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edited by Sandra Gianfreda, Francine Giese, Axel Langer and Ariane Varela Braga

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Wassily Kandinsky at the Exhibition *Meisterwerke muhammedanischer Kunst* in Munich, 1910

A Modernist Artist's Interpretation of Persian Art

Abstract

In 1910, Wassily Kandinsky attended the Munich exhibition *Meisterwerke muhammedanischer Kunst* and subsequently wrote a review of it for the Russian literary journal *Apollon.* His review, which almost exclusively discussed the Persian paintings on display, provides insights into Kandinsky's way of seeing and understanding these objects at a significant moment in his artistic development. The most compelling aspect of his review is his repeated articulation of the sense of revelation that he experienced in front of these works. Conveying a sense of revelation through his own paintings was Kandinsky's primary goal in this period, and was a concept he struggled to formulate in his art. I argue that Kandinsky developed one of his primary artistic strategies in response to a specific practice that he had first encountered at the *Meisterwerke* exhibition: the Persian artist's practice of painting hidden forms within a composition. This article looks closely at a work from the exhibition, *Sleeping Rustam* (attributed to Sultan Muhammad, 1515-1522), which incorporates hidden figures in its rock formations, a practice described as demanding careful and sustained scrutiny by the viewer before the faces and forms reveal themselves. Kandinsky himself wrote later that his works from 1910, "dissolved objects to a greater or lesser extent within the same picture, so that they might not all be recognized at once and so that these emotional overtones might thus be experienced gradually by the spectator, one after another"; a process that the author believes he may have adapted from Persian paintings.

Keywords: Kandinsky; abstraction; hidden forms; Orientalism; Persian art

Wassily Kandinsky began his description of a Persian painting that he saw at the exhibition *Meisterwerke muhammedanischer Kunst* (Masterpieces of Muhammedan Art) in 1910 as follows: "its simplicity is almost barbaric, its complexity bewildering. Its elegance is that of a highly refined people lost in sensuous dreams" (Kandinsky, "Letters" 74). Kandinsky was one of many avant-garde artists at the turn of the twentieth century who referenced non-European sources in order to forge a new path for their art. In Kandinsky's case, the references were numerous and diverse and included the subject of my broader research, his complex and often problematic references to a homogenized "Orient." In addition to the exhibitions he visited in Europe, Kandinsky had spent three months living and painting in Tunisia in 1904-1905, a body of work he revisited while developing his challenging, abstracted artistic responses to "the Orient" in the years 1909-1913 (Benjamin and

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Ashjian). While my broader research investigates the implications of Kandinsky's "Oriental" references in their entirety, in this paper, I will focus on one component of this engagement: Kandinsky's passionate response to Persian paintings and the intriguing possibility that he adapted a specific technique seen in these paintings for his own artistic purposes.

Figure 1: Wassily Kandinsky. *Composition IV (Fragment)*. 1910-1911. Oil on canvas, 95 x 130 cm, Tate, London. Image courtesy of Tate. Photo © Tate.

In late 1910 through to early 1911, Kandinsky's paintings took on a new level of complexity. To take one example from this period, his *Composition IV (Fragment)* is a work without a recognizable geographic or narrative source (fig. 1). Both scale and orientation seem awry. A brief look at the painting provides little certainty of subject besides the rainbow in the center. This was a period of intense creative development and productivity for Kandinsky. A number of canvases followed immediately after this one with related iconography, similarly varied degrees of abstraction, and equally confounding spatial distribution. In this paper, I propose a new source for Kandinsky's artistic developments in this period from late 1910 through 1911: his exposure to and interpretation of Persian paintings at an exhibition in Munich. Although a few scholars have previously referenced his interest in Persian art, with the exception of a study of comparative iconography that proposes a narrow borrowing of specific forms and compositions by Kandinsky, the references have been relatively brief, touching in general terms on the broad visual evidence of Kandinsky's flatter planes and "carpet-like structures" of representation (Daftari; Hagedorn; Mühling; Troelenberg).

