

Lichtenstein – Kandinsky – Examination of a Painting

Take one painting by Kandinsky and describe it in detail, drawing connections between your visual response (emotions) and the formal elements (color, shape, movement, and line). Insert an image of the painting you are discussing. 6 to 12 paragraphs



Red Oval, 1920 Oil on Canvas

This essay examines Kandinsky's painting *Red Oval*, completed in 1920. The image presented is from the book, *Kandinsky: Russian and Bauhaus Years*, because it is much brighter than the one in the book I used for this class.

The turquoise border attracted me to this painting – it reminds me of the tranquility of water, but the border is about all there is that is tranquil. I feel a lot of tension in this painting – it has a split personality – the dynamic, assertive, outgoing feel of the yellow quadrilateral exploding with shapes is in tension or contrast to the calm turquoise border. The tension and contrast in this work which was produced by Kandinsky as a mature artist reflects how he perceived his mother, “grave, austere beauty, well-bred simplicity, boundless energy,” an ideal image of perfection’ (Duchting, 8). The dynamic character of this work and his other works can be attributed to his synaesthetic experiences with music and color as he

explains upon hearing Wagner's Lohengrin: "'I saw all my colours in my mind's eye. Wild lines verging on the insane formed drawings before my very eyes'" (Duchting, 10). Kandinsky also believed, and bolstered by Wilhelm Worringer's "Abstraction and Sensitivity" (1907), that representation was not necessary in art. (Duchting, 26). This painting, *Red Oval*, was "a conscious statement of his artistic principles, in response to his Russian contemporaries" (Guggenheim, 22), mainly the Constructivists and Suprematists - the avant-garde in Moscow (Duchting, 61). Our book describes this painting as "The centre dominating the picture consists of a yellow trapezoid, a complex shape creating a three-dimensional effect and a form used by the Suprematists in their work as well. But Kandinsky sets this surface against a richly modulated green background, thereby creating a curiously atmospheric space, in sharp contrast to the clarity and flatness of Suprematist paintings. He has also articulated a vocabulary of points, spots, lines and surfaces over the yellow shape, a vocabulary he was examining in his teaching activities. As an allusion to his Munich period there is also the hull of a boat and an oar projecting into the green surrounding area (Duchting, 61). Kandinsky used the border as an important compositional motif during his Russian period. The border acts as a spatial plane as well as an enframement for the composition (Guggenheim, 14).

Kandinsky ascribed to Goethe's color theory which is based upon subtractive color. According to Goethe, the color primaries are red, yellow, and blue. Secondary colors are green, violet, and orange. Complementary colors are on opposite sides of the color wheel. Complements are red and green, yellow and violet, and blue and orange. Red, orange and yellow are warm colors; green, turquoise and blue are cool colors (Sutton, 18, 19). Goethe "felt that blue and yellow were the hues that held the strongest contrast to each other. His obvious preference for warm hues is expressed by his description of them as "warm, lively, and exciting." Cool hues, in contrast, he considered "weak, unsettled, and yearning.'" (Koenig, 20, 21)

Color imparts emotion. Red refers to blood, fire, the sun at sunset. It seems to "glow within itself" Kandinsky. Yellow refers to sun and activity. Blue is quiet and restful; it refers to the sky – celestial or heavenly - and water. (Koenig, 26) 'Colors have also been associated throughout time with gender, notably the artists of The Blue Rider, an art movement in Germany formed in 1911, which led artists like Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc to associate blue with the male and yellow with the female. Marc's words on this association: "Blue is the male principle, sharp and spiritual, yellow, the female principle, soft, cheerful and sensual, red, the material, and ever the color which must be resisted and overcome by the other two!"' (Koenig, 194-195).

In *Red Oval*, Kandinsky uses the primaries red, yellow, and blue in their purest, most saturated form; "when pure primary hues are juxtaposed, a potent contrast is evident, because each hue is unique and contains neither of the two other hues" (Koenig, 27-28). The red oval and yellow quadrilateral dominate the painting. "Warm colors are thought to be more powerful, dominant hues than cool hues. Areas of warm hues such as red and yellow also form distinct boundaries, differentiating or segregating from each other more effectively than cool hues" (Koenig, 29). 'By positioning full saturation complementary hues to directly abut to each other, a visual effect called complementary vibration is generated. Pure complementary hue pairs are characteristically vibrant and visually "loud"' (Koenig, 159). Kandinsky does this very effectively – the red oval and green shape behind it vibrate, causing the red oval to shout.

Cool and warm colors can be used to create an illusion of spatial depth. Cool colors recede and warm colors advance spatially. The contrasts and tensions evident in *Red Oval* can be attributed to this “rule”. The red oval advances against the green and blue shapes behind it. The yellow quadrilateral also advances against the turquoise border; but, has cool shapes in front of it which recede, causing a tension or contrast.

Kandinsky’s use of red, blue and yellow, equidistantly spaced on the color wheel, forms a triadic color chord or harmony. “The color analogy to a musical chord suggest the varied spacing of three or four notes to create a harmonious sound. Each color chord has a different quality of harmony, as a musical chord has a different quality of sound” (Koenig, 32). “The triadic scheme best retains harmony when used in an uncomplicated fashion, by utilizing only pure hues of the triad and their tints, shades, and tones, omitting intermixing between hues” (Koenig, 163). Kandinsky keeps to pure hues of red, yellow and blue, their shades and tones for the shapes on the quadrilateral. Although the shapes on the quadrilateral contrast in other ways, their colors are harmonious, the repetition of the triad colors visually unifies the composition. This triadic color chord; however, is not in harmony with the turquoise border – they seem to repel each other – adding to the tension in the painting.

