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## František Kupka: Sounding Abstraction – Musicality, Colour and Spiritualism

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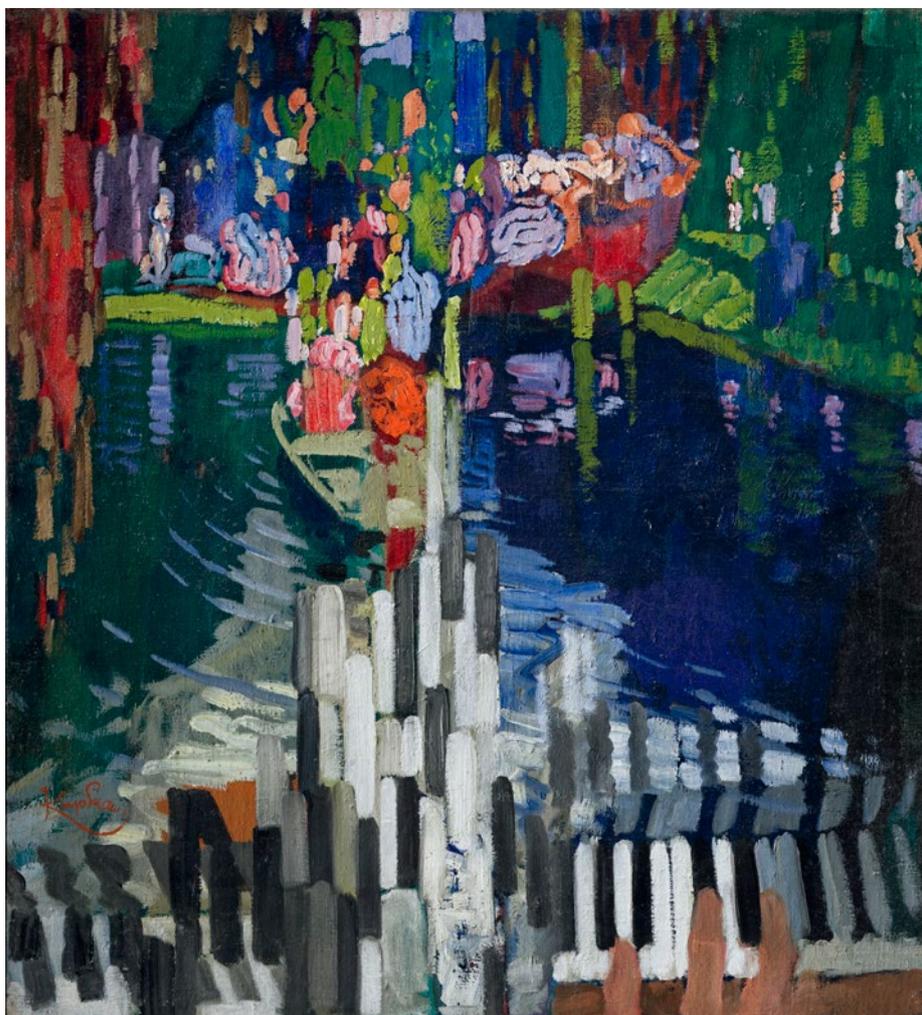
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The art of František Kupka (1871–1957) has intrigued artists, art historians and exhibition visitors for many decades. Although nowadays Kupka's name is less well known outside artistic circles, in his day he was one of the artists at the forefront in creating abstract paintings on the basis of colour theory and freeing colours from descriptive associations. Today his energetic paintings are still as enigmatic and exciting as they were in 1912, when his completely non-figurative canvases, including *Amorpha*, *Fugue in Two Colours* and *Amorpha, Warm Chromatics*, created a scandal when they were shown in the Salon d'Automne in Paris. It marked a turning point in many ways, not least in the decision of the Gaumont Film Company to use Kupka's abstract works for the news in cinemas in France, Germany, the United States and England.<sup>1</sup> And as we will see, Kupka's far-reaching shift to abstraction was a long process which grew partly out of his childhood interest in spiritualism and partly from Symbolist and occultist ideas to crystallise into the concept of an art which could be seen, felt and understood on a more multisensory basis. Kupka's art reflects the idea of musicality in art, colour and spiritualism. The transition period in which these ideas influenced his art, from 1907 to 1912, reveals a process which led to Kupka's contribution as a member of the important group of artists who followed a spiritual path to produce non-figurative, abstract art.

At the end of the 19th century there was an increasing interest in the world of esotericism and spiritualism, a cultural phenomenon which is today known as occulture.<sup>2</sup>

1 Markéta Theinhardt and Pierre Brullé 2012, 'František Kupka's Salons.' In Helena Musilová (ed.), *František Kupka: The Road to Amorpha. Kupka's Salons 1899–1913*. Prague: National Gallery Prague, 41–43, 115.

