

## Metamorphosis: Kandinsky in Munich

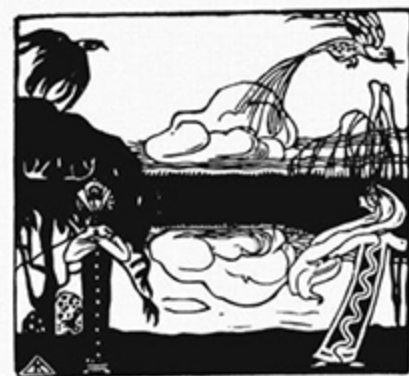
1896–1911

Kandinsky's decision in 1896, at the age of thirty, to study art in Munich was by no means a rash one. At that time Munich was considered a cosmopolitan city of art where such famous personalities as Franz von Lenbach or Franz von Stuck set the tone in the art world. In addition to this the "Munich Secession" was founded in 1892, stirring up the ossified fronts between the naturalism of the Munich School, academic historicism and the advocates of symbolism. The "Secession" included a host of artists following different lines, but among them were some of the most prominent art personalities of the time, painters such as Lovis Corinth, Adolf Hölzel, Max Liebermann, Franz von Stuck, Hans Thoma, Wilhelm Trübner and Fritz von Uhde. Within a few years this group drew other secessions along in its wake, for example in Berlin and Vienna.

In the same year the journal *Jugend* was founded and in Germany Art Nouveau was accordingly known as "Jugendstil." August Endell, a young architect, created an artistic scandal in that year with his plans for the Elvira Studio. He summarized the central idea of the new art in a pamphlet he published in 1896: "The greatest mistake one can make is to believe that Art is the precise reproduction of Nature."

This revolutionary approach alluded primarily to the works of the Swiss sculptor Hermann Obrist, who caused a sensation with his bold abstract carpet designs, drawings and sculptures, and who a short time later, being an enthusiastic advocate of Jugendstil, founded the Vereinigte Werkstätten für Kunst im Handwerk (United Workshops for Art in Craft) in Munich. Both Obrist and his pupil Endell had a direct influence on Kandinsky with their expressive use of colour and line.

But first of all Kandinsky underwent the strict discipline of drawing nudes at Anton Azbe's Art School, which he attended for two years without producing any work of note. Although he hated anatomical drawing, he tried to pick up the basics within a short time. Azbe's painting lessons were, however, far more important to him. Azbe painted in an Impressionist style and so stimulated Kandinsky to use a divisionist technique, using unmixed colours in juxtaposition, a style he later adopted in his small impressive landscape studies, for example *Beach Baskets in Holland* (ill. p. 15), which is painted in thick patches of paint casually applied next to each other. One already notices the desire to be in sole command of visual elements, but they are not strictly systematic (as in post-



*Two Birds*, 1907  
Woodcut on wood, 13.6 x 14.4 cm (5¼ x 5¾ in.)

