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Kandinsky and "Old Russia": An Ethnographic Exploration

His face is pale, but on the cheeks are two red spots. Likewise red are the lips. He has a great drum hung 'round and drums...
KANDINSKY, KLANGE, 1913

PEG WEISS

In 1889 WASSILY KANDINSKY was elected to membership in the Russian Imperial Society of Friends of Natural History, Anthropology and Ethnography. He would successfully carry out an ethnographical investigation at the behest of the society, and the same year the results of his work would be published as a nine-page article in the third issue of a new journal, Ethnographic Review, under the title "From Materials on the Ethnography of the Sysol- and Vechegda-Zyrians—the National Deities (according to Contemporary Beliefs)." During the same period, another ethnographic essay by the young scholar, this one on Russian peasant law within the district of Moscow, would be selected for inclusion in a series of special ethnographic studies published by the imperial society.

The first of these ethnographic essays was a summary of the research and interviews he had conducted during an ambitious trip into the still-remote regions of Vologda province in the summer of 1889. Then a 23-year-old student at the University of Moscow, Kandinsky had been selected for this challenging assignment by the imperial society out of a field of many competitors.

Should this zealous pursuit of ethnological concerns by the man who would later be recognized as the "father of abstract painting" seem surprising, we have only to turn to his 1913 memoir, "Rückblick," for confirmation of an interest that has, however, scarcely been mentioned in the voluminous literature on the artist. In several paragraphs devoted to an account of his university studies, Kandinsky recalled that he had studied, among other things, "ethnography (from which I initially promised myself the soul of the people)," seeming to imply that in ethnography he had hoped to discover the soul of the people.

In any case, his trip to the Vologda region provided him with an experience that he ranked among the most powerful of his student...
days, comparing it to the impression on him of his first sight of paintings by Monet and Rembrandt and his experience of a production of Wagner's Lohengrin. "My assignment," he wrote, "was double: to study peasant criminal law among the Russian citizenry (to discover the principles of primitive law), and to collect the remnants of pagan religion among the fishermen and hunters of the slowly disappearing Zyrians."5

In a passage as moving and poetic as any in the memoir, Kandinsky recalled that he had set out for Vologda province by train with a feeling that he was traveling "on another planet." At the last station he changed to a steamer and spent several days traveling along the Su­chona River ("deeply submerged in itself"), later making his way by primitive coach "through unending forests, between brightly hued hills." He traveled quite alone, which, he reported, was good for meditation and for "immersing myself in the environment. . . . Days it was often burning hot, nights frosty." But it was the Zyr­yan people themselves who captivated him with their "contrasting appearance"—now gray or yellow-gray from head to toe, then again appearing with "white faces, red-painted cheeks and black hair," clad in colorfully variegated costumes "like brightly-colored living pictures on two legs." The great two-storied wooden houses decked with carving likewise captured his attention.

In these "wonder houses" (Wunderhäusern) in which every surface was brightly painted, the walls were hung with folk pictures—perhaps one "like a painted folksong"—and the traditional "holy corner" filled with icons shimmered with its eternal light. Here Kandinsky found himself immersed in an environment marvelously rich in color and symbol, moving him to exclaim that it seemed as if he had actually crossed a threshold and entered into a painting in which he could move and walk about. In the Russian version of his memoir, Kan­dinsky likened this moment to "a miracle."6 It was indeed an experience that would have long-lasting reverberations, not only in his art but in his whole attitude toward the arts.7

There is still more information to be gleaned from Kandinsky's memoir pertaining directly to his interest in ethnography. In the Russian edition he added to his comment on the "frosty nights" an acknowledgment to a friend, a "noble hermit," who had helped him procure suitably warm Zyr­yan clothing for the trip. This was the scientist N. A. Ivaninsky, whom Kandinsky described as a botanist, zoologist, and "author of serious ethnographic studies."8

We also learn from the pages of "Rückblicke" that Kandinsky had personal reasons for being interested in ethnographic studies. Al­though he himself had been born in Moscow, his family comprised an interesting mix of Russian ethnic nationalities. Relatives on his mother's side stemmed from the German Baltic region, but his father had been born in Kyakhta, a city on what is now the border between Russia and Mongolia, southeast of Lake Baikal. His father's ancestors had moved to east Siberia, having been banished from "west Siberia" for "political reasons." This passage suggests the possibility that Kan­dinsky's trip into the eastern fringes of the Vologda area, bordering on


2. Wassily Kandinsky, "O nakazanijakh po resenijam volostnych sudov Moskovskoj Gubernii" (On the punishments [meted out] in accordance with the decisions of the district courts of the province of Moscow), Trudy Etnograficheskogo Otdela Imperatoriatskogo Obshchestva Ljubitelej Estestvoznaniya, Antropologii i Etnografii (Works of the ethnographic section of the imperial society of friends of the natural sciences, anthropology and ethnography), vol. 9 (Moscow, 1889), pp. 13-19. For further information on Kandinsky's activities and hitherto unknown publications as a young ethnographer, see Peg Weiss, "Kandinsky at the Source: A Note on the Artist as Ethnographer," in Festschrift for Kenneth C. Lindsay (1986, in progress), in which a new date is also established for the beginning of Kandinsky's association with the society.

3. N. Kandinsky, Kandinsky, p. 29.

4. Wassily Kandinsky, "Rückblicke," in Kandinsky, 1902-1915 (Berlin: Der Sturm, 1971), p. VIII. See also Kenneth Lindsay and Peter Verga, eds., Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art, 2 vols. (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1982), in which this work is translated as "Reminis­cences." I have used here my own translations unless otherwise indicated, except when reference is made to the 1918 Russian edition of the memoir, in which I have relied entirely and gratefully on Lindsay and Vergo.

5. Kandinsky, "Rückblicke," p. XI.


the Urals Mountains and the beginning of western Siberia, was prompted by an urge to seek his identity in his ethnic heritage, to seek in the “soul of the people” his own roots.9

According to Nina Kandinsky’s memoir, Kandinsky not only had Mongolian blood in his veins but often said with some pride that one of his great-grandmothers was a Mongolian princess.10 The peoples of the Lake Baikal area, the Buriats, were a Mongolic race whose traditions and heritage had already attracted the intense interest of several generations of travelers and ethnologists, so that, by the end of the nineteenth century, a substantial body of literature on the Buriats was available to the student of ethnology.

