

The Spiritual Context of *On the Spiritual in Modern Art*

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On the Spiritual in Modern Art was compiled from notebook entries made by Kandinsky during the early years of the 20th century when he was living and painting in the midst of the *Jugendstil* art scene in Munich and, after 1907, in a nearby village. He shared the generational dismay among young artists across the Continent that (European) “civilization” was being destroyed by “materialism,” an umbrella term that connoted for them positivism in science, realism in art, the denial of the spiritual dimension of life, and the destructive effects of the capitalist industrialization of society. Because they felt the churches had compromised themselves to appease modern “materialism,” the young artists turned to occult teachings for guidance in their quest to save civilization. In spite of Kandinsky’s admiring comments in this book about Madame Blavatsky and her ideas on the spiritual evolution of the human race, he was not a Theosophist. Rather, Kandinsky’s spiritual touchstone was the Russian Orthodox religion. He always kept over his desk a folkloric icon of a Russian Orthodox saint and took as his own patron St. George the dragon slayer, patron saint of his beloved Moscow.

To the *fin de siècle* concerns that gripped the young artists, Kandinsky brought formative experiences and constitutional characteristics that created a fruitful synergy. For instance, the sense that art could be transcendent and deliver people to spiritual refinement fit well with Kandinsky’s childhood experience of being gripped by bouts of “inner tension” (life-long neurasthenia) and finding calming relief in the act of drawing. He also had an extremely vivid sense of color in his surroundings, so the Symbolist notion of synesthesia seemed a logical extension of his own experience. (He notes in the book, “The sound of color is so definite....”) Most importantly, he never lost the perception from early childhood that all objects and beings have an inner reality as well as an external form. Hence encountering the Theosophical teaching that a powerful invisible reality informs the material plane rang true for him. The sense that the spiritually subtle realm exceeds the limits of words also fit well with the mystical and symbolic (rather than doctrinal) emphases of Russian Orthodox religion, especially involving the icons. Finally, Kandinsky shared the widespread fascination of his time with nonmodern cultures (free of “the nightmare of materialism,” as he put it); he wrote in *On the Spiritual in Art* of “our sympathy, our spiritual relationship, with the Primitives.” He studied ethnology (as well as law and economics) at the University of Moscow and made a research trip to study “peasant law” and the “remnants of heathenist religion” among the Zyrian people (a Sami culture) in the far north. There he had a formative experience in “those wonderful houses” that influenced his art and thought for the rest of his life: “They taught me to move in the *picture*, to live in the picture. I still remember how I

entered the room for the first time and stopped short before the unexpected vision. The table, the benches, the great oven..., the wardrobes, and every object were painted with bright-colored, large-figured decorations.... The same feeling slumbered within me, unconsciously up to then, when I was in churches in Moscow and especially the great cathedral of the Kremlin.” It is possible that he acquired an interest during that trip in the role of the shaman. It is likely that his little-known “Tartar blood” (his paternal grandmother was a “Mongol princess” from eastern Siberia near Lake Baikal) brought an existential dimension to his engagement with the “Primitives.”

In Kandinsky, then, we see a remarkable fit between personal propensities and the currents of his time. Poignantly, for he suffered as well as triumphed, he observed in the book that the artist who seeks expression of the internal lives “a complicated and comparatively subtle life.”