

Bombed

The loss of a major work of art may be a tragedy but sometimes the story of that loss calls attention to tragedy on a far greater scale. It can also pose questions about what history chooses to remember. But, quite simply put, the challenge of understanding the impact of the loss of a single artwork in the narrative of an artist's output and legacy, however difficult this may be, is as nothing compared to the difficulties involved in addressing the gaps in the narratives of families and societies caused by human loss on a large scale.

The story of Kandinsky's *Composition I* 1910 – a grand, ambitious and colourful canvas that was the first of an important series of paintings – is enmeshed with the broader tragedies of the Second World War. Known now only through a black and white photograph taken in 1912, it was destroyed by a British air raid on the industrial city of Braunschweig in the Ruhr Valley on the night of 14 October 1944. In the same raid, which purposely rendered the centre of the city uninhabitable, about one thousand men, women and children (figures vary) were also lost. The individuals were remembered by surviving relatives and friends for a generation, perhaps two, but today such memories are largely gone and are even harder to retrieve than the story of the destruction of this major work by one of the pioneers of abstract art.

Ironically, perhaps, given the work's subsequent history, Kandinsky believed that paintings such as *Composition I* were harbingers of a new spiritual awakening for modern man. In his book *On the Spiritual in Art* (1911), he claimed that vanguard artists and other visionaries were leading mankind up through 'the spiritual pyramid that will one day reach to heaven'. Focusing not so much on subject matter but simply on colour and form, artists, he wrote, needed to respond to their own inner feelings and impulses. In so doing they would touch the souls of others and engage them in the upward progress of humanity.

Kandinsky's sense of the artist as a prophet was deeply coloured by his reading of theosophy and other mystical texts. But his belief in the power of the visual language of art also came from his own acute sensitivity to colour and form, and his ability to be inspired by his 'inner world'. Two events, as he later recalled, had had a decisive impact on his thinking. In 1896 he saw an exhibition of the now famous series of paintings of haystacks by the French impressionist artist Claude Monet and had been profoundly struck by their ability to elicit a deep emotional response in viewers *before* they recognised what the paintings depicted. The 'unsuspected power of the palette', he commented in *Reminiscences* (1913), 'surpassed my wildest dreams'. In the same period a stirring performance of Wagner's opera *Lohengrin* led him to think about how painting

could begin to emulate the emotional and spiritual force of powerful music. Listening to the opera, he wrote, ‘I saw all my colours in my mind; they stood before my eyes. Wild, almost crazy lines were sketched in front of me.’ Spurred on by these events, Kandinsky, who had trained as a lawyer and had just been offered a teaching post in Moscow university, decided to leave Russia for Munich to train as a painter.

In fact, the traditional training Kandinsky received in the German city seems to have had little impact on him. He travelled widely in Europe and was quick to assimilate the bright colours and loose handling of paint characteristic of the fauvist artists in Paris. Soon he became an inspirational figure among young artists who wanted to break away from nineteenth-century realism. However, he was also passionately interested in Russian folk art, and his paintings reflected the religious themes and fairy tales associated with this naïve genre. His scenes of mounted riders galloping across a countryside dotted with castles and sometimes accompanied by angels, combined still-recognisable motifs with a high-octane colourful vision that seemingly had no need for traditional perspective or modelling, and resisted precise interpretation.

From c.1909 to the outbreak of the First World War, Kandinsky progressively cut loose the moorings that tied his imagery to recognisable motifs and became a pioneer of abstract art. Or, at least, this is how his achievements are typically discussed within art history. However, Kandinsky’s canvases of these years show a fluid balance between representational and abstract elements, with both typically being present in his works in different degrees. Some pictures looked abstract but closer examination showed that even these incorporated recognisable motifs and were inspired by recurring narratives.

In *On the Spiritual in Art* Kandinsky explained that he called his paintings that were rooted in experience of nature ‘impressions’. ‘Improvisations’, by contrast, arose from unconscious memories and thoughts. ‘Compositions’, however, were more ambitious and ultimately more important works. They were based upon images that came to him spontaneously and upon expressions of feelings that were then painstakingly and ‘almost pedantically’ examined and developed into visually strong arrangements of shapes, colours and lines, often over a very long period of time (‘Here, reason, the conscious, the deliberate, and the purposeful play a preponderant role’). In short, what mattered to Kandinsky was the visual and emotional force of his imagery, not the extent to which it did or did not look entirely abstract.

Kandinsky painted seven *Compositions* between 1910 and 1914, and only a further three after the First World War. For him, this category of work seems thus to have been particularly tied to this pre-war period. The first three paintings in the series all fell victim to Allied bombing during the Second World War, but attention focuses here on the very first of the series as arguably uniquely important in understanding Kandinsky’s development.

