

*Maven of Modernism: Galka Scheyer in California*



*Sketch for "Deluge I", 1912*  
Vasily Kandinsky  
Russian, 1866–1944  
Oil and charcoal on cardboard mounted on wood  
13-7/8 x 19-1/8 in. (35.2 x 48.6 cm)

Galka Scheyer had studied to be a painter before she discovered the work of artist Alexei Jawlensky in 1915. She was so moved by his art that she gave up her own art practice in order to devote herself to the promotion of his. Although her given name was Emilie, Jawlensky called her “Galka,” the Russian word for a jackdaw, a gregarious, intelligent crow, and she adopted the name as her own. Through Jawlensky, Scheyer met artist Paul Klee in 1919, and then Lyonel Feininger and Vasily Kandinsky in 1922. While all four artists worked in Germany, Kandinsky and Jawlensky were Russian, Klee was Swiss, and Feininger had been born in the United States. In 1924, united by friendship and a commitment to Modernism, they signed a formal agreement to show their work as a group. The group would be called “The Blue Four” and it would be promoted abroad by Scheyer who was about to sail to the United States. Each artist entrusted a selection of his art to Scheyer for her to bring to the U.S. First in New York, then in San Francisco, and finally Los Angeles, Scheyer gave lectures, hosted salons, and organized exhibitions of their work. Although she did not have much luck as an art dealer, she worked tirelessly to promote their work to an American audience. An eyewitness to her first public lecture on Jawlensky in 1920 recalled that her words “were like flames” and that her listeners “caught fire.” According to another friend, photographer Edward Weston, Scheyer possessed “insight of unusual clarity, and an ability to express herself in words, brilliantly, forcefully. She is an ideal ‘go-between’ for the artist and his public.” This calling to act as a bridge between art and the public also spilled over into her work as an art teacher for countless children in New York and Los Angeles.

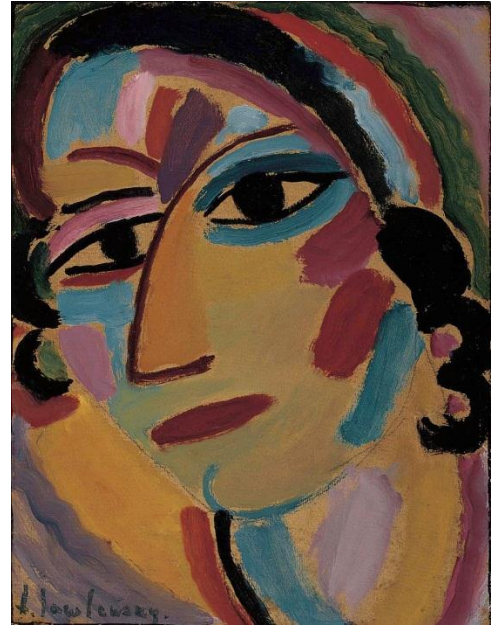
Her work promoting the art of the Blue Four abroad took on new significance with the rise of the Nazi regime and the subsequent suppression of modern art in Germany in the 1930’s. The Blue Four were included in the Nazi’s Degenerate Art Exhibition in 1937 and their work, and those of their peers, were removed from state museums, some never to be seen again.

***Mystical Head: Galka*, 1917**

Alexei Jawlensky (Russian, 1864-1941)  
Oil and pencil on tan textured cardboard  
15-1/2 x 12 in. (39.4 x 30.5 cm)

**Modern Icon**

Painting was Alexei Jawlensky's second career. He initially followed his father's footsteps into the Russian military before he moved to Munich to study painting in 1896. There Jawlensky met fellow Russian-expatriate Vasily Kandinsky and, through him, artists Paul Klee and Lyonel Feininger. He also traveled to Paris where he was inspired by the paintings of Vincent van Gogh and Paul Cézanne, and briefly worked in the studio of then **Fauvist** painter, Henri Matisse. A product of Russian, German, and French influences, Jawlensky was known for his abstracted compositions that explored the expressive potential of color.



**Key Concepts**

Jawlensky was greatly influenced by the expressive colors and break down of form he saw in the work of van Gogh, Cézanne, and Matisse. In this painting, the head is both defined and deconstructed by color.

Although Jawlensky painted some landscapes and still lifes, he is best known for his portrait heads. He called them "Mystical Heads," and they show the lasting influence of the Eastern Orthodox religious **icons** he had grown up with in Russia.