These few extracts from “Rückblicke” reveal a great deal about Kandinsky’s interest in ethnography and its lasting effect on him. Indeed, that these memories were recorded with such immediacy and enthusiasm a quarter of a century after the fact lends substance to Wordsworth’s insight that “the child is father of the man” and suggests that we art historians have been negligent in ignoring this perhaps most formative period of the artist’s life experience. It has been little remarked in the literature on Kandinsky beyond a nodding reference here and there to his so-called Russian paintings. No attempt has been made to read his iconography in terms of his experience as a professionally trained ethnographer. In fact, neither of his 1889 articles has been published in English. This is all the more surprising in that, contrary to published reports, these essays are so dense with information and references that only a study far beyond the scope of this brief essay could begin to do justice to them. I will consider here only certain ramifications of Kandinsky’s article on the Zyrians, today called the Komi, and even so only a suggestion of the wealth and complexity of the issues raised can be offered here. Indeed, those early experiences reverberated in his work to the very end.11

Although art historians have overlooked this rich source for Kandinsky’s later iconographic and aesthetic development, ethnographers have not been so remiss. Kandinsky’s essay was in fact cited by the great Finnish sociologist and ethnologist Uno Holmberg in his monumental work Finno-Ugric, Siberien, volume four of The Mythology of All Races. Holmberg not only footnoted Kandinsky’s essay but also referenced it in his extensive bibliography. Holmberg’s work itself is still quoted and cited as authoritative by ethnologists around the world. The Hungarian folklorist D. R. Fokos-Fuchs also cited Kandinsky’s work in his 1911 report of a student field trip among the Zyrians.12 Thus Kandinsky’s observations on the Zyrians have passed into the ethnographic literature.13

Before turning to Kandinsky’s publication itself, let us first recall some other events in his life, and the obvious evidence presented in some of his works, that relate to his ethnographic interest. There are, first of all, those “Russian paintings.” Perhaps the most frequently reproduced and exhibited is the monumental Motley Life of 1907 (fig. 1), to which we shall return.
Equally brilliant in coloring and conception are Song of the Volga (1906) and Riding Couple. Others of importance include Arrival of the Merchants (1905), Early Hour (1907), and Sunday Old Russia (1904).

There were also tempera works on cardboard (such as the early Russian Beauty in a Landscape), as well as a number of watercolors and sketches, which have obviously Russian themes. But the medium that seems most frequently to have stirred his ethnic memories was that of the woodcut, in which time and again Russian costumes, Russian walled cities with gleaming cupolas, Russian churches, Russian boats, and Russian heroes abound. The graphic work that perhaps most nearly evokes the impression of his trip along the “serene and deeply-submerged-in-itself” Suchona River, bordered by its “wonder houses,” is Golden Sail of 1903 (fig. 2). Here the wooden structures decorated with carving and brightly painted are set off against a dark ground that evokes the surrounding primeval forests of the ancient Zyrians.

There are other works of Kandinsky’s Munich period with an ethnic flavor, namely, those inspired by his 1904 trip with Gabriele Münter to Tunis, such as Oriental and Amros I (Cemetery), both of 1909. But there are also later works, such as the great Picture with Archer of 1909 and Blue Mountain, which strike a strong ethnic note. Furthermore, in 1902 Kandinsky had personally invited the Finnish painter Axel Gallen-Kallela to exhibit with his Phalanx society. At the time, Gallen-Kallela was internationally known as the illustrator of the Finnish folk saga The Kalevala, an epic summarizing the mythology of the Finnic peoples, the Suomi and Karelians, who were, in fact, related to the Zyrians—all of them members of the broader linguistic category known as the Finno-Ugric.  

We also know that Kandinsky was an avid collector of folk art and that he not only delighted in the Bavarian folk art of Hinterglasmalerei but imitated it from about 1910 on, frequently casting the subject matter in Russian terms, as for example in St. Vladimir of 1911 (fig. 3).

But of course the most telling demonstration of Kandinsky’s deep ethnographic interest was his inclusion of ethnic artifacts in the ground-breaking and influential Blue Rider almanac of 1912. A wide variety of ethnic objects was illustrated in the almanac, most having to do with themes of healing and salvation: Bavarian “miracle” paintings, a Ceylonese dance mask of the demon of disease, an Easter Island...

Figure 3. Kandinsky, St. Vladimir, 1911, glass painting, 29 x 25.6 cm. Courtesy, Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich.

In preparation for his ethnographic expedition Kandinsky marked a map of the area he was to visit (fig. 4), indicating that his route lay from Moscow to Vologda, near the fortieth meridian, and then east and north almost to the Urals. This corresponds roughly to what is today a territory combining parts of the Vologda and Arkhangelsk Oblasts together with the Komi Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, by itself a vast and still sparsely populated area of over 600,000 square miles, largely covered by dense taiga forest, as it was in Kandinsky’s day, stretching west to the crest of the Ural Mountains and north to the tundra of the Arctic circle. The major rivers, the Suchona, the Pechora, the Vychegda, and the Sysola, have been important transportation routes since the area was first settled in the tenth century. The central city of Syktyvkar, in Kandinsky’s day known as Ust’-Sysol’sk, standing at the confluence of the Sysola and the Vychegda, was and is an important center of trade especially noted for its fairs. Owing to the density of the forests rich in game (especially squirrel and arctic fox) and the plentiful rivers, the native Zyrians (Komi) were hunters and fishermen.
Kandinsky’s ethnographic essay consists of three main elements: a critique of the established church in its relation to the Zyrians; a review of some of the major Zyrian “deities” and animating “spirits”; and an extended discussion of the Zyrian concept of ort, a palpable “double” or “shadow.” He had chosen this investigation of pagan beliefs, he wrote, “in view of the chaos of contemporary religious concepts.”

Kandinsky’s critique of the church for its role in the “reckless” and almost total eradication of ancient Zyrian beliefs and customs is sharp. He particularly notes that it was the missionary zeal of St. Stephen of Perm that had forced the Zyrian conversion and caused the utter destruction of another regional tribe, the Chuds (who, it was said, to avoid the Bishop’s persecution, had fled into the forests where they buried themselves and their belongings). As a result, the Zyrians had been taught to refer to their ancestors by the derogatory Russian term “poganye,” a word suggesting something unclean because of its etymological association with the word poganke, a poisonous mushroom.

