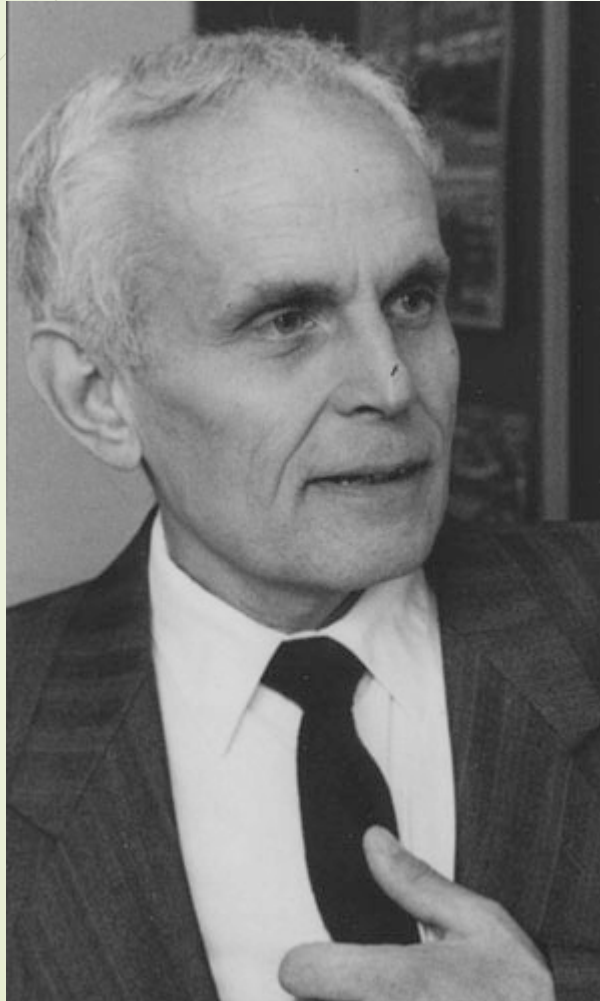


# The Sounding Cosmos Revisited

Ringbom, Kandinsky, the Theosophical Tradition and  
Religious/Artistic Innovation

Massimo Introvigne (UPS, Torino, Italy)

## 1965: «Dynamite in my baggage»



- On February 3, 1965, Finnish historian Sixten Ringbom (1935-1992, left) wrote from London's Warburg Institute to his wife that he had «DYNAMITE in my baggage» and was «in a manic state of mind», after he had discovered documents that, he believed, allowed for a truly revisionist interpretation of Kandinsky and the birth of modern abstract art

# 1966: First Article

- In 1966, Ringbom published in *The Journal of Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* his first article on Kandinsky. He argued that Kandinsky's interest in Theosophy and esotericism was not «some kind of personal hobby, a strictly private amusement which played a negligible role in the formation of his artistic outlook» but the very key to understanding his art

## ART IN 'THE EPOCH OF THE GREAT SPIRITUAL'

### OCCULT ELEMENTS IN THE EARLY THEORY OF ABSTRACT PAINTING

By Sixten Ringbom

In a review of a recent book on Kandinsky<sup>1</sup> the anonymous reviewer of *The Times Literary Supplement* criticized the author for not going into 'the apparently contradictory mixture of the nebulously mystical and the aridly rational in Kandinsky's approach to abstraction'. 'This is not only his most puzzling and fascinating characteristic', the reviewer continued, 'it also explains both his isolated position as an artist and his double appeal today to the two wings—hard and soft—of nonfigurative painting.'<sup>2</sup>

This critical observation applies not only to the work then under review,<sup>3</sup> but to much of what today is written on the early phases of abstract art. Kandinsky's biographers have shown faint interest in the artist's documented preoccupations with the occult or his attitude to theosophy and the teachings of Rudolf Steiner. Grohmann<sup>4</sup> remarks that Kandinsky shared Steiner's 'feeling that the world was headed for disaster, that science had failed, and that there was need for a spiritual rebirth', but at the same time assures the reader that although Kandinsky may have been influenced by Steiner's spiritual vision, the artist's 'interest in such matters subsided as he became clearer in his own mind about the role of rational elements in art.' According to Grohmann, Steiner's influence on Kandinsky's painting is restricted to the activity before 1914.<sup>5</sup> Johannes Eichner<sup>6</sup> devotes no less than six pages to Kandinsky's connexions with occultism, but none the less concludes that these somewhat surprising preoccupations did not affect Kandinsky's art.<sup>7</sup> Haftmann<sup>8</sup> notes the theosophical interests of the Blue Rider group, but adds the cryptic qualification that 'this religious sentiment remained free, unformulated, open to all wonders and prepared to see the wonder of revelation everywhere'. According to Cassou,<sup>9</sup> Kandinsky's idealism at first drew 'a little' upon theosophical writings by Steiner, H. P. Blavatsky, Annie Besant and Edouard Schuré, but only when it was independent of such influences did this idealism express itself with full force.

This general tendency to belittle the role of occultism in the early theory

The author wishes to thank Professor E. H. Gombrich, Professor L. D. Ettlinger and Mr. J. B. Trapp for advice and suggestions, and Dr. H. K. Röthel, Blauer Reiter-Archiv der Städtischen Galerie München, for the information contained in Appendix I.

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Lassaigne, *Kandinsky*, 1964.

<sup>2</sup> *The Times Literary Supplement*, no. 3282, 21 January 1965.

<sup>3</sup> Lassaigne, *op. cit.*, pp. 40, 53ff. Lassaigne calls the first half of Kandinsky's *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* 'a long mystical meditation', but does not discuss the sources of this mysticism.

<sup>4</sup> Will Grohmann, *Kandinsky, Life and Work*, 1959, pp. 41, 54, 84.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

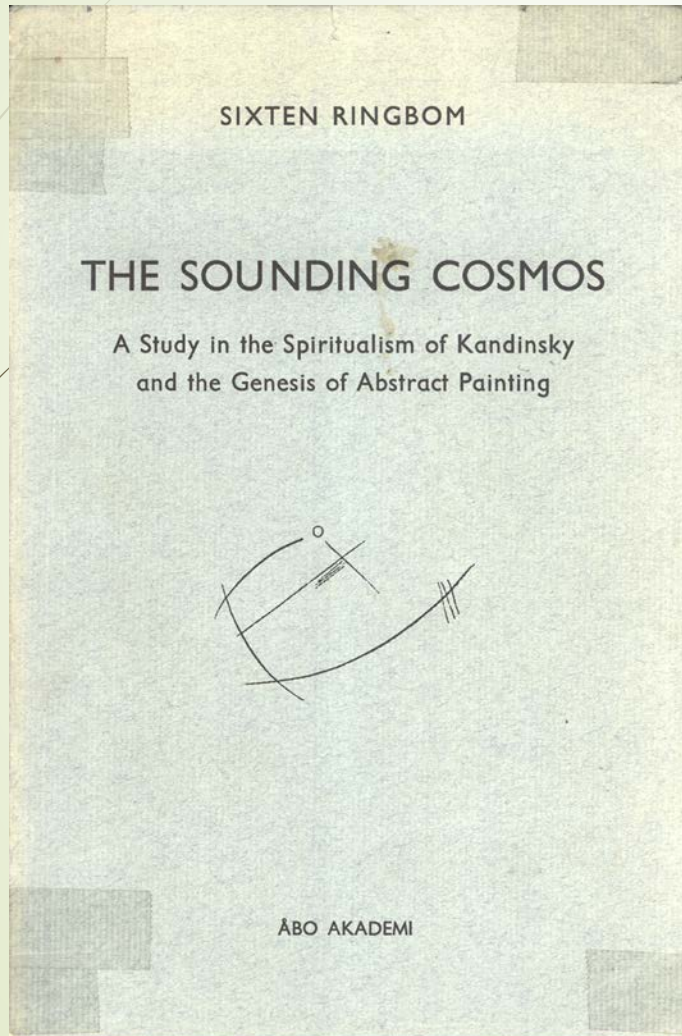
<sup>6</sup> Johannes Eichner, *Kandinsky und Gabriele Münter; Von Ursprüngen moderner Kunst*, [1957], pp. 17–21.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>8</sup> Werner Haftmann, *Painting in the Twentieth Century*, i, 1960, p. 118.

<sup>9</sup> Jean Cassou, 'Wassily Kandinsky—Der Mensch und das Werk', in: Wassily Kandinsky, *Gegenklänge; Aquarelle und Zeichnungen*, 1960, p. 19.

