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Whither the "New" Art?: Rudolf Steiner and Wassily Kandinsky on the Spiritual Mission of Painting in the Early 20th Century

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"Whither the 'New' Art?"

Rudolf Steiner and Wassily Kandinsky on the Spiritual Mission of Painting in the Early 20th Century

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ABSTRACT. While Wassily Kandinsky's thoughts on art have been remarked upon frequently, that is not the case with Rudolf Steiner. This article compares closely the aesthetics of Steiner and Kandinsky to highlight the post-World War I question of the direction of modern art – *whither the new art?* – and to demonstrate that the two proposals focused on the same basic societal problems and proposed similar, albeit distinctly different, artistic solutions.

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Art in Europe had reached a crossroads in the early years of the twentieth century. Over the course of the previous century, the national academies' once-unquestioned monopoly over art education, production and standards had been increasingly eroded by the challenges posed by independent art movements. Artistic vitality migrated away from official institutions toward various "secession" and "avant-garde" art movements, which by 1900 included Impressionism, Neo-Impressionism, and Symbolism. At the dawn of the new century, this newly achieved freedom for the arts combined with widespread hopes for societal revitalization, leading to a vibrant discourse about how art—including painting—might play a role in setting European society on a better path. Many joined the conversation, among them the spiritually-oriented artist Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944)

and the artistically-oriented spiritual teacher Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), whose ideas attracted greater attention than most. Kandinsky's slim treatise, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, published in 1912, was widely read and discussed by artists internationally. In it he advocated that painters move away from recognizable imagery of the visible world, relying solely on color and non-representational form in order to access and express invisible realities hidden within our everyday experience of the world. In doing so, he believed, artists could act as vanguard for the rest of humanity as it evolved toward a higher state of consciousness, which he described as the coming "epoch of the great spiritual."[1] Steiner, a charismatic lecturer associated first with the Theosophical Society and, after 1912, with his own Anthroposophical movement, also attracted widespread interest among artists.[2] Like Kandinsky—though in greater detail—he predicted a coming era of increased spirituality in mankind's future. He believed that "artistic feeling or sensitivity, coupled with a quiet, inward nature, is the most promising precondition" for such spiritual development, and that a new form of art making could help facilitate it.[3] Steiner elaborated his ideas on the topic in many of the thousands of lectures he delivered between 1914 and his death in 1925.[4]

Kandinsky, in his 1912 treatise, and Steiner, in his Anthroposophical lectures after 1912, both attempted to work out conceptions of new forms of

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[1] Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo, eds., *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 1994), 219.

[2] Steiner had been the General Secretary of the German branch of the Theosophical Society, but due to increasingly sharp differences with the organization's leadership, withdrew to form the Anthroposophical Society in 1912. Steiner's teachings, which he termed "anthroposophy," held more closely to the Western esoteric tradition and aspects of mystical Christianity than did those of the Theosophical Society, which had turned increasingly toward Asian spiritual philosophies.

[3] Rudolf Steiner, *How to Know Higher Worlds*, trans. Christopher Bamford (Great Barrington, MA: Anthroposophic Press, 2002), 42, n. 1.

[4] See, for example, Rudolf Steiner, *Colour: Three Lectures Given in Dornach 6th to the 8th of May, 1921, Together with Nine Supplementary Lectures Given on Various Occasions,* trans. John Salter and Pauline Wehrle (London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1996/2002) and Rudolf Steiner, *The Arts and Their Missions: Eight Lectures Delivered in Dornach, Switzerland, May 27-June 9, 1923, and in Kristiana (Oslo), Norway, May 18 and 20, 1923,* trans. Lisa D. Monges and Virginia Moore (New York: Anthroposophic Press, 1964), Rudolph Steiner Archive (Online Edition).

art that could revive the spiritual in modern European life, and consequently shared a number of concerns and views, though they differed significantly in the details of what this art should look like, as well as in their degree of adherence to an esoteric worldview. A close comparison between the aesthetics of the two may serve to highlight the fact that in the period before and after World War I the question of which direction modern art should take—or as Kandinsky voiced it, whither the new art? —was still very much in play. With Kandinsky and Steiner, we see two different proposals that focused on the same basic problem, both of which were venturing into uncharted territory. However, while Kandinsky's thoughts on art have been frequently remarked upon,[5] Steiner's teachings on spiritually informed art have seldom been examined by scholars outside of the Anthroposophical community, and are long overdue for discussion in the context of the emergence of modern art.

