

# EMILY CHRISTENSEN<sup>1</sup>

## «AMBIVALENT» IMAGES: WASSILY KANDINSKY'S ABSTRACT-ORIENTALIST PAINTINGS<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

In the years 1909–1911, Wassily Kandinsky sought to change art — but not simply for the sake of it. He wanted to create art capable of generating a spiritual epiphany in his viewers. To achieve this he strove for both a suitable formal element (abstraction of forms) and spiritual content. It was essential to Kandinsky that the paintings be recognised by his viewers as spiritual. Orientalist subject matter offered him this opportunity. This paper proposes that in a group of five paintings completed during this important period of transition, Kandinsky turned for inspiration to his personal experience of «the Orient»: photographs and sketches from his trip to Tunisia in 1904–1905 and two exhibitions in Munich in 1909 and 1910. Kandinsky quickly discovered that it was not only the spiritual associations that helped him achieve his objective; the visual material from his trip to Tunisia presented an approach to the dissolution of form. Bodies were veiled and hooded; architecture appeared reduced to flat planes and geometrical shapes. Content and form combined to propel him towards abstraction in a manner not available with any other thematic subject. Postcolonial studies of Orientalist art suggest that it typically involved the implicit or explicit support of an imperial agenda: the

<sup>1</sup> *Emily Christensen* — The Courtauld Institute of Art.

<sup>2</sup> The Russian version of the article will be published in the next issue of the article. — *Editorial Board*. Русский перевод этой статьи будет помещен в следующем номере журнала. - *Ред.*

domination of «the Orient» by «the West». This interpretation oversimplifies what Kandinsky did with his abstract-Orientalist paintings. Kandinsky's paintings engaged with Orientalist themes, but they were not conventional Orientalist works. Analysis reveals that he rejected as many dominant power structures as he accepted. This complex interplay of acceptance and rejection, or what Homi Bhabha expressed in terms of conflicting desire and derision led to the creation of quintessentially "ambivalent" images.

### ***Introduction***

Starting in 1909, Wassily Kandinsky transformed art: he formulated the concept of abstract art and then experimented until he was able to paint it. Abstraction was arguably the most influential innovation in art of the twentieth century, and Kandinsky is seen as one of its founders.<sup>1</sup> For Kandinsky, however, abstraction of form was not an end in itself: in his book *On the Spiritual in Art* he explained that «art is [...] a power that has a purpose and must serve the development and refinement of the human soul.»<sup>2</sup> He believed this could be achieved through abstraction, but only if it conveyed spiritual significance. This study proposes an entirely new understanding of Kandinsky's art in these critical years: his formal and thematic dependence on «Oriental» themes.

This study will examine a group of five paintings to reveal

<sup>1</sup> Rose-Carole Washton Long, *Kandinsky: The Development of an Abstract Style* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 1. See also Alfred H. Barr, «Cubism and Abstract Art» in *Abstraction: Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. by Maria Lind (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2013), pp. 28–33.

<sup>2</sup> Wassily Kandinsky, «On the Spiritual in Art», in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art, Volume One (1901–1921)*, trans. by and ed. by Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), pp. 114–219 (p. 212).

how content and form combined in these works in a manner uniquely suited to propel Kandinsky towards a new type of art. These paintings, which I will refer to as "abstract-Orientalist" paintings, have never previously been examined as a distinct group through the lens of postcolonialism. There are more paintings from this period with Orientalist references, but unfortunately space dictates a narrow focus in the present article.<sup>1</sup> Kandinsky assigned these paintings titles that include the words "African", "Arabs" and "Oriental".<sup>2</sup> Today we understand the three terms above to mean different things with distinct geographic, political and historical connotations; for Kandinsky, however, and for his contemporaries, these terms were interchangeable and related not to specific geographies, but rather to a culturally constructed idea.<sup>3</sup> Kandinsky's manipulation of this idea in his early abstract art forms the subject of this study.

Kandinsky's artistic objectives during these years centred around the desire to produce «spiritual» art. His book *On the Spiritual in Art*, written in 1909 but not published until 1911,

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Emily Christensen, «The Tunisian Sources of Wassily Kandinsky's «Improvisation on Mahogany'», *The Burlington Magazine* 159 (September 2017): 714–719. A comprehensive study of Kandinsky's abstract-Orientalist paintings forms the subject of the author's PhD at The Courtauld Institute of Art, London.

<sup>2</sup> Kandinsky assigned titles to his paintings in German until the year 1916, and recorded the titles in his Handlists, the hand-written lists of his paintings. See Hans K. Roethel and Jean K. Benjamin, *Kandinsky: Catalogue Raisonné of the Oil Paintings, Volume One: 1900–1915* (London: Sotheby Publications, 1982), p. 23. For ease of reference, English translations of the titles will be used in the text of this study.

<sup>3</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge & Kegan, 1978; reprint, London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2003), p. 1.

was his major intellectual contribution in the period under examination here.<sup>1</sup> In his book, he articulated the view that art is 'spiritual bread for the spiritual awakening now beginning' and believed it could lead viewers, and ultimately society as a whole, to a «spiritual turning point».<sup>2</sup> The intellectual landscape that Kandinsky inhabited was in the throes of responding to Nietzsche's proposition, «God is dead!», which Kandinsky cited in his book.<sup>3</sup> Raised in the Russian Orthodox tradition, Kandinsky was never an atheist, but like other cosmopolitan intellectuals across Russia and Europe, he was looking for a new solution to what J.J. Clarke has described as:

a pervasive cultural disquietude, an uneasy awareness of fault lines running deep into the strata of European cultural life, down through levels of politics, religion, and philosophy, giving rise to a sense of some fundamental breakdown at the heart of the West's intellectual, spiritual and moral being.<sup>4</sup>

Kandinsky's drive to produce «spiritual art needs to be understood in this context. And, like many of his predecessors and contemporaries, Kandinsky believed that «the West» that he inhabited was materialistic and spiritually corrupt. Like them, he turned to «the Orient» to fill the spiritual void.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Kandinsky also wrote several smaller articles and edited and contributed to *The Blaue Reiter Almanac*, but as the latter largely reiterated his views on abstract painting first propounded in «On the Spiritual in Art», the Almanac will not be examined further here.

