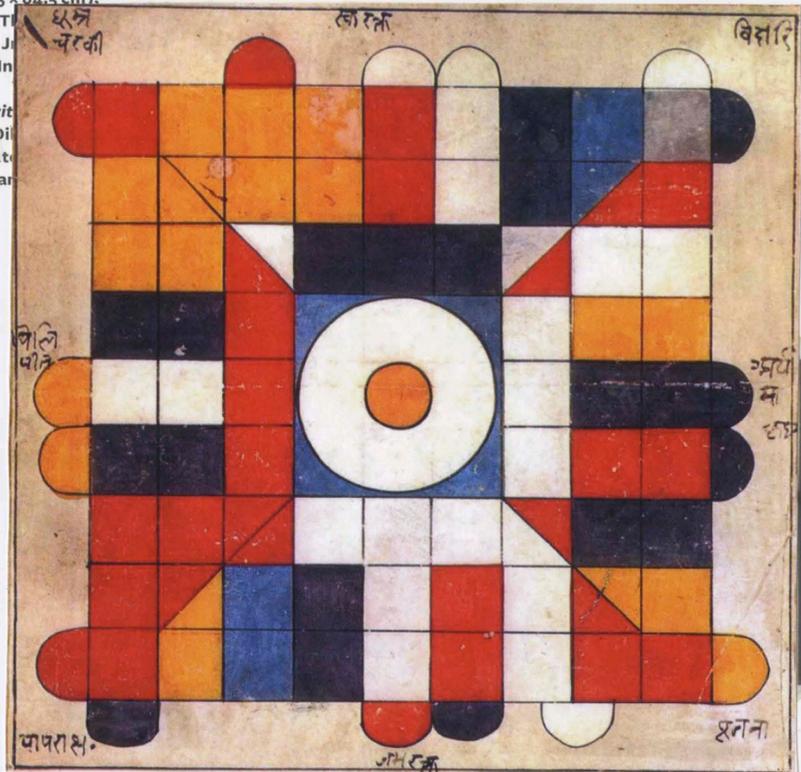
Composition with Yellow, 1921. Oil on canvas, 20 1/2 x 24 1/2 inches (52 x 62 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Edith Weissenstein, c/o HCR International.

Tableau I with Red, Black, Yellow, and Gray, 1921. Oil on canvas, 19 1/2 x 24 1/2 inches (50 x 62 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Edith Weissenstein, c/o HCR International.



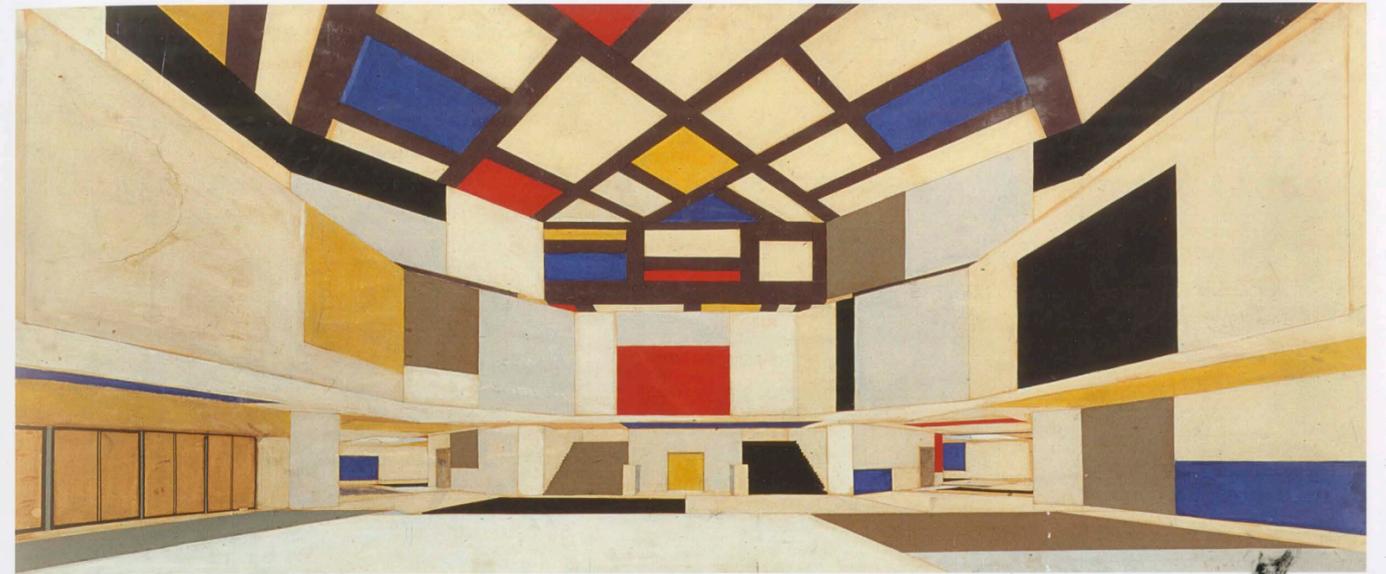
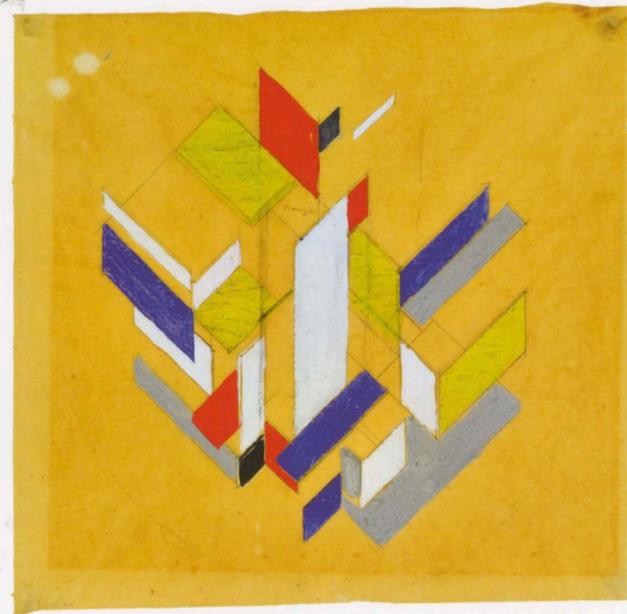
Composition with Blue, Red, and Gray, 1921. Oil on canvas, 19 1/2 x 24 1/2 inches (50 x 62 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Edith Weissenstein, c/o HCR International.

