3rd Grade: OCTOBER

Improvisation 31 (Sea Battle)
Wassily Kandinsky

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About the Artist
The following information is provided to give classroom teachers a comprehensive understanding of the artist and artwork. Use your judgment on what to share with your students based on their level of curiosity, observation/inquiry skills, comprehension and age-appropriateness.

Wassily Kandinsky
Vassili (Wassily) Kandinsky was born on December 4, 1866, in Moscow, Russia. He was raised in a loving, upper middle-class home by his father, a successful tea merchant, and his mother, a teacher. He enjoyed the German fairy tales his mother and grandmother told him as well as family trips to such places as Venice, Rome, and Florence. While on a trip to Europe in 1871, Kandinsky’s father fell ill and forced the family to return to the small Russian town of Odessa. Although his father recovered, Kandinsky’s parents soon divorced and the young lad was raised by his father and aunt. Kandinsky managed to complete his schooling through high school and learned to play the piano and cello. This music was important to Kandinsky and served as the foundation for some of his abstract paintings. Painting, however, was a mere hobby during his early years.

In 1886, the twenty-year old Kandinsky moved to Moscow to study law and economics at Moscow University. As a good student, he earned a degree equivalent to a doctorate and secured a university faculty position. On a visit to a French Impressionist exhibition in Moscow, Kandinsky was surprised and troubled by the way artists such as Claude Monet painted objects as barely identifiable for he had never seen this before. Color and light were the subject and the representational object was absent. This epiphany was a great inspiration and motivation for Kandinsky.

Kandinsky married his cousin, Anja Chimiakin in 1892. When at age thirty, Kandinsky was offered a new teaching position and chairmanship at the University of Dorpat in Estonia, he was faced with a tough decision—to stay in the world of academia or venture on a new path. Kandinsky decided to shift his attention to art. He left the position at Moscow University, declined the position at the University of Dorpat, left his marriage to Anna Chimiakina and enrolled at the private school of Anton Ažbe and then the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich in Southern Germany with the intention of becoming a painter.

Having rejected his bourgeois life, Kandinsky had to adjust to a new life for which his years as a professor left him a bit out of place. He earned a diploma and a reputation as a competent artist from the Munich Academy with an interest in contemporary trends. He was the founding member of an artist’s organization credited with advancing the study of art. They opened a new school and brought Monet’s art to Munich for the first time in 1903. During this time period, Kandinsky separated from his wife and later divorced. Eventually he met German-American artist, Gabriele Munter, who became his mistress. They traveled throughout Europe and North Africa and settled in Paris in 1906. Two years later they relocated to Munich where Gabriele purchased a country house. Kandinsky used this location to bring together like-minded artists, composers, and playwrights who wished to work collaboratively. The major impact of his career during these years was painting some of his popular landscapes and experimenting with non-objective painting by replacing a representational object with expressive color and form. In 1910, Kandinsky exhibited his works in Odessa and Moscow, contributed to the production of an artist’s publication titled the Blaue Reiter Almanach (Blue Rider Almanac) in which he shared artists’ aesthetic ideas and inspirations, and published Über das Feistige in der Kinst (On the Spiritual in Art), a significant document on the theory of non-objective art.

When World War I was declared in 1914, Kandinsky and his mistress left Munich, Germany, for Switzerland. Within months, Kandinsky had left his mistress and returned to Moscow where he eventually married a wealthy Russian woman, Nina Andreevskaja who was twenty-seven years younger than Kandinsky. It is said they first met by phone and he was so impressed with her voice, he painted a watercolor titled, To the Unknown Voice. They had one child, a son, who died at age three from undernourishment during the Civil War in Russia. Kandinsky taught at Moscow’s Institute for Visual Arts, was Director of Public Museums, and taught art theory at the University of Moscow. Later, Kandinsky moved back to Germany to become an instructor at the Bauhaus School of Art and Architecture where he developed and published his aesthetic principles. He and his wife Nina became German citizens.

The rise of the Nazi regime threatened Kandinsky and the support for art and the Bauhaus was officially closed by the Nazi regime in 1933. Kandinsky and Nina moved to France and settled in Neuilly-sur-Seine near Paris, adopting French citizenship in 1939. He continued working until his death on December 13, 1944, at the age of seventy-eight. After his death, Nina founded the Kandinsky Fund for studying, exhibiting and preserving her husband’s work. Kandinsky is remembered as one of the most original and influential artists of the 20th century for the development of abstract painting.