“Objects of the same color will bond components of a composition together regardless of their location” (Koenig, 175). In *Red Oval*, the blue shapes encircle and contain the red oval – they create cohesiveness within the composition. “A point of emphasis or focal point is a form of visual dominance in which a portion of a composition strongly attracts visual attention” (Koenig, 176). The red oval is that focal point; it is unique, it is the only completely saturated red shape in the painting.

The painting exhibits color balance; visually heavyweight colors (the high-saturation colors of yellow, red and blue) are balanced with the visually lightweight colors (the low-saturation colors of tints and shades of the heavyweight colors and orange).

Kandinsky uses different values (formed by the addition of white or black) of red, blue, yellow, green and orange hues in *Red Oval*. By tinting (adding white) or shading (adding black) a hue becomes less saturated. As a result, the tinted and shaded areas of the painting are duller, more subtle and muted (Koenig, 43), especially against the saturated red, yellow, and blue areas.

“Wassily Kandinsky, in his book on art and design entitled *Point and Line to Plane* (1947), compiled a working list of the abstract components of art that are the basis for all design elements. Kandinsky identified the four major ingredients of art as point, line, plane, and volume. A *point* is defined as either a dot or simply a location in space. A point may also be visible or invisible, of any size; it refers to a specific position in a composition. A *line* is a connection between two points and can be thought of as a point’s or dot’s movement through space. A plane is a shape with height and width, but no breadth or depth. A *plane* is two-dimensional and flat, but may have any configuration of outer edge or contour” (Koenig, 121). “A volume is a plane that has been pushed back into or advances forward in space. A *volume* has three dimensions height, width, and depth” (Koenig, 122).

Red Oval demonstrates point, line, and plane. Although shapes vary in value, I do not perceive volume in this painting. Points can be seen in the green shape, and in the rainbow shape on the right side of the

painting; they add a feeling of lightness. Curved lines form the rainbow; red and orange lines curl upward, they add a feeling of playfulness. Meandering diagonal lines bisect the yellow quadrilateral and are themselves bisected. "Diagonals form a compositional dynamic that suggests movement" (Koenig, 123). "A line can also move through space three-dimensionally, either receding or advancing into the picture space, by convergence or gradation of width" (Koenig, 123). In this painting, the oar projecting towards the bottom left corner creates a diagonal which recedes from the corner into the shapes above. The rainbow moves through space wrapping around the yellow quadrilateral. "A shape is a two-dimensional closed form or plane. A shape can have any contour, height, and width, but no depth. A shape has a mass or area defined by its edges. It can be outlined or solidified by filling it with a value, a texture, or a color." (Koenig, 123). Shapes come in various forms such as geometric (circle, square, etc.), rectilinear (straight edges), curvilinear (curved edges), and invented ("a unique shape formulated by the artist" (Koenig, 126)). Kandinsky uses all forms of shape in this painting. For example, the red oval for which the painting is named is geometric, the yellow quadrilateral is rectilinear, the boats are curvilinear, and the other shapes are invented.

"On a two-dimensional plane, ..., space and form are created as an *illusion*" (Koenig, 127). "An open space that is defined by a horizon line instantly suggests a space with both gravity and depth" (Koenig, 129). *Red Oval* does not have a horizon line, nor does it make use of atmospheric or linear perspective. The yellow quadrilateral appears to be floating in the turquoise 'ocean'. It "is a trapezium-a four-sided figure with no two sides parallel. In itself, the figure has strong though contradictory spatial implications, as if it were a rectangle or square seen at an angle in space" (Guggenheim, 22). Only the oar projecting down towards the lower left corner conveys a sense of gravity. Overlapping is a strategy to create an illusion of depth. In *Red Oval*, shapes are overlapped, creating a foreground (the oar), a middle ground (the quadrilateral and its accompanying shapes), and a background (the turquoise border). The strategy of diminishing size to form the illusion of space is used, but not consistently creating tension and contrast. For example, some shapes such as the oar, the red and white curve on the left side, and the white shape at the top of the quadrilateral diminish in width giving the illusion of receding into the picture plane. But the other shapes in the painting do not follow suit.

"The design principles of movement and rhythm are separate yet interconnected concepts. Rhythm is a term that describes the essential beat and time structure of music. When an artwork possesses visual rhythm, it has a visual beat or repeating element that generates movement" (Koenig, 150). Kandinsky uses diagonals and curved lines in *Red Oval* to create rhythm. The eye does not move in one continuous line through the composition; but rather, it moves in at least a couple of different paths. First, the left side of the composition which includes the red oval focal point, oar, and curved red and orange lines forms one path; and second, the long diagonal blue lines, rainbow and accompanying shapes form another path. The first path keeps bringing our eye back to the oval - the oar brings our eye up to it, the curved lines bring our eye back to it. The second path follows the long diagonal blue lines up to the bisecting lines, then down to the rainbow, over to the blue shapes and back to the blue lines. The eye may break away from the first path and go to the second path if it breaks away from the orange curved line and jumps to the blue lines in the turquoise border.

Kandinsky introduces texture through brushstrokes and lack thereof. The turquoise background and shapes on the quadrilateral display brushstrokes while the quadrilateral itself and red oval are flat.

Through the use of color; the design principles of point, line, and plane; rhythm and movement Kandinsky's *Red Oval* is dynamic, and full of contrast and tension.

References

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