<sup>2</sup> Kandinsky, «On the Spiritual in Art», p. 138. «The Spiritual Turning Point» is the title of Chapter 3 in «On the Spiritual in Art».

<sup>3</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 120. And see Kandinsky, «On the Spiritual in Art», p. 139.

<sup>4</sup> J.J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment: The encounter between Asian and Western thought* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 28.

<sup>5</sup> See discussion in Clarke, pp. 16–34.



Although Russian, Kandinsky lived in Germany during the period under examination here and had done since 1896. This paper does not seek to deny his Russianness, nor his feelings about Moscow which he described on several occasions in spiritual terms. Nevertheless, Kandinsky was raised in a multilingual, metropolitan household, grew up in rapidly modernising Russian cities, and spent his formative artistic years in Munich, studying the European artistic tradition. This paper proposes that when Kandinsky referred to «the West», he was referring to the modern, increasingly homogenous metropolises across Europe, extending into Russia, and his view of «the Orient» was framed in opposition to this construction of «the West».<sup>1</sup>

A key element of Kandinsky's understanding of «the Orient» was a three-month trip to Tunisia that he took with his partner Gabriele Münter in 1904–1905, during which he produced hundreds of sketches, approximately thirty tempera paintings and several oils on board.<sup>2</sup> In addition, Kandinsky and Münter between them took more than one hundred and eighty photographs of their surroundings.<sup>3</sup> This Tunisian material is

<sup>1</sup> In addition, studies show that while there is some evidence that Russian academics were more willing to challenge the notion that «the Orient» was a homogenous whole, this was primarily within St Petersburg University; meanwhile the general public perceptions and stereotypes paralleled those in Germany. Vera Tolz, *Russia's Own Orient: The politics of identity and Oriental studies in the late Imperial and early Soviet periods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Vivian Endicott Barnett, *Kandinsky Drawings: Catalogue Raisonné, Volume Two: Sketchbooks* (London: Philip Wilson Publishers, 2007), Vivian Endicott Barnett, *Kandinsky Watercolours: Catalogue Raisonné, Volume One: 1901–1921* (London: Sotheby's Publications, 1992), and Roethel and Benjamin.

important for two reasons: it shows that Kandinsky had already engaged with conventional Orientalist themes; and it provided a visual resource for his subsequent abstract-Orientalist works.

### ***The Abstract-Orientalist Paintings***

The most literal representation of Tunisia in Kandinsky's abstract-Orientalist paintings occurs in *Arabs I (Cemetery)* (Fig. 1) of 1909. It is among his earliest paintings to experiment with abstracted forms in a context other than landscapes. Dominated by bright, warm yellows and contrasting, cool blues, the painting provides direct references to Kandinsky's trip to Tunisia, and evidence of his reliance on the artistic outputs from that trip. Roger Benjamin has identified two specific photographs which Kandinsky has «amalgamated» in order to produce this image: *Tunisian Village* (Fig. 2), which provides the background of the wall with arch and doorways, the steps down, and the twisted, pollarded tree; and *Ottoman Cemetery, Tunisia* (Fig. 3), which provides the rows of turban graves.<sup>4</sup> The four partially-abstracted figures appear to be loosely based on sketches and photographs from the trip. The two seated figures wrapped in burnous cloaks, one at the far left and one at the far right of the canvas, appear in multiple gouache paintings from the trip.

Two other paintings from 1909 show Kandinsky developing his Orientalist theme by reference to Tunisia while introducing increasingly abstract forms. He described this practice as follows:

I dissolved objects to a greater or lesser extent within the

<sup>3</sup> See the discussion on authorship of the photographs in Roger Benjamin with Cristina Ashjian, *Kandinsky and Klee in Tunisia* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015), p. 78.

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin with Ashjian, pp. 93–94.

same picture, so that they might not all be recognised at once and so that these emotional overtones might thus be experienced gradually by the spectator, one after another.<sup>1</sup>

*Improvisation 6 (Africans)* (Fig. 4), shows two turbaned figures in the foreground, in front of a white building with a green dome and a series of abstracted shapes delineated either by black lines or by contrasting blocks of colour. The building resembles the Tombs of the Beys, in Kandinsky's painting *Tunis Street (Tombs of the Beys)* (Fig. 5), with its blank white walls and green tiled, domed roof. The *Pencil sketch for Improvisation 6 (Africans)* (Fig. 6) bears an even closer resemblance (although reversed) to the Tombs of the Beys, showing not only the dome, but also the small turret in the corner, which Kandinsky subsequently omitted from the oil painting. The turbaned figures, meanwhile, recall those from his *Pencil sketches of figures in costume* and *Pencil sketches of male and female figures* (Figs. 7 and 8) and photographs including of *Courtyard of the Dar El Bey Mosque with traditionally dressed visitors* (Fig. 9).

A closely related painting is *Orientalists* (Fig. 10) of 1909. The figure on the left with dark brown skin, small feathered hat (known as a *cechia*) and loose white trousers that become tight around the lower legs is identifiable from a photograph taken by the artists in Tunisia, namely the right-hand figure in *Three dark-skinned men in elegant clothes in front of a café* (Fig. 11). The composition suggests people sitting in a cafe, a common theme in Orientalist art and popular photography, and a subject Kandinsky painted in Tunisia, in his work *Moorish Café*.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Wassily Kandinsky, 'Cologne Lecture', in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art, Volume One (1901–1921)*, trans. by and ed. by Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), pp. 392–400 (p. 393).