About the Art
Improvisation 31 (Sea Battle), was painted in 1913, oil on can-
Discipline-Based Art Education
The following components are integral to students having a complete, well-rounded art experience.

Art Aesthetics
Providing opportunities to develop perception and appreciation of visually expressed ideas and experiences.

Art Production
Providing opportunities to develop skills and techniques for creative visual expressions of emotions and ideas.

Art History
Providing opportunities to develop an understanding of the visual arts as a basic component of personal heritage.

Art Criticism
Providing an opportunity to develop an intellectual basis for analyzing and making aesthetic judgments based on an understanding of visual ideas and experiences.

ELEMENTS OF ART
- Line: A continuous mark
- Shape: Area enclosed by a line
- Color: Hue, reflection of light.
- Texture: Surface quality, real or implied
- Form: 3D shape or illusion of 3D
- Value: Graduated areas of light/dark
- Space: Illusion of depth

PRINCIPLES OF DESIGN
- Repetition: Imagery repeating pattern
- Variety: Contrast/variation
- Rhythm: Issues of eye movement
- Balance: Even visual weight
- Emphasis/Economy: Dominance/minimalism
- Proportion: Compare size relationships

COMPOSITION
- Symmetrical: Mirrored imagery
- Asymmetrical: Random placement
- Radial: Mirror image from center point
- Repetition: Repeating pattern, motif

ARTISTIC STYLES
- Realism: Realistic representation
- Abstraction: Personal interpretation
- Non-Objective: No recognizable depiction

ELEMENTS OF DESIGN IN PICTURE BOOKS
Children’s literature that relate to this lesson due to elements of art or story content are:
- A Door to Your Imagination by Heath and lam Knight
- Wassily Kandinsky: Life and Work by Paul Flux
- Naval Battle of the Civil War by Peter F. Copeland
- Sticker Art Shapes: Wassily Kandinsky, Frances Lincoln Children’s Books

REFERENCE/BIBLIOGRAPHY
- Kandinsky, Wassily. Concerning the Spiritual in Art. Translated by M.T. Sadler

The title of his work, Improvisation 31 contains the subtitle of Sea Battle which gives a hint to the imagery. While it’s not overtly obvious, one can easily imagine ships shooting cannonballs at each other and experience the chaos and motion of battle on the sea. Kandinsky imitates battle through the use of colors placed roughly and angled on the canvas. Smeared and smudged paint adds to the feel of motion and action. The use of strong vertical and diagonal lines references masts and sails on a boat.

Directed Observation
Show students an image of Improvisation 31 (Sea Battle) and tell them it was painted with oil paint on canvas by Wassily Kandinsky in 1913. Invite students to quietly study the work. After some time for thinking, encourage students to share what they see. Welcome all comments. The following questions are provided to help students use art vocabulary to talk about the work.

1. Do you like realistic work or abstract work better? Which is harder to make?
2. Kandinsky’s intention was to capture the emotion of a sea battle. What emotions are connected with a battle at sea?
3. How does this eye movement make the viewer feel?
4. Would a painting be art if you couldn’t recognize anything in the painting? Would a painting be art if it were only lines and shapes? These are the questions which inspired Kandinsky’s work. His work is about letting go of conventional thoughts about art. Use the following activity for a collaborative experience in “letting go.” Divide the classroom into groups of three. Give each student a large piece of paper or tagboard (16 x 20”). With a pencil, lightly divide the paper into six even sections. With a black marker, have each student create a line in one section of the paper. Then, pass their paper to the next person in the group to create an interesting line on their neighbor’s paper. Continue to pass the papers around the group until all the sections have a line. (Lines can intersect.) Repeat the process of passing their papers. This time have group members create a shape in each section. (Shapes can intersect.) Shift to oil pastels or crayons. Working with their own papers, have students color in and alongside the lines and shapes, blending colors, until the entire paper is filled in. Once completed, frame the work in a white mat using poster board and display work for all to see. Allow students to discuss the finished work by comparing and contrasting what they see. Discuss the process of “letting go” of their work. How did they feel about it? What was the risk involved? Did it improve the final work and the ability to experiment? Title and exhibit the work.

Wassily Kandinsky was a very smart and well-educated man who worked hard at understanding art. He struggled between painting realistic images and abstracts of the real. In the end, he felt he could better represent the object or scenery by concentrating on the emotion of what he saw.