Composition with Blue, Red, and Gray, 1921. Oil on canvas, 19 1/2 x 24 1/2 inches (50 x 62 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Edith Weissenstein, c/o HCR International.



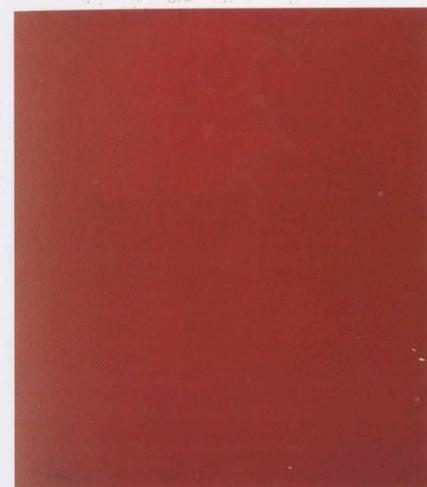


Netherland Architecture Institute, Rotterdam



209. (1923) *Study for a Composition*, 1923. Color design for Amsterdam University Hall. View towards east. Architect Cornelis van Eesteren. Royal, church, and collage on paper, 22 1/2 x 56 1/2" (57 x 144 cm). Netherland Architecture Institute, Rotterdam (on loan from the Van Eesteren-Flink Foundation, The Hague)

210. *Study for a Composition*, 1923. Color design for the ceiling of Amsterdam University Hall. Gouache and ink on tissue paper, 6 1/2 x 6 7/8" (17 x 17.5 cm); including original mat, 11 1/2 x 9 1/2" (29 x 24.5 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The Riklis Collection of McCrory Corporation



709. *Prorok* (Spatial composition no. 12).  
 1911. Oil on canvas, partially painted with  
 aluminum leaf, and encaustic, 18 1/2"  
 (61 x 45 cm). The Museum of Modern Art,  
 New York. Acquisition made possible through  
 the generous donations of George and Elizabeth  
 Lurie. Gift of the Trustees of the Museum of Modern Art,  
 Samuel Rosenberg, Jr., and Erna Feller, and  
 Carl A. Hauptmann.

