Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, (1911)

IV. THE PYRAMID

And so at different points along the road are the different arts, saying what they are best able to say, and in the language which is peculiarly their own. Despite, or perhaps thanks to, the differences between them, there has never been a time when the arts approached each other more nearly than they do today, in this later phase of spiritual development.

In each manifestation is the seed of a striving towards the abstract, the non-material. Consciously or unconsciously they are obeying Socrates' command--Know thyself. Consciously or unconsciously artists are studying and proving their material, setting in the balance the spiritual value of those elements, with which it is their several privilege to work. And the natural result of this striving is that the various arts are drawing together. They are finding in Music the best teacher. With few exceptions music has been for some centuries the art which has devoted itself not to the reproduction of natural phenomena, but rather to the expression of the artist's soul, in musical sound.

A painter, who finds no satisfaction in mere representation, however artistic, in his longing to express his inner life, cannot but envy the ease with which music, the most non-material of the arts today, achieves this end. He naturally seeks to apply the methods of music to his own art. And from this results that modern desire for rhythm in painting, for mathematical, abstract construction, for repeated notes of colour, for setting colour in motion.

This borrowing of method by one art from another, can only be truly successful when the application of the borrowed methods is not superficial but fundamental. One art must learn first how another uses its methods, so that the methods may afterwards be applied to the borrower's art from the beginning, and suitably. The artist must not forget that in him lies the power of true application of every method, but that that power must be developed.

In manipulation of form music can achieve results which are beyond the reach of painting. On the other hand, painting is ahead of music in several particulars. Music, for example, has at its disposal duration of time; while painting can present to the spectator the whole content of its message at one moment.[Footnote: These statements of difference are, of course, relative; for music can on occasions dispense with extension of time, and painting make use of it.] Music, which is outwardly unfettered by nature, needs no definite form for its expression.

[Footnote: How miserably music fails when attempting to express material appearances is proved by the affected absurdity of programme music. Quite lately such experiments have been made. The imitation in sound of croaking frogs, of farmyard noises, of household duties, makes an excellent music hall turn and is amusing enough. But in serious music such attempts are merely warnings against any imitation of nature. Nature has her own language, and a powerful one; this language cannot be imitated. The sound of a farmyard in music is never successfully reproduced, and is unnecessary waste of time. The *Stimmung* of nature can be imparted by every art, not, however, by imitation, but by the artistic divination of its inner spirit.]

Painting today is almost exclusively concerned with the reproduction of natural forms and phenomena. Her business is now to test her strength and methods, to know herself as music has done for a long time, and then to use her powers to a truly artistic end. And so the arts are encroaching one upon another, and from a proper use of this encroachment will rise the art that is truly monumental. Every man who steeps himself in the spiritual possibilities of his art is a valuable helper in the building of the spiritual pyramid which will someday reach to heaven.

V. THE PSYCHOLOGICAL WORKING OF COLOUR

To let the eye stray over a palette, splashed with many colours, produces a dual result. In the first place one receives a PURELYPHYSICAL IMPRESSION, one of pleasure and contentment at the varied and beautiful colours. The eye is either warmed or else soothed and cooled. But these physical sensations can only be of short duration. They are merely superficial and leave no lasting impression, for the soul is unaffected. But although the effect of the colours is forgotten when the eye is turned away, the superficial impression of varied colour may be the starting point of a whole chain of related sensations.

On the average man only the impressions caused by very familiar objects, will be purely superficial. A first encounter with any new phenomenon exercises immediately an impression on the soul. This is the experience of the child discovering the world, to whom every object is new. He sees a light, wishes to take hold of it, burns his finger and feels henceforward a proper respect for flame. But later he learns that light has a friendly as well as an unfriendly side, that it drives away the darkness, makes the day longer, is essential to warmth, cooking, play-acting. From the mass of these discoveries is composed a knowledge of light, which is indelibly fixed in his mind. The strong, intensive interest disappears and the various properties of flame are balanced against each other. In this way the whole world becomes gradually disenchanted. It is realized that trees give shade, that horses run fast and motor-cars still faster, that dogs bite, that the figure seen in a mirror is not a real human being.

As the man develops, the circle of these experiences caused by different beings and objects, grows ever wider. They acquire an inner meaning and eventually a spiritual harmony. It is the same with colour, which makes only a momentary and superficial impression on a soul but slightly developed in sensitiveness. But even this superficial impression varies in quality. The eye is strongly attracted by light, clear colours, and still more strongly attracted by those colours which are warm as well as clear; vermilion has the charm of flame, which has always attracted human beings. Keen lemon-yellow hurts the eye in time as a prolonged and shrill trumpet-note the ear, and the gazer turns away to seek relief in blue or green.

