

The Painters of the Blaue Reiter and Japan

Towards Defining a New Stage of German Japonisme in the Twentieth Century

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Abstract

Japonisme, like today's Japanese pop culture, is a transcultural phenomenon. In the 'classical phase of Japonisme' individual artists were influenced by Japanese art (especially by *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints) and transcended thematic and compositional adaptation: the confrontation with Japanese art sparked a creative process and led to new developments in art. Japonisme became not only an important medium in the development of modern western art, but also attested a cultural transcendence.

Japanese colored woodblock prints also influenced German expressionist artists of the Blaue Reiter (Blue Rider) before the First World War. While Impressionists aimed to move away from naturalism and history painting, Expressionists used the simplification of artistic expressions according to Japanese models, above all to express strong emotions and experiences. Japanese art helped them to take a decisive step in their search for a new visual language in their bold use of color, and in finding abstract forms. Like many European artists, the painters of the Blaue Reiter collected Japanese woodblock prints. Thanks to the spectacular discovery of Franz Marc's Japanese collection in 2009 and the exhibition *The painters of the Blue Rider and Japan* in the Schlossmuseum Murnau in 2011, the role of Japanese art in the work of the artists of the Blaue Reiter, as well as the sources of the Japanese pictures in the *Blaue Reiter Almanach*, edited by Franz Marc and Wassily Kandinsky, can finally be fully examined.

This paper will shed light on the reception of Japanese art in the works of this early-twentieth-century modern painters' group. It will focus on Franz Marc, August Macke, and Wassily Kandinsky. The Japonisme of the Blaue Reiter led to abstraction and a revolution in color, and can be termed 'New German Japonisme'.

Keywords

New German Japonisme – The Blue Rider – Franz Marc – August Macke – Wassily Kandinsky

Introduction

It is well known that Edgar Degas (1834-1917), Édouard Manet (1832-1883), and James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903) – the pioneers of Japonisme – as well as Claude Monet (1840-1926) and Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890), were inspired by Japanese woodblock prints (*ukiyo-e*). However, these were also collected by painters of the German art group Blaue Reiter and sparked off a new development in 'Expressionist art.

In my book *Das Imaginäre Japan in der Kunst. 'Japanbilder' vom Jugendstil bis zum Bauhaus*¹ I analyzed the beginnings of Japonisme in Germany from 1880 to 1933. Many years after I had published the book, I discovered that some of the painters of the Blaue Reiter had also collected Japanese woodblock prints and dealt in Japanese art.²

Thanks to the discovery of Franz Marc's Japanese collection and the exhibition *The painters of the Blaue Reiter and Japan*³ in the Schlossmuseum Murnau in 2011, the role of Japanese art in the work of the artists of the Blaue Reiter as well as the sources of the Japanese pictures in the *Blaue Reiter Almanach*, edited in 1912 by Franz Marc and Wassily Kandinsky, can finally be fully examined. The *Almanach* is a programmatic collection of essays and pictures of old and contemporary art for the modern painter, which includes 'world art' and music.⁴ It advocated a new and global concept of art with equal rights for painting, music, folk art, and non-European art.

Franz Marc, his Collection of Japanese Art, and the Creation of the *Blaue Reiter Almanach*

Franz Marc was born in Munich in 1880. He attended the Munich Academy of Arts during the year 1900. In 1903 he traveled to Paris, where he bought

1 See Claudia Delank, *Das Imaginäre Japan in der Kunst. 'Japanbilder' vom Jugendstil bis zum Bauhaus* (München: Iudicium, 1996). Japanese translation by Suitō Tatsuhiko and Ikeda Yūko, *Doitsu ni okeru Nihon zō* (Kyōto: Shibunkaku shuppan, 2004).

2 Due to the lack of documentation at the time I was undertaking research for the book, the painters' group Blaue Reiter was not part of my study.

3 See three of my own contributions to Brigitte Salmen (ed.), *Die Maler des Blauen Reiter und Japan*, Exhibition Catalogue, Schlossmuseum Murnau, Munich, 2011: "Japonismus," pp. 11-18; "Die Japansammlungen der Maler des „Blauen Reiter“ und ihr Einfluß auf die Malerei," pp. 89-95; "Die Maler des Blauen Reiter, die Rheinischen Expressionisten und Japan," pp. 96-102.

4 See Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc (eds), *Der Blaue Reiter*, Munich, 1912; also the new edition, edited by Klaus Lankheit (Munich: Piper, 2000).