At 1.4 metres wide, *Composition I* would certainly have been striking, and was later remembered by one witness as having radiant and joyful colours. (Kandinsky’s lettering

on a preliminary pencil study shows that he initially intended the three riders to be white and the horses grey and pink, though it was not uncommon for his compositions to become more colourful when painted.) Some motifs are relatively clear. In the foreground are three seated figures while in the middle distance are the three riders, one to the left and two to the right. Behind them are onion-domed churches and houses clinging precariously to the sides of seemingly impossibly vertical hills in a manner that echoes children's drawings. But the meaning of these and the other harder-to-decipher elements in the painting remains mysterious.

According to a note in the artist's records, *Composition I* was completed in January 1910. Its subsequent exhibition history suggests that Kandinsky saw the work as important. It was sent immediately for exhibition in London and was then shipped to Odessa, where it was shown at the *2nd International Art Exhibition* at the Salon Izdebsky in December 1910. The painting then appeared – with an illustration in the catalogue – in the 1912 *Kandinsky Collective Exhibition* at Der Sturm Gallery in Berlin, an important centre for modern art in Germany.

The painting then came back to Kandinsky, now one of the leading figures in the artist group called *Der Blaue Reiter* (possibly named after one of Kandinsky's paintings). Hans (also known as Jean) Arp exhibited with this Munich group in 1912 and quickly became friends with Kandinsky. According to a note in the latter's papers, Arp acquired *Composition I* and he is thought to have taken the canvas with him when he fled to neutral Switzerland during the First World War.

Arp did not forget Kandinsky while in Switzerland. He had parts of the Russian artist's illustrated book of sound poems, *Klänge* (1912), read out by members of the Cabaret Voltaire in Zürich, home to the dada movement during the war. Later in life he was reported to have allowed no-one else beside himself and his wife to handle his copy of the book, about which he later wrote appreciatively:

Kandinsky has undertaken the rarest spiritual experiments in his poems. Out of 'pure existence' he has conjured beauties never previously heard in this world. In these poems, sequences of words and sentences surface in a way that has never happened before ... In these poems we experience the cycle, the waxing and waning, the transformation of this world. Kandinsky's poems reveal the emptiness of appearances and of reason.

Records indicate that *Composition I* passed to Otto Ralfs, a German businessman and collector. Ralfs developed an interest in modern art following a visit in 1923 to the Bauhaus art school, where Kandinsky taught. Within a year Ralfs had staged his first exhibition of *Modern Art* in Braunschweig's Landesmuseum, showing works by Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Lyonel Feiniger and Alexei Jawlensky, who were then practically unknown in the city. By 1925 Ralfs had established a Society of Friends of the New Art in Braunschweig, together with a Klee Society, which aimed to promote the Swiss artist's works to German collectors. Ralfs and his wife Käte welcomed artists from across Germany to their home. Entries in the couple's guestbooks show that they

received not only Kandinsky but also Arp, Klee, Nolde and Schwitters. It was during this period that Ralfs acquired *Composition I* from Arp.

With Hitler's advent to power in January 1933, Ralfs ceased to promote the cause of modern art. The movements he had tried to support were now branded 'degenerate' by the authorities; his contacts in the museum world were forced from their positions; and his artist friends were driven abroad. At their meeting of 6 July 1933, Ralf's Society of Friends of the New Art voted to disband. There were no entries in Ralfs' guestbooks between 1933 and 1945.

Ralfs was not Jewish and his private collection was therefore not a priority target for Nazi confiscation. But it would certainly have attracted unwelcome attention. The situation worsened when many of the artists featuring in Ralfs's collection appeared in the Nazi-organised *Degenerate Art* exhibition in 1937. In this Kandinsky earned the dubious honour of an entire wall daubed with decorations intended to mock his compositions. A programme of confiscations of modern works from museum collections and forced sales of items in Jewish collections made ownership of modern art risky, even for Ralfs. As the 1930s progressed, he managed to sell some works abroad but at the outbreak of war in September 1939 his collection still numbered between two and three hundred pieces, including *Composition I*.

As a major industrial centre – home to munitions factories, major rail interchanges, research institutions and the German Research Centre for Aviation – Braunschweig was a target for air raids from the beginning of the Second World War. But the air raid carried out by the British RAF as part of 'Operation Hurricane' on the night of 14 October 1944 was unprecedented in its devastation. The use of explosive and then incendiary bombs caused – as had been fully intended – a massive firestorm, and left fires burning in the city for two and a half days. Owing to the city's frequent air raid drills, the death toll was much lower than might have been expected (it is estimated at around one thousand, with nearly a hundred killed in one bunker at the height of the firestorm through lack of oxygen). But 90% of the city's medieval city centre was destroyed, together with Ralfs's home and art collection. This included not only *Composition I*, the very first of Kandinsky's ground-breaking series, but also works by Otto Dix, Alexei Jawlenski, Paul Klee, Oskar Kokoschka, László Moholy Nagy, Edvard Munch, Emil Nolde and Max Pechstein.

Kandinsky died not long after the raid, in December 1944. Forced to leave his teaching post in the Bauhaus, he spent his last years in Paris, knowing that significant portions of his life's work had already been destroyed in Germany. Ralfs, however, survived the war, and was able to open a gallery dedicated to modern art, which he ran until his death in 1955.

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Jennifer Mundy