
Article

Iconic Encounters: Vasily Kandinsky's and Pavel Florensky's 'Mystic Productivism'

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Abstract This essay examines the multiple discursive intersections between the theories of perception and representation articulated by Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944) and Pavel Florensky (1882–1937) in the first two decades of the twentieth century. More specifically, it traces Kandinsky's latent interest in medieval visuality and resituates his well-known formulation of a new spiritual art in the form of abstraction within the realm of Orthodox theology and aesthetics as theorized by Florensky. This article thus proposes an entirely novel set of as yet unexplored interpretative possibilities for understanding Kandinsky's oeuvre on the one hand, and the broader dialectical relationship between medieval revivalism and avant-garde experimentation on the other.

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In 'The Return of the Middle Ages,' the theorist Umberto Eco argues that 'modern ages have revisited the Middle Ages from the moment when, according to historical books, they came to an end' (Eco, 1986, 65). More specifically, he claims that these returns tended to occur at moments of historical transition or cultural and social crisis (Eco, 1986, 74). This hypothesis certainly holds true in early twentieth-century Russia, which, in the aftermath of the 1905 Revolution and on the eve of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, saw a rise of interest in the Byzantine and Russian Middle Ages. Rejecting the positivist, materialist and

largely anti-clerical stance of the nineteenth-century intelligentsia, many *fin-de-siècle* Russian thinkers, artists and philosophers embraced New Age theology, the notion of inner perception and the transcendental nature of the artwork. As members of this new Symbolist generation, both Pavel Florensky and Vasily Kandinsky sincerely believed in the urgent need for widespread social and moral reform and called for the creation of artworks that would stimulate a new kind of spiritual cognition. Although often mentioned in passing, the striking parallels between Kandinsky and Florensky's medievalizing and unapologetically sacralized conception of modern art have rarely been discussed at length in academic scholarship.¹ Accordingly, the present essay aims to address this lacuna by contending that the multiple, compelling intersections between Kandinsky and Florensky's aesthetic theories offer a new set of discursive possibilities for understanding the dialectical relationship between medieval revivalism and avant-garde experimentation in the early twentieth century.

1 Mislser touches upon some of the differences and similarities between Kandinsky and Florensky's aesthetic theories (Mislser, 2002b, 1996).

Apart from being countrymen and exact contemporaries, Kandinsky and Florensky shared several other affinities. For example, their personal libraries contained many of the same literary, philosophical and scientific texts, such as Carl Friedric Zollner's *Die Transcendentale Physik* of 1878, Henri Bergson's *Introduction to Metaphysics* of 1903, Rudolph Steiner's *Theosophy: An Introduction to the Supersensible Knowledge of the World and the Destination of Man* of 1904, as well as writings by the chemist and spiritualist Aleksandr Butlerov (Mislser, 2002a, 61). In addition, Kandinsky and Florensky moved in some of the same artistic and intellectual circles, and shared a number of acquaintances, such as the religious philosopher Sergei Bulgakov and the Symbolist poet and writer Dmitri Merezhkovsky. They were also formally affiliated with a number of the same early Soviet artistic and cultural institutions, such as the RAKhN (Russian Academy of Artistic Sciences, Moscow) and the VKhUTEMAS (Higher State Art-Technical Studios, Moscow), where they both taught a number of courses in the years 1920–1924.² Although it is highly tempting to speculate how they may have crossed each other in the long corridors of these institutions, there are no known documents recording an actual meeting between the two men. Moreover, neither Kandinsky nor Florensky ever overtly mention each other in their respective writings or acknowledge any reciprocal influence. Indeed, as Mislser cautions, 'it would be very misleading to conclude that there is a total resemblance between the scholar and the artist' (Mislser, 1996, 128).

2 Kandinsky taught at the VKhUTEMAS from 1920 through the end of 1921, and Florensky taught there from 1921 through 1924.