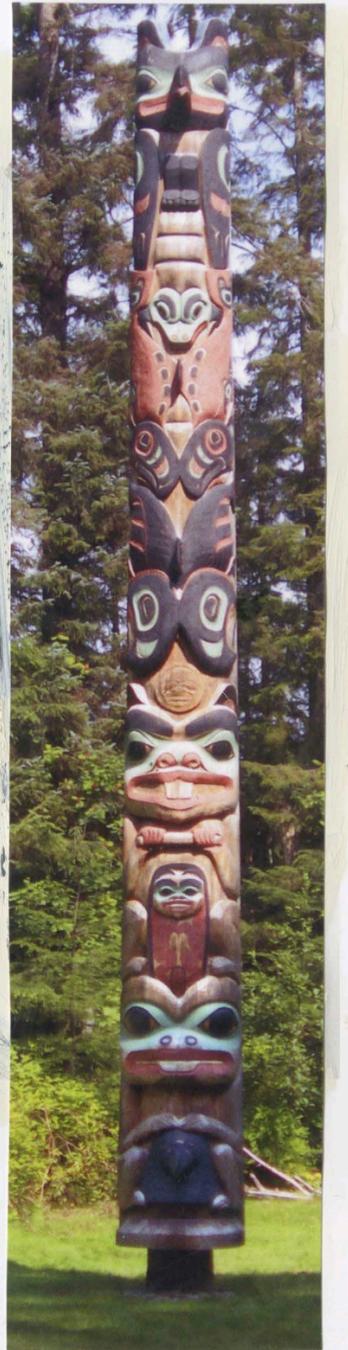
709. *Prorok* (Spatial composition no. 12).  
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 pure red color, pure yellow color, pure blue  
 color, pure white color, the red tsvet, each  
 24 x 18 cm (9 1/2 x 7 1/4 in.). A. Rodchenko  
 and V. Stenberg, Artists, Moscow.



Untitled (Dada Bowl), 1910. Black lacquer on turned wood, 8" long (20.3 cm). Musée d'art moderne et contemporain de Strasbourg

Untitled (Pavilion), 1910. Black lacquer on turned wood, 8" long (20.3 cm). Musée d'art moderne et contemporain de Strasbourg

Untitled (Amphore), 1910. Black lacquer on turned wood, 8" long (20.3 cm). Musée d'art moderne et contemporain de Strasbourg





