

Wassily Kandinsky - *His Years in Munich and Murnau*

Philipp Grieb

On 3 March 2023, the international media reported on an auction at Sotheby's in London: the painting "Murnau mit Kirche II" (Murnau with Church) by Wassily Kandinsky changed hands for the record sum of 45 million US dollars. The painting was created in 1910 and is one of the early works from the Munich period in which Kandinsky developed his abstract visual language, which later earned him the reputation of a forerunner of abstraction. It was inspired by a view of the village of Murnau in the Bavarian highlands, 70 km south of Munich. The painting had been acquired by the Jewish business family Stern in Berlin in the 1920s. The family collected modern art. The Stern father died in 1935, the mother fled from the Nazis to the Netherlands and was forced to sell a large part of the collection. She was finally arrested and murdered in



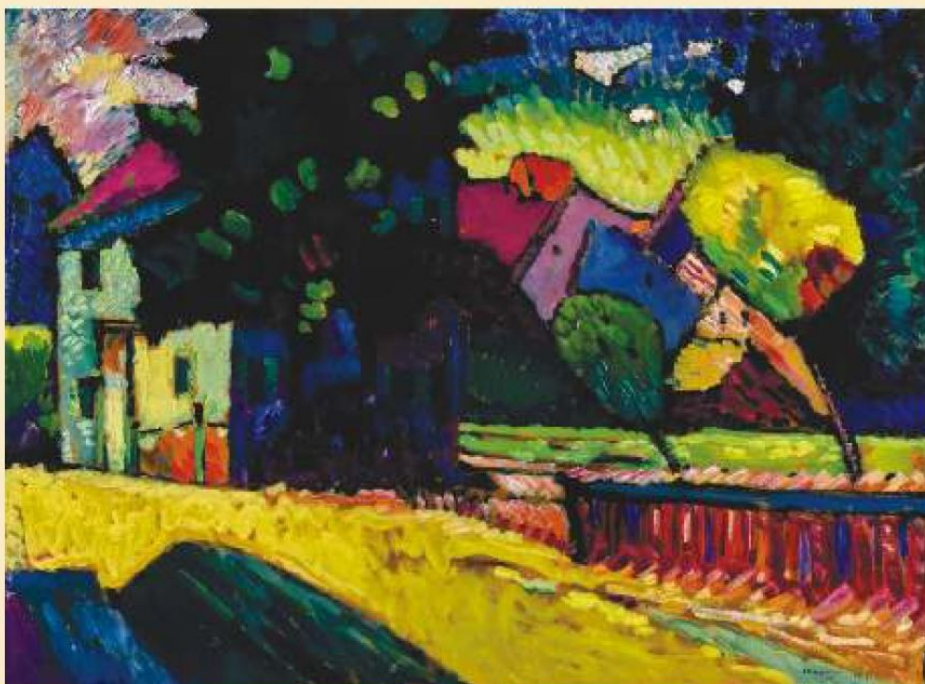
Murnau mit Kirche II (1910)

1944 in the Auschwitz concentration camp.

After World War II, the Kandinsky painting was found in a museum in Eindhoven. It was returned to the Stern family's heirs after a lengthy restitution process, and they now sold the work.

Kandinsky in Munich

Wassily Kandinsky was born in Moscow in 1866 as the son of a wealthy tea trading family. He attended a secondary school and then studied law, national economics and ethnology. Alongside his studies, he painted and took an interest in art. In 1896 he decided to take up painting and moved to Munich to study at the Academy of Arts. Initially he attended a private painting school, where he first met Alexej Jawlensky. It was not until



Study for Landschaft mit grünem Haus (1908)



Murnau Dorfstraße (1908)

1900 that he took up studies at the art academy.

Just one year later, together with colleagues, he founded the artists' group Phalanx, which also offered classes in sculpture, drawing and painting. There he met Gabriele Münter (1877-1962) in 1902. A close relationship developed that lasted for many years. From 1904 they travelled extensively, including to the Netherlands, Tunisia, Italy and France. Münter sketched and later completed many drawings as paintings in Munich. She brought back many photographs from all her journeys. In Rapallo (Italy), where they spent the winter at the end of 1905/06, they created about 20 paintings showing the landscape of the region.