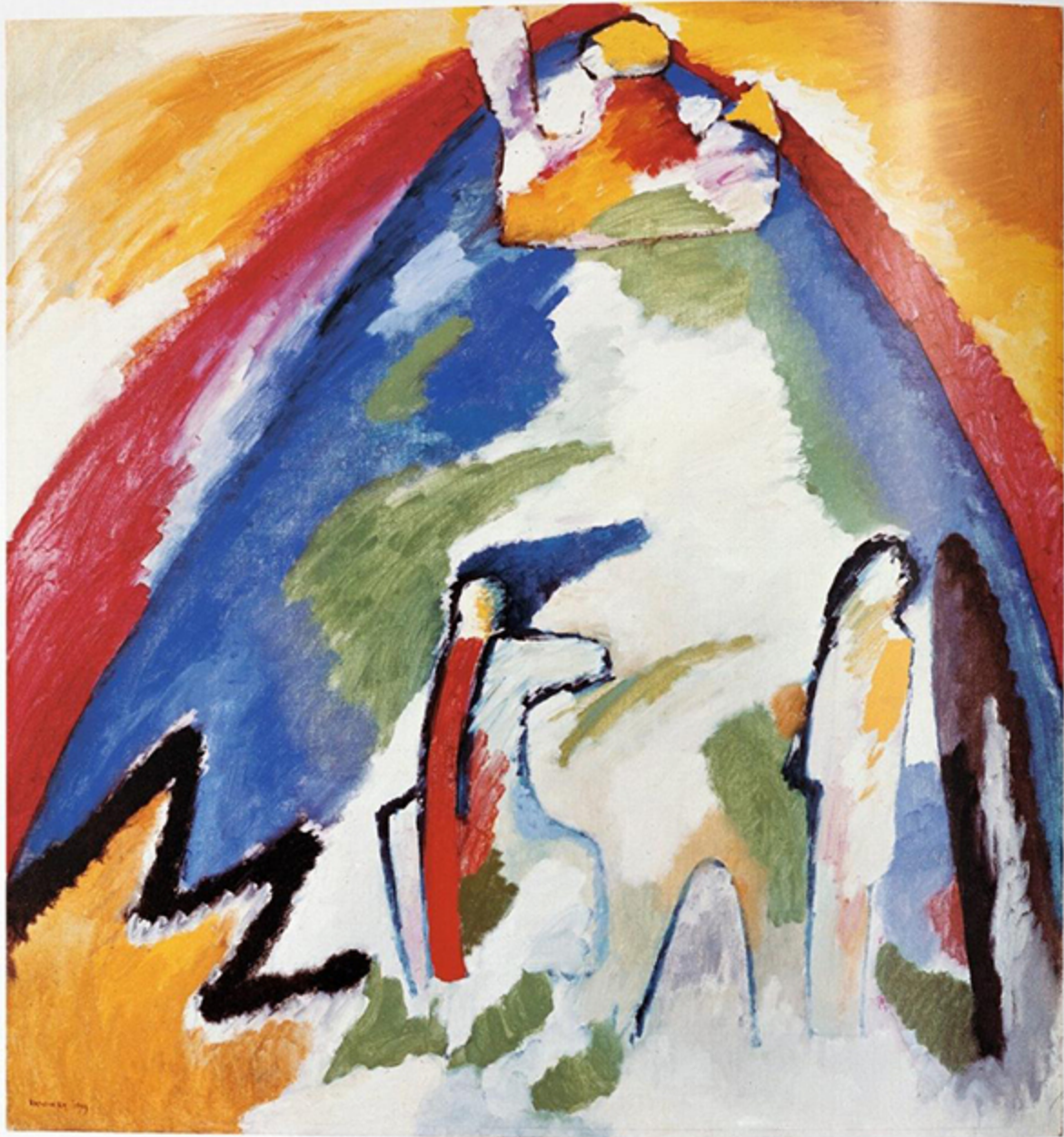
PAGE 12  
*Munich-Schwabing with the church of St. Ursula*, 1906  
Oil on cardboard, 68.8 x 49 cm (27 x 19¼ in.)  
Munich, Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus

*"The German fairy tales, which I often heard as a child, came alive. The high, narrow roofs, which are now gone from Promenadenplatz and Maximilianplatz in old Schwabing, and particularly the meadow which I once discovered quite by accident, transformed these fairy tales into reality. The blue tram moved through the streets like the embodiment of the air of fairy tales that made breathing easy and joyful. The yellow letter boxes on the corners sang their canary songs. I welcomed the sign "Kunstmühle" and felt that I was in a city of art, which meant the same to me as a fairy tale city. The mediaeval pictures that I later painted were inspired by these impressions."*