Over time his painting became more and more abstract, but, unlike his colleague Kandinsky, Jawlensky never sought complete abstraction in his work. His paintings were always grounded in recognizable subject matter drawn from nature.

**A Closer Look at *Mystical Head: Galka***

- The tilted head, direct gaze, large eyes, and long nose of this portrait head are all typical of Russian religious icons.
- Galka Scheyer spent several months with Jawlensky and his family in 1917, and he used her as a portrait model during that time. Despite the abstraction and the influence of religious **icons**, Scheyer's dark hair with side curls, intense gaze, and prominent nose are all recognizable in this painting.
- In a 1919 essay on Jawlensky, Scheyer wrote, "Jawlensky has transposed the human head as such into a language of abstract life, raised it out of its earthly existence to manifest the soul and the spirit."

**Discussion Questions**

- What do you think it says about Jawlensky's friendship with Scheyer that he would paint her like this? How would you feel if your close friend painted you in this style, so closely cropped?
- Compare this painting to van Gogh's *Portrait of a Peasant (Patience Escalier)* painted in 1888.

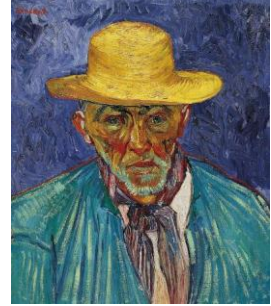
How does Jawlensky's use of color in a portrait head compare to that of van Gogh, an artist he admired?

### Activity

- Draw a line drawing of a partner's head. Then create a list of five words that describe him or her. Finally, choose a color to express each word and paint your partner's portrait using these colors.

### Vocabulary

- **Icon:** a religious work of art, most often a painting, from Eastern Christianity, and usually depicting Christ, Mary, or saints.
- **Fauvism:** a Modern art movement that emphasized painterly qualities, simple forms and saturated colors. The Fauvists advocated the separation of color from its descriptive, representational purpose, instead utilizing color as an independent formal element and means of personal expression.



### *Possibilities at Sea*, 1932

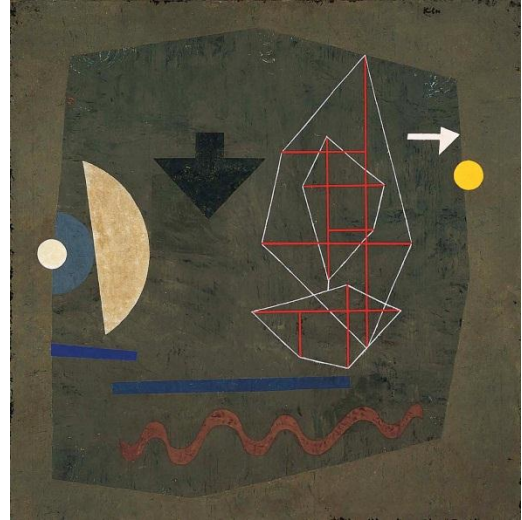
Paul Klee (Swiss, 1879-1940)

Encaustic and sand on canvas

38-1/4 x 37-5/8 in. (97.2 x 95.6 cm)

### Revealing Possibilities

In addition to being a painter, Paul Klee was also an accomplished poet and violinist. He first met Vasily Kandinsky and Alexei Jawlensky in 1911 and later worked with Kandinsky and Lyonel Feininger at the **Bauhaus** art school. On a visit to Germany from the United States in 1933 Scheyer saw Klee's *Possibilities at Sea* and wrote "I am in love with [it]. It is one of the most amazing pictures I have ever experienced." She asked to buy it, but Klee's wife responded, "Klee wants you to know that he is, apologetically, just as much in love with [it] as you are.." However, he agreed to let Scheyer take it back with her to the U.S. to exhibit. After Klee's death in 1940, his widow agreed to sell the painting to Scheyer at a reduced price.



### Key Concepts

Klee's father was a music teacher, his wife was a piano teacher, and he was an accomplished violinist. As a musician, Klee wanted to use color the way musicians use sound, to evoke nuances of feeling rather than describe appearances. In his words, "Art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible."

Klee's titles were very important to how he wanted the viewer to interpret his works. Here, rather than creating a naturalistic image of a boat, Klee celebrates the boat's freedom from gravity, and the possibilities of movement out on the water that don't exist on land.