# 1970: *The Sounding Cosmos*

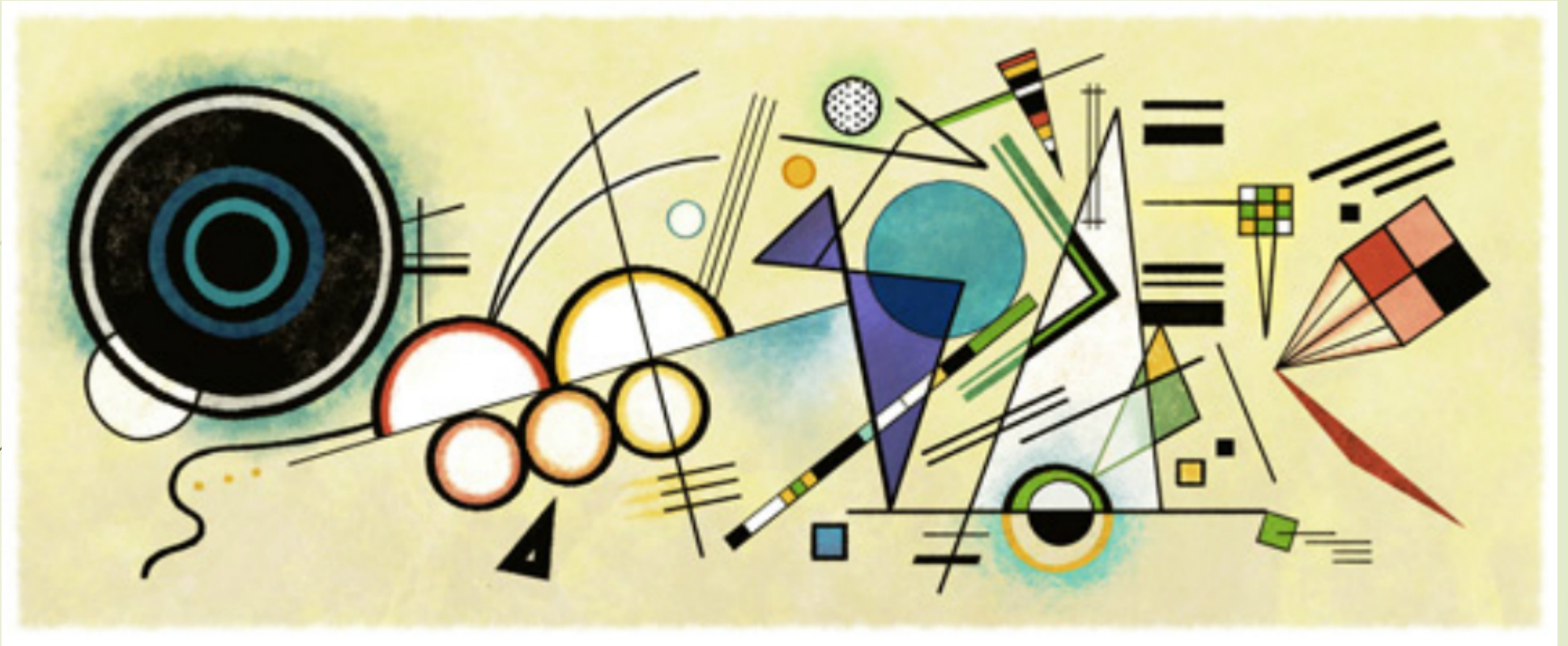


- The argument caused great controversy and even scandal. Ringbom developed it in 1970 into his book-length treatment of Kandinsky and the genesis of abstract painting, *The Sounding Cosmos*

# A Summary

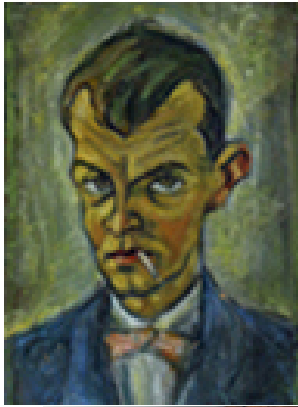
- I will discuss here:
- 1. Who was Sixten Ringbom
- 2. His revisionist approach to Kandinsky (right)
- 3. The reception of his studies





I. Who Was Sixten Ringbom?

# An Academic Dynasty



- In 1970, Sixten Ringbom (right) succeeded his father Lars-Ivar Ringbom (1935-1993, left) as professor of art history in the Åbo Akademi University, Finland's Swedish-language university located in Turku. Among Sixten's students was his eventual successor Åsa Ringbom (below), the wife of one of his cousins

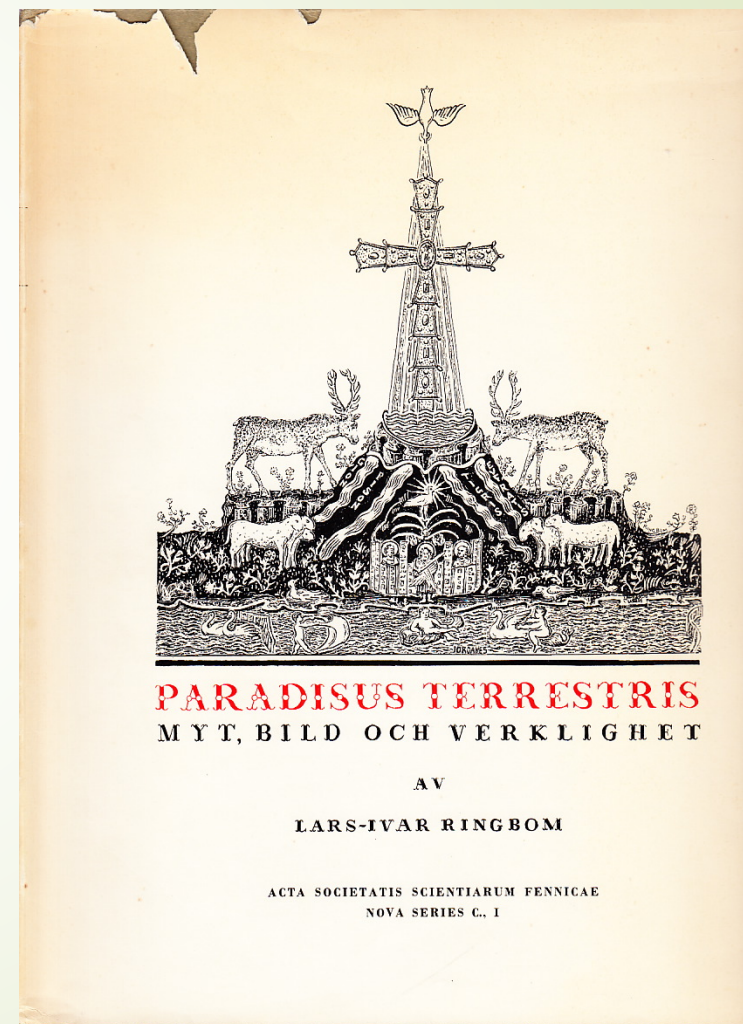
# The Presence of the Father



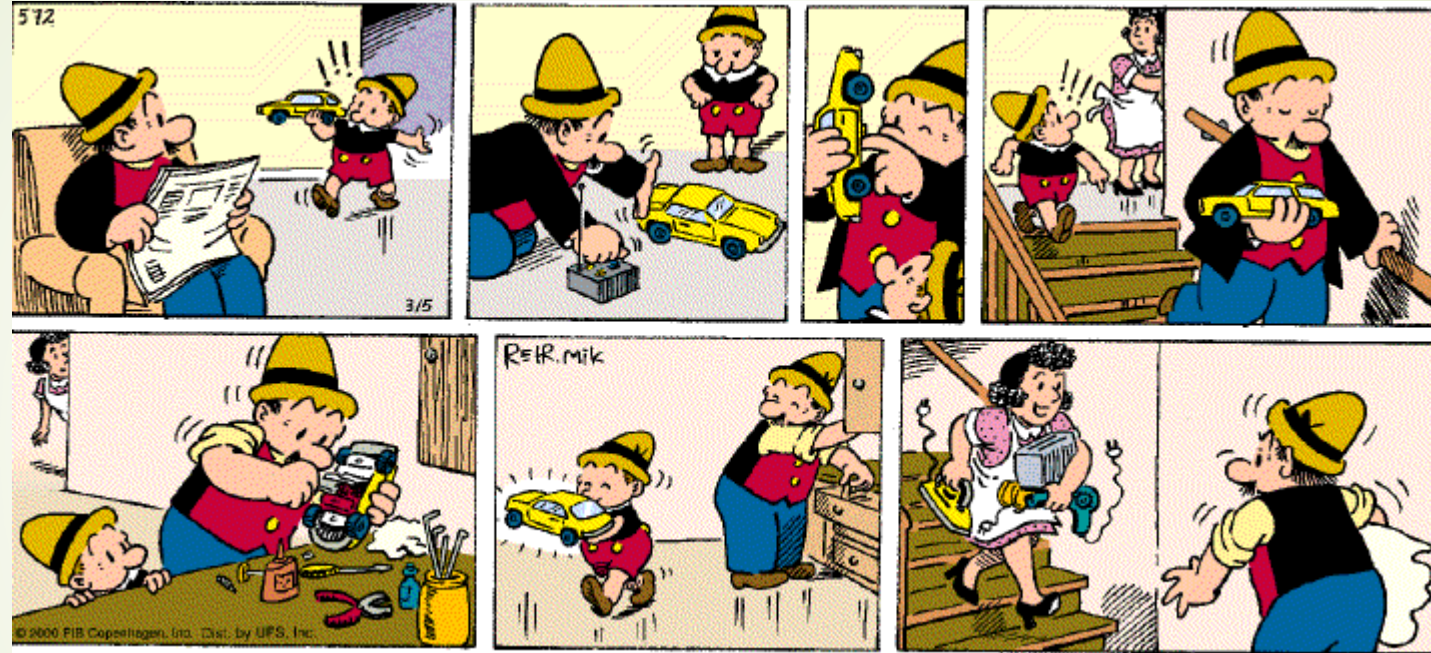
- Lars-Ivar Ringbom's reliance on both the irrationalist philosophy of Ludwig Klages (1872-1956) and art historical theories of Josef Strzygowski (1862-1941, left) led him to a controversial search for the roots of Medieval art in a primordial Indo-German cradle of Western religion and culture, the real historical Garden of Eden, that he located in Azerbaijan