Japanese woodblock prints from the publishing company *Flammarion*.⁵ As a young painter in Munich in 1904 he began to deal in Japanese art, antiques and books to support himself. His small collection, bought by the Schlossmuseum Murnau in 2009, includes six ink drawings, twelve *ukiyo-e* and seventeen illustrated books, including the *Manga* and *Ippitsu gafu* by Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849). Also in his collection were nine craft objects, including a *netsuke* representing a malnourished wolf (Fig. 1a), which inspired his painting of a white dog with similar protruding ribs (Fig. 1b), and a Chinese snuff bottle⁶ with horses turning their heads, in black cameo glass (Fig. 2a). Franz Marc painted many horses and deer with similar raised heads (Fig. 2b). These craft objects are still in a private collection.⁷ Very prominent among the Japanese ink paintings in his collection are a goat and a *shishi* attributed to Hokusai. The *shishi* raises its right paw and opens its mouth (Fig. 3a). While its body contours, mane and tail show strong brush strokes, a third of its body is actually empty space. The use of modulating brush strokes and the empty space was new to western painters. The *shishi* is reproduced in the *Almanach*, in the article 'On the Question of Form' ('Über die Formfrage') by Kandinsky, next to a painting of a white bull by Franz Marc (Fig. 3b).

Between 1910 and 1912 several of Marc's paintings were inspired by the bright and pure colors and the composition of Japanese woodblock prints. His painting *Haystack in Snow* of 1911 is one of the earliest paintings showing his use of such colors (Fig. 4). One year before, in 1910, he had painted haystacks in a more realistic manner in brown, yellow and green with *chiaroscuro* and a geometric perspective.

This reminds us of van Gogh's use of pure, bright colors as a result of his encounter with Japanese *ukiyo-e*. In his 1886/87 portrait of Julien Tanguy in the Ny Carlsberg Glyptothek, Copenhagen, he painted the sitter in a traditional way of portraiture, whereas in the 1887 version with colored Japanese *ukiyo-e* prints in the background, now at the Rodin Museum in Paris, van Gogh used bright colors to portray his model.

The painting *Cat Behind a Tree* by Franz Marc of 1910/11 (Fig. 5a) shows a sleeping cat partially concealed by a large blue tree trunk in the manner of Hokusai's woodblock print 'Mishima Pass in Kai Province' ('Kōshū Mishima goe') from the series *Thirty-six views of Mount Fuji* (*Fugaku sanjūrokkei*, Fig. 5b).

5 See Myung-Seon Oh, *Der Blaue Reiter und der Japonismus*, doctoral thesis, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munich, 2006, p. 29.

6 Chinese snuff bottles, often imported from China into Japan during the Edo-period (1603-1867) were frequently found in collections of Japanese art.

7 See Claudia Delank, "Japanische Tuschezeichnungen, Holzschnitte und Objekte aus der Sammlung Franz Marc," in Brigitte Salmen (ed.), *op. cit.* 2011, pp. 180-204 and 252-256.



FIGURE 1a Lean wolf, netsuke, 19th century, boxwood with ivory inlays, private collection, former collection of Franz Marc

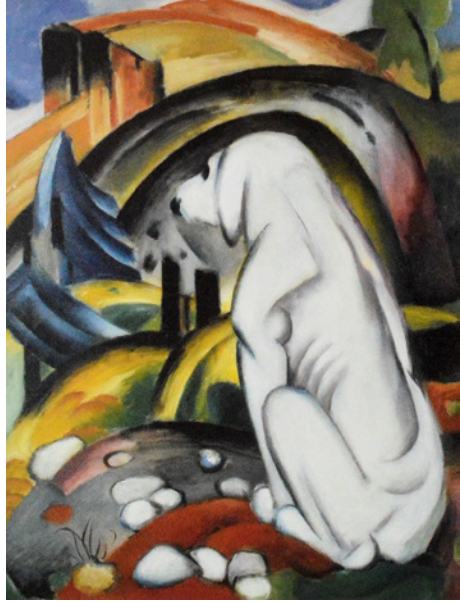


FIGURE 1b Franz Marc, *The White Dog* (also known as *Dog in Front of the World*), 1912, oil on canvas, private collection



FIGURE 2a Snuff bottle, late 19th century, black cameo glass, private collection, former collection of Franz Marc



FIGURE 2b Franz Marc, *Deer in the Snow*, 1911, oil on canvas, Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich



FIGURE 3a Katsushika Hokusai (attr.), Shishi, 19th century, ink on paper, Schloßmuseum Murnau, former collection of Franz Marc



FIGURE 3b Franz Marc, *White Bull*, 1911, oil on canvas, Guggenheim Museum, New York



FIGURE 4
Franz Marc, *Haystacks in the Snow*, 1911, oil on canvas, 79.5 × 100 cm, Franz Marc Museum, Kochel on Lake

Van Gogh's large tree trunk in his work *The Sower*, painted in 1888, may also have served as an inspiration.