My proposal is more conceptual than the iconographic study and more specific than the generalized references and suggests that there might have been a causal link between Persian art and Kandinsky's early experiments with abstraction. In order to understand the connection, I examine a network of overlapping material: his paintings, of course, but also his writings and the Persian paintings that he saw. Although I will be looking closely at one particular work that Kandinsky saw at the *Meisterwerke* exhibition, I would like to make clear that the focus of this paper is not an examination of Persian art in the complex historical context of its production, function, and circulation in sixteenth-century Persia; this is, rather, a study of what a European artist saw when he looked at this painting, and how he internalized and interpreted it—and the others on show—in his own work.

***Meisterwerke muhammedanischer Kunst*, Munich**

The starting point for this analysis is the exhibition *Meisterwerke muhammedanischer Kunst* that took place in Munich from May to October 1910. The exhibition was unprecedented in terms of its scope and its ambition: 3600 objects of every conceivable type were displayed across eighty rooms, and its bold intention, highlighted in the introductory essay in the official guidebook for the exhibition, was to change the perception of Islamic art in Europe (Troelenberg). In particular, the essay concluded, it sought, "to show that the creations of Islamic art deserve a place equal to those of other cultural periods, and above all, that their color harmony and ornamental magnitude are capable of stimulating the creation of modern art, and perhaps forging new directions" (*Amtlicher Katalog* 13).[2]

We know that Kandinsky visited the exhibition some time that summer because his fervent response to it is recorded in a review he wrote for the St Petersburg literary journal *Apollon*, published in October 1910 (Kandinsky, "Letters" 73-75). It is worth noting that Kandinsky was only one of a number of avant-garde artists who visited the exhibition: among others, Henri Matisse, Franz Marc, and Auguste Macke all visited the exhibition (Troelenberg 380-398). While both Matisse and Marc made subsequent references to the exhibition, theirs were fairly brief and generalized responses; neither left a detailed written response to the conceptual issues raised by Persian paintings that could be considered comparable to Kandinsky's review (Hagedorn 298).

The first thing to note about his review is that despite the breadth of the exhibition, Kandinsky focused almost entirely on the Persian paintings on show. His writing follows its usual meandering and unpredictable path from beginning to conclusion, but in summary it conveys with passion the elements that he valued most highly in these paintings: their approach to composition and color (which is something he may have been predisposed to look for, given the stated intention of the curators); and the manner in which they produced in him a sense of revelation.

The focus here is on how Kandinsky described the Persian paintings as evoking in him a sense of revelation. He conveyed this in the review's opening paragraph, in which he described standing in front of Persian paintings for the first time:

> And suddenly, I seemed to see before my eyes the embodiment of that dream, that reverie I had long carried around with me, unknowing… It seemed unbelievable that this could have been created 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,

[2] Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the author of this paper.

> without knowing where to find it. It was as if a curtain had parted before one, revealing new depths of happiness ("Letters" 73-74).

Kandinsky's choice of language leaves the reader in no doubt of his desire to convey his experience of revelation: the sudden embodiment before his eyes; the simile of a curtain parting to reveal new depths; the use of the term "like a revelation." The most striking point about his description of this moment is the strength of Kandinsky's association of these Persian paintings with a mystical otherworldliness: the painting was more like a dream than reality; he bestowed extrasensory qualities on it with the idea that it was something he had been carrying around with him without knowing; he gave it mystical origins with the suggestion that it might have been created by a being other than a human, perhaps a deity in heaven; and he declared that the image provided him with spiritual nourishment.