Among the various deities and legendary figures about whom Kandinsky sought information was the so-called Slata Baba or “golden woman” mentioned by the sixteenth-century Austrian diplomat and gadabout Baron Sigmund von Herberstein, whose famous chronicle

16. As his source for information on St. Stephen, Kandinsky refers to the Life of St. Stephen, Bishop of Perm by Epiphanius the Wise, famous for his literary style of “word weaving.” St. Stephen of Perm (1349–96) destroyed the arbors of the spirits and the idol sheds of the heathen Zyrians, but he also learned their language and created their alphabet. Perhaps most famous of the deeds related by Epiphanius was the bishop’s encounter on the shore of the Vychegda River with the powerful Zyrian sorcerer Pam. See G. P. Fedotov, The Russian Religious Mind, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966), vol. 2, pp. 230–45.
the young scholar had evidently consulted. Another was called *Iomala*, about whom only notions of evil or anger remained; and another, *Sverla*, who, according to one old man, was a principal deity of the ancient Chuds, to whom this informant ascribed an animistic religion. 19 Two other creatures who once animated the Zyrian world also survived only in fragments: the *lesh-mort* or "forest man," and *Poludnitsa*, a "midday goddess" thought to protect the rye (in olden times, according to Kandinsky, no Zyrian would harvest the rye before St. Elias Day for fear of reprisal from her). 18 In his diary Kandinsky apparently recorded yet another deity, *vorna*, a water spirit reputed to steal horses and children. 19

The *domnovi*, however, a house spirit imagined as a benevolent though sometimes mischievous protector of hearth and home, was still an active participant in Zyrian life. Associated with the hearth, the Zyrian *domnovi*, Kandinsky reports, refuses to move into a new house until the hearth is ready. Even then, no move to a new dwelling is made without some sacrifice, for fear of disturbing the ancestors and thus provoking the *domnovi* to mischief, even to the extent of causing a death in the family.

As to natural phenomena such as the heavenly bodies, constellations, winds, and fire, Kandinsky found that somewhat stronger superstitions and remnants of pagan beliefs survived. The Zyrians still imagined the stars as "nailed" to the sky and the sun and moon as wanderers (a belief shared by the neighboring Samoyeds, who called the North Star the "nail of the sky"). 20 Fearing to incur the sun’s wrath, no one dared carry ice uncovered before St. Elias Day lest hail be sent in revenge, and old women still held "conversations with the wind." Various taboos against spitting into it or stomping it out with the feet, and the use of fire for purification) recalled the pagan veneration of fire. 21

Kandinsky devotes most of his commentary to a consideration of remnants of the Zyrian’s ancestor cult, especially as seen in their persistent although rather vague conceptions concerning an elusive being known as *ort*. 22 In so doing, his main concern is to demonstrate that the notion of *ort* is not to be misconstrued as “spirit” in the Christian sense of that term. Indeed, he sharply criticizes two scholars who had translated the Zyrian term "ort" by the Russian word “dukh” (meaning spirit in the intellectual Christian sense). Pointing out that all of the Zyrian forest spirits and water sprites are conceived of as corporeal, Kandinsky advances various testimony from his observations and interviews to show that *ort* was conceived of similarly.

Among the proofs of *ort*’s physical nature, Kandinsky reports, is its appearance before death, when it is said sometimes to pinch the dying person so severely as to inflict blue spots. More often the *ort* visits the dying person’s relatives both before and for forty days after death, walking about in much the same form as the person of whom it is the "double." Sometimes a towel is hung outside the home where a death is said to notice the towel. 23 In the case of a dead "sorcerer" (*kuldan*), whose ability to transcend earthly bonds is

17. See Holmberg, *Finnó-Ugric*, p. 237 and esp. pp. 260–61. Although Kandinsky found no traces of Herberstein’s “golden woman,” she was probably a goddess of childbirth venerated by the Khants/Magis (Vogul and Ostyak) peoples who lived mostly, but not exclusively, on the eastern side of the Urals along the Ob river. See also Z. P. Sokolova, “The Representation of a Female Spirit from the Kazym River,” in *Dioszegi and Hoppál, Slavamánus in Sátoros*, p. 408.

18. *Lesk-mort* was probably Holmberg’s *vörna*, a forest spirit taller than the highest tree who rushes about like a whirlwind. Kandinsky’s love of color comes out in this discussion as he links Poludnitsa to the cornflower, known as “Poludnitsa-Blue” or “Eye of the Midday Goddess.” See Holmberg, *Finnó-Ugric*, pp. 181 and 247, where he again cites Kandinsky.

19. Kandinsky’s “vörna” might have been the forest spirit *vorsa*, described by Fokos-Fuchs as a giant as tall as a tree and having magic powers. See D. R. Fokos-Fuchs, “Eine Studienreise,” *dtmwvoi*, p. 236 and *Syrjänisches Wörterbuch* 1–II (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1959), p. 105. But since Kandinsky apparently identified this creature as a “water spirit,” his reference may actually have been to *vorsa*, described by Holmberg as a giant water spirit with a big round head, imagined as either clad in a green robe or naked, who causes tempests by throwing himself into the water. See Holmberg, *Finnó-Ugric*, pp. 197–98. For a discussion of the forest and water spirits of the Zyrians and their neighbors, see also Ivar Paulson, *Schutzgeister und Gottheiten des Wildes* (der jagdthiere und Fische) in *Nordensien*, Stockholm Studies in Comparative Religion, vol. 2 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1960), pp. 124–27.


especially suspect, Kandinsky reports that the Zyrians tie up or bind the body so that relatives will not be disturbed by his ort's nocturnal visits. It never occurs to anyone, Kandinsky observes, that the soul cannot be bound.

Such customs speak "loud and clear" Kandinsky says, against the exact identification of the ort with the dead person, not to mention with his "spirit" or "soul," about which no care is taken whatsoever. Interestingly enough, the young ethnographer calls upon that classic anthropologist and founder of the discipline Herbert Spencer to demonstrate that other primitive peoples may be "more advanced" than the Zyrians in respect to their understanding of the body-soul dichotomy. He cites a section from Spencer's multivolumed The Principles of Sociology, first published in 1876, dealing with the Indian Bhils, who, it was said, left food at the grave for the dead person and at the threshold of his house for his "spirit" (dukh).24 As to where the ort comes from and where it goes after death, the Zyrians are mute. But, Kandinsky concludes, unquestionably the ort is not a spirit (in the sense of dukh, i.e., spirit, mind) and certainly not the dukh of ancestors. As we shall see, these musings on ort; the discussion of the precise meanings of dukh (which shares the root of the noun dukhovnom, the term Kandinsky would later use in the title of his treatise O dukhovnom v iskusstve (On the Spiritual in Art)); and the references to practices concerning the burial of the kuldun, the sorcerer or shaman, were to have important repercussions in Kandinsky's art and thought.25