# An Embarrassing Legacy

- Sixten was very much aware that his father's theories were dangerously close to Nazism, and that Lars-Ivar, although by no means a Nazi, sided with the Germans in World War II, as «the lesser of two evils» with respect to Soviet Russia. The need to deal with his father's legacy influenced many of his studies

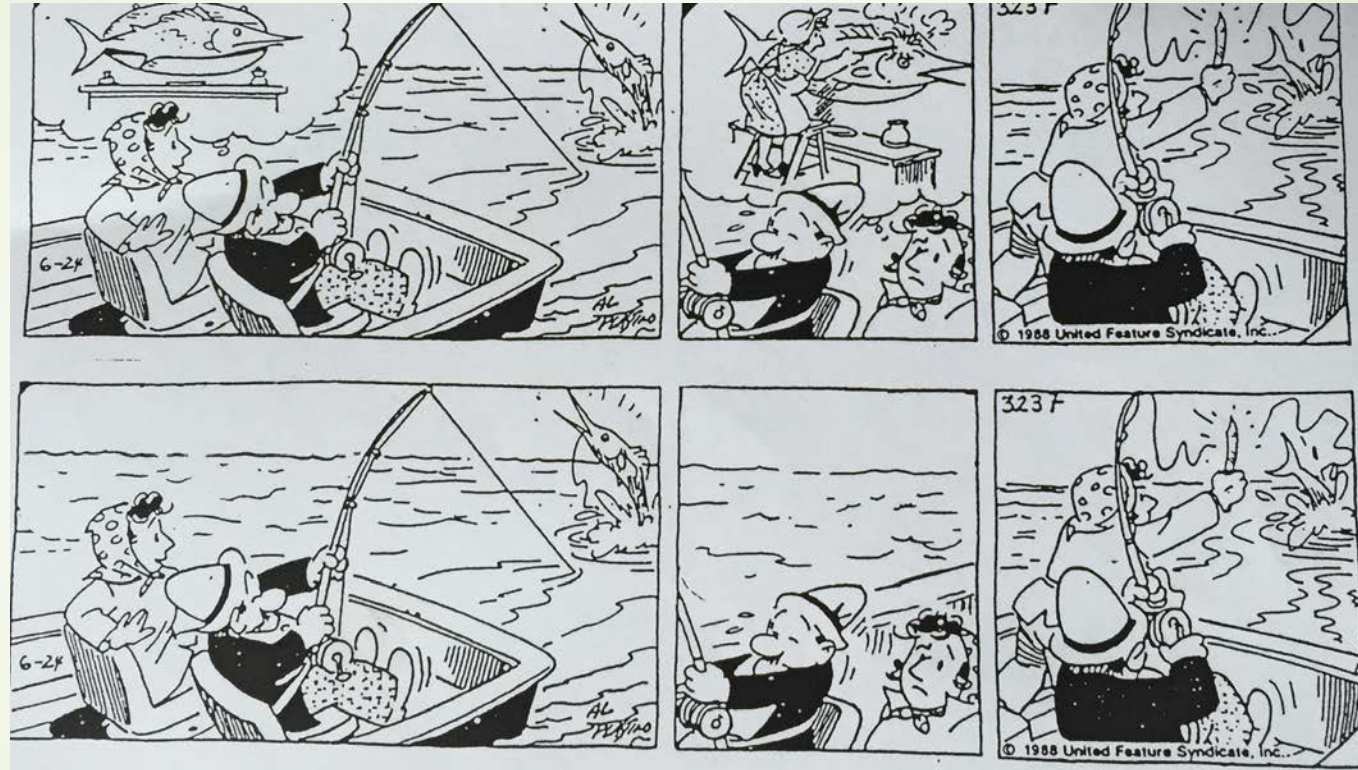


# From Cartoon to Icon



- At age 20, Sixten Ringbom traveled to Italy, was fascinated by Medieval and Renaissance art, and decided he wanted to be an art historian. He devoted most of his career to elucidating how pictures tell stories, even when they are not accompanied by texts. He discussed inter alia comic strips without text, such as *Ferdinand*, created by Danish comic artist Henning Dahl Mikkelsen (1915-1982)(above)

# Ringbom on *Ferdinand*



- Above, we see a *Ferdinand* strip in original, and below the same strip retouched by Ringbom. If the thoughts of Ferdinand's wife were not depicted – since she does not speak – why she cuts the fishing line would become unclear

# Indirect Narration and Holy Images



- For Ringbom, how to clearly convey a meaning without using words («indirect narration») was a very serious problem. He focused his doctoral dissertation *Icon to Narrative* (1965), on late Medieval and early modern Catholic images - such as the *Holy Family* by the Master of Delft (circa 1510, above)

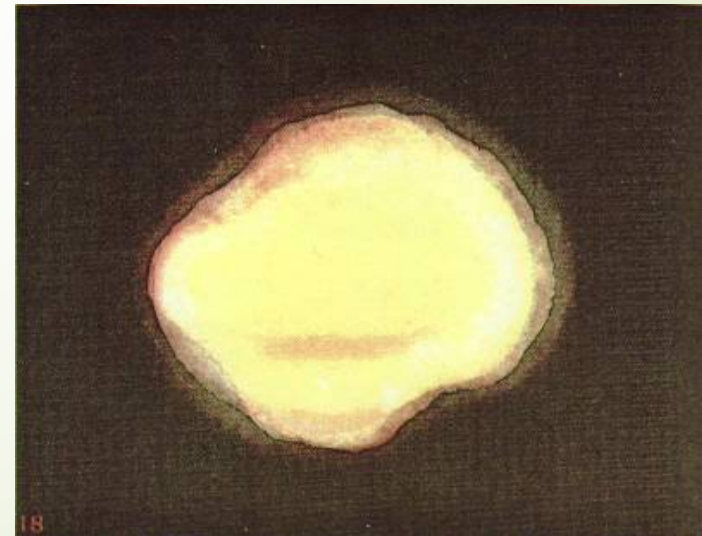
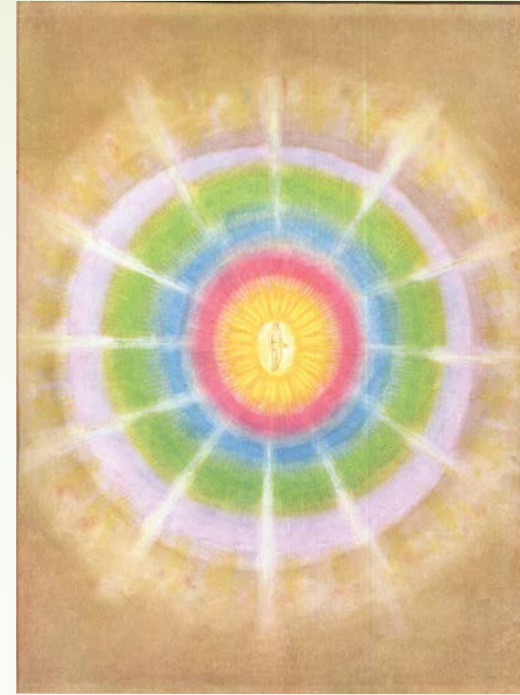
# Librarian at the Donner Institute



- While considering how modern abstract art, without figures, can also «tell stories», Ringbom supplemented his income by working as a librarian, between 1963 and 1968, at the Donner Institute, a private institution attached to the Åbo Akademi University. The largest Nordic library of comparative religions, it was founded by Anthroposophists, and his work there familiarized Ringbom with the writings of Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925)

# Thought-Forms

- At the Donner, Ringbom discovered the book by Theosophical leaders Annie Besant (1847-1933) and Charles Webster Leadbeater (1854-1934) *Thought-Forms* (right), claiming that thoughts and emotions have forms and colors, which a trained clairvoyant is able to recognize