One ostensibly fundamental difference between Kandinsky and Florensky is the latter's outright rejection of abstract art. In his well-known essay 'On Reverse Perspective,' Florensky condemned illusionistic and non-objective art alike, claiming that it was materialist, mechanical, 'false' and confused our limited, subjective preconception of reality for objective, cosmic reality (Florensky, [1920] 2002, 197–272). According to Florensky, beginning with the development of linear perspective during the Renaissance, artists had dedicated themselves to the illusory tracing of shadows in the Platonic cave instead of pursuing the 'true'



forms of divine essence. In the ensuing centuries, these ‘bitter Kantian fruits’ continued to grow and flourish, culminating in the Productivist and Constructivist experiments of the Soviet avant-garde (Florensky, [1920] 2002, 216). Florensky thus believed that both illusionistic and abstract paintings were equally dishonest in their attempts to ‘recreate’ the world instead of representing it in its ontological essence. According to him, both naturalistic painters and Suprematists were ‘makers of machines, not artistic creations’ (Greenfield, 2010, 199), sacrificing all possibility of transcendence to ‘volume and thingness’ (Florensky, [1920] 2002, 258). By contrast, Florensky argued that medieval representation – and especially the Russo-Byzantine icon – constituted an autonomous and self-consciously virtual plane, which connected the viewer to a higher spiritual reality. As such, the icon was the only genuine and ontologically ‘realist’ form of art, which presented an objectively transcendental truth.

Although at first glance Florensky’s formulation appears to be radically at odds with Kandinsky’s artistic project and theoretical position, a closer consideration of Kandinsky’s pictorial techniques and methodology betrays an attitude that was ultimately not that different from the one espoused by Florensky. Despite the fact that Kandinsky has been hailed as one of the major twentieth-century innovators of non-objective painting, he himself continued to be wary of pure abstraction, especially in the 1910s. In *On the Spiritual in Art*, he warned artists that

If, even today, we were to begin to dissolve completely the tie that binds us to nature, to direct our energies toward forcible emancipation and content ourselves exclusively with the combination of pure color and independent form, we would create works having the appearance of geometrical ornament, which would – to put it crudely – be like a tie or a carpet. Beauty of color and form (despite the assertions of pure aesthetes or naturalists, whose principal aim is ‘beauty’) is *not* a sufficient aim of art. (Kandinsky, [1912] 1982, 197)

From this and other statements, it is clear that Kandinsky intended his art to have transcendental signification beyond its own materiality even in its most abstract phases. In fact, even as late as 1938, Kandinsky preferred to call his non-figurative paintings ‘concrete’ rather than ‘abstract’ (Kandinsky, [1939] 1982, 841).

Indeed, several scholars, such as Rose-Carol Washton Long, Peg Weiss and Dmitri Sarabianov, have convincingly demonstrated that Kandinsky continued to encode Christian – and more specifically Russian Orthodox – iconography in many of his works throughout his career (Long, 1980; Weiss, 1995; Sarabianov, 1998). For example, Weiss argues that the motif of St George, based on a nineteenth-century Russian icon in Kandinsky’s possession, continued to appear in his paintings throughout his lifetime. Even in his ostensibly ‘abstract’ works such as *Black Accompaniment* (1924) and *Yellow-Red-Blue* (1925), the diagonal



Figure 1: Vasily Kandinsky, *Black Accompaniment*, 1924. Oil on canvas. 166×135 cm (65¹/₄× 53 in).
Source: Private collection, Switzerland.

thrust of St George's lance, his shield, galloping horse, as well as the writhing form of the vanquished dragon, are all clearly perceptible (Figure 1) (Weiss, 1995, 148). This reading is supported by the fact that Kandinsky was not only an avid collector of old icons, but continued to rely on iconic representations for inspiration throughout his lifetime as evidenced by Nina Kandinsky's description of his studio in their Neuilly apartment at 135 Boulevard de la Seine:

Since Kandinsky died, I have changed hardly anything in the apartment ... the antique icons in his studio continue to hang where he hung them. He did not want anything but those icons in his studio, and especially not his own creations. (Kandinsky, 1985, 24)

In her seminal study of Kandinsky's oeuvre, *Kandinsky: The Development of an Abstract Style*, Long explains that the artist would systematically hide the physical aspect of objects in his paintings through a process of 'veiling and stripping,' which involved the simplification of an object to a partial outline or basic framework and the blurring of its outlines with unrelated colors (Long, 1980, 66). The union of these two methods produced what Kandinsky called 'the



Figure 2: *The Fiery Ascension of the Prophet Elijah*, Novgorod Icon, Fifteenth Century. Tempera on wood, 67.5×54 cm (26½×22⅓ in).

