



*Vasily Kandinsky, Several Circles, 1926 (detail). Oil on canvas, 140.3 cm. × 140.7 cm.
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, by permission*

Inner Cosmologies

Exhibits of Works by C. G. Jung and Wassily Kandinsky,
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The Red Book, C. G. Jung's illuminated manuscript revealing his conscious descent into the world of the unconscious, was literally brought out of a Swiss bank vault and put on public display for the very first time from October 2009 through February 2010.¹ The venue was the Rubin Museum, a beautifully restored building located on a quiet, tree-lined block of 17th Street, between 6th and 7th, in the Chelsea district of downtown Manhattan. The museum, each of its seven floors painted in a different earth tone, is the inspiration of Shelley and David Rubin and houses their remarkable private collection of Himalayan art. It also features special temporary exhibits and has a marvelously warm and spacious entry-level floor flanked by a café and bookstore, an inviting atmosphere for frequent and lively cultural events.

The special exhibit of *The Red Book*² was appropriately underground, reached by descending a staircase. In addition to the book itself, historical documents and Jung's drawing and paintings from private collections were on display. Some of Jung's paintings, based on images also appearing in *The Red Book*, had a distinctly art deco feel; others were on dark paper, reminding me of a particular genre of Tibetan paintings (*nag-thang*) on black backgrounds (Béguin 1990) and also of certain Kandinsky sketches and paintings on black backgrounds simultaneously on display at the Guggenheim.

The Red Book exhibit begins with two pages from the black notebooks, in which Jung originally wrote down his dreams and visions beginning in 1911. But the small, intimate paintings on the walls drew my attention first. I became

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engrossed in a complex painting depicting *kabiri* (or *Cabiri*), which Jung later described as,

... unseen, creative dwarf-gods . . . , hooded and cloaked manikins who are kept hidden in the dark *cista* but, who also appear on the seashore as little figures about a foot high, where, as kinsmen of the unconscious, they protect navigation, i.e., the venture into darkness and uncertainty. In the form of Dactyls they are also the gods of invention, small and apparently insignificant like the impulses of the unconscious but endowed with the same mighty power. (1968/1999, CW 12, ¶203)

Jung had written a passage on the back of the painting, as if spoken by the kabiri:

We hauled things up, we built. We placed stone upon stone. Now you stand on solid ground. . .
 We forged a slashing sword for you, with which you can cut the knot that entangles you. . .
 We also place before you the devilish, skillfully twined knot that locks and seals you.
 Strike, only sharpness will cut through it. . . Do not hesitate.
 We need destruction since we ourselves are the entanglement.
 He who wishes to conquer new land brings down the bridges behind him.
 Let us not exist anymore.
 We are the thousand canals in which everything also flows back again into its origin.
 24 December 1917

In a previous painting, the kabiri emerge from the open flowers of a plant nourished by the decomposing body of a green, multilegged monster, which was depicted as having been slain by a hero in another painting. Yet another painting showed a bearded man, a primitive and haunting image.

The original *Red Book*, an enormous leather-bound, parchment volume, was displayed within a large glass cube attached to the floor and situated in an interior space within the exhibit. The book was placed on a high lectern, so one could view it from a standing position, and opened to page 78. Calligraphic text in German was on the left-hand page and on the right an “abstract” geometric painting. This painting featured four beautifully shaded circles or spheres in the center, each composed of many facets reminiscent of a stained glass window. The four circles were surrounded by a series of narrow, circular bands, each unique in its patterning. Here, we see an imaginal basis for Jung’s conceptual formulations about the tendency of the psyche to group things into a fourfold unity, as in the four directions of the compass: “The total personality is indicated by the four cardinal points, the four gods, i.e., the four functions which give bearing in psychic space, . . .” (1928/1972, CW 7, ¶367), as well as his interest in *mandalas* (1950/1980, CW 9i, ¶¶627–718; 1968/1972, CW 12, ¶¶122–331). Jung’s painting is more dynamic and deeply evocative than an “abstract” concept: it is an inner cosmology that arose from Jung’s intense engagement with the depths of his psyche, one that included inner human figures but which led him to a more primal realm of the human psyche.