August Macke

August Macke was born in Meschede in Germany in 1887. He was interested in Japanese art from an early age. In 1905, during his training at the Düsseldorf Academy of Fine Arts, he attended evening classes at the Kunstgewerbeschule (School for Applied Arts). In the same year Macke received the fifteen volumes of *Manga* by Hokusai, as a gift from the industrialist and art collector Bernhard Koehler (1849-1927), who was his wife's uncle. Macke was very enthusiastic about Hokusai's work and writes in a letter to his wife: "Then we saw the sketches he did, all carved in wood, hundreds of small, delicious movements of



FIGURE 5a
Franz Marc, *Cat behind a Tree*, 1910-1911,
Franz Marc Museum, Kochel on Lake



FIGURE 5b Katsushika Hokusai, 'Mishima Pass in Kai Province' ('Kōshū Mishima goe') from the series *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji* (*Fugaku sanjūrokkei*) 1833, woodblock print, Berlin, Museum für Asiatische Kunst



FIGURE 6 August Macke, *Japanerstudien*, 1906, pencil on paper, Kunstmuseum Bonn

these lovely women, everything, everything [...] You know, they are so strange, so stylishly finished and so madly full of life ...".⁸ A whole new world opened up for August Macke; he studied the *Manga* enthusiastically and discovered the "Japanese" – as he called them – for his artistic work.

From 1905, August Macke's sketches, letters and works show traces of his reception of Japanese art. For example, in the *Japanese sketches (Japanerstudien)* of 1906, he drew pencil scenes inspired by the *Manga* and other illustrated books by Hokusai. One scene shows two Japanese figures struggling in a storm (Fig. 6).

In the portrait study *Elisabeth Gerhardt (from memory)* of 1907, he quoted from a woodblock print by Andō Hiroshige (1797-1858) with the title 'Seba', which is number 32 in the series *The 69 Stations of the Kisokaidō*, published in 1837: a tree, the boat and the full moon.

August Macke, who spent a year in Tegernsee near Munich, visited Franz Marc in his studio in Munich in 1910 after seeing his work in an exhibition. This encounter was the beginning of a friendship, which lasted until Macke's untimely death in the First World War, in 1914 – Marc fell two years later, in 1916.

⁸ August Macke, Letter to Elisabeth, 18 June 1907. See Werner Frese and Ernst-Gerhard Güse (eds), *August Macke, Briefe an Elisabeth und die Freunde* (Munich: Bruckmann, 1987), p. 128.



FIGURE 7
August Macke, *Sitting Nude with Cushion*, 1911, oil on canvas, Wilhelm Lehmbruck Museum, Duisburg

This friendship contributed significantly to the development of classic modern art in Germany.

In 1911, under the influence of his friendship with Franz Marc, August Macke painted the *Sitting Nude with Cushion* in a Japanese style (Fig. 7). The model was his wife Elisabeth; her hair piled high, the head bowed, directing the viewer's eye to the chignon and a long 'beautiful neck' (*unaji*), reminiscent of Japanese portraits of beautiful women (*bijin*). The body, as in Japanese woodblock prints and illustrated books, is indicated by a black, modulating contour. Similar to Manet's painting *Olympia*, the naked body radiates a bright light, which seems to come from the viewer. Macke was much fascinated by Manet's work, which he saw in Paris in 1907: "Manet paints women's skins shimmering white, full of life..."⁹

The surrounding cushions and the carpet form a surface pattern that defines the space. Macke sketched a terracotta figure by Artistide Maillol (1861-1944), after a picture from the article by Maurice Denis, in his sketchbook no. 21 (p. 45). For his painting of the sitting nude, Macke took over Maillol's pictorial

9 Letter by August Macke to Elisabeth, 19 May 1907, in Werner Frese and Ernst-Gerhard Güse (eds), *op. cit.* 1987, p. 74.

idea, but was also inspired by the vivid contour lines (*rinkakusen*) of Japanese ink paintings. On the one hand, Maillol's "symmetry of the torso and the architecture of the senses,"¹⁰ as described by Maurice Denis, resonates in Macke's image; on the other, Macke succeeds in increasing tension through the brushstrokes of the living outline. The Maillolian composition of the back, the living Japanese line, and Manet's light together contribute to the attractive sensuality of Macke's sitting nude.

August Macke's relationship to the Blaue Reiter was ambivalent. Although he was at times deeply impressed by Kandinsky's paintings, he had reservations when it came to the high intellectual claims of the group and Kandinsky's dominant personality. He was open to the manifold artistic trends of his time and experimented with new painting styles, such as Futurism or Fauvism, and especially the avant-garde style of Robert Delauney (1885-1941). Macke never completely embraced any of these art movements – including Japanese art – but from each took elements that could serve him to develop his distinctive personal style.

Wassily Kandinsky

Wassily Kandinsky was born in Moscow in 1866. He is considered to have been the leader and the strategist of the Blaue Reiter. He owned a Japanese collection of nine woodblock prints, one ink drawing and three *katagami* (Japanese stencils).¹¹ On one of his Japanese woodblock prints by Utagawa Yoshitora (fl. c. 1836-1882) the address of an art dealer is listed: "E. Kratzer. Japanese goods Munich Türckenstr. 69". It is quite possible that Marc and Kandinsky bought their Japanese ink paintings and the woodblock prints there before 1914.¹²

How did Kandinsky become familiar with Japanese woodblock prints? As artistic director of the Kusverev printing company in Moscow, Kandinsky had already come into contact with woodcut techniques in 1895, when he discovered the Japanese method of first printing the contour lines with a so-called key block, and, subsequently, each color with a separate block. For Kandinsky, the different color fields had their own rhythm and "sound" in a non-figurative way, and provided a first step towards abstraction on a simple technical level.