In addition to his vocabulary, Kandinsky's review reveals a binary structure of East and West which underpinned his articulation of what was for him a new way of describing art as having a spiritual impact. He wrote about the Persian artist in contrast to "we Europeans," and in a subsequent section of his *Meisterwerke* review, he wrote:

> I stood and looked, and as I did so, everything that had previously seemed true in our own "decadent" art, everything to which the soul responded with such joy that it felt like pain: "This is truth; this, beauty!" – everything else was eclipsed, obscured, forgotten. And again, on this later occasion, the same thought awakened within me, and I began to compare this art of the past with that of our own times. It became clear to me how great was the power of this mature art, with its roots deep in the soil, the fruit of centuries of inner life, by comparison with our own, beneath which the soil has scarcely begun to form, growing in an atmosphere that in its uppermost strata is only gradually beginning to free itself from the stifling accretions of the materialism of "yesterday" ("Letters" 73-74).

What emerges from this passage is the concept that it was only upon exposure to Persian art that he was able to understand "our own" European art. The binaries Kandinsky employs in this passage (strange/familiar; theirs/ours; timeless/changing; spiritual/material) are the familiar binaries of Orientalism, but they are unsettled by a partial inversion relating to assumptions around superiority and inferiority. It is the art of "we Europeans" that was ascribed negative attributes in the passage: "decadent"; with a tendency towards "decoration"; and burdened with "the stifling accretions of the materialism of 'yesterday.'" The derogatory connotations of the words "stifling" and "accretions" sharpen the contrast with his positive, aspirational attitude towards the Persian paintings. It is the Persian paintings that represent truth and beauty and that were repeatedly associated with an engagement with the spiritual world. These include the references mentioned earlier to their having a heavenly origin, reiterated here with the repeated use of the word "miracle" and "miraculous".

The work of Rémi Labrusse is relevant as we consider this passage of Kandinsky's writing, particularly Labrusse's distinction between Orientalism and Islamophilia (Labrusse, *Islamophilies* 19-20). He argues "the 'Orient' was an object of political control for the Orientalist conqueror, of knowledge for the Orientalist scholar, of representation for the Orientalist artist" (Labrusse, "Islamic Arts" 1208-1209). He defines Islamophilia, meanwhile, as originating from an entirely different process. It is, he argues:

> the attitude by means of which, in the context of industrial Western culture, a formative dialogue was engaged with visual cultures marked by what we still call 'Islam', with little or no reference to its religious dimension. An affective desire of identification with the Other was the starting point for such a dialogue, but its end was the Western foundation of a new universal culture (1210).

This was undoubtedly true of Kandinsky: his response to the Persian paintings lacked both understanding and interest in the cultural specificities of the works; his panegyric to the paintings was colored throughout by a simple and self-serving desire to understand their technique for inducing a spiritual revelation.

Kandinsky did undoubtedly enter into a "formative dialogue" with Persian visual culture in his review: having articulated his moment of spiritual revelation, he immediately began an interrogation of how the artists were able to imbue the paintings with spiritual content. He wrote in the review:

> And then, as the eye became accustomed, as it immersed itself and began to comprehend these treasures, the eternal question in art, "How?" – as one sees the combination of such priceless dreams, the unification of the irreconcilable ("Letters" 74).

This is significant, because it suggests that it was in the context of his exposure to Persian paintings that Kandinsky began identifying and exploring different painting techniques that might, in turn, help him to produce paintings that conveyed spiritual content.

There is no doubt that the question of how to produce paintings that conveyed spiritual content and inspired a sense of revelation in the viewer was one that preoccupied Kandinsky in the years 1909 and 1910. It was the central concern of his first major theoretical work, *On the Spiritual in Art,* which he was drafting throughout this period and finally published in late 1911 (Kandinsky, "Spiritual"). The book is premised on a recognition of the potential power that paintings can exert on their viewers on a profound and metaphysical level. The question of "how" is one that he probed continuously in his work and is reflected in his various publications and in his experimental and constantly evolving artistic techniques.

Kandinsky's rhetorical question within the *Meisterwerke* review, then, suggests a concrete point of origin for this process; it demonstrates that he was actively interrogating the artistic approaches used in Persian paintings, and he was doing so because of the spiritual revelation they evoked in him. There is one particular aspect of Persian paintings that I propose Kandinsky would have identified as contributing to his sense of revelation in the exhibition, to which I will now turn. This was an aspect which I believe he internalized and developed into one of his primary technical solutions to the question of how to induce a sense of revelation through his own paintings, a compositional technique that contributed to a process of slow looking and gradual, sequential comprehension: hidden forms.