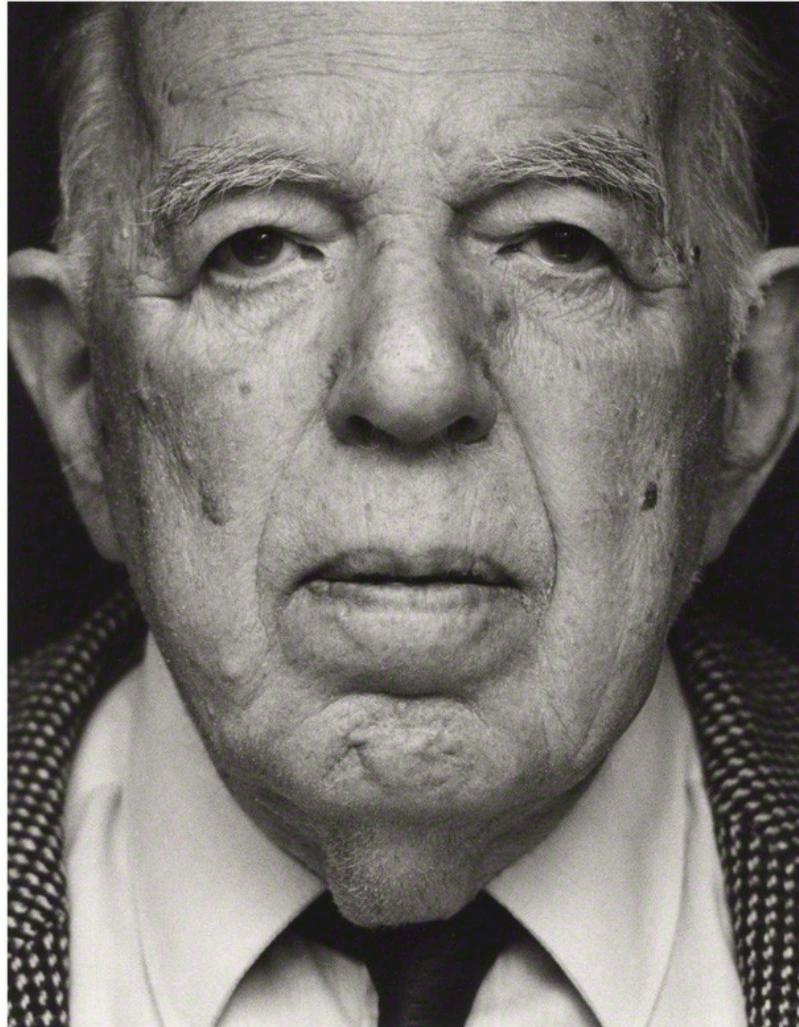


# Concerning the Spiritual in Art

- Ringbom noticed how some of the Theosophical «thought-forms» were similar to abstract art. He knew that Kandinsky quoted Theosophy in his seminal book *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1911) and decided to further explore the connection



# The Warburg Connection



- Partly as a reaction against his father's irrationalist approach, Ringbom favored the rationalism of Austro-British art historian Ernst Gombrich (1909-2001), whom he asked to supervise his thesis. Through Gombrich, he was introduced to London's Warburg Institute, where he first worked at his dissertation and later was encouraged to pursue his studies on Kandinsky's esoteric connections



## II. Ringbom's Approach to Kandinsky

# Before Ringbom

VASILY KANDINSKY, 1909 - 1913: PAINTING AND THEORY

by  
Rose-Carol Washton

1968

A Dissertation presented to the Faculty  
of the Graduate School of Yale University in  
Candidacy for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy.

- Ringbom was not the only scholar to notice Kandinsky's esoteric connections. They were noted by several contemporaries and in doctoral dissertations of the 1960s, including one at Yale by Rose-Carol Washton (later Washton-Long) of 1968, that Ringbom did not know in 1970 and became known to the general public only when it matured into a book in 1980
- No other author, however, went as far as Ringbom in exploring the connections systematically

# Washton-Long's Thesis

- Washton-Long's thesis had her inaccuracies, but is not without interest. She took Ringbom's 1966 Warburg article as her starting point, but added new evidence about Kandinsky's sustained interest in Schuré and Blavatsky. She also interviewed surviving witnesses of Kandinsky's Munich years, including painter David Burliuk (1882-1967, right)



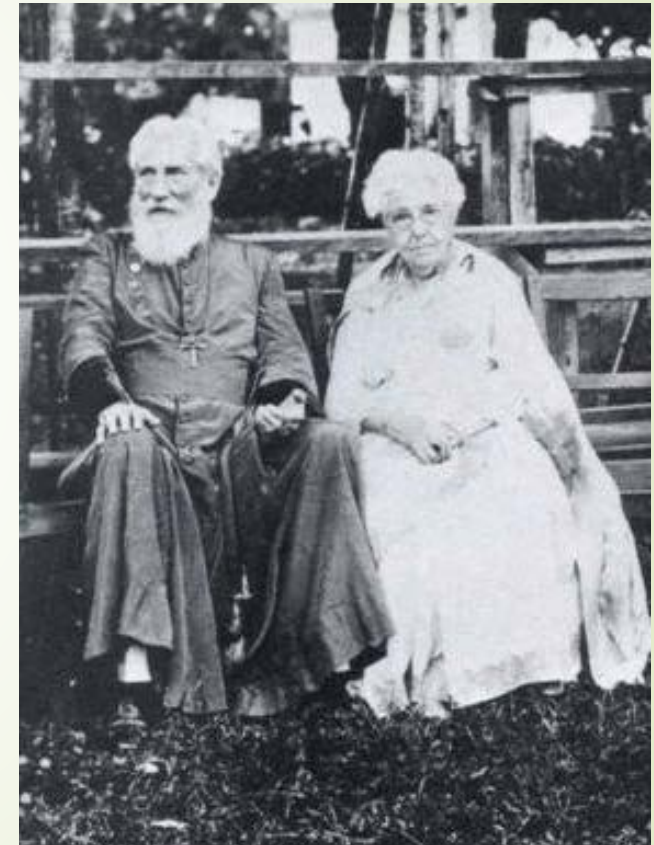
# The Christian Kandinsky



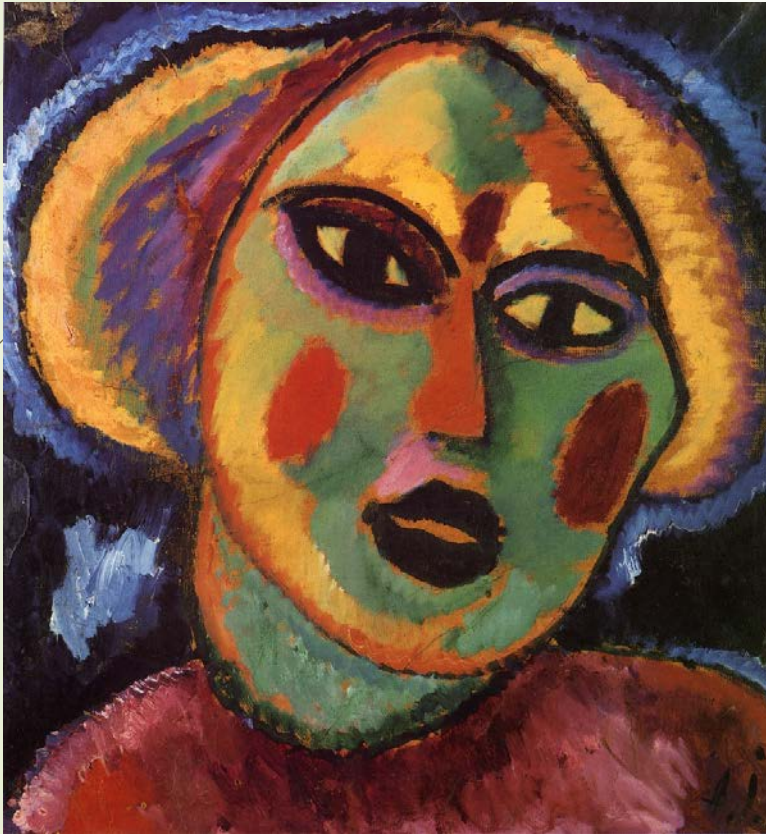
- Washton-Long also noted that Ringbom failed to emphasize how Kandinsky managed to remain an esoteric Christian. He never accepted the Theosophical idea that Buddhism and Hinduism were superior to Christianity and, for this reason, preferred the Theosophy of Steiner (left) to the version of Besant and Leadbeater

# Ringbom on Kandinsky: Ten Theses

- Ringbom developed a series of arguments that I would summarize in ten theses:
  1. During the Munich period (1896-1914), Kandinsky was impressed by new scientific discoveries about the atom. At that time, he also became familiar with the writings of Steiner, Blavatsky, and the Besant-Leadbearer duo (right), and interpreted the scientific discoveries in the occult sense that there is a «refined matter» perceptible only by «inner senses»



# The Great Initiates



A. Jawlenski, *Maiden with Violet Blouse*, 1912

- 2. In 1907, Kandinsky read the German edition of the esoteric classic *The Great Initiates* by French Theosophist Edouard Schuré (1841-1929), an author the painter already knew through his friend, the expressionist painter Alexej Jawlenski (1864-1941). Kandinsky became persuaded that a new era, the «Epoch of the Great Spiritual», was coming