O F PRIMARY CONCERN TO KANDINSKY in composing his notes for this remarkable essay was his interest in the phenomenon of dvoeverie (or "double faith"), that is, the side-by-side existence of both pagan and Christian belief systems sometimes inextricably intertwined. We have already seen that in the artist's memory, the moment of his "immersion" within a brightly painted decorated peasant house with its painted folk heroes and its "holy corner" was the apotheosis of his Vologda experience. Now, from the perspective of the ethnographic essay, one can imagine the overwhelming sense of presence in that room of the domovei, perhaps even an ort.26

Viewed with the artist's ethnographic background in mind, the "Russian paintings" take on new meaning. Motley Life, with its bright medley of figures and action, is a prime example (see fig. 1). Like Arrival of the Merchants, this painting presents a throng of people in old Russian costume converging on a town bordering a river. We need only recall that Ust'-Sysoyl'sk, the center of Kandinsky's activity as ethnographer, was at the confluence of two important rivers and that it was therefore famous for its fairs to recognize the setting. Clearly, both Christian and pagan imagery is present amid this teeming multiplicity of life. The whole composition is built on a series of contrapuntal contrasts: life and death, old and young, love and hate, peace and war, and so on.

Central to the composition is the figure of a long-bearded old man, a rucksack on his back, a staff in his hand. Is this the "old man" among 22. Although Kandinsky felt that this creature was a purely Zyrian phenomenon, not mentioned by other scholars among the related Permians and Votaks, Holmberg and others have shown that it was a rather widely spread belief, relating to the concept of the "double." See Holmberg, Finn-Ugric, who relates ort to the Cheremiss ort and Vogul ort; see also Károly Rédei, Syriânischen Lehnmôrurter, p. 95, n. 19, who also relates it to ort and ort.

23. Rédei, Syriânischen Lehnmôrurter, confuses ort with "spirit" (Geist) but cites Kandinsky's testimony on the "blue spots" almost word for word (though without reference). See Holmberg, Finn-Ugric, pp. 169-72, with respect to the Votak spirit Übyn. On the tort custom, see Gustav Ränk, Die heilige Hinterere im Hauskult der Völker Nordosteuropas und Nordasiens, Folklore Fellows Communications, no. 137 (Helsinki: Academy of Sciences of Finland, 1949), pp. 488ff.

24. See Herbert Spencer, The Principles of Sociology, originally published in London, 1876-96 (3 volumes). In the edition of 1882 (New York: D. Appleton, 1882, vol. 1), the exact citation appears on p. 171, whereas Kandinsky cited p. 172, possibly from another edition. Kandinsky seems to assume that the symbolic gesture of placing food at the grave for the body but at the threshold for the spirit implies a conception of separation of body and soul (or spirit) without an implication that the soul might be expected to "consume" the offering. See the unabridged version of the present essay in Traditions and Revivals: Source Studies in the History of Art, ed. Gabriel Weisberg and Laurinda Dixon (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, forthcoming).

25. Kandinsky's careful scrutiny of the usage of the word dukh (German Geist) and his rejection of it for the concept of a palpable "double" or shadow (which he describes as "relief-like") lend further weight to my discussion of his use of the term dukhovnom (as in O dukhovnom v iskusstve, translated by him into German as Über das Geistige in der Kunst) as a conscious choice to emphasize its meaning as spirit/mind rather than as having any association with a meaning range that might convey a sense of "spiritualism" or "spiritism." Cf. Weis, Kandinsky in Munich, pp. 139-41.
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27. Squirrel pelts are mentioned as a mainstay of the Zyrian economy in travel accounts as ancient as Herberstein’s chronicle (cited n. 36) and as recent as 1926.


29. As in Czaplicka, Aboriginal Siberia, p. 254, citing an 1895 work by M. N. Khangaloff.

Kandinsky’s Zyrian informants who carried within himself the recollections of the Zyrian people? For assuredly we are back in Ust’-Sysol’sk, in the midst of a fair by the Vychegda River. The squirrel in the tree, about to be done in by the archer below, is the “dead” giveaway, for the harvesting of squirrel pelts was then central to the region’s economy.

But the old man may have other connotations. His unrealistic green beard suggests an alliance with the supernatural and hence his possible identification as “old sorcerer.” He carries a stave that points to the central vertical axis of the painting, leading the eye upward to the pair engaged in a life-and-death struggle, and then on to the walled town (or monastery) with its church domes at upper center. Thus another counterpoint is set between upper and lower spheres, between pagan and Christian, an axis that turns about life and death.

An identification of the old man as old sorcerer is reinforced by the fact that among the Votiaks, another Finno-Ugric tribe with whose traditions Kandinsky was familiar, the “being” who instructs the shaman on supernatural matters is imagined in the form of an old man, and among the neighboring Cheremiss, the name for shaman or sorcerer is bart, or “old man.” Furthermore, the stave carried by the old man also suggests a reference to shamanic lore, for among several Siberian tribes the stave functions as the shaman’s symbolic “horse,” on which he rides to “other worlds” in the course of his duties.

If we recall that Motley Life was painted in 1907, when Kandinsky was living in Sevres, we should also recall that the artist was visited there by his father, who lived with him for some time. Since the elder Kandinsky would have been a source of Buriat lore, having lived near the Lake Baikal Buriat peoples much of his life, another interpretation of the old man is possible. The Balagask Buriats imagine the “owner of the whole earth,” a personage called Daban-Sagan-Khatun, as a benevolent old man. Then, too, it is primarily among the Buriats that the shamanic use of “horse staves” or “horse sticks” is common.

To return to the painting: immediately behind the old fellow, almost growing out of his back, is a tall tree—a pine, cedar, or fir, in any case symbolizing the home of the ancient pagan spirits. Dramatically opposing him, across that vertical axis, is the figure of an elaborately costumed mother and child, flanked by a child in prayerful attitude, an obvious reference to orthodoxy veneration of the Virgin and Child. Thus, horizontally across the central axis, we find yet another contrapuntal expression of dvoeverie. Examples of the pagan-Christian opposition can be found throughout the picture: the figure with stave, black beard, and tall black hat in the left center suggests a “black shaman,” opposing the orthodox monk figure immediately to the left; just above right center, smoke from a fire (recalling pagan veneration of fire) opposes the church tower of a Christian cemetery, and so on. A double meaning may in fact accrue to the mother-and-child image for, according to Fedotov, the cult of the Virgin (as Mother of God) was also allied with pagan veneration of “Rozhanitsy,” a goddess of childbirth (related doubtless also to the ancient myth of the “golden woman”). More observations could be made about this painting, but...
let these suffice to suggest that, indeed, this work has to do with the ramifications of dvoeverie. 