10 Maurice Denis "Maillol," in *Kunst und Künstler* 4, 11, 30 July 1906, p. 474.

11 His collection of Japanese woodblock prints and *katagami* is housed in the Centre Pompidou in Paris.

12 Claudia Delank, "Die Japansammlungen der Maler des „Blauen Reiter“ und ihr Einfluß auf die Malerei," in Brigitte Salmen (ed.), *op. cit.* 2011, p. 94.

Unlike Marc and Macke, Kandinsky does not seem to have written much on Japanese art. Like many artists, he had become familiar with the early Japonisme of the Impressionists and Postimpressionists, as seen, for example, in Whistler's paintings. Interior photographs of Kandinsky's flat in the Amalienstrasse No. 36 in Munich (Fig. 8a) show that a Meiji-period (1868-1912) edition from the late nineteenth century of the print referring to the poem by Ono no Takamura (a.k.a. Sangi no Takamura, 802-852?) from Hokusai's series *Hyakunin issū uba ga etoki* (*One Hundred Poems by One Hundred Poets, Explained by the Nurse*) was hanging above his desk (Fig. 8b).¹³ After moving to Munich in 1902, he began to design his own woodcuts out of admiration for Japanese woodblock prints and their production techniques. In this context, Kandinsky was enthusiastic about Emil Orlik's (1870-1932) woodcuts, which he saw in an exhibition of the Vienna Secession in 1903.¹⁴ The exhibition *Japan and the Far East in Art* (*Japan und Ostasien in der Kunst*), in Munich in 1909, organized by the Association Exhibition-Park, had a great visual impact on Kandinsky. He emphasized the "true Eastern talent", writing in a letter from Munich on 3 October 1909: "A whole room was filled with graphic art dedicated to the theme of landscape. Here, in addition to woodcuts showing true Eastern talent, we found tiny details which could be gathered in one coherent sound, and also works of unusual generosity and abstraction in the treatment of forms and colors, which obey entirely to their own rhythm of pure artistic temperament."¹⁵ Here Kandinsky spoke about Japanese art from his own point of view as a seeker. The quotation shows that in Japanese art, as well as in the art of the Far East in general (he generously spoke of "true Eastern talent"), he saw what he himself sought to express. In his early woodcuts, between 1904 and 1907, he adapted

13 Helmut Friedel (ed.), *Gabriele Münther. Die Jahre mit Kandinsky. Photographien 1902-14*, (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 2007), p. 253, fig. 191. See also Claudia Delank, "Japanische Holzschnitte aus der Sammlung Wassily Kandinsky," in: Brigitte Salmen (ed.), *op. cit.* 2011, pp. 217 and 258.

14 Letter to Gabriele Münther, 16 April 1903, in *Das bunte Leben. Wassily Kandinsky im Lenbachhaus*, Exhibition Catalogue, Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus Munich (Cologne: Dumont, 1995), p. 79.

15 Kandinsky. Briefe aus München (I), in: Helmut Friedel (ed.), *Wassily Kandinsky. Gesammelte Schriften 1889-1916. Farbensprache, Kompositionslehre und andere unveröffentlichte Texte* (Munich, Berlin & London: Prestel 2007, p. 330, quoted from: Brigitte Salmen: Die Maler des Blauen Reiter und ihre Begegnung mit japanischer Kunst, in: Brigitte Salmen (ed.), *op. cit.* 2011, p. 81. The original text reads: "Ein ganzer Raum war mit graphischen Arbeiten gefüllt, die dem Thema Landschaft gewidmet waren. Hier fanden sich neben Holzschnitten, die echt östliche Begabung zeigten, winzige Details, in einem einheitlichen Klang zu vereinen, auch Werke von ungewöhnlicher Großzügigkeit und Abstraktion in der Behandlung von Formen und Farben, die ganz und gar einem eigenen, von rein künstlerischem Temperament erfüllten Rhythmus gehorchten."



FIGURE 8a
Kandinsky at his desk in his flat
in the Amalienstrasse no. 36 in
Munich



FIGURE 8b Above his desk in the top row, far right, is the woodblock print by Katsushika Hokusai, ‘Sangi no Takamura’ (also referred to as ‘Female Diver’) from the series *Hyakunin issshū uba ga etoki* (*One Hundred Poems by One Hundred Poets, Explained by the Nurse*).