This painting includes the sun, moon, waves, and an abstract red and white sailboat. In 1923, Klee had wrote the following poem for Scheyer:

We are standing upright and rooted in the earth  
Currents move us softly to and fro  
All that is free is the longing  
For the moons and sun

### A Closer Look at *Possibilities at Sea*

- Klee often used arrows to direct the reading of his compositions. Here the arrows play a formal role in balancing the composition, and they represent the forces of nature (the wind is represented by the white arrow and gravity is represented by the black one) at work on the boat.
- Here Klee uses the wavy line as a symbol of flowing movement and gives the straight blue lines a slight tilt. These tilted and wavy lines, in combination with the ambiguous background, lend a sense of floating movement to the composition.
- This work is painted in **encaustic**, a challenging hot-wax technique with which Klee experimented.

## Discussion Questions

- How do you think this painting reflects the associations evoked by its title?
- How does Klee's abstracted geometric composition change the viewer's reading of this subject as opposed to looking at a more naturalistic depiction of a boat at sea like Claude Monet's *The Entrance to the Port of Le Havre* (formerly *The Entrance to the Port of Honfleur*) from c. 1867- 1868?



## Activity

- Using your arms, torso, and/or legs, create a short movement inspired by nature (for instance twisting like a tornado or fluttering your arms like a swan), and then create a line or gesture drawing that you feel communicates the sensation of that movement.

## Vocabulary

- **Bauhaus:** a German art school founded by architect Walter Gropius with the idea of creating a total work of art in which all arts would be brought together. The school combined crafts and fine arts, and was famous for its streamlined and functional approach to design. It was operational from 1919 to 1933, when it was closed under pressure from the Nazi regime.
- **Encaustic:** the technically difficult art of encaustic or hot wax painting in which pigments mixed with hot wax are burned into a canvas or panel as an inlay. The technique was used in Ancient Egypt and Rome, and then rediscovered at the Bauhaus in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Diego Rivera also experimented with it. Encaustic is valued for the dimensional quality and luminous colors it produces. Other materials, such as sand, can be encased into or layered onto the surface.

### *Unequal*, 1932

Vasily Kandinsky (Russian, 1866-1944)

Oil and gouache on canvas

23-5/8 x 27-5/8 in. (60.0 x 70.2 cm)

### Harmonies

Russian painter Vasily Kandinsky, moved to Germany at the age of 30 to paint, having previously taught law and economics. He met fellow Russian expatriate Alexei Jawlensky while studying in Munich, and then taught at the Bauhaus art and design school along with Paul Klee and Lyonel Feininger until the school was closed under pressure from the Nazi government in 1933. During World War I, he returned to Russia and was influenced by the geometrical shapes, open visual space, and patterns of Russian **Constructivism**. However, unlike the Constructivists, he used them as purely formal elements without reference to the real world.



### Key Concepts

Kandinsky strived for purer and more **abstract** forms in his painting. He used circles, squares, triangles, and lines as his visual vocabulary and balanced contrasting shapes and colors to give a sense of abstract order.

A music lover who had studied both piano and cello, Kandinsky believed there was a strong connection between color and music. He wanted viewers to respond to his paintings instinctively as if hearing a piece of music, appreciating parts and then the whole, without the distraction of recognizing subject matter.

By placing his shapes within an ambiguous space and order, he wanted to avoid fixing them in a specific space so that they would appear to float.

### A Closer Look at *Unequal*

- This composition is composed of floating rectangles and squares surrounded by haloes of black or white, and a large blue circle or orb surrounded by yellow. He believed that yellow had the power to disturb the viewer, while blue could awaken the highest spiritual aspirations.
- For the background, Kandinsky applied black paint over a light ground and then applied blue-gray and green-gray paint over the black using a palette knife for greater depth, texture, and contrast. This technique reveals the influence of Paul Cezanne and Paul Gauguin on his work.
- This painting was among the pictures Kandinsky shipped to Scheyer in 1933 to avoid Nazi censorship and reach a new audience in America.

### Discussion Questions

- Take a moment to look at the shapes, colors, and composition of the painting. What is your immediate response to the painting? How does it change when you take your time to look at each component and then the whole as Kandinsky suggested? What mood does the painting invoke?

Is it calm or tense, balanced, or off kilter? What kind of music would you choose to accompany it?

- Do you react to art the way you react to music? How does it change your experience to listen to music without lyrics or look at abstract art without a recognizable subject?