# A Theosophical Circle

- 3. At that time, Kandinsky and his lover Gabriele Münter (1877-1962), were part of a Munich circle from which the Blue Rider movement would emerge in 1911. The circle included several artists in close contact with Steiner before and after his break with the Theosophical Society
- One of these, Maria Strakosch-Giesler (1877-1970) took Kandinsky and Münter to lectures given by Steiner. According to Strakosch-Giesler, Steiner recognized Kandinsky as a natural clairvoyant



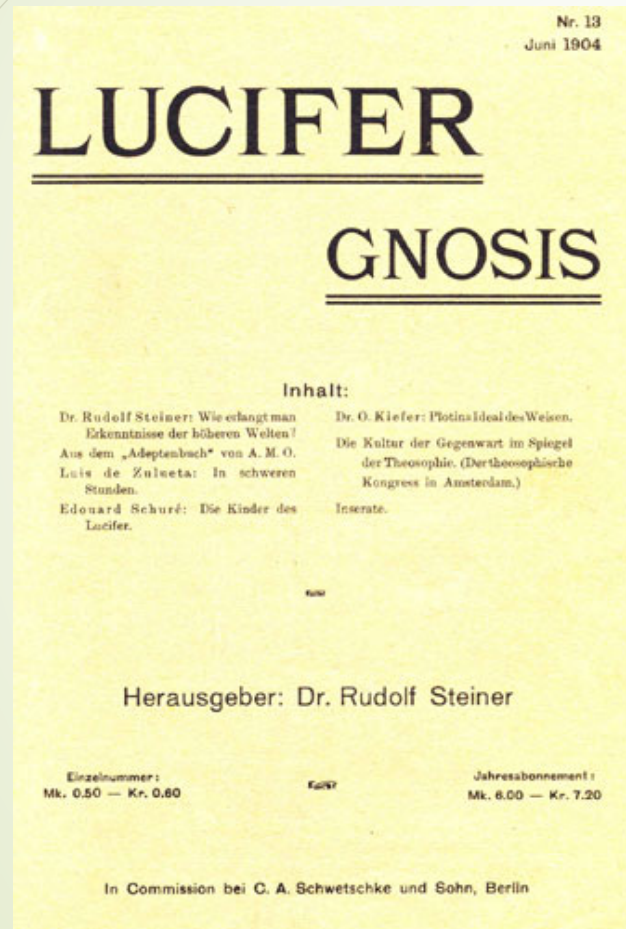
M. Strakosch-Geisler, *Element I*, 1930

# Marianne Werefkin (1860-1938)



- A close associate of Kandinsky and Münter was Russian painter Marianne Werefkin, Jawlensky's companion. Her journals are a primary source for the relationship between Kandinsky and Steiner, whom she also followed with interest. She claimed that Kandinsky's 1908 *Ariel Scene from Goethe's Faust* (left) was intended as an illustration of a lecture by Steiner on that subject

# Theosophical Readings



- 4. Kandinsky read and annotated Steiner's book *Theosophie* and several issue of the German Theosophical magazine *Lucifer-Gnosis*. He also read *Thought-Forms*, as he himself reported to friends in later years – or so Ringbom claimed

# Kandinsky's Occult Milieu

- 5. Steiner's Theosophy, and later Anthroposophy, were not the only new religious movements Kandinsky was interested in. His writings and notebooks refer to Spiritualism, and one of his close friends was composer Thomas de Hartmann (1885-1956), a man with multiple occult interests who later became a close associate of Armenian spiritual teacher George Gurdjieff (1866?-1949)



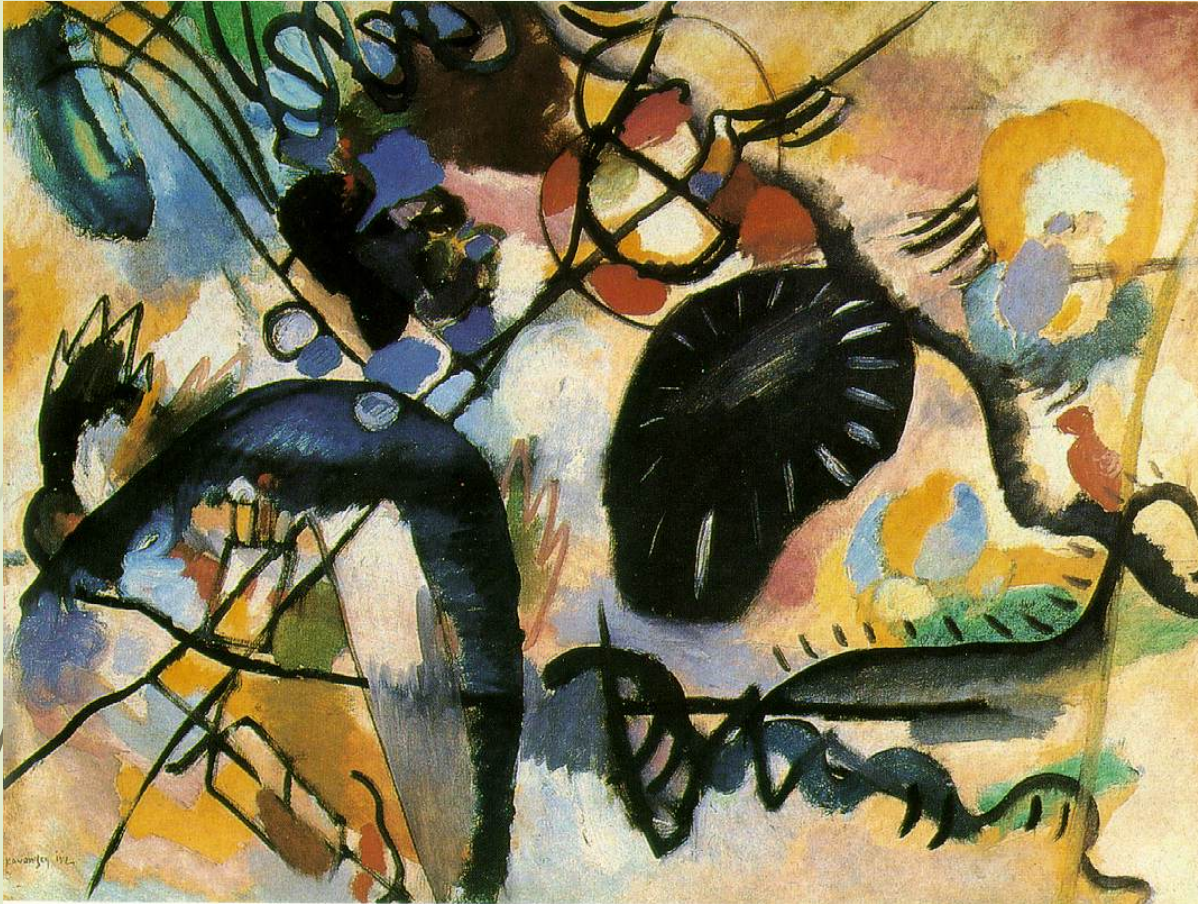
Kandinsky (seated), de Hartmann (far right) and friends

# Olga de Hartmann Speaks



- As a footnote to Ringbom, it is perhaps useful to add that Washton-Long for her thesis interviewed Olga de Hartmann (1885-1979), who reported that she, her husband – who, inter alia, wrote the musical score for Kandinsky's piece *The Yellow Sound* (1909) – and Kandinsky met to discuss Blavatsky and Steiner and to perform parapsychological experiments, including psychic lifting of tables and telepathic communications from Munich with friends in Russia

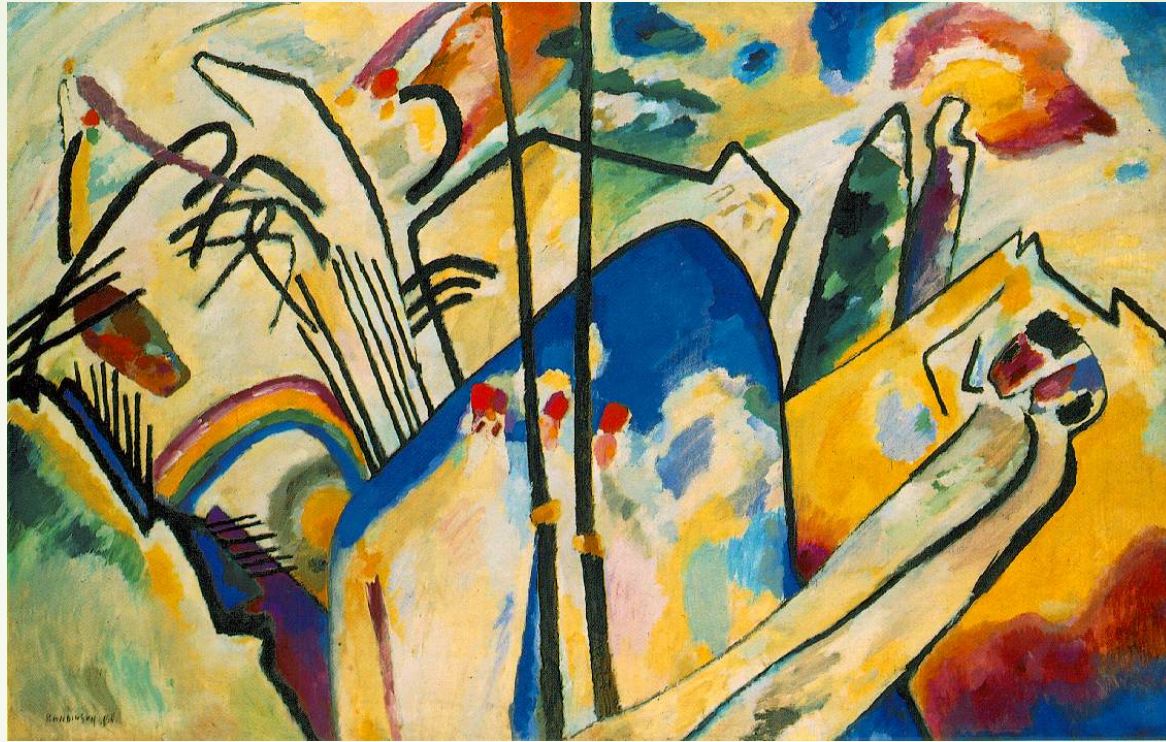
# A Decisive Influence



Kandinsky, *Black Spot I* (1912)