But to a more sensitive soul the effect of colours is deeper and intensely moving. And so we come to the second main result of looking at colours: THEIR PSYCHIC EFFECT. They produce a corresponding spiritual vibration, and it is only as a step towards this spiritual vibration that the elementary physical impression is of importance.

Whether the psychic effect of colour is a direct one, as these last few lines imply, or whether it is the outcome of association, is perhaps open to question. The soul being one with the body, the former may well experience a psychic shock, caused by association acting on the latter. For example, red may cause a sensation analogous to that caused by flame, because red is the colour of flame. A warm red will prove exciting, another shade of red will cause pain or disgust through association with running blood. In these cases colour awakens a corresponding physical sensation, which undoubtedly works upon the soul.

If this were always the case, it would be easy to define by association the effects of colour upon other senses than that of sight. One might say that keen yellow looks sour, because it recalls the taste of a lemon.

But such definitions are not universally possible. There are many examples of colour working which refuse to be so classified. A Dresden doctor relates of one of his patients, whom he designates as an "exceptionally sensitive person," that he could not eat a certain sauce without tasting "blue," i.e. without experiencing a feeling of seeing a blue color. [Footnote: Dr. Freudenberg. "Spaltung der Personlichkeit" (*Ubersinnliche Welt*. 1908. No. 2, p. 64-65). The author also discusses the hearing of colour, and says that here also no rules can be laid down. But cf. L. Sabanejeff in "Musik," Moscow, 1911, No. 9, where the imminent possibility of laying down a law is clearly hinted at.]

It would be possible to suggest, by way of explanation of this, that in highly sensitive people, the way to the soul is so direct and the soul itself so impressionable, that any impression of taste communicates itself immediately to the soul, and thence to the other organs of sense (in this case, the eyes). This would imply an echo or reverberation, such as occurs sometimes in musical instruments which, without being touched, sound in harmony with some other instrument struck at the moment.

But not only with taste has sight been known to work in harmony. Many colours have been described as rough or sticky, others as smooth and uniform, so that one feels inclined to stroke them(e.g., dark ultramarine, chromic oxide green, and rose madder).Equally the distinction between warm and cold colours belongs to this connection. Some colours appear soft (rose madder), others hard (cobalt green, blue-green oxide), so that even fresh from the tube they seem to be dry.

The expression "scented colours" is frequently met with. And finally the sound of colours is so definite that it would be hard to find anyone who would try to express bright yellow in the bass notes, or dark lake in the treble.[Footnote: Much theory and practice have been devoted to this question. People have sought to paint in counterpoint. Also unmusical children have been successfully helped to play the piano by quoting a parallel in colour (e.g., of flowers). On these lines Frau A. Sacharjin-Unkowsky has worked for several years and has evolved a method of "so describing sounds by natural colours, and colours by natural sounds, that colour could be heard and sound seen." The system has proved successful for several years both in the inventor's own school and the Conservatoire at St. Petersburg. Finally Scriabin, on more spiritual lines, has paralleled sound and colours in a chart not unlike that of Frau Unkowsky. In "Prometheus" he has given convincing proof of his theories. (His chart appeared in "Musik,"Moscow, 1911, No. 9.)]

[Footnote: The converse question, i.e. the colour of sound, wastouched upon by Mallarme and systematized by his disciple Rene Ghil, whose book, *Traite du Verbe*, gives the rules for"l' instrumentation verbale."--M.T.H.S.]

The explanation by association will not suffice us in many, and the most important cases. Those who have heard of chromo-therapy will know that coloured light can exercise very definite influences on the whole body. Attempts have been made with different colours in the treatment of various nervous ailments. They have shown that red light stimulates and excites the heart, while blue light can cause temporary paralysis. But when the experiments come to be tried on animals and even plants, theory falls to the ground. So one is bound to admit that the question is at present unexplored, but that colour can exercise enormous influence over the body as a physical organism. No more sufficient, in the psychic sphere, is the theory of association. Generally speaking, colour is a power which directly influences the soul. Colour is the keyboard, the eyes are the hammers, the soul is the piano with many strings. The artist is the hand which plays, touching one key or another, to cause vibrations in the soul.