Steiner, the older of the two by only five years, took on the role of esoteric spiritual teacher in mid-life, in the midst of a successful academic career. He initially came to public attention through editing Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's voluminous scientific writings for the Kürschner publishing house between 1883 and 1897, and established himself as a lecturer on philosophical and scientific topics.[6] He began speaking publically on spiritual topics only after the turn of the century. In 1902, his career shifted radically when he joined the Theosophical Society—founded by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and Henry Steele Olcott in 1875—and initiated the organization's German branch. From this point on, Steiner lectured extensively throughout Germany and Europe on Theosophical themes,

[5] Despite this extensive scholarly attention, however, many scholars have, until recently, shied away from engaging Kandinsky's clear interest in contemporary esoteric thought, such as the work of Steiner, or alternatively have arguably overemphasized his reliance on such sources.

[6] Goethe remained a touchstone for Steiner for the rest of his life, contributing to his ideas about color and intuitive engagement with the natural world. In addition to Goethe's color theory, Steiner was especially interested in his conception of imaginatively feeling into the living processes of nature, exemplified in the morphology of the archetypal plant, the *Urpflanze*. Stewart C. Easton, *Rudolf Steiner: Herald of a New Epoch* (Hudson, NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1980), 42-46.

based on the esoteric doctrines outlined in Blavatsky's writings, as well as on his own episodes of clairvoyant insight, which, his biographers report, he had experienced since childhood.[7] He quickly gained a following for his variant on Theosophical teachings, which he called "anthroposophy," in which he emphasized Western esoteric sources and the "Christ Impulse" over the increasingly Eastern orientation of the Theosophical Society leadership. By 1911, Steiner's differences of opinion with the new leadership of the organization, by this time headed by Annie Besant, led to his severing ties with the society in December 1911/January 1912, and to the founding of the Anthroposophical Society the following month.

Although Steiner had lectured on the role of art and the spiritual properties of color from his earliest days on the Theosophical circuit, such topics increasingly interested him beginning in 1910, when he wrote and staged the first of his four "mystery dramas" in Munich. These productions incorporated multiple art forms and were intended to give modern audiences an experience of the profundity of esoteric initiation. From 1913 onward, he became even more engaged with the possibilities for new forms of art, through designing and constructing the first Goetheanum, his new organization's headquarters, in Dornach, Switzerland. The Goetheanum was to be a new form of architecture embellished with sculpture and painting, and intended to house lavish performances of Steiner's mystery plays and of "eurythmy," a new art form of movement and color that he was developing. Hence, it was intended to combine all the arts in a single space, with the intention of bringing about spiritual transformation in both participants and viewers.[8] In working out his ideas for the painted embellishments in its interior, and in response to his artist-followers' request for an Anthroposophical approach to painting, he developed his conception of "painting out of the color."

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[7] Easton, 17.

[8] He talks in one lecture of the architectural space – and by extension any work of art – acting as a "jelly mold": just as a jelly mold is not itself a final product, but is primarily useful in its forming of the jelly, so the architectural space creates the conditions within which the true "art" – the spiritual transformation of individuals – happens. Rudolf Steiner, *Art: An Introductory Reader*, ed. Anne Stockton (Forest Row, England: Sophia Books, 2003), 89-91.

