

<b>Wassily Kandinsky, <i>Composition 4</i>, 1911, oil on canvas, 160 x 251 cm (63 x 99")</b>	initial analysis	
<p>On initial viewing the left part of the picture plane consists of many elements drawn in black paint in straight and folded lines. The most imposing shape is that of a discrepantly drawn four-colour rainbow with a black inner curve. Near the corner is a pink painted tapered curve attached to strips of black and yellow with a red and green spotted top.</p>		<p>The painting is in the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf</p> <p>In the centre a hill-like shape with a blue fringe. Two almost straight black lines divide the picture. There are also three red patches and smaller yellow patches. On the hill shape the crude outline of a drawn building. To the right two shapes that appear to be elongated figures with red faces and hats. These are imposed on a drawing of a mountainous area near the top of which are two shapes resembling towers.</p>
<p>Interpretation of the mark feature on the left is made simple by explaining the upper shapes as a figure on horseback with a lance, that is St. George. He appears to approach an unidentifiable form with a long neck, perhaps a dragon, but not really resembling one.</p>	<p>Putting these elements together we could give an approximation of a battle, or a painting that signifies a battle. In his book <i>On the Spiritual in Art</i>, Kandinsky describes his 'compositions' as a kind of painting which 'reason, the conscious, the deliberate, and the purposeful play a preponderant role', and as having been 'slowly and almost deliberately worked out' by means of preliminary sketches. (note 1) Six drawings, factured in preparation for paintings in the period of <i>Composition 4</i> in January and February 1911, can help the viewer understand some of what is being said here regarding arrangement. The subject matter needs a further study into the ideas of Kandinsky and his associations with St George, both in terms of that saint's attached to Moscow and München, but probably more importantly to the allusions to the fight against evil in a period after the Russian revolution in 1905 and destruction of the Ottoman empire in Europe and the ethnic battles that became the Balkan wars in 1912. Gabriele Münter regarded Kandinsky's 'Compositions' as concerned with spiritual regeneration and the destruction of the established order of materialism.</p>	<p>The complex of three small red marks, with yellow elements and possibly eyes, two of them holding lances could be cossacks. The painting made a month before this was titled <i>Cossacks</i> and conveyed similar figures.</p> <p>There are further allusions too broad to expand here, but which include the castle and rainbow bridge in the first part of Wagner's <i>The Ring of the Nibelung</i>. A note from Gabriele Münter to Arnold Schoenberg refers to the writings of Volker and what for her were associations with Kandinsky's 'Compositions'. (note 2)</p>

1. *Kandinsky. Complete Writings on Art*, edited by Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo, 2 volumes, London, 1982.
2. I have attached a concluding comment from Peter Vergo on Kandinsky's work in this period.



‘To find Wagnerian references embedded alongside philosophical and mystical allusions in a picture supposedly inspired by the 1905 Russian revolution need not surprise us unduly. In his essay on *Composition 6*, which is in so many ways revealing of his working methods at this time, Kandinsky admits to his fondness for 'mingling' disparate kinds of imagery. The same tactic is used in many of his other pre-1914 paintings: the juxtaposition of the well-worn motif of the troika [a vehicle pulled by a team of three horses] with that of St George and the dragon, for example, in *Picture with White Edge*, or the apocalyptic rider who makes a dramatic incursion into the summer holiday outing depicted in the painting known as *Improvisation "Gorge"* of 1914. Kandinsky not only expected his paintings to produce their effect gradually, after prolonged contemplation, as the imagery on which they are based slowly insinuated itself into the viewer's consciousness. He also clearly intended them to work on a number of different levels, so that to see the various layers of meaning contained within a picture such as *Composition 4* as somehow incompatible would be to miss the point – the point being that Kandinsky's major paintings are not susceptible of any single, definitive interpretation; rather, they lend themselves to numerous interpretations.

‘But in fact, the multifarious sources on which the artist draws in the making of *Composition 4* are remarkably consistent as regards what Kandinsky would have considered their inner significance. Volker's treatise *Siderische Geburt [Sidereal birth]* (subtitled 'A Seraphic Quest from the Death of the World to the Baptism of the Deed'),<sup>1</sup> which [Gabriele] Münter regarded as so similar in content to Kandinsky's *Compositions*, is concerned with spiritual regeneration and the destruction of the established order of materialism. As we have seen, Kandinsky's hopes of a rebirth or 'turning-point' kindled by the stirrings of revolution would have been first and foremost spiritual, not political in character. And, after all, what is Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelung* about, if not the passing of the old order? And, of course, about the power of love. Nothing in Kandinsky's work is the product of coincidence, least of all the fact that the 'reclining figures' absent in the Tate's *Cossacks*, but which occur at lower right in *Composition 4*, derive from the artist's earlier treatments of the traditional theme of the Garden of Love or Garden of Delights, enabling us with reasonable certainty to substitute for the artist's unrevealing label our own more telling identification “loving couple”.’<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Volker is a pseudonym for the writer Eric Gutkind.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Vergo. *Kandinsky: Cossacks*, London: Tate Gallery, 1986, p. 26.