The Red Book exhibit coincided with the publication of a facsimile of the book. The preparation of *The Red Book* for publication, an endeavor taking nine years, was entrusted by the Jung family to the scholar of psychoanalytic history, Sonu Shamdasani, formerly of the Freud Archives and now Reader in Jung History at Wellcome Trust Centre for the History of Medicine at University College London, with the financial support of the Philemon Foundation.³ Mr. Shamdasani has provided extensive editorial notes and collaborated in the English translation with Mark Kyburz and John Peck. The facsimile, weighing 9.6 lbs, or 4.4 kg, and published by W. W. Norton in the Philemon Series, sold out in a day at the Rubin, even at its full retail price of US\$195.

The opening of the exhibit was accompanied by a series of celebratory events. A high point was Mr. Shamdasani's public lecture on the book's significance, given on October 9 at the New York Academy of Medicine in its elegant, classically ornate auditorium. (See the article by Ann Casement in this issue.) According to Shamdasani, Jung tried to find a right relationship to his *daimons* and to his own soul, and in so doing, he became more human. *Out of his process there emerged a personal cosmology.* According to Shamdasani, the science of Jung's work, that is, comparing his experience to the experience of patients and to historical sources, folded back into it. Shamdasani made the important point that if *The Red Book* were viewed from the Zeitgeist of science, it would be of *historical* interest only.

A dozen blocks from the Academy of Medicine, at 5th Avenue and 89th Street, the Guggenheim was celebrating its fiftieth anniversary with a retrospective of the work of Wassily Kandinsky.⁴ Though long recognized as an innovator of "abstract" art, the spiritual nature of Kandinsky's painting was emphasized in this spectacular exhibit, which drew primarily from the Lenbachhaus in Munich, the Pompidou in Paris, and the Guggenheim's permanent collection. Many of Kandinsky's works, like Jung's, may be viewed as inner cosmologies, universes of the imagination. Some contain many spheres or circles in dynamic relationship to one another. In fact, as a young man, Kandinsky had seen the subjective, prescientific cosmologies that Siberian shamans painted on their drums, having done field research for the Ethnographic Society in Moscow, of which he was a member, and also having viewed the drums of shamans in the Moscow ethnographic museum (Weiss 1995). Indeed, Peg Weiss has shown that a number of Kandinsky's works resemble the actual figures found on shaman's drums, which he viewed on frequent visits to the museum during his time in Moscow.

C. G. Jung and Wassily Kandinsky were contemporaries, although there is no record that they ever met or even took notice of one another's existence. Both struggled with the limitations of a constricting rational, logical approach to human experience, while living in an era when logical positivism, science, and industrialization seemed to hold the key to quality of life, one that involved less physical labor and one unfettered by "primitive," instinctual urges. Early on, Jung wanted to approach

the nature of psyche as an observer, a scientist. In a much-noted passage in *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, Jung wrote,

When I was writing down these fantasies, I once asked myself, "What am I really doing? Certainly this has nothing to do with science. But then what is it?" Whereupon a voice within me said, "It is art." I was astonished. It had never entered my head that what I was writing had any connection with art. (1961/1963, 185)

He examined the source of this "voice" and determined that it was an inner figure or part of his psyche, a negative anima, who was trying to undermine his purpose:

Therefore I gave up this estheticizing tendency in good time, in favor of a rigorous process of *understanding*. I saw that so much fantasy needed firm ground underfoot, and that I must first return wholly to reality. For me, reality meant scientific comprehension. I had to draw concrete conclusions from the insights the unconscious had given me—and that task was to become a life work. (Jung 1961/1963, 188)

Thus, as a psychiatrist, Jung came down on the side of "science."

In contrast, Kandinsky had no doubt that he was an artist. As a young man, he responded to a critic, "Psychology, archeology, ethnography! What has art to do with all this?" (Weiss 1995, xiii).⁵ Despite the difference in their chosen paths, each man, in his unique way, overcame a fear of the unconscious (represented at times by a dragon or monster) and was led to a fascinating encounter with a nonstatic inner universe.