Münter House in Murnau

After their return, the couple discovered the village of Murnau am Staffelsee in late summer 1908, together with friends Marianne Werefkin (1860-1938) and Alexej Jawlensky (1865-1941). The four

spent six weeks there together, painting, discussing and learning from each other. The location of Murnau, between lake and high mountains, hilly country and moors, the diversity of the landscape fascinated the painters. Werefkin's and Jawlensky's influence can be attributed to Münter's and Kandinsky's move to the

expressionist style of painting during this period. A large number of paintings with motifs of the village and its surroundings were created.

In January 1909, the quartet and a number of other artists founded the Neue Künstlervereinigung München (N.K.V.M.) in Munich, with Kandinsky as its first chairman. A few months later Münter and Kandinsky discovered a vacant house in Murnau, just a little outside the village. Münter, who loved the surroundings, allowed herself to be persuaded by Kandinsky to acquire the house. She bought it in August 1909. From then on, they both lived and worked there when they were not in Munich or travelling. The house became a meeting place for visitors, collectors, critics and painter friends such as Werefkin, Jawlensky, Franz Marc, August Macke and the composer Arnold Schönberg. Munich was easily accessible by regular train service.

Peaceful Murnau became a retreat



Murnau mit Zug und Schloss (1909)



Münter-Haus, Murnau(2005)

for creative work, Munich remained the important centre at which to encounter galleries, exhibitions, media and colleagues. Therefore, Kandinsky's flat in Munich's Ainmillerstraße continued to be their base in the city.

The Blaue Reiter

With his increasingly abstract style of painting, Kandinsky visibly distanced himself from the direction of the N.K.V.M. and resigned from its chairmanship after two years. Instead, he developed new activities and won Franz Marc for a joint exhibition and publication activity under the name "Redaktion Der Blaue Reiter". The two left the N.K.V.M. Gabriele Münter and Alfred Kubin joined the new group. August Macke joined later. In December 1911, they opened the first exhibition of the editorial team Der Blaue Reiter in the Galerie Thannhauser in Munich with around 50 works by 14 artists. Kandinsky's book "Über das Geistige in der

Kunst, insbesondere in der Malerei" (On the Spiritual in Art, especially Painting) was published to accompany the exhibition. In it, Kandinsky formulated fundamental ideas on the synaesthetic aspects of colour in comparison to other sensory perceptions. An almanac of "Der Blaue Reiter" appeared in print six months later. These writings contain fundamental programmatic ideas for the further development of abstract painting and modern music. The first exhibition, which became legendary, went on tour through nine German and Scandinavian cities, followed by a second, unique exhibition in Munich in 1912.

The outbreak of World War I in July 1914 put an end to all Blaue Reiter projects. The Russian citizens Kandinsky, Jawlensky and Werefkin had to leave Germany. Kandinsky went back to Russia. Jawlensky and Werefkin migrated to Switzerland. Franz Marc (1914) and August Macke (1916) died on the battlefields of the war in the following years.

Münter and Kandinsky met for the last time in Stockholm in 1916. Kandinsky did not return to Germany until 1922, when he was offered to work as a teacher at the Bauhaus. He did not come to Munich. In 1926, Münter packed 26 boxes with personal objects and works and sent them to Dessau, where Kandinsky was living in the meantime. A large part of his works from the Munich and Murnau period were left by Kandinsky to his long-time partner Gabriele Münter.



Portrait Wassily Kandinsky (1913)

On her 80th birthday in 1957, Münter donated the large collection of works by Kandinsky, members of the Blaue Reiter, her own paintings and a huge number of photographs to the municipal gallery in the Lenbachhaus of Munich, which advanced to become a museum of international rank with the most extensive collection of artworks by the Blaue Reiter. After her death in 1962, her house in Murnau was renovated and turned into a museum.

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