<sup>2</sup> See discussion in Benjamin with Ashjian, pp. 30–31.

*Arabs II* and *Arabs III (with Pitcher)* both from 1911 show Kandinsky conflating his visual references to Tunisia with Persian and possibly Syrian influences in broad stereotypes of Orientalism. Before discussing these paintings individually, it is important to note that by naming the pair *Arabs II* and *Arabs III (with Pitcher)*, Kandinsky made a deliberate link back to the first of his abstract-Orientalist paintings: *Arabs I (Cemetery)*. Stylistically the three are dramatically different; the titular link suggests that his intention was to link the paintings by theme. The titles prepare the viewer to search out, even in the most dissolved forms, conventional images of «the Arab», and, by implication, to make the association between Orientalist themes and spirituality. In *Arabs II*<sup>1</sup>, the composition is centred around a group of galloping blue horses ridden by the abstracted forms of men in flowing white burnouses. Of the figures in the lower right corner, the red ones are barely discernible other than by the turbans on the backs of their heads, while the small figure pointing to the riders clearly has dark skin and a red cecchia hat reminiscent of the left-hand figure in *Orientalis*.

In *Arabs III (with Pitcher)* (Fig. 12), only the title allows the identification of the almost entirely dissolved shapes in the upper left and right of the painting as riders on galloping or rearing horses ridden by men in white burnouses and wearing turbans. The reclining woman and the pitcher are, by contrast, easily identifiable. The reclining woman with her exotic veil and chin in her hand does not appear in sketches or photographs from the trip to Tunisia. It seems most likely that she was introduced as a visual cue to the Orientalist theme of the

<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, this painting is owned by a private collection and the author was unable to obtain permission to reproduce this image. A reproduction of the image can be found in the artist's catalogue raisonné. Roethel and Benjamin, p. 360.

painting, particularly given that the «Oriental' horsemen are almost entirely dissolved into abstract shapes. The presence of a reclining woman in Orientalist art is one with which Kandinsky and his viewers would have been familiar from innumerable Odalisques painted since the eighteenth century, all erotic fantasies based on assumptions around the availability of sexual encounters in «the Orient'.<sup>1</sup>

### *Ambivalence and Postcolonial Theory*

Before proceeding further with an analysis of these paintings, it is necessary to address the treatment of postcolonial theory and its related terminology used in this study. The decades-long debate around «Orientalism' has been highly charged. The term itself is burdened with a multiplicity of meanings, and will be largely avoided in this paper in favour of the adjective «Orientalist' (in relation to art or themes) which is used here to reference an affinity with a genre of painting produced mainly in Europe during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries featuring largely imaginary scenes of people and places outside of Europe, often in the Middle East and Northern Africa. The term «Orientalism' will be used sparingly to reference the postcolonial debate around the meaning of «the West's' engagement with «the Orient'. Other than the brief outline below, this paper does not purport to reproduce a history of the debate, but rather extends some of its most important ideas to an analysis of Kandinsky's abstract-Orientalist paintings.

Postcolonial interpretations of Orientalism began with the publication in 1978 of Edward Said's book *Orientalism*. Said

<sup>1</sup> Christine Peltre, «Et les Femmes?», in *De Delacroix à Kandinsky: L'Orientalisme en Europe*, ed. by Roger Diederer and Davy Depelchin (Paris: Hazan, 2010), pp. 157–165.

criticised the Orientalism practiced by «the West' on «the Orient' and analysed it in terms of Foucauldian discourse and the relationship between truth and power. For Said, the study of «the Orient' is not and never was a neutral academic exercise in pursuit of truth.<sup>1</sup> On the contrary, he argued that Orientalism is a manifestation of the power relationship that underlies the broader «Western' imperial project, and as such it says more about the moral and political concerns of «the West' than it does about any «Oriental' reality.<sup>2</sup> The proliferation of inverted commas in the preceding sentences reflects the sensitivity which surrounds these terms in the wake of the debate.<sup>3</sup> For the purpose of this study, inverted commas will be used for these essentialised terms to represent the way in which they were used by Kandinsky (and others) in the period.

While Said's work did not engage significantly with painting, his arguments were systematically applied to nineteenth century French Orientalist painting by Linda Nochlin in her article, «The Imaginary Orient'.<sup>4</sup> Nochlin's article translates the standard themes of Orientalist ideology into the visual language of painting: among them, the mystery

<sup>1</sup> See Foucault's statement that «truth is a thing of this world. [...] Each society has its regime of truth, its «general politics» of truth.» Michel Foucault, «Truth and Power' in Paul Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault Reader* (London: Penguin Books, 1984), pp. 51–75 (p. 73).

<sup>2</sup> Said, pp. 11–12.

<sup>3</sup> Not the least of which was Said's use of the term «the West' in his criticism of how «the West' essentialises «the Orient', which has itself drawn criticism for essentialising «the West'. See for example, John M. MacKenzie, *Orientalism: History, theory and the arts* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Linda Nochlin, «The Imaginary Orient', *Art in America*, 71, (May 1983), pp. 119–131, 186–191.

of the East, the vice of idleness, the harmonious religious practices, and of course lasciviousness and the sexual availability of submissive women. All of these appear in Kandinsky's Orientalist paintings and need to be examined both in relation to their status as century-old themes, and to their particular manifestation in his twentieth century modernism. Significantly, Nochlin also identifies four conspicuous absences in Orientalist art: the absence of history, in which the Oriental world is «a world without change, a world of timeless, atemporal customs and rituals, untouched by historical processes;» the absence of the Western colonial presence; the absence of artistic interpretation, bringing with it the implication of scientific objectivity; and finally the «*apparent* absence of art', the eradication of all artistic traces to create a «pseudo-realist' painting.<sup>1</sup> These, as shall be seen below, provide a method for interpreting the complex interplay of the conventional and the unconventional in Kandinsky's abstract-Orientalist works.