Like Steiner, the Russian-born Kandinsky also came to his ultimate calling somewhat late, leaving a successful academic career in law and economics in 1896 and moving to Munich to become a painter at the age of 30. During the first decade of the century, while he was formulating the ideas for his 1912 treatise, Kandinsky worked in a richly colored, folkloric style, his thinking steeped in Symbolist aesthetics, which was itself heavily infused with contemporary esoteric thought.[9] Kandinsky was drawn to Theosophical Society teachings at the time, engaging with the works of Steiner as well as Blavatsky and her successor Annie Besant.[10] He owned, and had extensively annotated, a series of articles Steiner had written for the journal *Lucifer-Gnosis* on how one might increase spiritual sensitivity through meditative exercises, and had taken careful notes on Steiner's descriptions of the spiritual meanings of color.[11] He also likely attended lectures by Steiner while living in Berlin during 1908.[12] Kandinsky's positive assessment of Theosophy as of 1911/1912 is attested by his references to Madame Blavatsky—one of the few non-artists mentioned in the body of the text—in the original German edition of *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, as well as his recommendation of Steiner's *Lucifer-Gnosis* articles in a footnote.[13]

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[9] Symbolism was a late nineteenth-century European art movement that held that art and poetry should seek to present spiritual truths that could only be suggested, not directly described.

[10] This has been amply demonstrated by Sixten Ringbom, Rose-Carol Washton Long and others. Coincidentally, Kandinsky's book was published December 1911/January 1912, at precisely the time Steiner was separating himself from the Theosophical Society. As Kandinsky went to press, then, Steiner was still officially a Theosophist.

[11] The articles appeared in the Theosophical journal *Lucifer-Gnosis,* and were compiled and published in 1904 as *Wie Erlangt Man Erkenntnisse der Hoeheren Welten?* (*How to Know Higher Worlds*). Sixten Ringbom, "Transcending the Visible: the Generation of the Abstract Pioneers," in *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, ed. Maurice Tuchman (New York: Abbeville Press, 1986), 131-153. See also Rose-Carol Washton Long, *Kandinsky: the Development of an Abstract Style* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 27, 32.

[12] Kandinsky's friend and former student, Maria Strakosch-Giesler, who recalled attending Steiner's Berlin lectures with Kandinsky in Spring 1908, reported she had once shown some of Kandinsky's work to Steiner, who had "show[n] particular interest in the work" and commented that "He is capable of something, he knows something." Maria Strakosch-Giesler, et al., *Conversations About Painting with Rudolf Steiner: Recollections of Five Pioneers of the New Art Impulse,* trans. Peter Stebbing (Great Barrington, MA: SteinerBooks, 2008), 29.

[13] Kandinsky draws attention to Blavatsky's contribution in the text itself. He

The new art must counter the extreme materialism of modern European society.

Both Steiner and Kandinsky – along with many of their contemporaries – considered the reductive materialism of the current age of industrialization and scientific positivism troubling, and felt that Western mankind urgently needed to regain a connection to spirituality that had been lost through the erosion of traditional religion. As Kandinsky described it, the "nightmare of materialism" had "infected [our minds] with the despair of unbelief, of lack of purpose and ideal," a condition from which he felt the human soul was only beginning to awaken.[14] Steiner believed this "disenchantment of the world," as Max Weber famously termed it, had stripped people of spiritual sensitivity as well as artistic sensibility, capacities that he felt to be closely linked.[15] Despite its "splendid achievements," he felt, the materialist worldview has left "our sense impressions, colors and sounds, flutter[ing] around in a totally indeterminate state. The physicists have stopped talking about color and sound altogether; they talk about air vibrations and ether vibrations and those are neither colors nor sound…. And there is not the slightest understanding of sensory qualities…. Nowadays people actually only see what can be measured, weighed, and counted, and the rest has evaporated."[16] Such blind "acceptance of modern science," he claimed, "means yielding to dead thoughts and looking for them in nature. Natural history, that proud achievement of our science, consists of dead thoughts, corpses of what constituted our soul before we descended from super-sensible into sensory existence."[17]

Despite this, Steiner believed that the current materialism was a

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recommends Steiner's articles in a footnote. In the 1914 English translation, however, only the reference to Blavatsky remains, and in subsequent editions, all references to Theosophical Society leaders are removed, perhaps reflecting Kandinsky's cooling toward their teachings. Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art,* trans. Michael T. H. Sadler (Boston: MFA Publications, 1912/2006), 28-29. Long, *Kandinsky,* 39-40.