Sleeping Rustam

The Persian artistic practice of hidden forms is evident in a significant folio displayed at the exhibition: *Sleeping Rustam* (fig. 2) attributed to Sultan Muhammad (1515-1522), a single-page painting from the unfinished *Shahnama* (Book of Kings) of Firdawsi.

The folio shows the hero Rustam asleep in a dangerous forest. Rustam reclines on a red-striped quadrilateral rug that appears projected on a vertical plane in front of the tree and bushes behind. In the foreground, his horse, Rakhsh, fights a lion that has returned to the forest as Rustam slept. Rakhsh ultimately prevails by trampling the lion. Surrounding the human and animal characters are trees, bushes, plants, and rocks in a rich palette of colors all set against a sky of densely applied gold paint. The natural forms are highly detailed, but without any attempt at illusionary mimesis: modeling is minimal and much like Rustam's rug, perspective is flattened on a vertical plane. Set into the painting are three small areas containing script, unadorned, on a white background. Their apparently random placement, supplemented by four columns of text at the bottom-right of the page reinforces Kandinsky's statement later in his review that Persian paintings "do not attempt to

Figure 2: Sultan Muhammad (attr.). *Sleeping Rustam*. 1515-1522. Paint on paper, 31.5 x 20.7 cm, The British Museum, London. Image courtesy of The British Museum. © The Trustees of the British Museum.
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Figure 3: (Detail) Sultan Muhammad (attr.). *Sleeping Rustam*. 1515-1522. Paint on paper, 31.5 x 20.7 cm, The British Museum, London. Image courtesy of The British Museum. © The Trustees of the British Museum.
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go 'beyond the frame', but remain confined to the flat surface upon which their life is conceived" ("Letters" 75). This is a clear reflection of his understanding of an alternative form of artistic intent, one very different from that promoted in the European academies of art.

This painting, therefore, had several aspects that may have appealed to Kandinsky's desire to experiment with non-academic techniques. However, in the context of his search for how to evoke a sense of revelation in the viewer, I believe that he may have recognized the specific artistic practice of hidden forms as a technique worthy of closer attention.

Sleeping Rustam abounds with hidden faces incorporated into the rock formations. In at least nine places, faces can be observed in the stylized landscape. Although small (some of the faces are less than ten millimeters across) they are clearly observable to the human eye, even from a distance of about fifty centimeters away. The grey rock towards the left-hand-side, halfway up the page shows the face of a snarling lion above that of a horse, references perhaps to the scene being enacted below and its mythical status (fig. 3). These two heads are particularly apparent when looking at the original object because of the effect of the opaque blue paint on this section of paper: it has bulged outwards slightly, giving the two heads a rounded, almost three-dimensional appearance.

In this same rock, a human face appears to the right of the horse, the outline of its eyes, nose, and chin visible behind a stalk of flower. Further to the right again, a more detailed face materializes, in profile, looking down. In the green rock formation below these, two small faces emerge at the top, their eye sockets clearly visible. To the left of these, a larger face appears, on an oblique angle, perhaps a demon with its oversized, distorted features. The pink rocks in the center of the image display more faces. Another, somewhat cruder, face can be seen in the rocks in the lower left corner of the page.

Although they are technically visible to the naked eye, several aspects make them challenging to discover for the viewer: their small size; the unexpectedness of their presence, largely divorced from the subject of the narrative; their varying scale, not just relative to one another, but relative to the size of the central protagonists in the painting; and their orientation, with each face at slightly different orientations within the picture plane. In order to find them, the viewer is required to concentrate fully on the painting and interrogate every part of it.