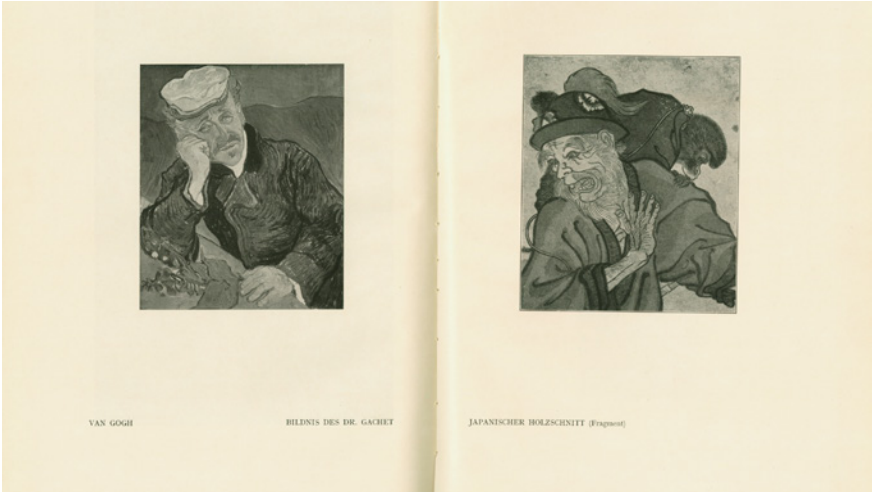


FIGURE 9a Wassily Kandinsky, *The Hunter*, 1907, colored linocut, Centre Pompidou, Paris



FIGURE 9b
Katsushika Hokusai, *Ippitsu gafu* (*An Album of One-Stroke Drawings*), 1823, Schloßmuseum Murnau, former collection of Franz Marc

Japanese coloring and the composition of Japanese woodblock prints.¹⁶ Kandinsky's own woodcuts *Moonrise* and *Summer* (both 1904) contain unshaded areas of color and lack spatial depth; he used the narrow vertical format (*has-hira-e*) as the image format for the woodcut *The Hunter* (1907, Fig. 9a). The birds were inspired by migratory bird representations in illustrated books by Hokusai, such as *Ippitsu gafu* in Franz Marc's collection (Fig. 9b).¹⁷ Working in this medium opened Kandinsky's path to abstract form. He was concerned with an increasingly resolute reduction from the objective to the elementary forms of circle, line and color, wanting to capture "the purely spiritual", to express the "inner sound" ("innerer Klang") in a painting.

1911-1912, the Year of the New German Japonisme

From 1910 on, August Macke and Franz Marc had a lively correspondence, reflecting their common predilection for Japanese art and especially for *shunga*. On the 9th of December, 1910, Macke wrote to Marc: "I am occupied with thoughts of Japanese erotic sheets at the moment."¹⁸ Time and again, Marc and Macke's letters reflect their interest in Japanese art.

However, Marc had ambivalent feelings about a Japan-orientated art. On the one hand, he assigned Japan to cultures which, like the European renaissance, "have already gone through a thousand-year-old path" and therefore are not suitable for the "rebirth of our artistic feeling" as a state before birth, a completely new beginning.

On the other, he seemed to find in the woodblock prints "the simple things" he was seeking for his own new visual language. Marc writes to Macke: "I find it so self-evident that we are seeking the rebirth of our artistic feeling in this cold dawn of artistic intelligence, and not in cultures that have already trodden a thousand-year-old path such as [that of] the Japanese or the Italian Renaissance."¹⁹ The notion that the Far Eastern cultures of China and Japan were old

16 Kandinsky printed his prints with 'Japanaqua' soft colors on Japanese paper, probably wet-on-wet, often with only one monotypic color. The colors were printed sequentially as in *ukiyo-e* production.

17 Letter by August Macke to Franz Marc, 9 December 1911, in Wolfgang Macke (ed.), *August Macke Franz Marc Briefwechsel* (Cologne: Dumont, 1964, p. 27..

18 Letter by August Macke to Franz Marc, 26 December 1911, in Wolfgang Macke (ed.), *August Macke Franz Marc Briefwechsel* (Cologne: Dumont, 1964), p. 27. Franz Marc had a collection of Japanese *shunga*, but it was probably destroyed by his wife after his death in 1916.

19 Letter by Franz Marc to August Macke, 14 January 1911, in Wolfgang Macke (ed.) *op. cit.* 1964, p. 39: "Ich finde es so selbstverständlich, dass wir in diesem kalten Frührot künstlerischer Intelligenz die Wiedergeburt unseres Kunstfühlens suchen und nicht in

and depleted had been advanced by the art historian Jacob von Falke (1825-1897): "China clearly shows the character of old age and Japan draws close to it."²⁰ On the other hand, the painters of the *Blaue Reiter* saw Japanese ink drawings and woodblock prints as lively and authentic expressions of art, which reinforced their own search for new ways of expression.