[14] Kandinsky, 6-7.

[15] Steiner, *Colour*, 185; Steiner, *The Arts and Their Mission*, Lecture 7.

[16] Lecture on July 29, 1923; Steiner, *Colour*, 185.

[17] Steiner, *The Arts and Their Mission*, Lecture 7.

necessary stage in the process of human spiritual evolution. The idea of spiritual evolution played a strong role in Steiner's teachings, and he worked it out in great detail, quite apart from its connection to art. Steiner was far from unique in transposing the concept of human evolution from the realm of biology to that of spirituality and consciousness. It was a theme embraced by many esoterically minded writers at the turn of the century—among them Blavatsky—who anticipated an imminent leap in human consciousness that would result in the emergence of the spiritually advanced "new man."[18] Steiner believed that humans had once been endowed with clairvoyance, but that this had gradually drained away over the centuries, replaced by the logical, analytical reasoning characteristic of post-Enlightenment Europe. Humanity, during the current age, had completed its long descent into matter, and must now begin its ascent back to spirit, without losing the understanding of materiality gained along the way. Although Steiner believed that the time had come, with the turn of the twentieth century, to reinitiate humanity more broadly into the esoteric truths that had gone underground in this process, he also believed that the movement toward positivism had been a necessary development in human consciousness, allowing scientific thought and a greater individualism to develop. Now the time had come, he believed, to reunite scientific and spiritual understanding in the greater synthesis of "spiritual science."

The concept of spiritual evolution that Kandinsky outlines in his treatise was far less extensively delineated than Steiner's, nor did Kandinsky suggest that the "nightmare of materialism" was a necessary stage in human evolution, but rather that it contributed to its temporary retrogression. Nevertheless, his view, like that of Steiner, is ultimately optimistic. Kandinsky describes the evolutionary process through the imagery of a triangle, representing humankind, moving ever forward and

[18] Similarly to Blavatsky, Steiner claimed knowledge of many ages of the universe, of the solar system, of life on earth and specifically of humankind. At the time he was writing, humanity was in the fifth of seven epochs, an age that he termed the "Post-Atlantean," which would, like the periods before it, end in catastrophic apocalypse to make way for the next age. Long, *Kandinsky*, 28.

upward, at its apex a small number of visionaries – among them the greatest of artists – who through their greater insight help raise humanity to a higher plane.[19] The triangle's movement is inexorable, if sometimes slowed and even temporarily reversed by periods in which spiritual values are trumped by worldly pursuits, as Kandinsky felt was true of his own time. The lower segments of the triangle represent those who remain blinded by the shortsightedness of the culture in which they live, with the blindest of these inhabiting the lowest – and largest – segment. Nevertheless, he claims, the triangle "slowly but surely, with irresistible strength, moves onward and upward," such that spiritual realities that few can grasp today will soon be understood by several and then by many, until eventually the very base of the triangle reaches the level that the very tip had occupied, and what were formerly considered esoteric views become commonplace.[20]

The new art will point towards spiritual realities veiled by the material world, and help bring about a spiritual renewal of (European) humankind.