My suggestion is that *Sleeping Rustam*, as one of the most significant paintings in the exhibition (as reflected by its inclusion as an illustration in the commemorative catalogue), would have attracted Kandinsky's close attention. And in any case, this was one of several paintings in the exhibition that featured hidden faces; this was not an uncommon practice in Persian art.[3]

The hidden faces in these paintings provide the suggestion of a compositional solution to Kandinsky's problem of how to produce spiritual art. In Bernard O'Kane's article on rock faces in Persian paintings, he argued that the purpose of these hidden faces was "to demand careful scrutiny before the concealed faces and figures reveal themselves to the observer" (O'Kane 220). The viewer, in other words, must allow their eyes to scan the full extent of the painting; he or she must not focus simply on the main protagonists, but must look patiently and with an open, enquiring mind at all the individual elements within the painting. This process of slow looking and gradual revelation mirrors Kandinsky's description of his engagement with these paintings. It requires us to revisit the rhetorical question he posed in his review:

> And then, as the eye became accustomed, as it immersed itself and began to comprehend these treasures, the eternal question in art, "How?"—as one sees the combination of such priceless dreams, the unification of the irreconcilable ("Letters" 74).

His process of artistic enquiry emerges from this sentence: at first, he found these objects difficult to understand; then, as he engaged with a process of closer looking (immersing himself and allowing his eye to become accustomed), he began to understand them; and finally, he achieved a spiritual revelation. This process of slow looking in order to achieve a spiritual response from a painting finds a direct parallel in the process Kandinsky subsequently adopted in his own paintings.

The impact of Persian art on Kandinsky's paintings from 1910-1911

I am not suggesting that Kandinsky introduced hidden faces into his paintings, but that he adopted a parallel concept for similar ends. The parallel concept was his abstraction of form: during this period, Kandinsky did not abstract all the forms in his paintings, nor did he abstract them all to an equal degree. In January 1914, he recounted his developments over the preceding few years ("Cologne" 392, notes). Among other things, he explained why some of his works from 1910 exhibited varying degrees of abstraction within the same canvas:

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[3] See, for example, another work reproduced in the catalogue for the exhibition: *Two Sheiks in a Landscape* (first half of the sixteenth century) by the artist Hashim.

> I dissolved objects to a greater or lesser extent within the 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 ("Cologne" 396).

This quotation describes an almost identical process to that associated with the Persian rock faces: Kandinsky articulated a strategic approach to abstraction that demanded slow, careful scrutiny from the viewer and rewarded him or her with the identification of forms hidden from more cursory viewers.

Returning to *Composition IV (Fragment),* it exhibits several elements that I believe reflect Kandinsky's interpretation of and internalization of Persian art. Most noticeably, the teeming composition with forms in varying stages of abstraction require the viewer to look carefully from one section of his painting to another before they reveal themselves.

To the right of the rainbow, in front of what might be a blue mountain, there appear to be figures that are almost abstracted by their white cloaks, but not entirely. We can recognize a face with eyes on one, red hats on their heads, and yellow hands, which hold what turn out to be nearly vertical black lances. Once we have identified the tall black lines as lances, we can identify the other parallel black lines in the canvas as lances, apparently ranged for battle. Above the rainbow in the upper left quadrant, black outlines resolve themselves into participants from the battle: two white horses, identifiable only by the merest outline of their straining heads and rearing forelegs are mounted by riders in red hats, their contorted bodies brandishing curved swords. To their right, a white fortress emerges at the top of the blue mountain, its form difficult to discern because of its tilted orientation. A flock of birds circles in the sky above the chaotic scene. Some of the forms, particularly the two rearing horsemen, seem almost hidden within the painting because of the "greater extent" of their abstraction. The scale, orientation, and degrees of abstraction of forms force us as viewers to examine the painting slowly.

Orientalist language

This new analysis demonstrates, I believe, Kandinsky's internalization of the lessons he drew from Persian paintings, and the impact they had on his search for a way of conveying a sense of revelation to his viewers. But it is important to recognize that despite his idealized and aspirational descriptions of Persian art, Kandinsky's Islamophilia did not preclude him from simultaneously exhibiting imperialist, Orientalist tendencies. On the contrary, my research has identified a significant tension between Kandinsky's eulogizing of Persian art and artists, and his culturally loaded vocabulary that hints at a different underlying ideology.