Marc formulated a program for a new beginning: "We must bravely surrender almost everything that we, good mid-Europeans, have always considered dear and precious; our ideas and ideals must bear a hairy garment, we must nurture them with grasshoppers and wild honey, and not with history, in order to extricate ourselves from fatigue of European tastelessness."²¹ Interestingly, the imagery is soundly 'European' since it refers to John the Baptist, who is supposed to have worn a tunic of camel's hair and lived on locusts and wild honey. Be that as it may, the woodblock prints in his collection helped Franz Marc to realize this goal in his own art.

The artists of the *Blaue Reiter* wanted nothing less than the renewal of life through art, and sought to unify new artistic forces from abroad, to reach a spiritual *Erhebung*.

The practical realization of these ideas in the choice and juxtaposition of the pictures, of all times and peoples, for the *Almanach* had its formative impact.

In June 1911 Franz Marc and Wassily Kandinsky had the idea of compiling a programmatic manifesto to promote a global approach for their search for a new beginning in art. The *Blaue Reiter Almanach*, published in May 1912, is composed of their own contributions, as well as folk art and non-European art, and is explicitly transcultural. In German-speaking countries, the *Almanach* is considered one of the most important artistic 'programs' of the 20th century, and a key document for the understanding of the *Blaue Reiter*.²² In fact, it is the beginning of global art.

Kulturen, die schon eine tausendjährige Bahn durchlaufen haben, wie die Japaner oder die italienische Renaissance."

20 Jacob von Falke, *Die Kunstindustrie auf der Wiener Weltausstellung 1873*, Vienna, 1873, p. 198.

21 Letter by Franz Marc to August Macke, 14 January 1911, in Wolfgang Macke (ed.), *op. cit.* 1964, p. 40: "Wir müssen tapfer fast auf alles verzichten, was uns als guten Mitteleuropäer bisher teuer und unentbehrlich war; unsere Ideen und Ideale müssen ein härenes Gewand tragen, wir müssen sie mit Heuschrecken und wildem Honig nähren und nicht mit Historie, um aus der Müdigkeit unserer europäischen Ungeschmacks herauszukommen."

22 See Katharina Erling, "Der Almanach Der Blaue Reiter," in Christine Hopfengart (ed.), *Der Blaue Reiter*, Exhibition Catalogue, Kunsthalle Bremen (Cologne: Dumont, 2000), p. 188.

For the planned second volume of the *Almanach* Franz Marc formulated a determination to break free from the constraints of cultural conventions: "With the dowsing rod we walked through art past and present: we only showed what was alive, and untouched by the constraint of convention. Everything that art itself brings forth, that lives of its own accord, and does not walk with the crutches of habit, is entitled to our affectionate love."²³

The 1912 *Almanach* includes folk art objects as well as children's drawings, combined with pictures of Russian icons, Bavarian and Mexican wooden figures, and reverse glass paintings. Images from Japanese illustrated books and woodblock prints from Franz Marc's collection played a significant part in the assemblage of non-European art for the *Almanach*. For example, two images from Japanese illustrated books, a *kirin* (a Chinese mythical animal) and a cat, are placed at the beginning and the end of an article by the Russian artist David Burjuk (1882-1968) on new currents in Russian painting, titled 'The Wild Russians' ('Die "Wilden" Russlands'). Japanese artefacts are always coupled with western ones and reproduced in a comparative context. Van Gogh is represented in the *Almanach* with the portrait of Dr. Gachet, because it represented what Kandinsky had learned from Van Gogh: that the strong line not necessarily defines an object, but has its own expressive value (Fig. 10). Van Gogh's painting of Dr. Gachet is combined with a head of a man from the right hand side print of Utagawa Kunitsuna's (1805-1868) tryptich *Kanshin kosen no zu*, which was in Franz Marc's collection. In his article 'Masks' ('Die Masken'), August Macke writes about the formal analogies between the two completely different works of art: "Does not the portrait of Dr. Gachet by van Gogh derive from a similar spiritual life as the astonished grin of the Japanese juggler in the woodcut?"²⁴ This comparison, chosen by Marc and Kandinsky, claims an essential relationship.²⁵ It can be seen in the expression of their wrinkled faces and their hands.

1911-1912 was a crucial year for the New Japonisme of the *Blaue Reiter*. It gave birth to the idea of the almanac as a programmatic global art guide. In their

23 Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc, foreword to the second edition of the *Der Blaue Reiter Almanach*. The second volume was planned for 1914, but was not published. The original text reads: "Wir gingen mit der Wünschelrute durch die Kunst der Zeiten und der Gegenwart: Wir zeigten nur das Lebendige, das vom Zwang der Konvention unberührt. Allem, was in der Kunst aus sich selbst geboren wird, aus sich selbst lebt und nicht auf Krücken der Gewohnheit geht, dem gilt unsere hingebungsvolle Liebe."

24 August Macke, "Die Masken," in Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc (eds), *op. cit.* 1912, p. 58: "Stammt das Portrait von Dr. Gachet von Van Gogh nicht von einem ähnlich geistigen Leben wie die im Holzdruck geformte erstaunte Fratze des japanischen Gauklers."