40.5 x 9.2 cm). Private collection

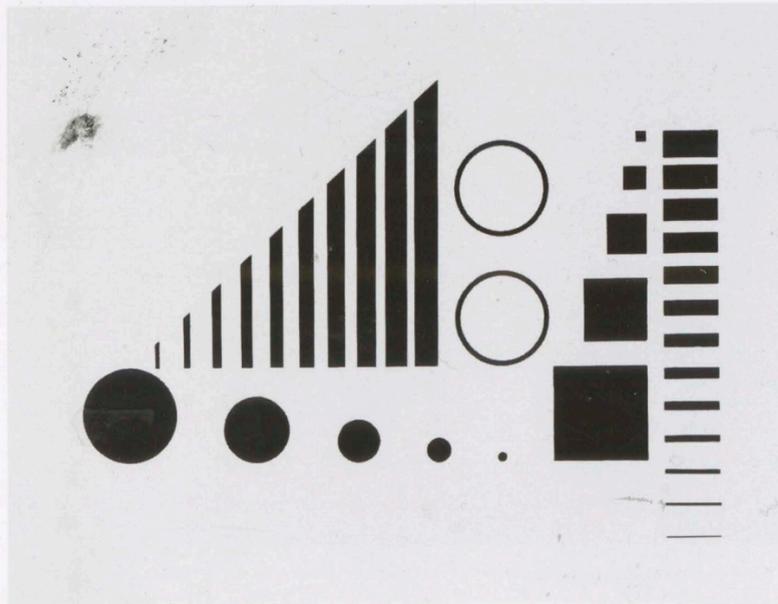
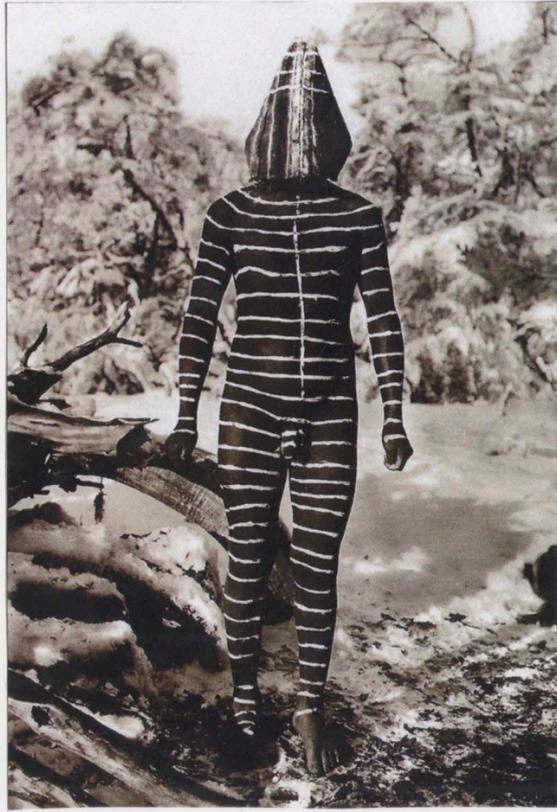
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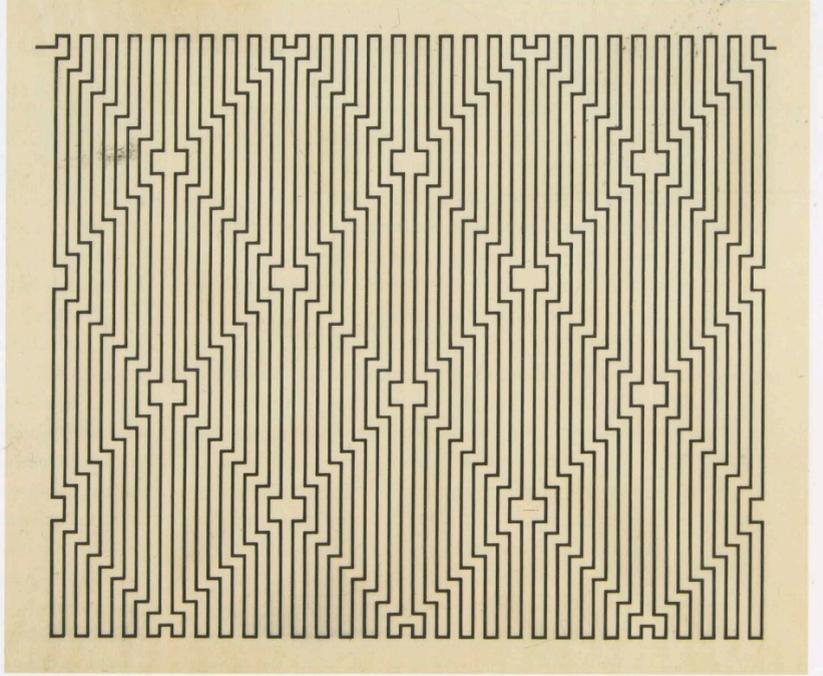
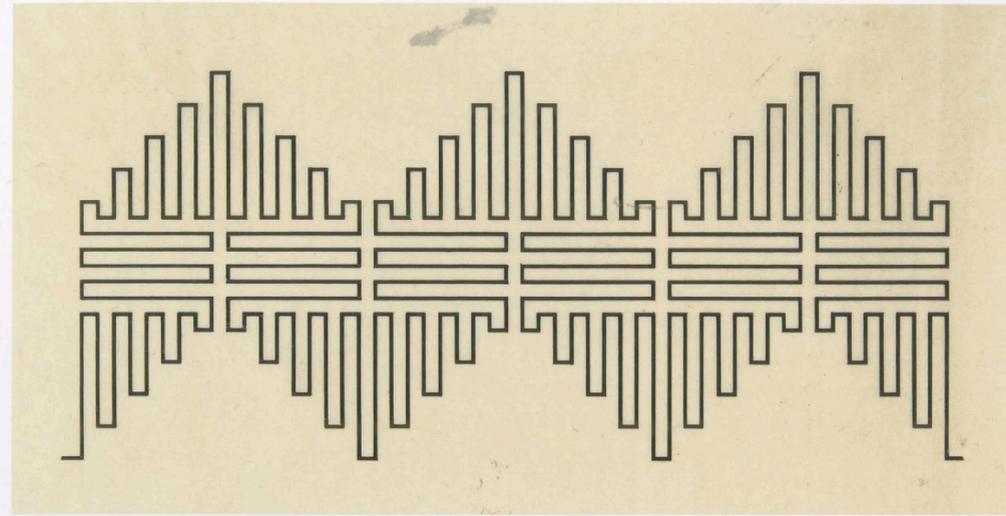
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Collection of The Cleveland



40. *Wzrostowa faktura*  
 (White, red and black  
*wzrostowa faktura*). 1924. Gouache on paper,  
 31 1/2 x 21 1/2" (80.3 x 54.6 cm). Muzeum Sztuki, Lodz



41. *Z serii A:Ag*  
 ("From the series A:Ag", 1924. Ink on tracing  
 paper, 12 1/2 x 15 1/8" (31.8 x 40.3 cm). Muzeum  
 Sztuki, Lodz