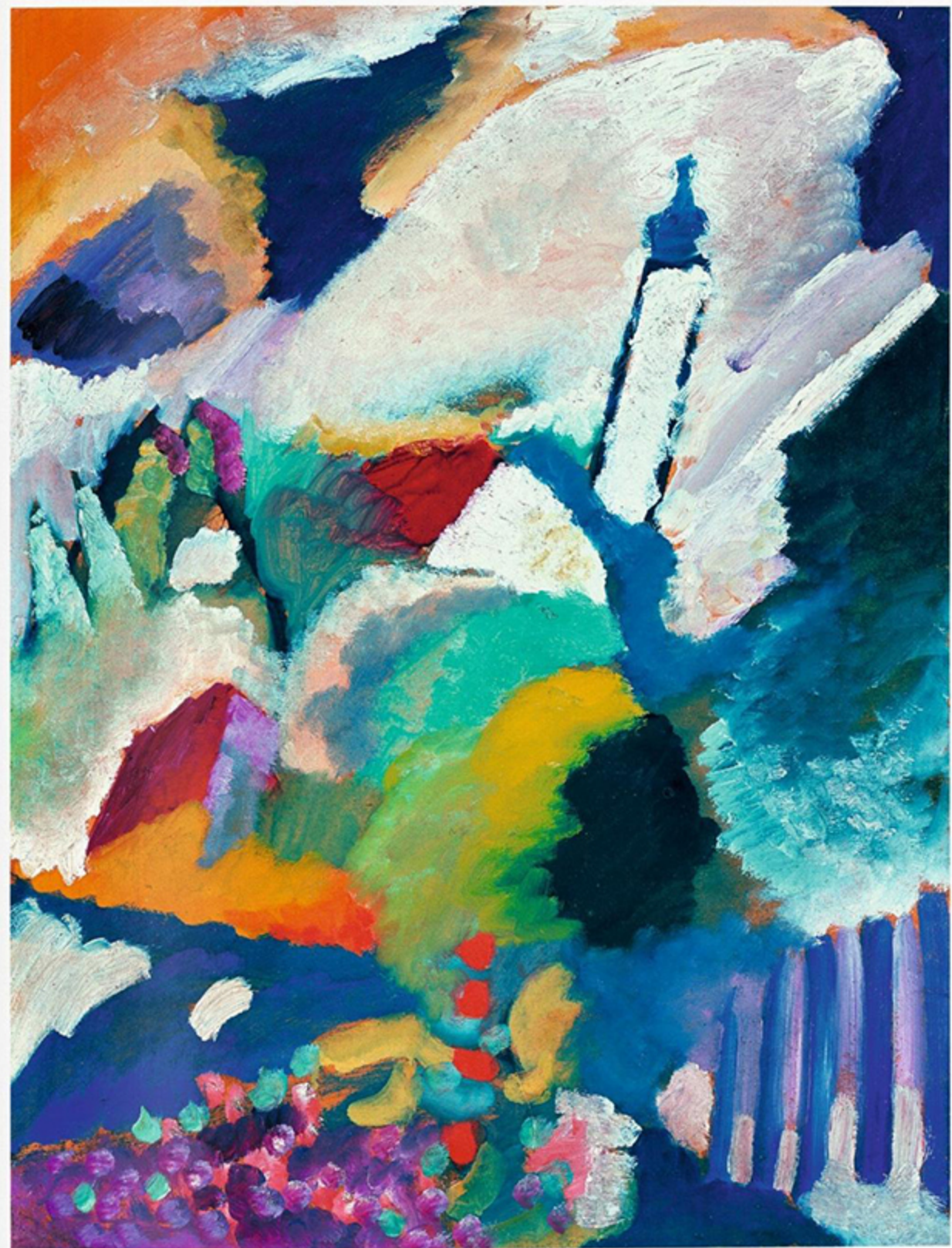
— WASSILY KANDINSKY



*Study for "Composition II," 1910*  
Oil on canvas, 97.5 x 150.5 cm (38½ x 59¼ in.)  
New York, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum



*Mountain*, 1909  
Oil on canvas, 109 x 109 cm (43 x 43 in.)  
Munich, Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus



*Church in Murnau*, 1910  
Oil on cardboard, 64.7 x 50.2 cm (25½ x 19¾ in.)  
Munich, Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus



colours and graphic symbols embedded in them. The contrast between glowing streaks of colour and the characteristic graphic style is even more clearly pronounced here and is reminiscent of Japanese calligraphy, which Kandinsky admired all his life. Perhaps this richness of graphic invention was, along with his sense of colour, Kandinsky's strength. This painting can almost be considered an early example of informal painting in the spirit of Wols' nervous style of drawing.

Incidentally, the so-called *First Abstract Watercolour* (ill. p. 37), dated 1910 by Kandinsky himself, is also similar in style to these paintings. In its free graphic style it resembles a preliminary sketch for the great *Composition VII* of 1913.

Kandinsky described the creation and meaning of *Composition VI* (ill. p. 49) in greater detail than any of his other paintings. He mentions the Flood as his starting point, a theme he had already dealt with in more representational form in a glass painting. After doing many preliminary sketches he finally attempted the actual painting. In "Reminiscences" he writes: "One sees two centres in this picture: first, on the left, a tender, pink, somewhat diffuse centre with weak shaky lines in the middle, and second, on the right (a little higher than the left), a coarse red-blue centre, somewhat discordant, with sharp, strong, very precise and rather malevolent lines. Between these centres is a third (closer to the left), which can only later be recognized as a centre but nevertheless is ultimately the main centre. Here the pink and white froth in such a way that they seem neither to lie on the surface of the canvas nor on any idealized surface. They seem to be floating in air, surrounded by vapour ... The person standing in the vapour is neither near nor far; he is just somewhere. This somewhere of the main centre determines the tone of the whole painting."

The composition of the painting is reminiscent of *Flood Improvisation* in the choice of colour and in some of the elements of the composition, such as the bundles of lines at the top and the right of the picture. After creating an impression of "inner nature," as Kandinsky defined "Improvisation," the internal action of the picture was refined via the glass painting into the big, sweeping "Composition," "a statement formed slowly and deliberately about the inner world of imagination and feeling." The pivotal (inner) motif of the Flood (apocalyptic atmosphere, preparation for the dawning of the spiritual age) is completely assimilated by the abstract means of expression and is "transformed into an inner, independent, objective entity of pure painting."

*Composition VI* was Kandinsky's most important work in the famous "Erster Deutscher Herbstsalon," which was organized by Herwarth Walden in Berlin in September 1913. It was modelled on the annual "Salon d'Automne" in Paris with its survey of the latest trends in art. For the radical Blaue Reiter painters it was again an opportunity to show their work in a large-scale exhibition of international prominence.

The most impressive paintings in the exhibition were by Kandinsky, Marc and Macke, who together with Walden and Bernhard Köhler, a collector in Berlin, were responsible for the organization of the exhibition. The most important pictures were Kandinsky's *Composition VI*, *Picture with White Border* and *Picture with White Shapes*, Macke's *Four Girls*, *Zoological Garden* and *Girls Bathing*, and Marc's *Tower of Blue Horses* (lost), *Tyrol* and *Animal Destinies*. Along with the work of some Cubists and Futurists from Paris and Italy, including Jean Metzinger, Albert Gleizes, Fernand Léger, Umberto Boccioni, Giacomo Balla and Gino Severini, twenty-two works were dedicated to the memory of the late Henri Rousseau.



Composition sketch for *Black Strokes*, 1913  
Black chalk, grey background sheet,  
21 x 20.5 cm (8¼ x 8 in.)  
Munich, Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus

PAGE 46  
*Black Strokes I*, 1913  
Oil on canvas, 129.4 x 131.1 cm (51 x 51½ in.)  
New York, The Solomon R. Guggenheim  
Museum