Source: Location unknown.

hidden construction,' and, through it, he hoped to void both the materialism of representational art and the opacity of non-representational art by providing the spectator with familiar key motifs (Long, 1980, 66). In Kandinsky's mind, religious forms in particular could tap into millennia of accumulated Christian imagery on the level of the collective subconscious, which Kandinsky thought could produce a transformative psychic or spiritual experience in his audience.³ Moreover, as someone who was well versed in the most up-to-date Byzantine scholarship and was himself a practicing Orthodox believer, Kandinsky understood the iconic image as the 'energetic-material bearer of the divine archetype,' rather than simply as its 'sign' or 'symbol' (Bychkov, 1993, 71).⁴ This meant that the mere depiction of the divine already ensured its spiritual presence in the material object.

Thus, for example, Kandinsky reproduced the iconographic motif of *The Fiery Ascension of the Prophet Elijah* – typical of Russian icon painting (Figure 2) – in several of his *All Saints II* paintings (Figure 3) from 1911 to 1912, where a simplified, schematic form of Elijah's burning chariot drawn by three white horses is distinctly visible in the upper left corner of both works.

3 While in Munich, Kandinsky would regularly attend debates on Freudian psychoanalysis at the Café Stefan and subsequently demonstrated a keen interest in the role of the subconscious in the creative

process. Similarly, during his tenure at the RAKhN, Kandinsky closely followed – and sometimes even participated in – the various research projects that examined human psychology and psychoanalytical theory.

4 In *On the Spiritual in Art*, Kandinsky observes that blue is reserved only for the holiest figures in icon-painting and is therefore the most spiritual color, citing Kondakov's *Histoire de l'art byzantin* (Kondakov, 1886–1891, 38): 'les nymbes ... sont dorés pour l'empereur et les prophetes et bleu de ciel pour les personnages symboliques' (Kandinsky, [1912] 1982, 182).



Figure 3: Vasily Kandinsky, *All Saints II*, 1911. Tempera and oil on glass, 31.1×47.8 cm (12¹/₄× 18⁷/₈ in).
Source: Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich, Germany.

However, in addition to these obvious citations, Kandinsky also used this motif as a 'hidden construction' in several other works. For example, in *Red Spot II* (Figure 4), Kandinsky seems to have transplanted Elijah's fiery scarlet cloud, spherical black cave and flowing stream into his painting after subjecting them to a system of geometrization akin to his treatment of the St George motif in *Black Accompaniment* or *Yellow-Red-Blue*. A glass painting of *All Saints II* from 1911, which depicts Elijah's fiery ascension on the left-hand side of the image, suggests that the rounded, triangular form of Elijah's fiery cloud directly evolved into the central red 'spot' of the later work, after which the painting is named. Similarly, the angel's curved green trumpet with a series of orange striations seems to have migrated from the upper register of *All Saints II* to the bottom left corner of *Red Spot II*. Lastly, the overall color scheme – especially the striking rich blues, deep greens, vibrant yellows, and passages of white and black – in *Red Spot II* appear to have been directly drawn from the earlier work. As such, even in his seemingly purely abstract works, Kandinsky still relied on figurative representation derived from iconic sources.

Although Kandinsky's methodology is more of a reinvention than a return to traditional icon painting, it nonetheless accords with Florensky's call for a universal, transcendental art that would simultaneously negate both the dead-end corporeality of naturalistic illusionism and the crude 'thingness' of purely non-objective art. Moreover, Kandinsky's organic lyricism, his synthetic



Figure 4: Vasily Kandinsky, *Red Spot II*, 1921. Oil on canvas, 137×181 cm (54× 71¹/₆ in).
 Source: Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich, Germany.

approach and the spiritual significance that he attributed to his paintings would have certainly appealed to Florensky. In his description of how a ‘true’ representation ought to function, Florensky closely approached Kandinsky’s own concept of art-making and the active, creative role of the artist. Even in his language, Florensky recalls Kandinsky’s terminology, particularly with reference to ‘vibrations,’ which was one of the artist’s key concepts in *On the Spiritual in Art*. Florensky writes:

The artist should and can depict his idea of a house, but he absolutely cannot transfer the house itself to canvas. He grasps this life of his idea, whether it be a house or a human face, by taking from the various parts of the idea the brightest, the most expressive of its elements, and instead of a momentary psychic fireworks it provides a motionless mosaic of its single, most expressive moments. During *contemplation* of the picture, the viewer’s eye, passing step by step across these characteristic features, reproduces in the spirit what is now an image extended in time and duration of a scintillating, pulsating idea, but now more intense and more cohesive than an image deriving from the thing itself, for now the vivid moments observed at different times are presented in their pure state, already condensed, and don’t require an expenditure of psychic effort in smelting the clinkers out of it. As on the incised cylinder of a

phonograph, the sharp point of the clearest vision slips along the picture's lines and surfaces with their notches, and in each spot arouses in the viewer corresponding vibrations. And these vibrations constitute the *purpose* of the work of art (Florensky, [1920] 2002, 271).

Kandinsky writes in a similar vein:

The inner element, taken in isolation, is the emotion in the soul of the artist that causes a corresponding vibration (in material terms, like the note of one musical instrument that causes the corresponding note on another instrument to vibrate in sympathy) in the soul of another person, the receiver In art, form is invariably determined by content. And only that form is correct which expresses, materializes its corresponding content. All other considerations, in particular, whether the chosen form corresponds to what is called 'nature,' i.e. external nature, are inessential and damaging, in that they detract from the sole purpose of form – the embodiment of its content. Form is the material expression of abstract content. Thus, only its author can fully assess the caliber of a work of art; only he is capable of seeing whether and to what extent the form he has devised corresponds to that content which imperiously demands embodiment of its content ... Thus in essence, the form of a work of art is determined according to internal necessity. (Kandinsky, [1910–1911] 1982, 87)

In addition, both Kandinsky and Florensky were deeply interested in synesthesia and considered the medieval church or cathedral to be the original synesthetic prototype in which a totalizing aesthetic environment was combined with a transformative spiritual experience. In his *Reminiscences* from 1913, Kandinsky claimed that his first experience of synesthesia occurred

in the Moscow churches, and especially in the cathedral of the Assumption and the Church of St Basil the Blessed It was probably through these impressions, rather than in any other way, that my further wishes and aims as regards my own art formed themselves within me. (Kandinsky, [1913] 1982, 369)

According to him, the experience of being inside a medieval church was equivalent to inhabiting a multi-sensorial, three-dimensional artwork, and he continued to explore the psycho-physiological impact of visual and aural phenomena on human perception both at the INKhUK (Institute of Artistic Culture) and the RAKhN. In the former, he developed and headed the Section of Monumental Art, which investigated the interrelationships between different art forms and their impact as a single whole; in the latter, he established the Physico-Psychological Department, which aimed to bridge the gap between scientific thought and artistic activity by bringing together physicists, mathematicians, biologists, psychologists, chemists, philosophers, theologians and artists to carry out laboratory investigations into synesthesia and the psychology of perception and individual creativity.



As a scientist and theologian with a deep interest in the visual arts, Florensky was equally committed to bringing his scientific knowledge to bear on his investigations into art history and art theory. Just like Kandinsky, Florensky advocated the creation of a synesthetic ‘laboratory’ and argued that the Orthodox liturgy produced the ultimate synesthetic experience by combining images, movement, light, sound and smell. According to him, the monastery was the age-old *Gesamtkunstwerk* from which contemporary avant-garde artists could learn. In two essays from 1918, ‘The St Sergius Lavra and Russia’ and ‘Church Ritual as Synthesis of the Arts,’ Florensky envisioned the St Sergius monastery – located just outside Moscow – as a nexus of a renewed medieval culture, where a community of artists and scholars would ‘realize the high destiny to produce an integral culture, to re-create the integral spirit of antiquity, to reveal a new Hellas’ (Greenfield, 2010, 204). The ‘House of Saint Sergius,’ as Florensky called the monastery, would be an ‘experimental station and laboratory,’ where artists and thinkers could unite in tackling some of Modernity’s most pressing aesthetic, philosophical and spiritual problems (Greenfield, 2010, 204). Several years earlier, Kandinsky had articulated an analogous idea, claiming that