A somewhat later Munich work with ethnographic implications that include dvoeverie is Kandinsky's 1911 glass painting St. Vladimir (fig. 3). The work is an imitation of a Bavarian folk art known as "Hinterglasmalerei," and in this sense, then, it is in the form of an ethnic artifact. The Cyrillic inscription translates as "Holy Prince Vladimir," recalling Vladimir's secular life before his baptism in A.D. 989, when he received the name Basil (Wassily), which was also Kandinsky's Christian name. The saint's position as "founder" of the Russian church is clearly symbolized by the cupolaed church held aloft in his left hand. The ranks of the baptized, white faced and red checked (like Kandinsky's recollection of the Zyrians), stand below him. But to the left of the picture, below the saint's right arm, stands a forest of fir or pine trees, recalling the sacred groves of the heathens and the homes of their former deities. Vladimir's identification in Russian lore with the ancient cult of the sun can be recognized in the halo behind his head, which is also a sun, with sun streaks emanating from it. St. Vladimir, in fact, was also known in the Russian epic poems as Krastwe Solntse', "Ardent Sun" or "Radiant Sun." Kandinsky's interest in the cult of the sun and his awareness of the loss of cultural heritage brought by Christianization led him to create in this modern "icon" a symbol of dvoeverie.

But it is in Kandinsky's personal self-identification with the image of the Russian folk hero St. George that we see the real meaning for him of his ethnographic studies and his awareness of dvoeverie. St. George, whose image adorned the cover of the Blue Rider almanac, came to be the carrier of Kandinsky's message of aesthetic salvation and healing, a fundamental theme of the almanac itself and one that recurred in his work throughout his life. In Kandinsky's mind, St. George epitomized the message of many of the ethnic artifacts illustrates in the almanac, each in its own way expressing a shamanistic appeal to the gods for health and eternal life. The book itself was a metaphor for the social "healing" Kandinsky hoped the new aesthetic would bring. In fact, St. George, the ubiquitous Egori Khrabry (George the Brave, or Hero) of Russian epic poetry, although a Christian saint, was endowed with shamanic powers. As I have noted elsewhere, in Russia the saint's feast day on April 23 was also an important day in the agricultural calendar, celebrated with pagan rites as well as Christian ritual, and Kandinsky included in the almanac a Russian folk print from his own collection on this very theme, a typical example of dvoeverie.

As a student of ethnography at a time when the discipline was growing by leaps and bounds, particularly in Russia, where the lure of the mysterious Siberian tribes had been felt for centuries, Kandinsky would have been familiar with the literature on shamanism. He had obviously delved into the matter in his readings of Herberstein, Spencer, and Epiphanius (all referenced in his essay), and it can scarcely be doubted that he would have been aware of the "Russian Religious Mind" (vol. 2, pp. 349-62).
be doubted that he had read at least some of the burgeoning literature on the subject published in Russia and Germany from the middle of the century onward.35

When Kandinsky consulted Baron von Herberstein’s famous account of his travels in Russia in the early sixteenth century, published as Rerum Moscoviticarum commentarii, perhaps he had access to the Basel edition of 1556. He would have found the first full-page woodcut illustration in the book devoted to a seated portrait of the Russian Tsar Vasily III (resplendent in fur-trimmed robe and cap). He would also have noticed the inset heraldic emblem depicting St. George and the dragon (fig. 5). It is, at any rate, a warrior astride a horse, directing his lance downward onto the throat of a vanquished dragon. But this saint has no Christian paraphernalia; indeed, he is short haired and quite naked—a pagan hero, Egori the Brave, carrying out the raw act that would lead to his canonization. As Egori the Brave was to Vasily III, so St. George and the dragon would become to “Vasily” Kandinsky. This could well represent the origin of an identification that would inspire the artist until the end of his life.

Other woodcuts in this edition suggest the original inspiration for later Kandinsky motifs. For example, one large woodcut illustrates the dress of Russian warriors, or streltsy. Three warriors sit astride their fine horses. One raises his bow and arrow, turning to aim backward over the horse’s rump (fig. 6).36 Kandinsky recalled this marksman in an early tempera called Russian Knight, 1902, and in Picture with Archer, 1909.

THE SHAMAN ARTIST

For Kandinsky the step from identification with the role of St. George to assuming the role of shaman was easy enough: the Siberian shaman was also a “rider,” whose calling was to heal. Indeed the shaman role may well have been the prior one in Kandinsky’s experience.37

The role of the shaman in Russia’s primitive tribes both east and west of the Urals was already well documented and understood by both European and Russian ethnologists by the 1880s. The term shaman is derived from an Evenk word, saman, which has been shown to have the etymological root of the Tunguso-Manchurian verb sa, “to know.”38 The shaman then was the all-knowing who assumed the role of intercessor between humankind and the supernatural powers. Through his offices, physical and psychological ills could be healed, social problems of the clan solved, the future foretold, good hunting assured, and the lost found.39

The shaman—who had to be a person peculiarly predisposed to his calling—achieved his communication with the heavenly powers by leaving his body and journeying to other worlds (of which most tribes imagined there were several). He made this journey by means of his drum, which during his trance became his horse. On this magic horse he could fly above the treetops and mountains or descend to the
underworld if need be. Among some tribes, notably the Buriats of the Lake Baikal area, he rode to his destination upon his horse stick.

Both the drum and the horse stick would have had special meaning for Kandinsky. For the drum provided a kind of "canvas" upon which the shaman drew pictograms of the "upper" and "lower" worlds and the creatures in those spheres who operated as his helpers (fig. 7). And the horse stick was an actual "hobbyhorse" cut from a birch tree (the birch being widely considered a sacred tree from west of the Urals to east Siberia). The upper end was sometimes crudely carved to suggest the knee joint, and the lower end might be carved to suggest the hoof. 41

We have only to turn to Kandinsky's memoir, "Rückblicke," to see how near was this shamanistic "hobbyhorse" to him. In the opening sentences he recalled that, like all children, he had loved "to ride." He particularly recalled how his family's coachman used to carve for him just such a "horse" from the branch of a tree.