The criticisms of Said have been manifold.<sup>2</sup> A significant critique for present purposes comes from J.J. Clarke in his book *Oriental Enlightenment*. Clarke accepts much of Said's analysis, particularly his exposure of hidden and suppressed ideological

<sup>1</sup> Nochlin, p. 122.

<sup>2</sup> These include, most famously, Bernard Lewis' accusation that Said's book was anti-Zionist, anti-Semitic, anti-American and motivated by hostility: Bernard Lewis, *Islam and the West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). See also John MacKenzie's concern that Said presents an unchanging Western imperial intention over a span of 150 years, a well-argued critique, but one that is less relevant to this dissertation: MacKenzie, *Orientalism: History, theory and the arts*. A book summarising the critiques and comments on Said's *Orientalism* is A.L. Macfie, *Orientalism* (London: Longman, 2002).

agendas, but he argues that Said's analysis is too restricted in its dogmatic identification of Orientalism with the dominant imperialist ideology.<sup>1</sup> Clarke asserts that in some cases it also represents, «a counter-movement, [...] albeit not a unified or consciously organised one, which in various ways has often tended to subvert rather than to confirm the discursive structures of imperial power.»<sup>2</sup> It was not, he argued, simply a question of «power' and «domination'; it was an attempt to confront the structures of knowledge and power and to engage with «Oriental' ideas in ways that confronted the «painful void in the spiritual and intellectual heart of Europe'.<sup>3</sup> Elements of this interpretation are anticipated by Kandinsky's work.

Homi Bhabha has proposed, in his complex, multi-disciplinary chapter, «The Other Question: Stereotype, discrimination and the discourse of colonialism', an alternative to the binary oppositions identified by Said.<sup>4</sup> Bhabha also largely agrees with Said's thesis that Orientalism is a «regime of truth' which creates «the Orient' as a unified zone of the world.<sup>5</sup> He produces a more subtle reading, however, with his focus on stereotyping.<sup>6</sup> He is not interested in the stereotype as a wholly positive or negative characterisation; rather, he explores its inherent «ambivalence': an expression of ««otherness» which is at once an object of desire and derision.»<sup>7</sup> Looking at Kandinsky's abstract-Orientalist

<sup>1</sup> Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment*, p. 25.

<sup>2</sup> Clarke, p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Clarke, p. 34.

<sup>4</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 94–120.

<sup>5</sup> Bhabha, p. 101.

<sup>6</sup> Bhabha, p. 95.



paintings as ambivalent images allows the complex nature of this important and underestimated group of paintings to be revealed. At one level, the Orientalist themes express Kandinsky's yearning for the spirituality he associates with «the Orient» while simultaneously exposing his tendency to reduce «the Orient» to a homogenous, undifferentiated whole. And at another level, he relies on conventional Orientalist themes that play to the desires of his viewers while simultaneously rejecting artistic conventions through his dissolution of form.

### *Exhibitions as Catalysts*

The intellectual catalyst for Kandinsky's abstract-Orientalist paintings was, this study proposes, two exhibitions in Munich in 1909 and 1910, both of which he reviewed for the Russian art journal *Apollon*.

In 1909, Kandinsky visited «Japanese and East Asian Art». Featuring 1,276 works, this exhibition took place at what turned out to be the start of Kandinsky's intellectual commitment to spiritual content in his art.<sup>7</sup> He wrote about the exhibition:

Here, along with the truly Oriental gift for combining the subtlest details into an overall consonance, one finds landscapes of an extraordinary breadth and abstraction in the handling of colour and form, subordinated to a sense of rhythm that is the pure expression of a unique, wholly artistic temperament. Again and again, so much that is part of Western art becomes

<sup>7</sup> Bhabha, p. 96.

<sup>8</sup> Jens Kröger, «The 1910 Exhibition «Meisterwerke Muhammedanischer Kunst»: Its protagonists and its consequences for the display of Islamic art in Berlin» in *After One Hundred Years: The 1910 Exhibition «Meisterwerke muhammedanischer Kunst» Reconsidered* ed. by Andrea Lerner and Avinoam Shalem (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2010), pp. 65–116 (p. 72).

clear when one sees the infinite variety of the works of the East, which are, nonetheless, subordinated to and united by the same fundamental «tone»! It is precisely this general «inner tone» that the West lacks. Indeed it cannot be helped: we have turned, for reasons obscure to us, away from the internal and toward the external. And yet, perhaps we Westerners shall not, after all, have to wait too long before the same inner sound, so strangely silenced, reawakens within us and, sounding forth from the innermost depths, involuntarily reveals its affinity with the East — just as in the very heart of all peoples, in the now darkest depths of the spirit, there shall resound one universal sound, albeit at present inaudible to us — the sound of the spirit of man.<sup>1</sup>

Coming at a time when Kandinsky was seeking new content that would be identifiably spiritual, this exhibition revealed the potential to achieve his artistic objectives by reference to the «Oriental gift» with its «inner tone». Although there is no way of knowing definitively whether the exhibition inspired his links between «the Orient», spirituality and abstraction, or whether it coincided with ideas he had already read about, its powerful effect on Kandinsky at this formative time is evident from the quote above.

It is noteworthy that the language of the quote closely resembles the language he used in his introduction to *On the Spiritual in Art*, written the same year: «This all-important spark of inner life today is at present only a spark. Our minds, which are even now only just awakening after years of materialism, are infected with the despair of unbelief.»<sup>2</sup> Certainly if the

<sup>1</sup> Wassily Kandinsky, «Letters from Munich (1)», in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art, Volume One (1901–1921)*, trans. by and ed. by Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), pp. 54–59 (p. 59).

exhibition inspired him to revisit his sketches and photographs from his only experience of «the Orient» (Tunisia) he would have discovered two distinct stimuli for the development of his art: spiritual content and partially-abstracted forms. The visual material from his trip to Tunisia would have presented him with established assumptions around «Oriental» spirituality, offering him a subject matter that projected the «inner tone» he sought. Meanwhile, his newfound interest in the dissolution of form would have recognised the opportunities inherent in robed, veiled and hooded bodies and in architecture that appeared to be reduced to flat planes and geometrical shapes. This combination of content and form proved uniquely suited to his artistic objectives.