The great epoch of the Spiritual, which is already beginning, or, in embryonic form, began already yesterday amidst the apparent victory of materialism, provides and will provide, the soil in which this monumental work of art [*Gesamtkunstwerk*] must come to fruition. In every realm of the spirit, values are reviewed as if in preparation for one of the greatest battles against materialism And this is happening also in one of the greatest realms of the spirit, that of pre-eternal and eternal art. (Kandinsky, [1910–1911] 1982, 88)

In his unusual techno-spiritualism, his steady commitment to the ‘science of the soul’ and his aspiration for the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, Kandinsky would have undoubtedly received a warm welcome in Florensky’s ‘House of Saint Sergius’ had the Soviet Revolution not taken the course that it did.

Indeed, Kandinsky and Florensky’s conception of a modern, ‘living,’ organic and monumental art radically departed from the one promoted by the radical Constructivist and Productivist avant-garde, which embraced a materialist, rationalist and impersonal approach to artistic production. It is therefore hardly surprising that both Kandinsky and Florensky’s tenures in the new Soviet institutions of INKhUK, VKhUTEMAS and RAKhN were extremely short-lived and were constantly plagued by virulent and often personal attacks. For example, the leftist art critic Punin called on modern artists to effect a ‘mechanization of the soul’ and harshly criticized Kandinsky as ‘not only a bad craftsman (draftsman, painter) but quite simply a vulgar and altogether mediocre artist’ (Punin, 1919, 23; Punin, 1917, 62). Similarly, Varvara Stepanova noted in her diary that she, together with several of her INKhUK colleagues, including Aleksandr Rodchenko and Liubov Popova, had decided to

openly antagonize Kandinsky by launching ‘a schism’ and ‘founding a special group for objective analysis, from which Kandinsky [is] running away, like the devil from incense’ (Gough, 2005, 31–32). As Mislser observes, analogous attacks by the same group of artists were also aimed at the ‘mystic’ Florensky, who was repeatedly accused of ‘undermining the integrity of VKhUTEMAS and causing it to “collapse”’ (Mislser, 2002a, 79). One such example is the 1923 statement published by the Productivists in the journal *Lef*, which indirectly criticized Florensky and his followers for their ‘mystical Productivism’:

A curious subgroup of ‘mystical Productivists’ has formed among the ‘decorative’ painters They go around the Department of Polygraphy, filling the heads of students with the following kind of problem: ‘The spiritual meaning of the images of letters of the alphabet’ or ‘The struggle of white and black spaces in graphics’. (quoted in Mislser, 2002a, 78)

As these polemics clearly demonstrate, Kandinsky and Florensky’s artistic theories clearly appealed to a large enough number of Soviet artists and intellectuals in the early 1920s to elicit such aggression from other artistic groupings, who must have felt threatened by the popularity of their ‘Mystic Productivism.’ And yet, we are left with more questions than answers. Taking into account the striking convergence of their respective aesthetic philosophies, why then did Kandinsky and Florensky never formally join forces in advancing their unusual formulations of a transcendental modern art? Moreover, given their shared interests and overlapping presence in the new Soviet cultural institutions, why is there no evidence of active collaboration? Was this ellipsis a simple case of missed opportunity, a mutual indifference or disinterest, or a self-consciously meaningful elision? Was there a deeper philosophical disagreement between the artist and scholar or merely a trivial personality clash? The historical record remains silent, proving that ‘imagined encounters’ and elusive historiographies are not limited to cross-temporality but can often occur within the same spatial–historical matrix.

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Maria Taroutina, Assistant Professor of Art History at Yale – NUS College, has published a number of articles and essays on the art of Imperial and early Soviet Russia, and is co-editor, with Roland Betancourt, of *Byzantium/Modernism: The Byzantine as Method in Modernity* (Brill, 2015). Currently, she is working on the book *From the Tessera to the Square: Russian Modernism and the Russo-Byzantine Revival*, which charts the rediscovery and reassessment of medieval Russo-Byzantine representation in Russia in the years 1860–1920 (E-mail: Maria.taroutina@yale-nus.edu.sg).



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