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Face to faith



We need hope through art, and this makes Kandinsky more relevant today than ever, says Alastair McIntosh

A century ago this month, Wassily Kandinsky finished a little book called *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. Today in Govan, a hard-pressed part of Glasgow, we are celebrating the Russian artist's ideas in a conference on art, spirituality and the future.

What was Kandinsky then, and why is it as relevant as ever today?

Born in 1866 and living until 1944, Kandinsky grew up in a Russia where the consequences of modernity and nihilistic thought were hotly debated.

The old certainties of state, church and the soul in the human condition were in turmoil. At the same time, there was excited hope of a spiritual renaissance led by the influx of new ideas from the east. As Kandinsky said: "The nightmare of materialism, which has turned the life of the universe into an evil, useless game, is not yet past; it holds the awakening soul still in its grip."

As if in anticipation of some of today's Britart, he deplored art that "becomes the satisfaction of vanity and greed ... a scramble for good things ... of excessive competition, of over-production ... this aimless, materialist art".

He denounced the narcissistic wallow of "art for art's sake" - "this neglect of inner meanings ... this vain squandering of artistic power" with its consequence that "hungry souls go hungry away".

Instead, he urged, art must "feed the spirit" by revealing "the internal truth of art, the soul". This is its prophetic calling in serving society. The artist must "be priest of beauty". Beauty itself is that "which springs from the soul", being anchored in the sacred.

It was Kandinsky's friend Paul Klee who said that "art does not render the visible; it renders visible". But how?

Kandinsky's answer was through abstraction. Here I find myself more critical of him. The role of the artist, he suggested, is to separate out the spiritual from the material. Art should be an "advance into the kingdom of the abstract".

We see this in the geometric abstraction of his later work. Largely gone are the scintillating salsas of dancing colour that made his earlier paintings so magical.

We might ask: can the spiritual be abstracted from the material? Kandinsky, to his enduring credit, affirms the

spiritual on the artistic map, but did he, at the same time, lose the plot by going too far down the road of abstraction?

Can the incarnate - the infusion of spirit and matter - really be rendered disincarnate? Or has the time come to move towards a new spiritual realism - to art that can represent the outer world (and be able to paint and draw!), but which simultaneously reveals its interiority, its spirituality?

But why does this matter? There is a local saying that if you throw a stone over a wall in Govan you'll hit an artist.

The most vulnerable to suffering and with it, to evasions like addiction, are often the sensitive souls, the canaries down the toxic coalmines of our society.

Such people need art - not pretentious elite art that is up its own backside - but art that recovers meaning, that calls back the soul.

When I ask hard-pressed folks what they want of art I don't hear calls for the likes of Damien Hirst's *For the Love of God* with 8,601 diamonds glued to a human skull as "bling on bone".

I hear people yearning for what Kandinsky saw as prophetic art. Art that reveals hope. Art that breathes the flow of life into the veins.

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The international conference:

Kandinsky in Govan -
Art, Spirituality and the Future

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