- 6. Far from being merely anecdotal, Ringbom claimed, these Theosophical and occult connections led Kandinsky to the idea of an art that would grasp the «inner content» or «inner sound» of reality, what remains when all corporeal and material forms have been dissolved

# The Eternal Element



- 7. Kandinsky (*Composition IV*, 1911, above) wanted to avoid both realism, that he associated with materialism, and an abstract art without content, which would amount to mere decoration, «a glove without the hand». He solved the problem with the theory of «inner necessity»: each work of art responds to three «necessities», the artist's personality, his style, and the «purely and eternally artistic». Only the third element is objective and invariable

# Looking for the Inner Sound



Kandinsky, *Impression III (Concert)*, 1911

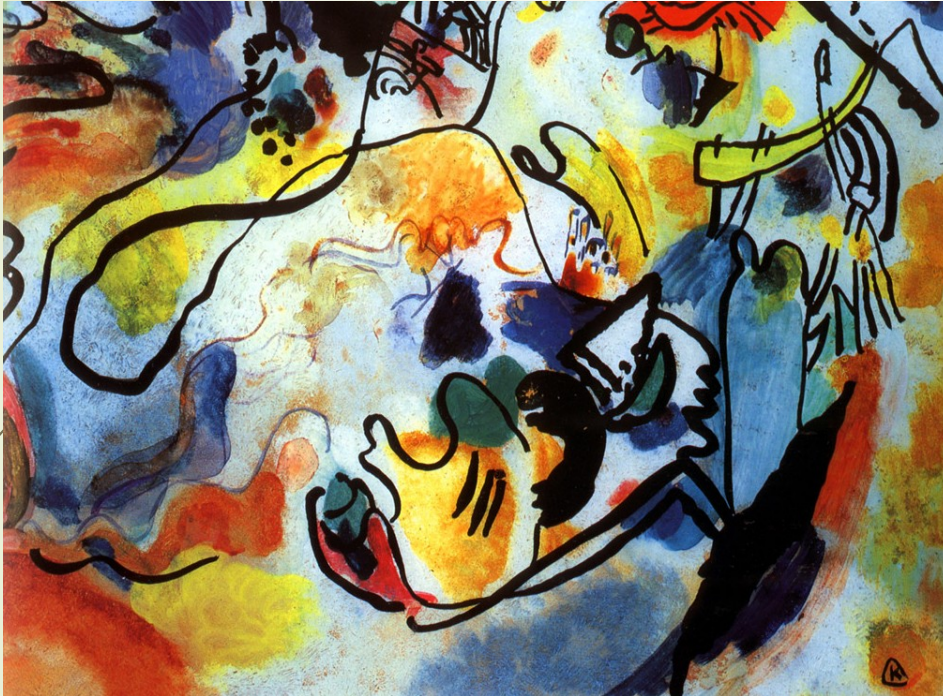
- Theosophy and esotericism helped Kandinsky define how art can be totally emancipated from realism and figuration, yet remain objective. Abstract art is not arbitrary, nor does it express mere feelings. It catches Blavatsky's «inner truth» or the «inner sound» of each object

# Composition VII



- 8. This theory led Kandinsky into the journey from figurative (symbolist) to abstract painting. A key example by Ringbom is Kandinsky's *Composition VII* (1913, above)

# The Genesis of *Composition VII*



- The artist went from several depictions of *The Last Judgement* (1911, left), where figures of humans and animals are still recognizable, to the so called first abstract watercolor (1913, right) and to *Composition VII*. The scene in the three paintings, Ringbom claims, is one and the same but in 1913 Kandinsky tried to paint the «inner essence» of each element rather than its (stylized) appearance

# Kandinsky and Millennialism

- 9. Ringbom also claimed that Kandinsky's theories (just like Mondrian's) included a millenarian element. The passage of the art into the Epoch of the Great Spiritual would herald the passage of the whole human society into a new era, the «third kingdom» of both the Medieval abbot Joachim of Fiore (1135-1202) and Steiner. «Now, Kandinsky wrote, we enter the great day of the revelation of this kingdom: the kingdom of the Spirit, the revelation of the Spirit. Father – Son – Holy Spirit»



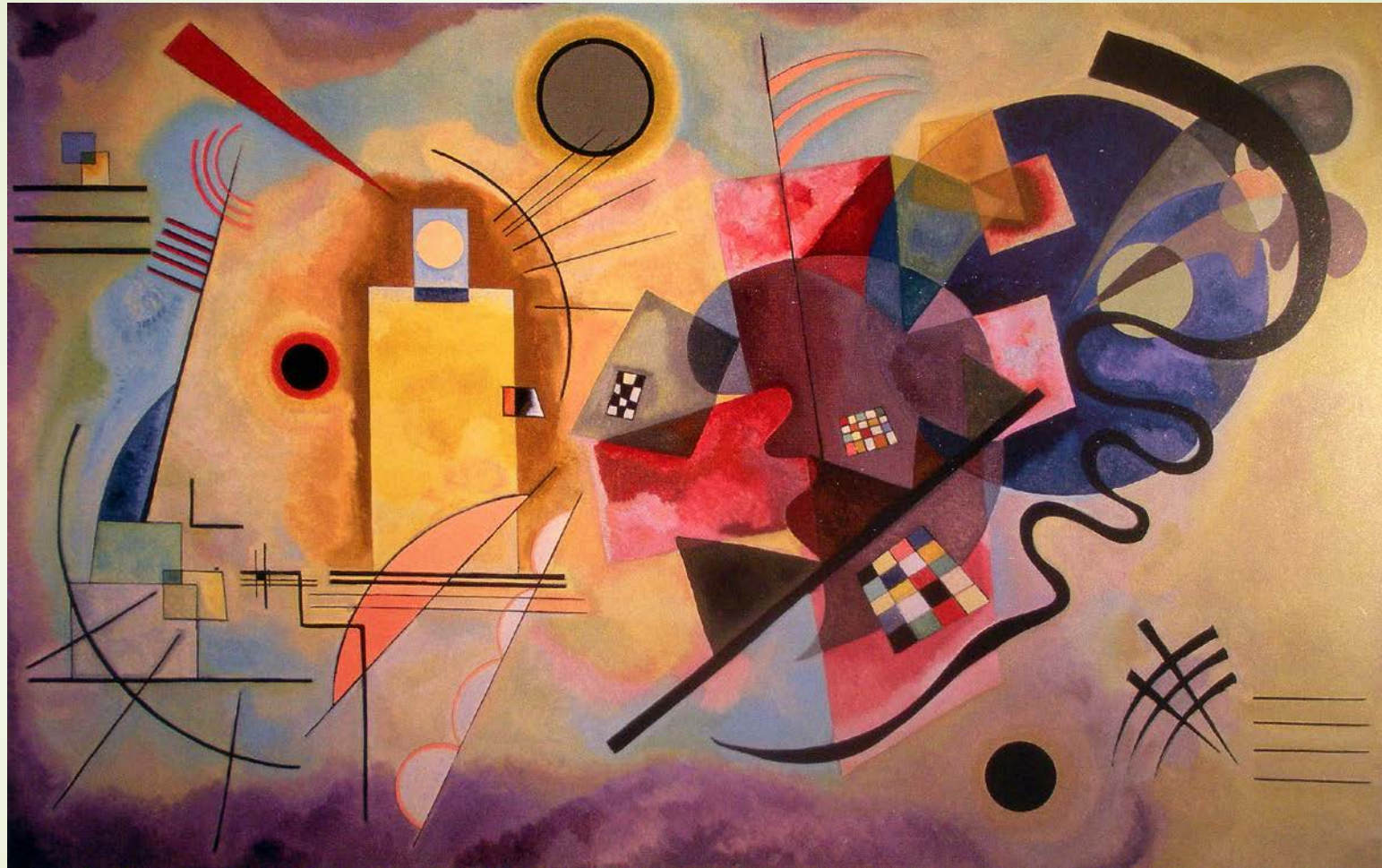
Kandinsky, *Sound of Trumpets*, 1911

# A Continuing Interest



Kandinsky, *Succession*, 1935

- 10. Ringbom studied Kandinsky's Munich period before World War I. He admitted that later, when he published *Point and Line to Plane* (1925), Kandinsky showed a more rationalist approach, but claimed that in the 1930 he reverted to his early ideas, suggested to «se méfier de la logique en art – et peut-être ailleurs aussi» and dreamed of a Grande Synthèse, yet another incarnation of the Epoch of the Great Spiritual