### **Activity**

- Play your favorite song or piece of music. Focusing on the music rather than the lyrics, think about how it makes you feel. If you close your eyes, what colors and shapes does it bring to mind? Create a completely abstract composition based on this piece using shapes carefully sized and placed to evoke the feeling of that music.

### **Vocabulary**

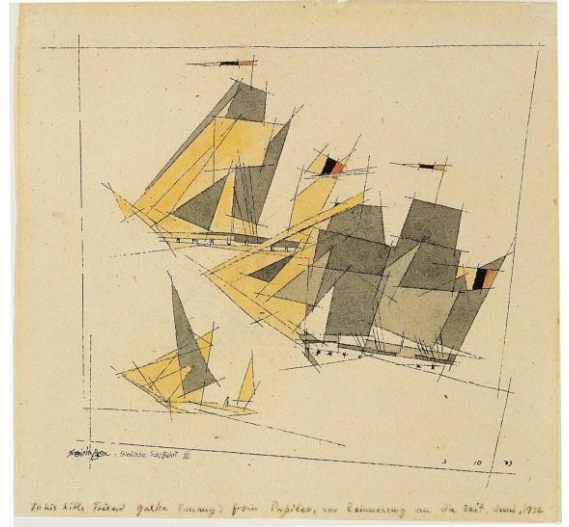
- **Constructivism:** evolving in Russia just as the Bolsheviks came to power in 1917, this modern art movement sought to abolish the traditional artistic concern with composition, and replace it with a careful technical analysis of modern materials that would eventually yield ideas that could be put to use in mass production, serving the ends of a modern, Communist society. The resulting style was based on machines and highly geometric.
- **Abstract art:** works of art that may have form, but have little or no attempt at pictorial representation.

### *Peaceful Voyage III*, 1933

Lyonel Feininger (American, 1871-1956)

Watercolor and India ink on laid paper

comp: 8-5/8 x 9 in. (21.9 x 22.9 cm); sheet: 10-3/4 x 11-1/4 in. (27.3 x 28.6 cm)



### A New Order

Like Paul Klee and Vasily Kandinsky, Lyonel Feininger was a music-lover. Both of his parents were professional musicians and he initially moved from New York to Germany to study music. Feininger met Kandinsky and Klee while teaching at the Bauhaus, and through Klee he met Jawlensky and Scheyer. He was greatly influenced by the Bauhaus style's emphasis on architecture, minimalism, and clean lines.

### Key Concepts

As a former aspiring musician, Feininger infused the principles of music in his paintings. His compositions often follow the structure of a musical **fugue**, a composition in which a short melody is introduced by one part and then taken up by others and developed by interweaving parts.

Feininger admired **Cubism**'s harmony, discipline, and order, and **Cubism**'s influence can be seen in the geometric and fragmented qualities of his work.

In the 1930s Feininger created a series of paintings of boats and sailing ships reminiscent of the boats he had seen growing up in New York.

### A Closer Look at *Peaceful Voyage III*

- Like a **fugue**, the form of the triangle repeats in varying size and orientation throughout this piece interwoven throughout the boats.
- If you look closely, you can recognize the German flag, with its red, black, and yellow stripes, hanging atop the boats.
- Working with watercolor and ink, Feininger has left a flat field of color to stand in for the background, giving the sense that the boats are isolated objects floating in space rather than grounded within a defined setting.

### Discussion Questions

- How does the title of this piece contribute to your reading of it?
- In the 1930s when Feininger created his boat paintings, Hitler was elected chancellor of Germany, the Bauhaus was closed under pressure from the Nazi government, and modern art was suppressed in Germany. As a result, Feininger left Germany to return to the U.S. in 1936. How could the subject matter and/or title of this piece be a reaction to what was going on around him during this time?

### Activity

- Break down the structure of your favorite song into sections between verse and chorus, etc. Then create an artwork that echoes this structure in some way using shapes and their relationships to



each other within a composition.

### **Vocabulary**

- **Fugue:** a contrapuntal (with two or more independent melodic lines) composition in which a short melody or phrase is introduced by one part and successively taken up by others and developed by interweaving the parts.
- **Cubism:** a style of art in which subjects are reduced and fractured into geometric forms and then realigned within a shallow, relief-like space. Cubists also often used multiple or contrasting viewpoints so that several sides of an object can be seen simultaneously.