Although both felt this re-spiritualizing was in some degree an inevitable result of evolutionary forces, both also believed that humanity itself would affect how quickly – or slowly – this would take place. Thus, both men felt some urgency to further the process, and thought that art had an important role to play in bringing about the coming spiritual era. As Kandinsky wrote in his treatise, art is "a power which must be directed to the improvement and refinement of the human soul – to, in fact, the raising of the spiritual triangle. If art refrains from doing this work, a chasm remains unbridged, for no other power can take the place of art in this activity."[21] Steiner also spoke of art serving to bridge the chasm between the reductive materialist worldview and a more spiritualized way of life, and providing a way "to harmonize the spiritual-divine with the physical-earthly."[22] Both felt

[19] Kandinsky, 14-20.

[20] Kandinsky, 14-15, 19.

[21] Kandinsky, 106.

[22] Steiner, *The Arts And Their Mission*, Lecture 4.

such art would contribute positively to the “spiritual atmosphere” – the sum of human actions, thoughts and feelings – and thereby could bring about spiritual healing and elevation of humanity.[23]

One of the ways art can do this, they both believed, is by alerting viewers to the spiritual realities underlying the surface appearances of the material world. In Steiner’s view, “art must realize that its task is to carry the spiritual-divine life into the earthly; to fashion the latter in such a way that its forms, colors, words, tones, act as a revelation of the world beyond.”[24] In such art, figures would not appear to be “illuminated by a source of light,” but instead would be “shining with their own light.”[25] For Steiner, this does not suggest an outright rejection of nature and outer reality, but instead requires artists to form “a much more intimate union with the external world [in order to present] not merely the external impression of color and sound and form but that which one can experience behind the sound and color and form, what is revealed in them."[26]

While both wished art to point toward the super-sensible, Steiner’s conception of this is noticeably more supernatural and steeped in esoteric thought than Kandinsky’s.[27] Steiner describes spiritual beings, as well as such features of modern esoteric thought as human etheric and astral bodies, as “spiritual facts” rather than theory – facts that he reports experiencing directly through spiritual-scientific means.[28] Kandinsky, on the other hand, makes no mention at all of spiritual entities and – although he seems open to the idea of subtle energy, and clearly finds positivistic materialism too reductive – leaves open the question of a supernatural

[23] Kandinsky, 84-85. Strakosch-Giesler, 45.

[24] Steiner, *The Arts And Their Mission*, Lecture 4.

[25] Lecture on July 3, 1918; Steiner, *Colour*, 3-4.

[26] Lecture on January 1, 1915; Steiner, *Colour*, 82.

[27] Steiner’s conception of the arts seems to grow directly out of aspects of his spiritual science. The relations between the arts, for example, reflects components of human evolution as taught by Steiner, with architecture corresponding to the physical body, sculpture associated with the “etheric or formative force body,” and painting reflecting the astral body or soul. Steiner, *Art,* 177-179.

[28] Steiner, *Art*, 149.

dimension. In Kandinsky's account, supersensory experience could just as easily be understood as the result of greater sensitivity to subtle, invisible – though still physical – realities, rather than an indication of a non-physical spiritual realm.

The new art must be non-naturalistic, and must intuitively explore the communicative possibilities of form and color.

Both authors are in agreement that, in order to counter materialism artistically, the painter must reject naturalism, in a sense dematerializing his imagery, though their specific recommendations differ as to how one might best do this. Steiner encouraged his followers not to rely on the deadening naturalistic conventions of painting they had been taught, because he felt such naturalistic depictions left behind much of what was present in the world around us, treating only the surface and not the vitality of what was depicted. Instead, Steiner emphasized the need for the artist to work intuitively – not merely "observing and studying nature" but "learn[ing] how to enter into elemental life with his innermost soul."[29] In his view, "figures… must be created out of an inner experience, out of the inherent creative activity of soul and spirit, while avoiding anything to do with a model in the ordinary sense."[30] Because his students initially found it difficult to grasp this new approach to painting, Steiner frequently took brush in hand himself in order to demonstrate what he meant.