25 Claudia Delank, "Die Japansammlungen der Maler des Blauen Reiter und ihr Einfluss auf die Malerei," in Brigitte Salmen (ed.), *op. cit.* 2011, p. 92.



FIGURE 10
Page from *Der Blaue Reiter*, edited by
Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc,
Munich 1912

paintings they were striving for reduction to an absolute minimum. The Japanese works of art chosen for the *Almanach* are characterized by minimal form on the one hand and utmost expression on the other. The empty unpainted space is as important as the painted one. Except for the man's head from the woodblock print by Utagawa Kunitsuna, the Japanese works reproduced in the *Almanach* are only composed of the modulating line and empty space: *shishi* (Fig. 3), cat, ox and *kirin* (Figs 11 a-c).

Significantly, the *shishi* is reproduced next to Franz Marc's painting of a white bull – within the surrounding landscape the white bull looks as if composed of empty space. Kandinsky's essay 'About the Question of Form', which accompanies these images, is about 'feeling' form. Kandinsky was concerned with an ever more resolute reduction from the objective to the elementary forms of circle, line and color; he wanted to capture "the purely spiritual."

In 1911-1912 the painters of the *Blaue Reiter* produced masterpieces of New German Japonisme in the context of reducing form and expressing "inner sound". Kandinsky contributed the woodcut *Lyrishes* (Lyrical) from 1911 (Figs 12 a and b)²⁶ to the *Almanach*, which in his accompanying essay, Marc pioneeringly proclaims to be "the first sign of the coming new epoch", as "a

26 Later in 1911 he painted *Lyrishes* in oil on canvas, now housed in Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, Holland.



FIGURE 11a
Takeuchi Seihō (1864-1942), *Cat*, page from *Seihō shūgajō* (*Seihō's Manual of Painting*), 2. vols, 1901, Schloßmuseum Murnau, Estate of Franz Marc



FIGURE 11b
Takeuchi Seihō (1864-1942), *Ox*, page from *Seihō shūgajō* (*Seihō's Manual of Painting*), 2. vols, 1901, Schloßmuseum Murnau, Estate of Franz Marc



FIGURE 11c
Kirin, page from *Kōrin hyakuzu* (*One Hundred Sketches by Kōrin*), vol. 2, 1815, copied by Aikawa Minwa (active 1806-1821), Meiji edition, Schloßmuseum Murnau, Estate of Franz Marc



FIGURE 12a Wassily Kandinsky, *Lyrishes*, 1911, woodblock print, Japanese paper, 14.5 × 21.7 cm, Schloßmuseum Murnau



FIGURE 12b Wassily Kandinsky, *Lyrishes*, 1911, oil on canvas, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam

beacon for travelers”.²⁷ He describes them as “self-willed fiery signs of a new age, which today are increasing everywhere” and adds: “This book [the *Almanach*] will become their focus, until dawn comes and with its natural light will take away the phantom looks these works still show to the world of today. What seems ghostly today, will be natural tomorrow.”²⁸

In Marc’s view, Kandinsky’s woodblock print of a horse and rider, outlined with only a few strokes, is the embodiment of the coming of the inner renaissance.²⁹ Kandinsky printed the black contour block first and the colors separately. This process helped him to develop abstract art, ascribing the quality and impact of sound to color and form.

The outstretched legs of the galloping horse, the crouching rider, and a hint of fir trees testify to the great sense of movement produced by abstract means. Just a few strokes and colored spots indicate the landscape the horse and its rider are passing through. Half of the painting consists of empty space, but it is just as important as the painted part. The composition of the picture depends on this tension between the painted and the empty space which Kandinsky had studied in Japanese ink paintings and woodblock prints. The beauty of the space left empty, is called *yohaku no bi* (lit. ‘beauty of the blank’) in Japanese. This is a concept borrowed from Chinese landscape painting where clouds, mist, sky and water could be left unpainted. Their existence or presence was suggested simply by the carefully rendered edges of the surrounding landscape. This painting concept reflected the Taoist idea of *qi* (Jap. *chi*) – the formless energy from which all things emanate.³⁰ For Kandinsky, the white empty space in Chinese and Japanese paintings must have been a revelation. In ‘Das Geistige in der Kunst’ (‘The spiritual in art’) he writes about the color white: “[...] white, which is often considered a non-color, [is] like a symbol of a world where all colors, as material properties and substances, have disappeared. This world is so high above us that we cannot hear any sound from there. A great silence comes from there, which, materially represented, appears like an insurmountable, indestructible, infinite cold wall. For this reason, white likewise acts on our psyche as a great silence, which, to us, is absolute.[...] It is a silence

27 Franz Marc, “Zwei Bilder,” in Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc (eds) *op. cit.* 1912, p. 38.

28 “Es sind eigenwillige, feurige Zeichen einer neuen Zeit, die sich heute an allen Orten mehrten. Dieses Buch soll ihr Brennpunkt werden, bis die Morgenröte kommt und mit ihrem natürlichen Lichte diesen Werken das gespenstische Ansehen nimmt, in dem sie der heutigen Welt noch erscheinen. Was heute gespenstisch erscheint, wird morgen natürlich sein.” *Ibid.*, pp. 35 ff.