If the exhibition in 1909 helped Kandinsky establish a link between «the Orient», spiritualism and abstraction, the exhibition in 1910 confirmed it. Kandinsky reviewed the exhibition «Masterpieces of Mohammedan Art» in one of his «Letters from Munich» for *Apollon* Magazine, writing that it «has far exceeded all hopes.»<sup>3</sup> The exhibition, held in Munich between May and October 1910, displayed over 3,600 objects and was described by Kandinsky as «a huge collection of the most diverse objects, which are, almost without exception, of the first quality.»<sup>4</sup> In the article, Kandinsky wrote over two pages about the profound impact the Persian miniatures had on him. In one passage, he explained his reaction to them:

It seemed unbelievable that this could have been created

<sup>2</sup> Kandinsky, «On the Spiritual in Art», pp. 1–2.

<sup>3</sup> Wassily Kandinsky, «Letters from Munich (5)», in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art, Volume One (1901–1921)*, ed. by Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), pp. 73–80 (p. 73).

<sup>4</sup> Lerner and Shalem, p. vii; and Lindsay and Vergo, p. 73.

by human hands. Standing before it, I felt it had come into being of its own accord, as if it had come down from heaven, like a revelation. This was one of those occasions when the spirit partakes of spiritual refreshment for which it has been waiting, searching, without knowing where to find it.<sup>1</sup>

He wrote about another work:

Horses! I remember one drawing of a team of black horses running as if pursued by devils from right to left across the picture. [...] The heads of the horses in the most distant rows are turned in such a way that they appear nearer to the viewer, so that not one single head should be concealed. [...] Imagine them obscured, and the whole strength not only of the linear composition, but also the whole «inner harmony» of the picture would be lost.<sup>2</sup>

Like the exhibition the previous year, this exhibition induced a sense of revelation and «spiritual refreshment» that closely matched his response to the art in the «Japanese and East Asian Art» exhibition. Also in the 1910 review he expressed the art from the «East» as originating in the artist's «internal world», in the same way that he had referred to its «inner tone» the year before. He again deplored «Western art», this time describing it as decadent and buried under «the stifling accretions of the materialism of «yesterday»».<sup>3</sup> Finally, both responses, in their description of his spiritual epiphany, supported his belief in art's power to impact its viewers.<sup>4</sup> His articulation of the dynamic relationship between an artwork

<sup>1</sup> Kandinsky, «Letters from Munich (5)», p. 74.

<sup>2</sup> Kandinsky, «Letters from Munich (5)», p. 75. The influence of Persian miniatures on Kandinsky more broadly, is explored in Fereshteh Daftari, *The Influence of Persian Art on Gauguin, Matisse and Kandinsky* (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1991).

<sup>3</sup> Kandinsky, «Letters from Munich (5)», p. 74.

<sup>4</sup> Kandinsky, «Letters from Munich (5)», pp. 74–75.

and its viewer in these exhibitions revealed the impact he sought with his own paintings.

*Kandinsky's Use of Stereotypes*

It is evident from these two reviews in *Apollon* magazine, and from the titles of his paintings, that Kandinsky conflated Japanese, Chinese, «East Asian», «the East», Tunisian, Persian and «African» under the umbrella terms «Eastern» and «Oriental». In relation to the «Japanese and East Asian Art» exhibition, he used the terms «Asiatic», «Japanese», «the Orient», «Oriental», «the East», all to refer to the art in the exhibition. Modern readers are left without much indication of their precise origin. Writing about «Masterpieces of Mohammedan Art», he focused specifically on Persian miniatures, but referred to the exhibition again as «the exhibition of Eastern art in Munich».<sup>1</sup> Despite Kandinsky's embrace of «Oriental enlightenment» in the constructive sense proposed by Clarke, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Kandinsky was an Orientalist artist of the type described by Said:

Orientalists [...] conceive of humanity either in large collective terms or in abstract generalities. Orientalists are neither interested in nor capable of discussing individuals; instead, artificial entities [...] predominate.<sup>2</sup>

For Said, all use of stereotype is necessarily negative. But while the quote above appears to be true of Kandinsky, it seems incorrect to follow this observation with Said's ultimate proposal that Kandinsky must, therefore, have been acting in support of the «Western» colonial agenda.<sup>3</sup> To do so would be to oversimplify Kandinsky's engagement with Orientalism. Bhabha's writing on stereotypes provides an alternative

<sup>1</sup> Kandinsky, «Letters from Munich (5)», p. 73.

<sup>2</sup> Said, p. 154–155.

<sup>3</sup> Said, pp. 11–12.

interpretation; for Bhabha, stereotypes are a site of ambivalence because of their inherent duality as objects of simultaneous desire and derision.<sup>1</sup> The desire expressed by Kandinsky is evident in his expressions of yearning for the «inner tone» or the «profundity of inner expression» he believed these «Oriental artists» capable of. The derision is present not only in his dehumanising generalisations of Japanese, Chinese, Persian, Syrian and other artists as generically «Oriental» or «Eastern», but also in a more insidious manner. His brief paragraph describing the Persian miniature that elicited his epiphany employed five adjectives from a conventional vocabulary of Orientalist writing: «barbaric», «sensuous», «cunning», and twice the term «primitive».<sup>2</sup> These are value-laden terms with established connotations in Orientalist literature, discussed in depth in Said and Nochlin, of containment, domination and derision in the creation of a justification for imperialism.<sup>3</sup> It is equally evident, however, that that was not Kandinsky's objective in the context of his panegyric on Persian miniatures. It seems rather to be an example of what Said wrote about when he described the essentialising impact of Orientalism on mental processes:

My point [...] is to emphasise the truth that the Orientalist, as much as anyone in the European West who thought about or experienced the Orient, performed this kind of mental operation. But what is more important still is the limited vocabulary and imagery that impose themselves as a consequence.<sup>4</sup>

Kandinsky's use of essentialising language was almost unconscious, what Said would describe as «latent», and the

<sup>1</sup> Bhabha, p. 96.