Among Kandinsky's personal collection of folk art there was a wooden "hobbyhorse"—not of the "stick" variety but rather of the representational, rocking type—which seems to have had, as rider, a sorcerer or shaman (fig. 8). 42 The little figure was a bearded old man, clad in a long robe and riding a spotted (piebald) horse; he wore a tall, pointed hat. It seems that, odd as such a "toy" might be, this rider in fact represented a sorcerer or shaman. A similar shaman image in a tall, pointed cap figures in Kandinsky's painting Storm Bell, probably painted around the time of Motley Life. The piebald horse was particularly prized among the shamanistic tribes of Siberia, and we should note that Kandinsky also recalled in his memoir that the sight of such a horse in Munich had called up memories of his Russian past.

But there is more that recalls shamanism in "Rückblicke." In speaking of the creative experience Kandinsky echoed the sense of "transport," the image of "riding" and "reining in" or "bridling" his inner resources in much the same language ethnographers have used to describe the shamanic experience. Expanding on the image of riding, Kandinsky writes: "The horse carries the rider with power and speed. The rider, however, guides the horse. Talent carries the artist to great heights with power and speed. The artist, however, guides his talent." He continues in the Russian edition: "The artist is perhaps in a position albeit only partially and by chance—to summon up within himself these states of inspiration by artificial means. Moreover, he can qualify the nature of those states which arise within him of their own volition. All the experience and knowledge that relate to this area are but one of the elements of consciousness." 43

These "confessions" parallel quite an astonishing degree the reports of ethnographers on the special psychological traits of Siberian shamans and their trance experiences. Shamans were almost universally marked by a special degree of sensitivity, often expressed in nervousness, excitability (sometimes to the point of hysteria), and innate creativity. For all that, they were required to keep themselves in check, to "rein in" their talent as it were, and to control their capacity to achieve various states of trance. Most authorities agree that the sha-
that shamanism is not to be confused with what is commonly known as "spiritism" or "occult," in which a key concept is "possession." The shaman plays a distinctly social role, and it is he (or she) who "possesses" and controls the shamanic ritual and his or her own part in it. See V. Voigt, "Shamanism in North Eurasia as a Scope of Ethnology," in Diöszegi and Hoppál, *Shamanism in Siberia,* pp. 62–64; L. Krader, "Shamanism: Theory and History in Buryat Society," *ibid.,* pp. 88–90; Eliade, *Shamanism,* p. 91; and Hultkrantz, *Aspects of Shamanism,* pp. 44–47.

For the shaman, too, the creative act is a "transport"—in trance he imagines that he leaves his body and is transported to other realms where he "sees" figures and images of all kinds; on his return, he reports what he has seen. As he drums and chants the tale of his incredible journey—for it has not been without struggle and hair-raising adventure—the drum becomes his vehicle, as the canvas or woodblock becomes the artist's vehicle, a concept Kandinsky tried to convey in naming his book of poems and woodcuts *Klänge,* "resonances." Repeatedly the shamanic experience is compared to a kind of "rebirth" or to a creation of "worlds," an analogy Kandinsky would apply to art. 46

It appears that with the passage of time Kandinsky's self-identification with the role of the shaman grew ever deeper. Not only do the signs and symbols of shamanic imagery appear in his works, but his writings, always visionary in tone, take on more shamanistic imagery as well. A striking example of this is his 1935 essay "Empty Canvas, etc." 47

In his 1892 treatise on shamanism (published, as we have seen, by the same society that in 1889 had elected Kandinsky to membership), Mikhailovskii included a long extract that he had taken from accounts recorded and published by the German ethnologist Wilhelm Radloff in 1884 (a work that was doubtless accessible to Kandinsky, too). The documentation concerns the shamanizing ritual of an Altaian shaman attending sacrificial rites to the celestial deity Bai-Yulgen. Before undertaking his precarious journey into other worlds, the shaman must "enliven" or "animate" his drum. He does so by solemnly summoning his helping spirits. Drumming and chanting, taking on the roles of the spirits as they appear, he gathers them into his drum. As each one appears it calls, "Here am I!! As for example:

*You who ride amongst the thunder
Who playfully with lightning comes*  
*Autumn cloud great with thunder*  
*Vernal cloud rich with lightning...*  
*Come...*
After each new appeal, the spirit helper arrives with the call, “Here am I.”

Kandinsky begins his essay with an address to his “empty” canvas: he says it is only apparently empty and silent; but in actuality it is “full of tensions with a thousand soft voices, expectant.” As each of the artist’s elemental forms appears on the canvas, it announces “me voilà,” “here am I.” “Each line says ‘Here am I.’” “Black circle—distant thunder, a world for itself that seems to concern itself about nothing . . . . ‘Here am I.’” All these voices come together in the total painting as a chorus: “HERE AM I.” What “happens” in the painting shouldn’t happen on the surface of the canvas but “somewhere” in “illusory” space. In this way, the artist concludes, truth is born out of untruth (as indeed the shaman often performs a miraculous deed through an apparent ruse). This truth, says Kandinsky, is called “HERE AM I.”

Almost universal across greater Siberia is the imagery of the cosmic tree (the sacred birch or sacred fir or pine), the ladder or ladder tree (by which the shaman ascends to the celestial sphere), the sacred path (river or road), and signs of the heavenly bodies (including moon, sun, the North Star, Venus, and the constellations), as well as a host of animal and bird spirits (which vary from place to place). Some of these images are physically present at the shaman rite. The cosmic tree, for example, is represented by the tree itself, sometimes cut whole and set up in the tent or yurt; sometimes steps are cut into it to form the ascensional ladder.

We also find these elements represented on the surface of the shaman’s drum. As Mircea Eliade remarks, the drum “harbors a large number of ascensional symbols.” The surface of the Teleut drum shown in figure 7 is divided into upper and lower spheres, corresponding to the celestial and nether worlds, which are separated by a zigzag line (the sacred path), also seen around the border of the upper half. Within are depictions of the sun and moon, the North Star, Venus, and the constellations, as well as a host of animal and bird spirits (which vary from place to place). Some of these images are physically present at the shaman rite. The cosmic tree, for example, is represented by the tree itself, sometimes cut whole and set up in the tent or yurt; sometimes steps are cut into it to form the ascensional ladder.