Although Steiner cautioned his students not to slip into "dry symbolism or allegory" which he considered "inartistic,"[31] he was also leery of fully non-representational art which he was convinced would lead to self-indulgence and the expression of personal emotion rather than anything more universally and spiritually true. While Steiner was interested in the Impressionists' experiments depicting light and color – though he felt they had not gone far enough – he felt the Expressionists may have gone too far

[29] Lecture on July 26, 1914; Steiner, *Colour*, 73-74.

[30] Lecture on October 21, 1917; Steiner, *Art*, 146.

[31] Steiner, *Art*, 202.

by embracing abstract painting, although he granted that they did nevertheless "sometimes gain insight into what is spiritual" though this was "a matter of fragments only."[32]

The Expressionist Kandinsky, in contrast, presented nonrepresentational painting as the best means of creating art that could point beyond mundane consciousness to the supersensible. Such an art would present mysterious signs that would startle the attentive viewer into seeing differently, seeing the "inner meaning" within the form and colors of the composition, which would act as "human words in which a divine message must be written in order for it to be comprehensible to human minds."[33] In order to argue for abandoning recognizable subject matter, he relied heavily on Romantic and Symbolist aesthetics of music, "the most non-material of the arts today,"[34] comparing sensations caused by color and non-representational form to the emotions aroused by the tonal qualities of music, referring to both as "vibrations" that can move the soul as an untouched instrument can sometimes resonate with another played nearby.[35] In a metaphor that he returned to several times in the book, Kandinsky declared, "Colour is a power which directly influences the soul. Colour is the key-board, the eyes are the hammers, the soul is the piano with many strings. The artist is the hand which plays, touching one key or another, to cause vibrations in the soul."[36]

Unlike music, however, Kandinsky felt in 1912 that painting could not yet fully do away with recognizable subject matter without losing the

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[32] Strakosch-Giesler, 171-172. Given this clear difference of opinion with Kandinsky, some advice given in the same passage to one of his students is noteworthy for the similarity it bears to the semi-abstract "hidden" apocalyptic imagery Kandinsky was using during 1912-1913. When asked how to employ symbolic motifs of the apocalypse, he suggested "one should not approach the symbolic directly, but disperse it within the picture, conceal it."

[33] Kandinsky, 59.

[34] Kandinsky, 40-41.

[35] Kandinsky, 50. This concept of vibrations is similar to and potentially borrowed from Theosophical ideas, and Ringbom has made a close study of Kandinsky's likely debt to the work of Annie Besant and Charles Leadbeater, especially their co-authored book *Thought Forms* of 1905. Ringbom, 135-137.

[36] Kandinsky, 52.

ability to communicate with viewers, and thus he spent a significant portion of his treatise addressing the need to develop a universal language of form and, especially, of color. In his long treatment of color, Kandinsky moves between subjective color analogies and associations, traditional color symbolism systems, and physiological responses to color in an attempt to establish some solid ground, but without being fully successful. He at one point introduces a medical account of synesthesia, in which the patient consistently experienced the taste of "blue" when eating a particular sauce, though Kandinsky attributes this experience to the individual's exquisite sensitivity of soul, rather than to a neurological difference.[37] Given the aspiration that Kandinsky held out for abstract art to express the "eternal and objective," what he saw as the intractable subjectivity of color experience remained problematic, and continued to occupy him during his years at the Bauhaus in the following decade.

Kandinsky emphasized working intuitively with form and color, which he described as attending to the "inner need." As he explained, "the artist must be blind to distinctions between 'recognized' or 'unrecognized' conventions of form, deaf to the transitory teachings and demands of his particular age. He must watch only the trend of the inner need, and hearken to its words alone. Then he will with safety employ means both sanctioned and forbidden by his contemporaries. All means are sacred which are called for by the inner need. All means are sinful which obscure that inner need."[38] To create such work, artists must not be slavishly tied to the materiality of objects nor the courser emotions of "fear, joy, grief, etc.," but must endeavor to awake subtler emotions, as yet unnamed. Living himself a complicated and comparatively subtle life, his work will give to those observers capable of feeling them lofty emotions beyond the reach of words."[39]

Kandinsky felt that the necessary sensitivity could be further

[37] Kandinsky, 50.