<sup>2</sup> Kandinsky, «Letters from Munich (5)», p. 74.

<sup>3</sup> Said, p. 40

<sup>4</sup> Said, p. 60.

negative connotations conflict with the apparent intention of his review.<sup>1</sup> Bhabha's reading of stereotypes, therefore, as ambivalent expressions of desire and derision reflect the tension between Kandinsky's conventional, essentialising Orientalism, and his assertions of «the Orient's' superiority over «the West'. It provides a more nuanced reading of Kandinsky's engagement with Orientalism than is available in Said's binary universe and thus provides a useful lens through which to view Kandinsky's abstract-Orientalist paintings.<sup>2</sup>

Said wrote of Orientalism that, «what mattered was not Asia so much as Asia's *use to* modern Europe.»<sup>3</sup> This could be rephrased: what mattered was not «the Orient' so much as «the Orient's' *use to* Kandinsky. Orientalist themes and their veiled forms were uniquely suited to Kandinsky's objective of developing art capable of provoking spiritual revelation in his viewers. Kandinsky's personal associations between «the Orient' and spiritual enlightenment were revealed in his reviews for *Apollon*. Crucially, these associations were not only Kandinsky's: given his focus on the impact of his art on his viewers, he may have employed Orientalist themes precisely because he would expect his viewers to make the same associations between «the Orient' and spirituality.<sup>4</sup> Writers on visual culture have noted the «explosion of the visual image' in the late nineteenth century in Europe, and the repertoire of Orientalist themes that formed part of this.<sup>5</sup> This was «the Orient's' *use to* Kandinsky:

<sup>1</sup> Said, p. 201.

<sup>2</sup> Bhabha, p. 95.

<sup>3</sup> Said's italics. Said, p. 115.

<sup>4</sup> Rémi Labrusse, «Islamic Arts and the Crisis of Representation in Modern Europe', in *A Companion to Islamic Art and Architecture* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017), pp. 1196–1217 (p. 1198).

<sup>5</sup> Volker M. Langbehn, «Introduction: Picturing Race: Visuality and

he relied upon the hidden assumptions underlying Orientalist visual imagery as a strategy for achieving his artistic goal of spiritual enlightenment with regard to his viewing public.

«Ambivalent» Images

The projection of spiritual content in *Arabs I (Cemetery)* is explicit: set in a Tunisian cemetery, veiled mourners are seated amongst anthropomorphic turban tombs. The focal point for the scene is the ambiguous interaction between the figure in a blue robe with a striped turban that echoes the stripes on the grave markers and the shrouded figure facing him, standing with arms outstretched and head bowed. The sense of ritual conveyed by this pair, combined with its setting, announces its spiritual theme clearly to the viewer. In *Improvisation 6 (Africans)*, the theme is less explicit and the forms more abstract. Kandinsky painted the two figures in the act of either wrapping themselves in their burnous cloaks, or removing them; in either case, what interested him was the enveloping cloak, a reprise of the Orientalist fantasy of the mysterious, exotic Orient.<sup>6</sup> The formal effect, meanwhile, is to partially abstract the bodies, whose limbs are concealed beneath their robes. In *Orientalis*, the composition suggests people sitting in a café, a common theme in Orientalist art and popular photography, and a subject Kandinsky painted in Tunisia. Beyond that, it suggests a timeless and idealistic social harmony, which could be an attempt by Kandinsky to project his esoteric beliefs that, as he wrote, «in the very heart of all peoples [...] there shall resound one universal sound [...] the sound of the spirit of man.»

German Colonialism', in *German Colonialism, Visual Culture and Modern Memory*, ed. by Volker M. Langbehn (New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 1 —36 (p. 3).

<sup>6</sup> Nochlin, p. 119.



*Improvisation 6 (Africans)* and *Orientals* manifest Kandinsky's stated intention of dissolving objects to a greater or lesser extent within the same picture: some figures are recognisable, others become apparent only after close examination, while some patches of colour appear to lack form entirely. As this was done with the stated intention of ensuring that «particular overtones might be experienced gradually by the spectator», it would appear that Kandinsky assigned (presumably spiritual) «overtones» to the recognisable objects in the paintings: the robed and turbaned «Oriental» men, and the domed religious buildings.

*Arabs II* with its flat picture plane and superimposition of multiple horses and *Arabs III* with its robed horsemen, reclining woman and pitcher show Kandinsky combining iconography from his trip to Tunisia with inspiration from Persian miniatures, and possibly Syrian ceramics, bringing them together under generic Orientalist titles in a conflation of visual stereotypes that mirrors his conflation of written stereotypes. The ambivalence of the resulting images is evident in his representation of «Arabs» as simultaneously homogenised and romanticised; in Bhabha's words, they are simultaneously derided and desired. The almost abstract forms of the visual stereotypes act to reinforce and multiply the ambivalence of the images: the «Arabs» in the paintings are designed to be recognised by the (Western) viewer because of their familiarity as stereotypes; and yet, the strangeness of their abstracted form is both confounding and disconcerting.