### III. Ringbom's Impact and Legacy

# Ringbom and Theosophy



- ▶ Ringbom had a very ambiguous approach to Theosophy. As reported by leading Ringbom scholar, Maria Väätäinen, he assured Theosophists that he never intended to «attack Theosophy» or Blavatsky (left), yet in letters to other correspondents he was keen to distance himself from «occult mumbo jumbo and theosophical trash culture»

# A Tale of Two Stories

- An agnostic and a rationalist, Ringbom hesitated, Väättäinen writes, between two stories about modern art: «an optimistic one where the art's wedding with the occult brought a new tantric world of images» and «a pessimistic one» where the occult «opened a way to dangerous irrationalism»



Kandinsky, *Brown with Supplement*, 1935

# Ringbom under Attack



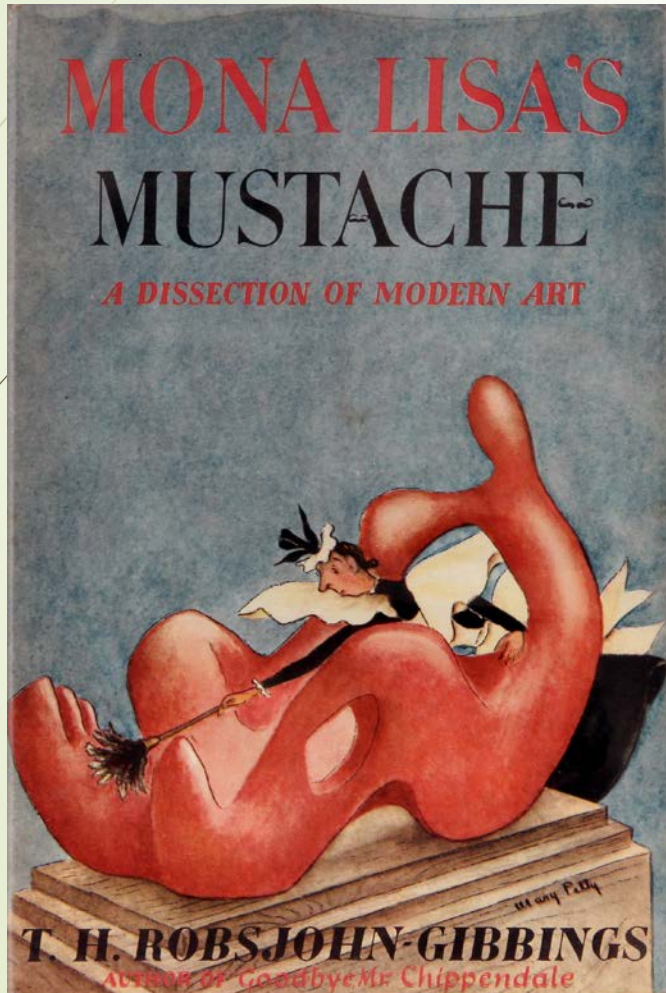
- *The Sounding Cosmos* did not get a single review in a scholarly journal during Ringbom's lifetime. It was never reprinted. One of the consequences of the book was that, for many years, scholars were not allowed to examine material pertaining to Theosophy in the Kandinsky archives at the Stadtische Galerie in Munich (left), whose curator, historian Hans Konrad Röthel (1909-1982), claimed Ringbom had breached a promise to keep certain documents confidential

# Esotericism and Deviance

- Ringbom's book got slandering comments for several years from several Kandinsky experts. We need to understand the context. As Wouter Hanegraaff (right) demonstrated in his *Esotericism and the Academy* (2012) for centuries, from the Enlightenment to Marxism, esotericism and esoteric movements were studied as forms of reactionary, irrationalist deviance. After World War II, esotericism was often associated with Nazism



# Modern Art as Occult Conspiracy



- ▶ That Kandinsky and other abstract luminaries – Piet Mondrian (1872-1944) was a loyal member of the Theosophical Society – took an interest in occult societies was well known to their contemporaries. But it was used as a weapon against them and modern art in general by evangelical Christian and other critics, most notably by American decorator Terence Harold Robsjohn-Gibbings (1905-1976) in his *Mona Lisa's Mustache* (1947)

# Revisionism as Denial



- Ringbom himself suspected that the popular book by Robsjohn-Gibbings led to another form of revisionism, where apologists for abstract art simply denied that Theosophical and other occult interests were important for its founders
- As late as 1990, a leading Mondrian scholar, Yve-Alain Bois, wrote that happily «the theosophical nonsense with which the artist's mind was momentarily encumbered» disappeared quite rapidly from his art. In fact, Mondrian himself (left) wrote: «I got everything from *The Secret Doctrine*» (Theosophy's main theoretical book)

# Revisionism and Counter-Revisionism



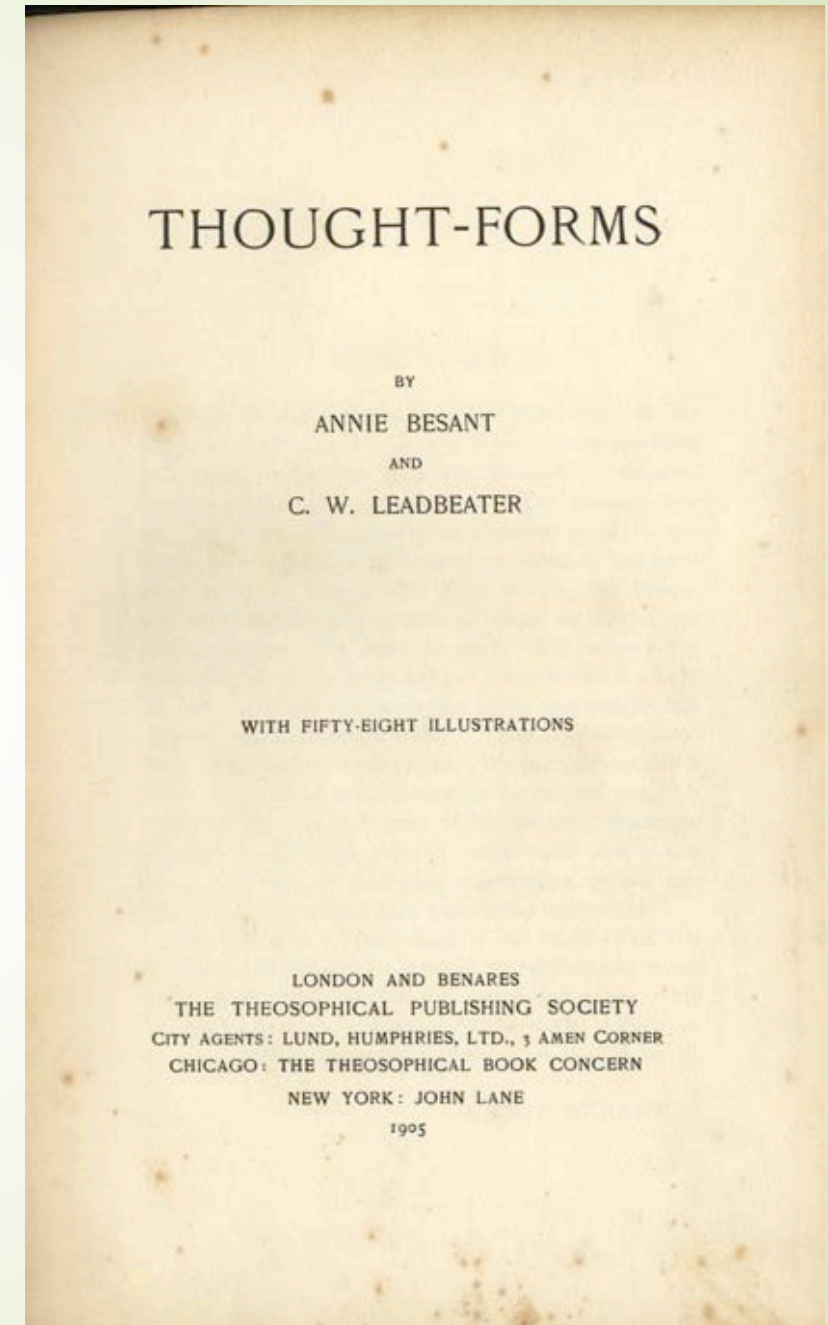
Kandinsky, *Untitled (Deluge)*, 1914

- To Ringbom himself, it was clear that he was engaged in a counter-revisionism, reacting to the first degree revisionism of those who tried to hide Kandinsky's occult connections. In a letter quoted by Väätäinen, he wrote in 1980 that he «had a feeling that the whole question of the irrational sources of modernism **had been swept under the carpet by a scholarly community anxious to save the respectability of the modern movement.** For that reason, I felt, every available piece of evidence had to be **hammered into the tick heads of the same community**»