Jung had been struggling with his ambitions, scientific interests, his powerful connection with Freud, and his role as heir-apparent to the leadership of the psychoanalytic movement that he had helped to create—and which he nevertheless found fundamentally lacking. This intensely painful period of inner conflict and transition, including his break with Freud and his excommunication from the psychoanalytic movement, led to a period of personal anguish and inner disorientation (Jung 1961/1963, 170–199).

Thus, in 1911, Jung made a conscious choice to begin an arduous inner exploration in search of his own soul. In a series of waking dreams, he allowed the contents of his psyche to emerge more freely, while his conscious personality interacted with the vivid, personified figures who appeared to him from the unconscious. He recorded these waking dreams (later called *active imaginations*) in six black notebooks, which, in turn, became the basis for *The Red Book*.

In 1912, Jung published *The Psychology of the Unconscious: A Study of the Transformation and Symbolisms of the Libido*, later revised and titled *Symbols of Transformation* (1956/1970), the work that publicly signaled his break from Freud's psychological reductionism. One wonders whether Jung would have been able to manage without the support of his family life (especially that of his wife, Emma), the discipline of his work as a psychiatrist, and the sensitive attunement of Toni Wolff to his inner world. After all, Jung did not have an analyst, nor did he have a nonpathological model for the profound pull he felt to explore the depths of his own being.

Not so far away from Zürich, Wassily Kandinsky was in Munich working on (among other projects) a series of paintings of St. George and the Dragon, a popular story in Europe and parts of Russia. In an early sketch of this subject (1903–1904), Kandinsky shows St. George completely dwarfed by the dragon (Weiss 1995, Fig. 70). Studying his paintings as a series, as they were displayed on one of my visits to the Lenbachhaus in Munich, I noted that the series begins with a figurative St. George holding his lance and facing the dragon. Over the series of paintings, however, St. George and the dragon become less distinct as entities, and a new and more profoundly satisfying, deeper sense of inner form, emerges. This kind of nonregular harmony of form and color might be compared to the irregular placement of stones in a Zen garden, which create a profoundly satisfying sense of dynamic inner harmony. I could not help but see Kandinsky's St. George and the Dragon series as representing the process of coming to terms with his fear of the unconscious, recognizing these contents as part of himself, not an enemy to be slain. This is a profoundly nonrational, nonconceptual, nonabstract—but deeply embodied—approach. In contemporary psychoanalytic language, one might say that the series illustrates the withdrawal of a projection. However, “withdrawal of a projection” leaves out an essential psychological fact: that is, an entirely new and ineffable form emerges within one's very being, something Kandinsky had a unique capacity to convey so that the forms and colors speak to us in a way that concepts cannot.

In 1911, Kandinsky was also writing *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, which was published in 1912 in German under the title, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*. In contrast to his youthful repudiation of psychology, Kandinsky devoted a chapter to “The Psychological Working of Colour” (1914/1977, 23–26), in which he explored emotional reactions to color, as well as the experience of synesthesias. Kandinsky felt that beyond the sensory impressions made by color: “. . . to a more sensitive soul the effect of colours is deeper and intensely moving. . . They produce a corresponding spiritual vibration, . . .” (24). “The artist is the hand which plays one key or the other, to cause vibrations in the soul” (25). In a chapter on “The Language of Form and Colour,” Kandinsky explores pairs of antithetical colors and the psychological effect of their direction of movement, using a series of diagrams. The final diagram of the chapter is entitled, “The antitheses as a circle between two poles, i.e., the life of colours between birth and death” (43). This is a direct challenge to logical positivism.

In 1914, just before the outbreak of war, when he had to flee from Germany to Russia, Kandinsky wrote:

At a certain time what is inevitable ripens, i.e., the creative spirit makes contact with the soul, later with other souls, and awakens a yearning, an inner urge. . . .
 When the conditions necessary for the maturation of a certain form are met, the yearning, the inner urge, the force is strengthened so that it can create a new value in the human spirit that consciously or unconsciously begins to live in man. . . .
 Behind matter, within matter, the creative spirit is hidden. . . .

