

AUSSTELLUNGEN

A SENSE OF PLACE. "KANDINSKY UND MÜNCHEN. BEGEGNUNGEN UND WANDLUNGEN, 1896—1914" Ausstellung in der Städtischen Galerie im Lenbachhaus München, 18. 8.—17. 10. 1982.

Despite its title, "Kandinsky und München" was originally conceived by an American scholar with the perversely asymmetrical spaces of New York's Guggenheim Museum in mind. Only at third hand — after New York and San Francisco — did Munich, without whose loans there could have been no exhibition, get to see the show, albeit in somewhat altered form. Ironic, then, that an exhibition which wore round its neck the label „made in America“ should have looked so much better in the more homely setting of Munich's Lenbachhaus.

In its original form, the exhibition as shown in New York under the title "Kandinsky in Munich" was the spin-off from a book (Peg Weiss, *Kandinsky in Munich. The Formative Jugendstil Years*. Princeton University Press, 1979) which was in turn the spin-off from a doctoral dissertation. A recipe, one might think, for a show scholarly enough in all conscience, but dry as dust. In fact, judicious re-arrangement, the omission of certain items and inclusion of other, more significant material produced in Munich an effect strikingly different from the New York showing, and different again from the monograph that preceded both of them. The monograph suggested, described, hypothesized, adducing evidence for this or that — hedged about, of course, by the proper scholarly reservations: "Kandinsky could have known X", "might have visited Y", and so on. In an exhibition, no such reservations are possible (an improvement, to my mind). An exhibition states, makes tangible, without ifs or buts (or at least, any "ifs" or "buts" must be confined to the catalogue). "Turn-of-the-century Munich was thus, not otherwise." "This map shows who lived where." "This is what a *Jugendstil* interior looked like" — no matter whether Kandinsky himself ever set foot in such an interior.

"Kandinsky und München" also succeeded in conveying more vividly than the American version of the show a sense of the period — for two main reasons. First, the Munich showing of the exhibition included a far greater number of contemporary documents. Documents, too, can be dry as dust; but carefully chosen and in their rightful place they can evoke, more powerfully than any painting, the ideas, debates and personalities of an epoch. Kandinsky's 1897 poster design for a Russian chocolate manufacturer is not only redolent of *fin-de-siècle* self-indulgence; it also reveals the artist surprisingly able, at such an early date, to employ fluently and confidently the graphic vocabulary of international *art nouveau*. The decision to include a small amount of Russian material (conspicuous by its absence in New York) was an important one, since much that is characteristic of Kandinsky's early development — his profound and far-reaching involvement with primitive art, for example — cannot be understood solely in terms of his Munich associations. By 1889 at the latest he would have been aware of the publications of the Russian Imperial Society for the Advancement of Science,

Anthropology and Ethnography, since one of his own early articles had appeared in the society's journal. He had also visited the Russian province of Vologda where, according to his autobiographical "Reminiscences", his interest was first captured by the folk art of the Russian North. This interest would have been reinforced by his subsequent acquaintance with the archaeological researches of artists of Dyagilev's circle such as Nikolai Roerich and Ivan Bilibin — artists likewise represented in the present exhibition. Several copies of Dyagilev's journal *The World of Art* are also displayed, important not only for the archaeologizing material it contained, but also because it carried reproductions of works by foreign artists who greatly interested Kandinsky, such as Frank Brangwyn and Akseli Gallen-Kallela. The latter's huge composition *The Defence of the Sampo* (1900) was hung, in Munich, opposite a showcase containing a volume of *The World of Art* opened to reveal the same composition reproduced as a woodcut — a neat piece of purely visual documentation.

In the first sections of the exhibition, it is undoubtedly the comparative material that is the most absorbing, though there are occasional little touches that reveal Kandinsky the man — his brass doorplate, for example, his name inscribed with characteristic flourish, lovingly preserved and toted around with him through all the years of war, revolution, self-imposed exile and war again. It is also this part of the exhibition that shows most clearly the second great merit of the Munich version, namely the clarity and lucidity of the manner of display. Admittedly, Munich's Lenbachhaus is at a considerable advantage in this respect, not having been designed originally as a museum, unlike the Guggenheim, which was, and suffers for it. But even the first, more modern rooms of the Lenbachhaus lend themselves admirably to a phase-by-phase account of the early stages of Kandinsky's career — his training as an artist, his travels, his contacts with Munich *Jugendstil* and the theatre of his day. The logic of this sequence of events was somehow far less perceptible on the winding slopes of the Guggenheim's endless ramp, perhaps because the weary visitor, trudging manfully uphill like an Alpinist *manqué*, never had opportunity to draw breath and say to himself: "I am now in a new section of the exhibition. What does this section signify?"

The only disadvantage of the Lenbachhaus is that it is really too small for an exhibition of this kind. But what started as a *pis aller* turned out to be a blessing in disguise. For reasons of space, the show had to be separated into two halves, with the coffee shop placed strategically in between. Separating the two parts of the exhibition in this way threw into stark relief the two distinct though related themes around which the whole enterprise revolved. On the one hand, its purpose was to bring to life the historical and geographical setting in which Kandinsky, at the outset of his career, found himself; on the other hand, by setting Kandinsky off against his contemporaries, it was evidently intended to convey some sense of the nature and scope of his achievements. If the latter part — what one might dub "Kandinsky and his friends" (though the title has been used before) — was marginally less interesting than the first, this was mainly because it included so

many works which in any case form part of the Städtische Galerie's permanent (and permanently visible) collection. Against this, it must be said that these latter sections of the exhibition contained some of the most careful and imaginative pieces of display: the little corner with Kandinsky's painted furniture that evoked the rural idyll of Gabriele Münter's cottage at Murnau, or the tiny section showing examples of primitive sculpture and design, with the corresponding plates from the *Blaue Reiter Almanac* on display in the showcases opposite.