In the Russian edition of his memoir, Kandinsky recalled, “Once, in the throes of typhoid fever, I saw with
great clarity an entire picture, which, however, somehow dissipated itself within me when I recovered. Over a number of years, at various intervals, I painted *The Arrival of the Merchants*, then *Motley Life*; finally, after many years, I succeeded in expressing in *Composition 2* the very essence of that delirious vision.” As I have suggested elsewhere, this is clear indication of an iconographic relation between these three pictures. Like *Arrival of the Merchants* and *Motley Life*, *Composition 2* (see fig. 9) is crowded with figures and goings on. It has been described as a representation of the apocalyptic Deluge. 53 But might this work, again, be a testimony to Kandinsky’s interest in dvoeverie? Might the giant figure in the foreground be the Zyrian waaxa, the water spirit who is imagined as clad in a green robe? It is said that when he throws himself from the shore into the water, a tempest arises. 54 Or again, might this be a shaman figure in trance, with his spirit helpers flying on horseback above his head, ascending the “cosmic tree”? On the other hand, we seem to find the “old man” of *Motley Life* prone before a sacred tree in the upper right: a reference to the pagan custom of shaman burial in the sacred grove? Do the kneeling figures before him drum? To the left of the “cosmic tree” or pillar we see a figure in yellow standing in a boat. If we are dealing with a tempest brought on by waaxa, then perhaps here we have also to do with Numi-Torum, the principal god of the Voguls (neighbors of the Zyrians) who controlled all natural phenomena. His son, Yanykh-Torum, takes the form of a man, but it is said that “from the splendour of his raiment he shines like gold.” It is he who descends to earth to respond to mortal appeals concerning atmospheric conditions. 55 Is that then Yanykh-Torum in the boat? Finally, both Finno-Ugric and Buriat legends concerning a “great flood” have been documented in the literature. 56 Perhaps here we have to do with Kandinsky’s most complex statement on the phenomenon of dvoeverie.

A large watercolor entitled *In the Circle* (1911) with “pictographic” inclusions is particularly suggestive of the kind of pictographic elements on shaman drums. Suggestions of horses, ladders, and zigzag “paths” float about within a clearly circular “drum” form. Indeed, it is scarcely necessary to point out again the association in Kandinsky’s mind between the horse and the circle. The shaman’s drum is his horse, and for Kandinsky the representational horse became the circle, a round form closely analogous to that of the drum with which the shaman “shamanizes.”

As I have suggested, shamanic imagery proliferates in Kandinsky’s late work as well. In *The Arrow* (1943) the “skeletonized” figures, the arrow, the floating “drum” and “drumstick” (on the right shoulder of
the right-hand “skeleton”) also suggest shamanic imagery. Figure blanche (1943) suggests a white shaman with his paraphernalia: an oval-shaped drum, a triangular “mask,” various pendants common to the shaman’s coat, feathered ornaments, and a boat (sometimes the shaman must forsake his horse for a boat). Certainly On White (1923), which must be considered part of the same series that includes In the Black Square and Black Accompaniment, seems to refer to shamanic lore in several of its figures: the black form streaking from lower right to upper left (toward heaven) is in the shape of the classic shamanic “horse stick,” with a “horse-head” top and a “bent knee” midway. Kandinsky’s hooked-curve symbol, upper left, to suggest horse and rider is presented threefold. The “cosmic mountain,” “bird spirit,” and cloud forms all attest to the shaman’s flight to other worlds, and the kidney-shaped amulets of the shaman’s coat can also be seen. The St. George figures of In the Black Square and Black Accompaniment may now be seen in this ethnographic light as fulfilling a shamanic role as well.

In the shamanic literature we learn of the “black” and “white” shamans of the Buriats (the white associated with benevolent actions, the black, with evil), and we also find that in some shamanic rituals, the shaman is mysteriously endowed with the ability to speak strange tongues that sound like nonsense words. We also read that in some shamanic rituals, the dancer in white appears as a white shaman; the voice crying out “Kalasimunafakola!” may represent the shaman’s voice; and the “black man” who appears on stage opposite a shamanist symbol, upper left, to suggest horse and rider is presented threefold. The “cosmic mountain,” “bird spirit,” and cloud forms all attest to the shaman’s flight to other worlds, and the kidney-shaped amulets of the shaman’s coat can also be seen. The St. George figures of In the Black Square and Black Accompaniment may now be seen in this ethnographic light as fulfilling a shamanic role as well.

As Kandinsky felt his life coming to its close, his paintings took a more somber turn. Ribbon with Squares sets its figures out on some cosmic plane like nothing so much as a shamanic “icon.” To the left is the head of the iron eagle who bore the shaman, below him the eternal snake (whose home, in Buriat lore, lies at the root of the cosmic tree in a lake of


Figure 10. Kandinsky, Tempered Elan, 1944, oil on cardboard, 42 x 58 cm. Courtesy, Musée National d’Art Moderne, Paris.


![Figure 11. Kandinsky, *Le lien vert*, 1944, oil on cardboard, 46 x 54 cm. Milan, private collection. [Photo: Galerie Maeght Lelong, Paris; Claude Gaspari]](image)

APPELLANTLY FACED WITH A PREMONITION of his death in February of 1944, Kandinsky’s mind returned to his ethnographic experience, and in a work entitled *Le lien vert* (fig. 11), he painted an almost representational image of himself assuming the shaman’s role for his last journey.

At the climax of the Altaian shaman ritual described above, as the shaman on his horse/drum reaches the zenith of his ride, he sings:

Lord to whom three ladders lead,
Bai-Yulgen, owner of three flocks,
The blue slope which has appeared,
The blue sky which shows itself,
The blue cloud which whirls along,
Inaccessible blue sky,
Inaccessible white sky...
Who uses the hoof of the horse...
[Who] hast created all men...
Thou who the starry sky
Thousands and thousands of times hast turned,
Condemn not my sins!

**Le lien vert** provides a graphic depiction of this scene. On the right we see a conglomerate of forms hovering around three vertical stripes. In the shaman’s song just quoted, the three ladders refer to the “sacred tree” or “heaven tree,” usually represented in the shamanic ceremony by three actual birch trees by which the shaman ascends to the celestial sphere. At the foot of Kandinsky’s triple tree trunk is a triangle, representing the cosmic mountain at the center of the earth. At the top, hovering just above the sacred tree, is a “cloud” symbol. Seen in this perspective, the hovering forms coalesce and metamorphose into the form of the artist shaman himself.

But then I grasped

My heaven tree grasped I
How many are my colleagues
May they bow down before me? 64

Here the shaman grasps the celestial tree wondrously with three arms (in Buriat legend, metamorphosis is characteristic of the shaman). His head is turned back over his shoulder and he wears, not the pointed cap, but a feathered helmet, another common type of shaman headdress (fig. 12). 65 Near his head, to the left, floats his “drum.” His coat is elaborately decorated, and he seems to wear his “breastplate” (a feature common among the Buriats and others) on his back. (The shaman’s breastplate is often embroidered with “ribs” mimicking the shaman’s skeleton.) His curved “drumstick” (ladle shaped, as is normal) floats just to the left of this ribbed breastplate. Floating about him are other small circles and pendants.