[38] Kandinsky, 69.

[39] Kandinsky, 8-9.

"strengthened and developed by frequent exercise. Just as the body, if neglected, grows weaker and finally impotent, so the spirit perishes if untended."[40] Because of this, he wrote, "it is necessary for the artist to know the starting point for the exercise of his spirit…[which] is the study of color and its effects on men."[41] In describing his own experiments with form and color, Kandinsky described three categories of painting he was currently developing: Impressions—his direct impressions of outward nature, Improvisations – "largely unconscious, spontaneous expression[s] of inner character, the nonmaterial nature," and Compositions – "expression[s] of a slowly formed inner feeling, which come to utterance only after long maturing."[42]

Steiner's conception of a spiritual form of painting likewise rested on exploration of color, though in a somewhat different manner than Kandinsky's. Whereas Kandinsky's move toward abstraction required the development of a universal language through which color and form could communicate to a viewer, Steiner was more focused on the clairvoyant quality of interaction between the artist and color. While Kandinsky was tentative in his movement toward such a universal language, Steiner was certain that specific spiritual meanings were inherent in the nature of colors, and that if artists "open [their] souls to what speaks to [them] out of color," the colors themselves "shall say how they wish to be on the surface of the picture."[43]

For Steiner, color was far more than the "ether vibrations" suggested by Newtonian optics and conventional physics.[44] Our experience of "the life of color," he believed, is thoroughly spiritual, allowing us to "step out of our skins and take part in cosmic life. Color is the soul element of nature and of the whole cosmos, and we have a share in this soul element

[40] Kandinsky, 71.

[41] Kandinsky, 70-71.

[42] Kandinsky, 111-112.

[43] Steiner, *Colour,* 71, 58.

[44] Steiner, *Colour*, 185.

when we experience color."[45] In applying this to painting, he explained, "forms by themselves are […] motionless and stay where they are. But the moment the form has color, the inner movement of the color sets the form in motion and world's ripples, spiritual ripples, pass through it. If you color a form you immediately give it a soul quality of a universal kind.…You are breathing soul into dead form when you give it color."[46]

Steiner repeatedly spoke about the spiritual qualities of what he considered the foundational colors for the artist – the four "image colors" of black, green, peach-blossom and white, chosen for their correspondence to the categories of death, life, soul and spirit – and the three "lustre colors" of blue, red and yellow, which he considered active in comparison to the form-giving image colors.[47] Yellow, which he called "the lustre of the spirit," tends to move outward, he explained, with a greater intensity at the center which gradually dissipates the farther outward it moves; blue, the "lustre of the soul," requires a distinct border of deeper intensity at the edges, growing lighter toward the center; and red, the "lustre of the living," is relatively stable, moving both outward and inward, and presenting as a relatively uniform density.[48] Despite describing these color associations in detail on a number of occasions, Steiner emphasized to his followers that "these formulas have to be evolved out of your feeling" rather than simply accepted as doctrine.[49]

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[45] Lecture on July 26, 1914; Steiner, *Colour*, 76.

[46] Lecture on July 26, 1914; Steiner, *Colour*, 71-72.

[47] His surprising inclusion of "peach-blossom" requires further explanation. He included it as the color of humankind – variations of human skin color notwithstanding. Not only is it an approximation of (northern European, Caucasian) skin color but, Steiner says, it is also the closest approximation of the delicate auric "color" (for which the comparison with optical color is analogous rather than literal) of the human etheric body as experienced by clairvoyants. Because we humans are so steeped in this color, he says, it is harder for us to perceive it than other colors, which is why we do not include it as part of the spectrum. Steiner, *Colour*, 104.