29 After this woodblock print, he painted the same image in oil on canvas, see Fig 12 b.

30 In the 12th century, Buddhist priest-artists brought the empty space concept and its expression to Japan. In time, the use of empty space moved beyond painting and became a key characteristic of Japanese art and design.

that is not dead, but full of possibilities. White sounds like a silence that can be suddenly understood.”³¹

Kandinsky's insight that the white is “full of possibilities” or – as Roger Goepper has put it – “full of potential”³² enabled Kandinsky to develop his theory of color sound further. He describes white as a “non-sound” that can be compared to pauses in music, or emptiness seen as potential, not as vacuum. His understanding of the color white as a “primeval color of potential” revolutionized his paintings and led him to what he called “absolute art”. Annegret Hoberg summarizes the impact of this discovery on Kandinsky as follows: “With the discovery of the ‘primary color white’ he learned that the character of a color or a line can be redefined infinitely.”³³ And Kandinsky himself stated: “This discovery turned the whole of painting upside down and opened up a realm that seemed inconceivable before. That is to say, the inner, thousand-fold, unlimited value of one and the same quality, the possibility of extracting and applying infinite series of just combinations of a single quality, opened the gates of the realm of absolute art for me.”³⁴

The Japanese and Chinese white spaces in ink paintings and woodblock prints and the concept of emptiness as potential provided him with a point of departure on his way to abstraction in art.

31 The original text reads: “[...] das Weiß, welches oft für eine Nichtfarbe gehalten wird, wie ein Symbol einer Welt, wo alle Farben, als materielle Eigenschaften und Substanzen, verschwunden sind. Diese Welt ist so hoch über uns, dass wir keinen Klang von dort hören können. Es kommt ein großes Schweigen von dort, welches, materiell dargestellt, wie eine unübersteigliche, unzerstörbare, ins Unendliche gehende kalte Mauer uns vorkommt. Deswegen wirkt auch das Weiß auf unsere Psyche als ein großes Schweigen, welches für uns absolut ist.[...] Es ist ein Schweigen, welches nicht tot ist, sondern voller Möglichkeiten. Das Weiß klingt wie Schweigen, welches plötzlich verstanden werden kann. Quoted after Annegret Hoberg (A.H.), in Helmut Friedel (ed.), *Kandinsky. Absolut abstrakt* (Munich, Berlin, London & New York: Prestel, 2008), p. 84.

32 See Roger Goepper, *Vom Wesen chinesischer Malerei* (Munich, 1962), p. 217.

33 Annegret Hoberg, “Wassily Kandinsky – Abstrakt. Absolut. Konkret,” in Helmut Friedel (ed.), *op. cit.* 2008, p.199.

34 “Diese Entdeckung stellte die ganze Malerei auf den Kopf und öffnete vor ihr ein Reich, an das man früher nicht glauben konnte. D.h. der innere, tausendfache, unbeschränkte Wert einer und derselben Qualität, die Möglichkeit, unendliche Reihen nur in Kombinationen mit einer einzigen Qualität herauszuholen und anzuwenden, rissen vor mir die Tore des Reiches der absoluten Kunst auf.“ Kandinsky „Mein Werdegang“, Text für einen Vortrag anlässlich seiner Ausstellung im Kreis für Kunst Köln, Januar 1914, in: Kandinsky, *Gesammelte Schriften I*, 1980 S. 56 f., quoted after Annegret Hoberg, “Wassily Kandinsky – Abstrakt. Absolut. Konkret,” in Helmut Friedel (ed.), *op. cit.* 2008, p. 199.

Conclusion

The painters of the *Blaue Reiter* integrated the *japoniste* achievements of the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists in their use of close-up views and cuts of foreground objects, decisive contouring, and a high-angle point of view. Reflecting on Japanese art was part of their quest to define the art of the future. For the artists of the earliest phase of Japonisme the encounter with Japanese art came at the right moment – they saw Japanese art as a confirmation of their own artistic development. This was even more the case for the artists of the *Blaue Reiter* discussed here. However, they were inspired by other aspects of Japanese art, for instance the tension between empty and painted surfaces and the potential of empty space. During a short period preceding World War I, this helped them to create their own style of expression and abstraction in painting. It was especially Franz Marc who dared to take a step in the use of bold color to express the emotional and immutable intrinsic qualities of the painted object. In addition, Japanese works of art in Franz Marc's collection showed him and his fellow artists how to reduce form and how to use empty space for their bold compositions.

Thus, the Japonisme of the *Blaue Reiter* led to abstraction and a revolution in color that can be termed as 'New German Japonisme'.