If we refer to the two drawings done in preparation for this painting (figs. 13, 14), we find, especially in the detail of the shaman alone, that these pendants and circles take on distinct similarities to the pictograms of heavenly bodies on shaman drums (cf. fig. 7). They seem to represent the sun, moons, and planets.

On the left-hand side of the picture, we observe a hand-shaped form with more than the normal number of fingers. This, too, is most likely a reference to shamanic lore. The six-fingered hand is a common attribute of the shaman’s costume (usually cut out of metal and appended, along with many other signs, to the back of his coat). Its purpose is to distinguish the shaman from ordinary mortals. Kandinsky has improved on the traditional design by adding one more finger to make seven, a number particularly important in shaman legend and lore. 66

Hovering between the two richly decorative areas of the painting, and central to it, floats a figure consisting mostly of triangular forms. This seems to represent the skeleton or abstracted “double” in its shroud, perhaps the artist-shaman’s or tied up in accord with Zyrian custom. In fact, the painting’s original French title, Le lien vert (used by Kandinsky in his own house catalog), hitherto translated in the literature as The Green Band, offers an obvious clue (as does the German, Das grüne Band). In the painting the lines forming the horizontal axis and one side of the uppermost trapezium are green (as are two other lines of this geometric aggregate). This indicates that a more precise translation would be “the green bond” (or “cord, shackle”).

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64. Cf. Diószegi, “Pre-Islamic Shamanism,” pp. 177–78; Hultkrantz, “Aspects of Shamanism,” p. 30; Mikhaliovski, “Shamanism,” p. 74; and Helmberg, Fino-Lige, pp. 349ff. The theme of the cosmic pillar also appears in the well-known Russian folk tale “The Seven Semyons,” in which the eldest Semyon, a smith, forges a tall pillar from the top of which his brother becomes the shamanic “all-seer.” For more on this and the connection between smiths, their reputed healing powers, and their patron saints, Cosmas and Damian, see Weiss in Weisberg and Dixon, Traditions and Revision.

65. See also Nioradze, “A Nganasan Shaman Costume,” in ibid., p. 2. See also Nioradze, Shamanismus, pl. 14 (feathered helmet).

66. See also Nioradze, Shamanismus, p. 69, fig. 15, also pp. 57 and 65 for illustration of ribbed breastplates. A six-fingered hand is to be found in Kandinsky’s 1943 painting A Conglomerate. Eliade reports that the Yukai-Samoied shaman wears a glove with seven fingers, Shamanism, p. 278.
The most obvious figure in the almost Scythian conglomerate of forms arising to the left is the triangular grid or checkerboard. Its shape mimics the central skeletal *ort* to a certain degree, suggesting its position here as the second type of "soul" with which Zyrian belief endowed the human being: namely, the nebulous *lof,* literally the breath soul, which upon death leaves the body as vapor. Its pattern adds a further interpretation relating to the "Book of Fates" or "Book of Divination" (often represented on shaman drums as a grid). This in turn is related to the deeply-rooted Russian belief that one's destiny is determined at birth. The dangling amulets suggest soul forms, perhaps here signifying rebirth. The mushroom-domed form below suggests the general shape of the Siberian yurt or dwelling, but may have another association, as we shall see. The whole configuration seems to sail heavenward upon the back of a form resembling a bird, a frequent host of the soul among the Finno-Ugric, especially the Zyrin, peoples.67

There is, however, an important element missing from the final painting, a detail that was perhaps too close and too "secret" to expose to public view. In the large drawing in figure 13, floating just below the shaman and to the left, is a mushroom-shaped form. In fact, I believe it is a mushroom and that it refers again back in time to Kandinsky's ethnographic essay. Kandinsky had reported that with Christianization, the Zyrinians had been forced to refer to their ancestors by the "insulting" name *poganye.* As noted, this word is etymologically related to the Russian word *poganka,* a poisonous mushroom, and therefore implies something dirty and inedible. But it has another implication as well. Widespread among the Finno-Ugric shamans was the custom of using the poisonous mushroom *Amanita muscaria* (or *Agaricus muscarius*), commonly known as fly agaric, to help achieve a state of trance and hallucination. In Zyrin Sysola dialect, exactly the area of Kandinsky’s study, the word *pogalny* (*pogavny*) means "to lose consciousness," "to be poisoned," "to stagger," a reference to the ritual use of fly agaric. This suggests that in Kandinsky’s mind there was an association between the Russian *poganye-poganka* and the similarly sounding Zyrin *pogavni.*68 In a drawing of the same year as *Le lien vert* (1944) Kandinsky filled the sheet with a veritable rain of mushrooms, together with some butterfly "souls" (fig. 15).

Both *Motley Life* and *Composition 2* came to Kandinsky while he was in a state of hallucination, from typhoid fever, according to the Russian edition of "Rückblicke." In the same edition he also remarked: "The artist is perhaps in a position—albeit only partially and by chance—to summon up within himself these states of inspiration by artificial means." He goes on to say that only years of experience train the artist to control these moments, to bring them up at will. We cannot know exactly what he meant by "artificial means," but in *The Green Bond* he has left a suggestion that perhaps he envied the shaman’s intoxication and ready trance. Perhaps he felt his own creative powers slipping away and gave expression to a dream of the past, of a time when he was in his youth and nothing was impossible.
IF WE TURN ONCE MORE to the lines of the opening poem from Kandinsky’s *Kline* with which this essay began, we realize that we are once again confronted with a reminiscence of his ethnographic experience. The man with the white face and red cheeks in the long black coat who drums his way along the road is a Zyrian shaman. Sometimes he drums “feverishly,” sometimes “mechanically,” sometimes he drums “like the white-furred toy rabbit, which we all so love.” The white rabbit pelt is in fact of particular significance to the Buriat shaman (and the Altai as well), for it represents the spirit of the hunt and is widely considered a messenger or helper of the powerful forest spirit. The fur of the white rabbit is said to have fallen from heaven into a shaman’s drum to aid the original hunter, and among the Altai it is also associated with the protection of horses.

Kandinsky ends the poem by saying that he has seen all this “from above” and begs the reader to do likewise. The shaman artist, on his sounding drum, has taken wing and would indeed fly to other worlds.

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*His magic drum they hung on him*

*His magic drum pulled itself tight*

*Again he shamanized*

*The old one doesn’t cease.*

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