The process of development towards abstraction in his abstract-Orientalist works reveals Kandinsky's constant awareness of the dynamic relationship between his paintings and their viewers, and his desire to create art that «has a purpose and must serve the development and refinement of the human soul».<sup>1</sup> A passage from Said that subsequently

formed the central part of Bhabha's chapter on stereotypes suggests a way of understanding this:

Something patently foreign and distant acquires, for one reason or another, a status more or less familiar. One tends to stop judging things either as completely novel or as completely well-known; a new median category emerges, a category that allows one to see new things, things seen for the first time, as versions of a previously known thing. In essence such a category is not so much a way of receiving new information as it is a method of controlling what seems to be a threat to some established view of things.<sup>2</sup>

For Bhabha, this describes the ambivalence that goes beyond the binary notions of the dominant coloniser and the colonised subject in Said's book and suggests an object that «vacillates between delight and fear».<sup>3</sup> In this way, Kandinsky can be seen to introduce his progressive abstraction as «versions of a previously known thing», where familiar Orientalist themes are a method for controlling the threat posed by these new abstract forms. In this inversion of the discourse, the «patently foreign», «Oriental' subject has become the familiar.

### *Conclusion*

Kandinsky achieved extraordinary artistic innovation in the years 1909–1911. The significance of his engagement with Orientalist themes in enabling this achievement has thus far been overlooked. This study has found that in his abstract-Orientalist paintings, content and form combined in a unique synthesis to propel him towards abstraction. These works reveal Kandinsky reprising familiar Orientalist stereotypes of timeless, anti-materialistic spirituality, in order to lead his viewers

<sup>1</sup> Kandinsky, «On the Spiritual in Art», p. 212.

<sup>2</sup> Said quoted in Bhabha, p. 104.

<sup>3</sup> Bhabha, p. 105.

towards an acceptance of his radical formal innovations. While some postcolonial studies suggest that stereotypes support an imperial agenda of domination over «the Orient» by «the West», this interpretation oversimplifies what Kandinsky achieved with his abstract-Orientalist works. These paintings engage with certain aspects of the dominant power structure while simultaneously challenging others. The resulting complex interplay of desire and derision makes them quintessentially ambivalent images. Their role in the development of one of the twentieth century's most influential artistic innovations deserves to be celebrated.

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*Figure 1. Wassily Kandinsky, Arabs I (Cemetery), 1909, oil on cardboard, 71.5 x 98 cm. Kunsthalle, Hamburg. © bpk-Bildagentur.*

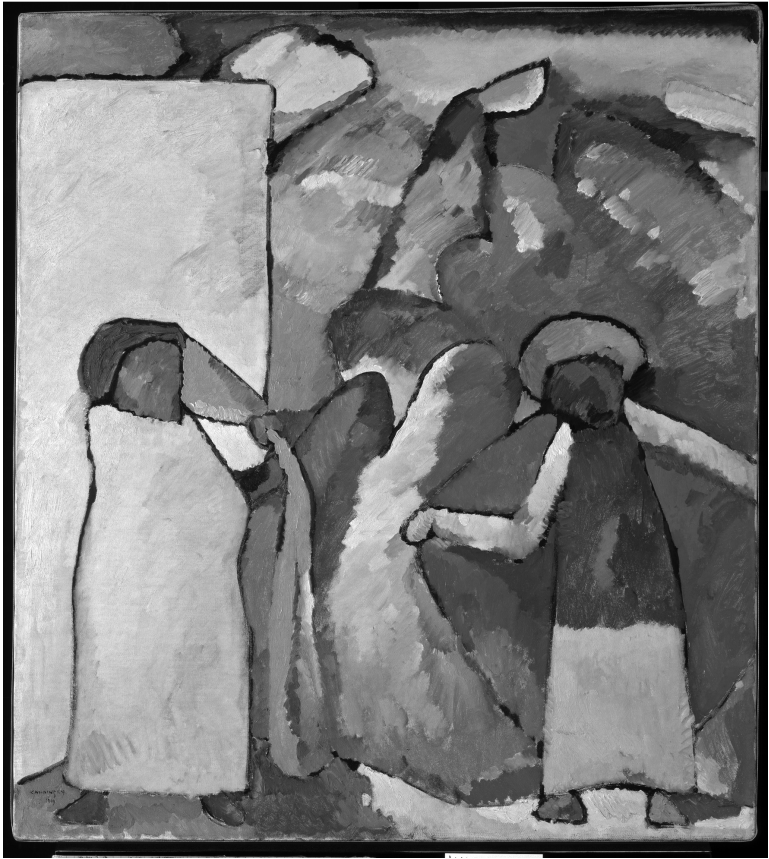


*Figure 2. Gabriele Münter, Tunisian Village (Zaouia of Sidi Bel-Hassen, Tunis), 1905, photograph, dimensions unknown. Gabriele Münter und Johannes Eichner Stiftung, Munich*

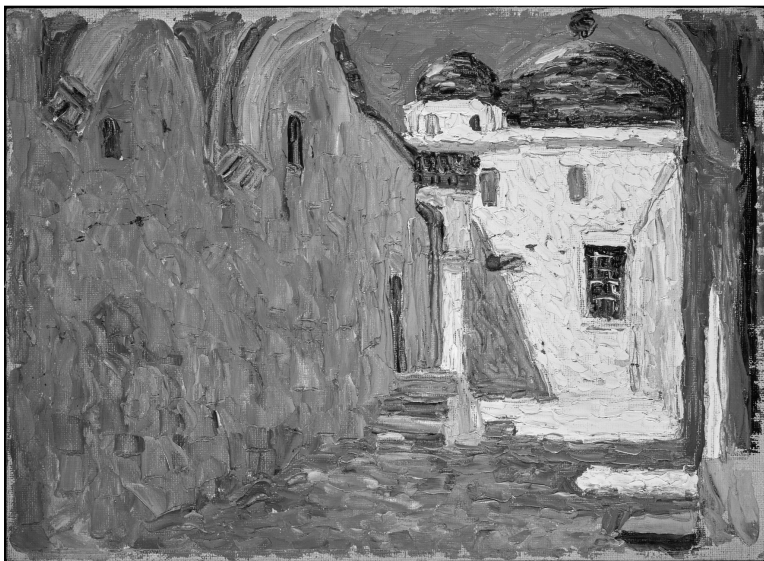


*Figure 3. Gabriele Münter, Ottoman cemetery, Tunisia, March 1905, photograph, dimensions unknown. Gabriele Münter und Johannes Eichner Stiftung, Munich.*