The veiling of the spirit in matter is often so thick that, generally, only a few people can see through it to the spirit. . . . There are whole epochs that deny the spirit, . . . So it was during the nineteenth century and so it is for the most part today. (1914/1974, 147)

Later in the same essay Kandinsky declared, "*The world sounds. It is a cosmos of spiritually effective beings. Even dead matter is living spirit*" (1914/1974, 173, italics in original). Kandinsky was very sensitive to sound and listened to an inner sound or vibration when he painted. He also painted forms inspired by music, including *Impression III (Concert)* (1911), *Lyrical* (1911), and *Three Sounds* (1926). The Guggenheim exhibit features a number of paintings and drawings that emphasize a beautiful and harmoniously balanced inner cosmology, including *Several Circles* (1926).⁶ Still other works reflect an inner universe in conflict, fragmented, out of harmony, such as *Overcast* (1917) and *In Gray* (1919).

One cannot help but wonder what effect these two simultaneous exhibits will have on those who view them. Both potently evoke the need for soul and spirit in the lives of human beings, and they come at a time when the fragility of life cannot be ignored and the limits of technology to meet nonmaterialistic human needs has become apparent to many. Might we be inspired to make more space in our lives for the simple human endeavors that arise from Kandinsky's "inner sound" and Jung's conscious encounter with his own depths? By this, I do not mean that we should consider emulating either Kandinsky or Jung in a concrete way. Rather, we each have our own ways, our own "inner necessity." As Jung explained,

My method of treatment does not consist of causing my patients to indulge in strange fantasies for the purpose of changing their personality, and other nonsense of that kind. I merely put it on record that there are certain cases where such a development occurs, not because I force anyone to it, but because it springs from inner necessity. . . . Fantasies are no substitute for living; they are the fruits of the spirit which fall to him who pays his tribute to life. (1928/1972, CW 7, ¶369)

ENDNOTES

1. A different exhibit including the original Red Book will be at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC beginning in June 2010.
2. A slide show of the exhibit, as of this writing, is available on the Rubin website at this link: <http://www.rmanyc.org/nav/exhibitions>.
3. The Philemon Foundation (<https://philemonfoundation.org/>), a nonprofit based in the United States, was founded and headed by Stephen Martin until 2010, when Nancy Furlotti and Judith Harris became co-presidents. Sonu Shamdasani, who works in London, is the general editor of the ambitious project of publishing Jung's many heretofore unpublished works, as well as producing a new translation of the *Collected Works*. Philemon has supported the editing of the Jung-White letters by Ann Lammers, Jung's lectures on children's dreams, as well as *The Red Book*. Current projects include the editing, translation, and publications of Jung's ETH (Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule, Swiss Federal Institute of Technology) lectures as well as the correspondence between Jung and first-generation analyst James Kirsch.

4. Kandinsky's first name is often spelled "Vasily," and such is the case in the Guggenheim catalog.
5. Later, he referred to the importance of his ethnographic research in the remote Vologda region in 1899 as having made a most powerful impression on him (Weiss 1995, xiii).
6. *Several Circles* is the frontispiece of this article and may also be viewed on the Guggenheim online collections at this link: <http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/collections/collection-online/>.

NOTE

References to *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung* are cited in the text as CW, volume number, and paragraph number. *The Collected Works* are published in English by Routledge (UK) and Princeton University Press (USA).

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ABSTRACT

The first public exhibit of C. G. Jung's *The Red Book*, at the Rubin Museum in Manhattan, is described and linked to the Guggenheim's simultaneous retrospective of the work of

Wassily Kandinsky. The author draws parallels and contrasts between the work of these two twentieth-century geniuses, one working from a scientific perspective and the other from an artistic perspective. In particular, each was dedicated to a relationship to an inner world of true imagination, one which emerges from a dedicated process of self-discovery. Each attempted to find a way to restore soul and spirit during a time when the Zeitgeist emphasized scientific rationalism in a one-sided way to the expense of human values and a harmonious relationship with the natural world.

KEY WORDS

abstract painting, active imagination, color, Guggenheim, C. G. Jung, Lenbachhaus, Wassily Kandinsky, logical positivism, mandala, Philemon Foundation, projection, Sonu Shamdasani, St. George and the Dragon, *The Red Book*, Rubin Museum, waking visions