It was also the latter part of the exhibition that occasioned certain albeit slight reservations. In the section devoted to the Neue Künstler-Vereinigung München, why was Jawlensky, who was from a bureaucratic point of view the most important member of the association after Kandinsky himself (he was for a time vice-president), not represented? Indeed, in the whole exhibition there was only a single painting by Jawlensky, and that in the theatre section — his portrait of the dancer A. Sakharov shown, one suspects, not so much for its own sake as for the sake of the person represented. More might have been made also of the importance of Kandinsky's graphic album *Klänge* which, quite apart from the remarkable poems it contains, occupies a crucial place within the artist's immediately pre-war development. *Klänge* gathers together a whole series of images of extraordinary generative power — generative, that is, of still further, more highly abstracted compositions.

This, perhaps, is the point at which the exhibition should have stopped — with Kandinsky's designs for *Klänge* and for his treatise *On the Spiritual in Art*, or with the ethnographic material reproduced in the *Blaue Reiter Almanac*. To have included a further section, entitled "Der Weg zur Abstraktion", seems ill-judged. Awkwardly placed, so that it might easily be mistaken for a prelude to the sections on the Neue Künstler-Vereinigung, Murnau, the Blaue Reiter, etc., this part of the exhibition raised more questions than it could possibly answer. One can understand only too well the temptation to end on an upbeat, to include a number of "star" paintings such as the Guggenheim's *Picture with White Edge* and *Small Pleasures*, or to re-unite the four *Campbell Panels*, normally divided between the Guggenheim and the Museum of Modern Art in New York. There is, moreover, the historical compulsion to follow Kandinsky's career all the way through to the summer of 1914, to the end of the Munich period. But the precise topic of Kandinsky's development towards abstraction can scarcely expect to receive adequate treatment in one, medium-sized room of a medium-sized gallery; nor, strictly speaking, is it a topic wholly suited to an exhibition at all, unless it were to be minutely detailed. Kandinsky's "path to abstraction" was by no means direct; rather, it was both arduous and tortuous. His writings show clearly how long he continued to harbour doubts concerning the possibility of an entirely non-representational art. His paintings of the Munich period, even those of 1913 and 1914, are not really non-representational; rather, they conceal references to recognizable objects beneath a welter of seemingly abstract colours and forms. In order to isolate such motifs it is necessary to trace the evolution of each painting

step by step via all the preparatory drawings and studies, as well as the prints and glass paintings that often serve as staging posts on this voyage of discovery. This is not, however, a task that can be easily accomplished within the context of an exhibition. In the event, a number of preparatory studies were shown in the final section of "Kandinsky und München", in particular, studies relating to the paintings *Small Pleasures* and *Picture with White Edge*, but which served only to whet one's appetite, rather than elucidating the artist's by this date extremely complex manner of working.

If it is this final section that presents us with the visually most intractable material, these difficulties are not eased by the fact that this is the only room in the entire exhibition given over solely to Kandinsky. One way of understanding his apparently abstract paintings of these years is by reference to the diverse sources on which he draws: Russian folk prints, Bavarian *Hinterglasmalerei*, and the like. But although most of these objects are on display somewhere in the exhibition, they are not physically present here where they are most needed. For the rest, however, the hanging is a model of clarity and discretion, while the exhibition itself makes a vital and significant contribution to the study of an artist so often written about, and yet still so little understood.

Peter Vergo

FRANZÖSISCHE AUSSTELLUNGEN ZUM 100. GEBURTSTAG VON GEORGES BRAQUE

Eine jubiläumsgerechte Jahrtausendausstellung zu Ehren des am 14. Juni 1882 geborenen Georges Braque mit Leihgaben aus aller Welt schien den französischen Verantwortlichen verzichtbar, wenn nicht unmöglich, nachdem 1973/74 in der Orangerie der Tuileries eine große Braqueausstellung zu sehen war und auch die Fondation Maeght in Saint-Paul-de-Vence Braques Werk 1980 umfassend gezeigt hatte. Statt der säkularen Retrospektive also wurden zwei verhältnismäßig kleine Ausstellungen organisiert, eine im Centre Pompidou durch das Musée national d'art moderne, eine weitere durch die Museen in Bordeaux und Straßburg, die bis zum 1. September in Bordeaux zu sehen war und zur Zeit noch in Straßburg stattfindet (bis zum 28. November). Schiere Beliebigkeit ließ sich trotz der Beschränkung wenigstens in Paris vermeiden. Die Ausstellung vereinigte hier vorübergehend und im Vorgriff auf einen für später erhofften Zustand die Gesamtheit dessen, was das Musée national d'art moderne an Werken Braques besitzt (52 Nummern im Katalog), zugleich die rund zwanzig Werke in den übrigen französischen Museen. (Druckgraphik blieb allerdings, wie auch in Bordeaux/Straßburg, ausgeschlossen.) Vor allem war aber in die Ausstellung eine Präsentation der nicht sehr zahlreichen papiers collés Braques eingebettet, am genauen Ort innerhalb der chronologischen Abfolge der Exponate, ausgestattet mit einem Anflug von Weihe durch das aus konservatorischen Gründen gebotene Halbdunkel. Daß es sich ei-