*Figure 4. Wassily Kandinsky, Improvisation 6 (Africans), 1909, oil on canvas, 107 x 99.5 cm. Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich.*



*Figure 5. Wassily Kandinsky, Tunis Street (Tombs of the Beys), 1905, oil on canvas board, 24 x 35 cm. Centre Pompidou, Paris. © MNAM-CCI, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais.*

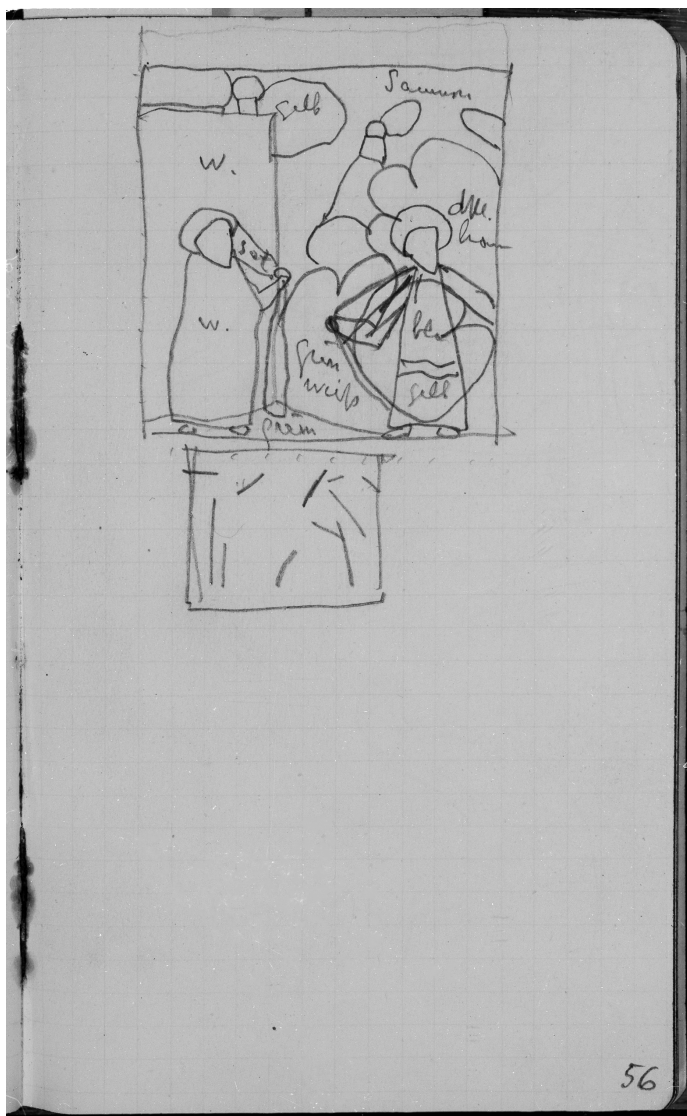
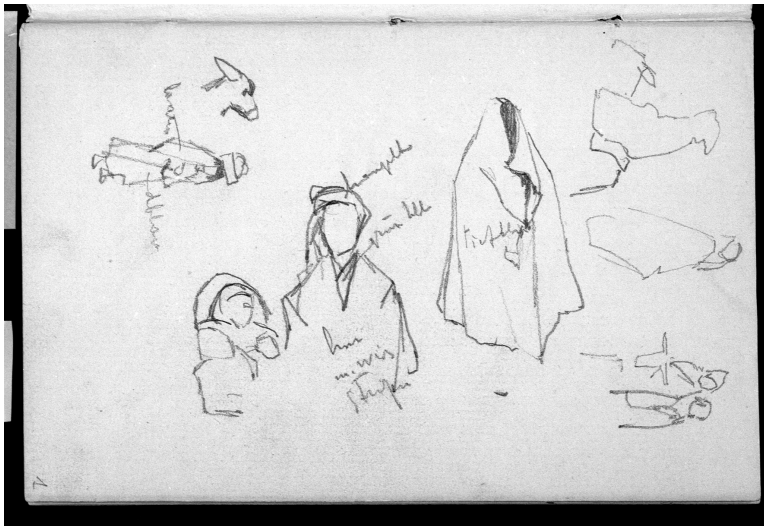


Figure 6. Wassily Kandinsky, *Pencil sketch for Improvisation 6* of 1909, c. 1908–1910 (possibly 1909), pencil on paper, 13.2 x 8.1 cm. Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich.



*Figure 7. Wassily Kandinsky, Pencil sketches of figures in costume, 1904–1905, pencil on paper, 16.6 x 11 cm. Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich.*



*Figure 8. Wassily Kandinsky, Pencil sketches of male and female figures, 1905, pencil on paper, 12 x 19.1 cm. Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich.*



*Figure 9. Gabriele Münter, Courtyard of the Dar El Bey Mosque with traditionally dressed visitors, 1905, photograph, dimensions unknown. Gabriele Münter und Johannes Eichner Stiftung, Munich.*



*Figure 10. Wassily Kandinsky, Orientals, 1909, oil on cardboard, 69.5 x 96.5 cm. Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich.*



*Figure 11. Gabriele Münter, Three dark-skinned men in elegant clothes in front of a cafe, 1905, photograph, dimensions unknown. Gabriele Münter und Johannes Eichner Stiftung, Munich.*





*Figure 12. Wassily Kandinsky, Arabs III (with Pitcher), 1911, oil on canvas, 106 x 158 cm. National Gallery of Armenia, Yerevan. Alamy Stock Photo.*