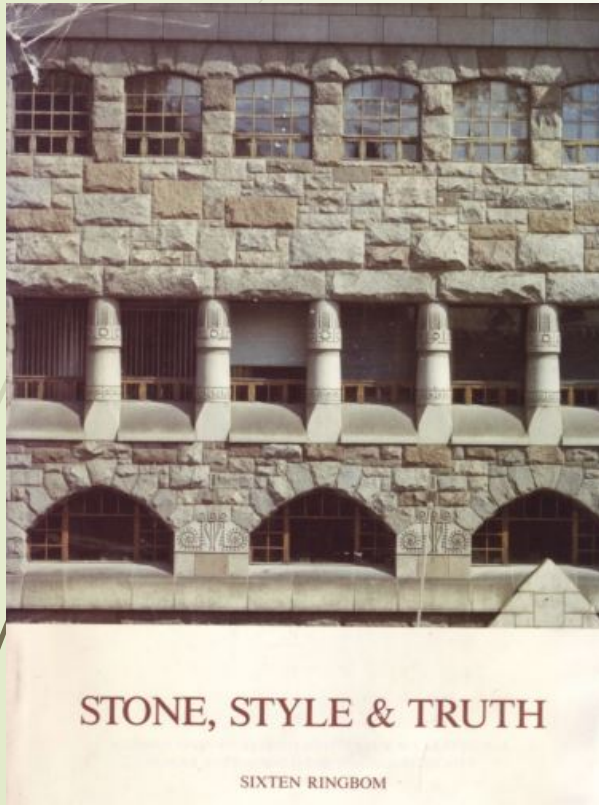
# Mistakes

- Ringbom's book did include factual mistakes. He over-emphasized the influence on Kandinsky of the book *Thought-Forms*, based on unconvincing evidence. Of one important Ringbom mistake his critics were not aware: based on a typo in the 1925 edition of *Thought-Forms*, he believed that the first had been published in 1901, although the real date was 1905 – hence, it could not have influenced anybody before 1905\*

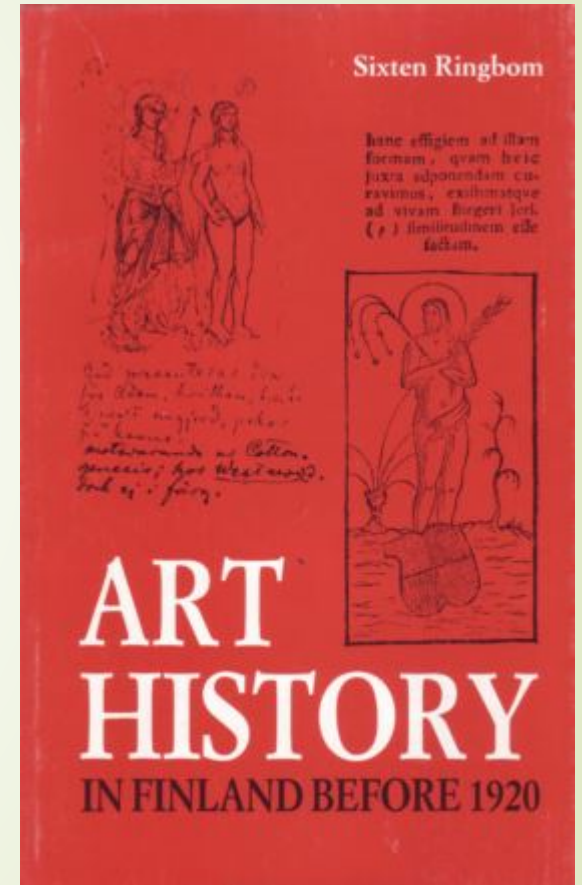
\* See John Crow, "Thought Forms: A bibliographic error," *Theosophical History*, XVI, no. 3-4 (July-October 2012): 126-127



# Ringbom in Retreat



- Capitalizing on Ringbom's factual mistakes, his thesis about Kandinsky was also dismissed as a whole, occasionally in terms verging on the insult. In the 1970s and 1980s, Ringbom still wrote some articles on Kandinsky, but mostly retreated to the safer field of Finnish art



# The Fourth Dimension



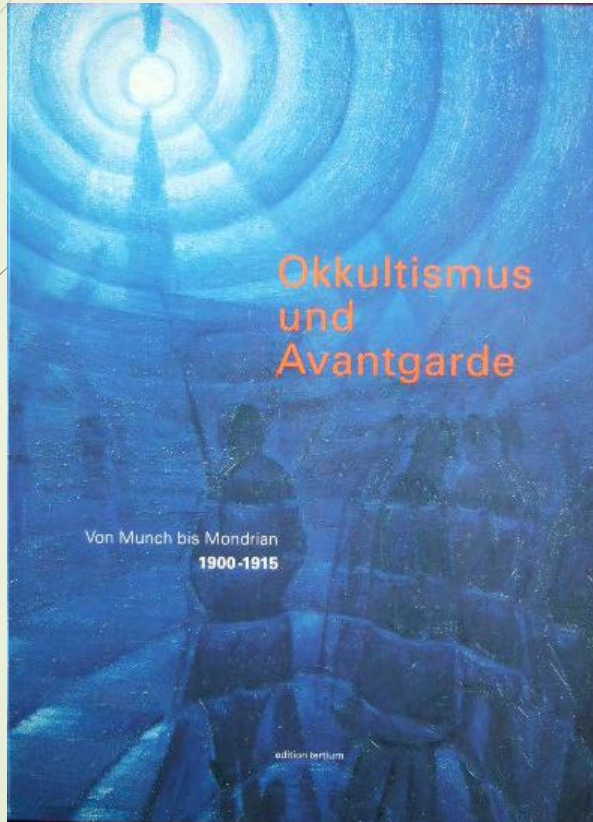
- This is, however, only part of the story. In 1983, Linda Dalrymple Henderson (left), a well-respected American art historian, published her seminal *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art*, where she proved, quoting Ringbom approvingly, that Theosophy and other esoteric movements played a crucial part in leading artists to explore a fourth dimension located in space rather than in time, a key element of modernism and abstract art

# Ringbom Redux: Los Angeles 1986

- In 1986, American star curator Maurice Tuchman organized in Los Angeles the exhibition *The Spiritual in Art*, which basically extended Ringbom's argument to modern art in general. Ringbom was invited to lecture and contribute to the mammoth catalogue, and felt finally vindicated



# From Los Angeles to Frankfurt



- Tuchman was in turn controversial, but his command of a network of influential relationships in the art world was much wider than Ringbom's. He held his own against criticism, and gradually to claim that modern art, particularly abstract, had something to do with esotericism and Theosophy became fashionable in several circles. This was evidenced by several exhibitions, including *Okkultismus und Avantgarde* (Frankfurt 1995). By that time, however, Ringbom had succumbed to cancer, dying in 1992 at the premature age of 57.

# Persisting Revisionism

- Pre-Ringbom revisionism still exists, although it represents a minority view. The London *Times*' star critic Waldemar Januszczak (right) wrote on February 21, 2010: «The fact is, theosophy is embarrassing. If there is one thing you do not want your hardcore modernist to be, it is a member of an occult cult. Theosophy takes art into Dan Brown territory. No serious student of art history wants to touch it»



# Enchanted Modernities

- In 2013, the conference *Enchanted Modernities: Theosophy and the Arts in the Modern World* at the University of Amsterdam included some 50 papers, with an audience of 150 scholars plus some 2,000 connected via streaming from all over the world
- Conferences, publications, and exhibitions on the subject continue at an increasing pace. Ringbom's shortcomings are noted, but it is also recognized that in a way he started the whole movement



# Revisionism or New Orthodoxy?



Kandinsky, *Fairy Tale*, 1918

- Every revisionism runs the risk of becoming sooner or later a new orthodoxy. There is the risk of interpreting Kandinsky exclusively through Theosophical lenses, something Ringbom himself never did. In fact, Kandinsky's art and theory are the product of multiple influences: Russian, French and German avant-gardes, Byzantine icons, Russian and German folk art....

# Towards a More Balanced Approach

- ... Siberian shamanism, and the artist's ethnographic journey of 1886 to Vologda, Northern Russia.
- Recent exhibitions came to a more nuanced assessment. Theosophy and other new religious movements were an important presence in the birth of modern abstract art – as Ringdom claimed – but by no means the only one



Vologdan artifact, from the «Artist as Shaman» Kandinsky exhibition in Vercelli, Italy, 2014, with Eugenia Petrova as curator



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