Three times in his *Meisterwerke* review, Kandinsky used the word "primitive" ("the primitive use of colour"; "this primitive ornament"; and "primitively expressed impression"). I am aware of the fact that the word was commonly used at the time, by the theorist Wilhelm Worringer among others, to refer to non-Western art, including Persian Safavid paintings, as well as early European Gothic art (Worringer 55). My view, however, is that this does not negate the fact that the word "primitive" suggests an earlier stage of human development, which by definition confers an inferiority on the people described as "primitive" and a corresponding superiority on those who are using the term. This subtle assertion of assumed cultural superiority of the West was reinforced by Kandinsky's use of other value-laden terms in the review: the Persian paintings and the artists who created them are variously described as "barbaric", "sensuous," and "cunning," all words with established connotations in Orientalist literature. "Barbaric" suggests an uncivilized people, in implied contrast with the person using the term; "sensuous" taps into associations of sexual licentiousness that reach back to *Arabian Nights* and Gustave Flaubert's sexual fantasies in his popular novel

Salammbô (1862); while "cunning" implies an untrustworthiness and a morality that differs from supposedly straightforward and honest European standards of behavior.

The tension that emerges between Kandinsky's overt eulogizing of the Persian paintings on the one hand, and the tone of inferiority implied by his descriptive vocabulary on the other is typical of his approach to the "Oriental" subject elsewhere (Benjamin and Ashjian 29), and appears to be an example of what Edward Said meant when he described the essentializing 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 (Said 60).

Kandinsky's use of essentializing language in his descriptive vocabulary seems almost unconscious, what Said would describe as "latent." It reinforces the conclusion we can draw from Labrusse's definition of Islamophilia. As he explained in relation to a superficial interest in Islamic culture on the part of artists: "there can be no doubt that the 'Islam', which was celebrated as a model was a partially constructed reality; besides, the final goal was to obliterate it by founding a global modern (i.e., Western-dominated) visual culture" (Labrusse, "Islamic Arts" 1210). This certainly appears to be true for Kandinsky who called repeatedly for a new era, which he named "the epoch of the great spiritual" (Kandinsky, "Spiritual" 219). In this context, then, it seems that the Persian paintings were relevant to Kandinsky only in insofar as they inspired him and facilitated his objectives for a new visual culture.

Kandinsky's response to the Persian paintings in the exhibition *Meisterwerke muhammedanischer Kunst* suggests that the impact of the exhibition succeeded beyond its stated intention of stimulating modern artists with the "colour harmony and ornamental magnitude" of its art. To conclude on a note of caution, however: I do not want to overstate the significance of Persian art in the context of Kandinsky's overall artistic development, nor do I want to reduce his interest in Persian art to only this single element. He was an artist with a voracious intellectual appetite who constantly drew on multiple different sources of inspiration. And he was notably and deliberately opaque in his attempts to provide an explanation for his artworks.

Kandinsky's passionate and inquisitive response to the Persian paintings show him willing to engage with the works on a conceptual level and reminds us that at this moment in his artistic career, his objective was to produce art that evoked a revelation in his viewers and provide them with spiritual nourishment. It is in this context that I believe his exposure to and interpretation of Persian paintings—and in particular the practice of slow looking produced using hidden forms—should be reassessed as a contributing element in Kandinsky's evolving artistic techniques.

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Biography

Emily Christensen is a PhD candidate at The Courtauld Institute of Art, supervised by Professor Gavin Parkinson. Her thesis explores the role of "the Orient" in the development of Wassily Kandinsky's artistic strategies, examining its impact on his development of abstraction, and his contribution to a broader network of Orientalist imagery. Emily's undergraduate and first Master's degree was in law. After a decade of legal research followed by management consulting work, Emily completed her MA at The Courtauld Institute in 2016.