[48] Steiner describes green as yellow and blue moving toward each other and intermingling at the center of a white sheet of paper. Peach-blossom he describes, very strangely, as made up of alternating white and black lines vibrating and thereby blurring together, with red light radiating through from behind. Steiner, *Colour*, 29-30.

[49] Lecture on May 6, 1921; Steiner, *Colour*, 25. Although Steiner's "spiritual-scientific" understanding of color owes much to Goethe's color theory, it also departs significantly, especially where it ties in with aspects of anthroposophical cosmology, such as in the elaborate schema he developed to link each of the image colors to levels of the continuum between matter and spirit.

Based on these ideas, Steiner developed his method of "painting out of the color," an intuitive process that he noted was still in its beginning stages, and one that he said he, himself, would likely require thirty years or more in order to truly master.[50] This method, first mentioned in his mystery plays,[51] required one to "overcome drawing" by allowing a composition to "rise out of the colors, be born from the colors."[52] Such a radically intuitive mode of working required a new orientation to composition. "The intellect is a 'bad dog' when it comes to the artistic," he explained to one of his students. In painting, "certainly you must have had a thought, an idea. But you must then leave it behind you, forget it and only work out of feeling. You may never know beforehand how […] the composition will look when it is finished. First you make a picture, concentrating on it wholly; then comes the second figure, and then you watch how it relates to the first, and so on, until finally you have a composition. You must wait for the composition, never visualize or determine it beforehand."[53]

Steiner advocated the use of fluid, transparent paints, ideally made of plant pigments, rather than the dense materiality of commercially available "tube colors."[54] Such fluid, intuitive painting would help the artist make the necessary shift away from spatial perspective—a necessary innovation in its time, he believed, but not adequate for the kind of spiritual painting one can "experience inwardly."[55] Instead, such painting would employ "color-perspective which overcomes the third dimension not by foreshortening and focusing, but by a soul-spiritual relationship between colors … Painting must acquire a color-perspective which overcomes space

[50] Strakosch-Giesler, 108.

[51] Steiner sketched the basic concept in his first mystery drama, *The Portal of Initiation,* of 1910, in which the central character, an artist, "paints in a way that lets the 'form' appear as the 'work of the colors'." Steiner, *Colour*, 3.

[52] Steiner (2003), 155.

[53] Strakosch-Giesler, 171.

[54] Steiner, *Colour*, 56.

[55] Steiner, *The Arts and Their Mission*, Lecture 3. He associated this fluid form of painting with ancestral memories of earlier stages of evolution in which form evolved from a sea of undifferentiated color. Steiner, *Colour*, 56.

in a spiritual fashion. Thus can the artistic be brought back to what it was when it linked man directly to spiritual worlds."[56] In order to approach this kind of painting, he recommended his students repeat a single theme multiple times, coming ever closer to "letting colors themselves speak" and to expressing the archetype of the motif.[57]

In seeking to answer the question whither the new art, then, Kandinsky and Steiner pointed toward the same societal problems and proposed similar, though distinctly different, artistic solutions. The two men were certainly aware of one another's work while they were developing their own ideas, ideas that may to some degree have been in dialogue with one another. Kandinsky, however, writing primarily for other artists, saw the greatest opportunities for a spiritually efficacious art lying in the development of nonrepresentational painting, and was far less interested than Steiner in the details of an esoteric gnosis. Steiner, on the other hand, was above all laying out ideas for painting as a spiritual practice within the Anthroposophical path, albeit a practice that would ideally influence the spiritual development of humankind. Nevertheless, both men hoped to see a new spiritually-informed type of painting emerge that could help counter the reductive positivism of their era, and both agreed that such painting must leave behind naturalism in favor of an intuitive engagement with form and color. Despite setbacks and disappointments, each held fast to these ideals throughout their lives.

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[56] Steiner, *The Arts and Their Mission*, Lecture 5.

[57] Lecture on June 29, 1923; Strakosch-Giesler, 105-106.

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