2 The term 'Occulture' was coined by Christopher Partridge in 2004. Christopher Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West. Vol. 1. Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture, and Occulture*. London: T&T Clark International, 1–4. Today this term also refers to a wide spectrum of esoteric currents in artistic circles from the end of the 19th century onwards. Nina Kokkinen 2011, 'The Artist as Initiated Master. Themes of Fin-de-Siècle Occulture in the Art of Akseli Gallen-Kallela.' In *Fill Your Soul! Paths of Research into the Art of Akseli Gallen-Kallela*. Espoo: Gallen-Kallela Museum, 46–47; Tessel M. Bauduin 2017, 'Að sjá og sýna hið ósýnilega. Um nútímalist og andleg verk Hilmu af Klint' ['Seeing and Depicting the Invisible. On Hilma af Klint's Modern Art and Spiritual Paintings'], translated by Eva Dagbjört Óladóttir. *Ritið* 1/2017.



František Kupka, *Piano Keys, Lake*, 1909,  
oil on canvas, 79cm x 72cm  
National Gallery in Prague

Theosophy, in particular, was a key interest among many artists and knowledge of this subject spread rapidly among international artistic circles in Vienna, Paris and elsewhere in Europe. Spiritual ideas permeated the environment around these artists, who were involved in the Theosophical movement and who produced abstract works at the beginning of the 20th century.<sup>3</sup> They included the Dutch artist Piet Mondrian (1872–1944), the Russian artist Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944), as well as the Swedish painter Hilma af Klint (1862–1944) and the Lithuanian artist Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis (1875–1911). František Kupka too can be linked to this group of artists.<sup>4</sup>

3 Exhibitions such as 'The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985' (1986), 'L'Origines des abstraction' (2003), 'Traces du Sacré' (2008) have widely discussed the spiritual currents and environments of the 19th- and 20th-century artists.

4 Meda Mladek 1975, 'Central European Influences.' In *Frank Kupka: a Retrospective*. New York: Guggenheim Museum, 15, 17, 28–37; Maurice Tuchman 1986, 'Hidden Meanings in Abstract Art.' In *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985*. New York, Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Abbeville Press, 35–36.

Important as this interest in occulture was, there were also other vital aspects that played an important role in Kupka's artistic development. First, as an artist, he was very well aware of other sciences and the analogies between the arts. His art reflects musicality, not only in the works' titles, but through subject, form and colour, revealing a deeper aim to create 'musical' art during the 1890s and throughout his career. Indeed, Kupka created his paintings by working in series and combining coloured planes, rhythmical geometric forms and giving his works titles, such as *Yellow Scale* (1907), *Piano Keys*, *Lake* (1909), *Nocturne* (1910), *Amorpha*, *Fugue in Two Colours* (1912) and *Warm Chromatics* (1911–12), the latter two titles inspired by the example of Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750). With this in mind, Kupka's ambitious trajectory in the direction of abstract art does have its context but will also show how he differs from the other artists mentioned here, as he aimed for an immersion in form, light and colour, to create a *sounding abstraction*.<sup>5</sup>

*I am still groping in the dark, but I believe I can find something between sight and hearing and I can produce a fugue in colours, as Bach has done in music.* (Kupka, 1913)<sup>6</sup>

Throughout his life František Kupka was a spiritualist. Besides reading classical literature and books on anatomy, astronomy, chemistry and natural history, he explored philosophy, reading not only Plato but also Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. In particular, meeting the German painter and social reformer Karl Wilhelm Diefenbach (1851–1913) further developed his ideas on the reciprocal relationship between music and painting. The basis of Kupka's artistic training provided him with the principles on which he could later build his exceptional abstract works. At the Prague Academy, with its Nazarene artists, who stressed geometry rather than life drawing, Kupka came to master Golden Section theory and practice.<sup>7</sup> During these years he also became a sun worshipper, taking naked air baths daily, and revealing his multisensory 'Newtonian' experiences: '[M]y entire body penetrated by the fragrances and rays of light (...) bathed by hues flowing from the titanic keyboard of colour.'<sup>8</sup>

At the time theosophical publications, illustrations and periodicals played a part in the rapid dissemination of Theosophy around Europe. Annie Besant and Charles W. Leadbeater's book, *Thought-Forms* (1905), was illustrated with colourful images of astral bodies and auras. A.P. Sinnett's *Esoteric Buddhism* (1883) included planetary diagrams that were reproduced in an 1890 issue of *La Revue Théosophique*. As well as these texts, their schematic and colourful illustrations may have provided inspiration for many artists at the beginning of the 20th century.<sup>9</sup> One contemporary of Kupka's, Hilma af Klint, began painting her abstract 'Temple Series' in 1906.<sup>10</sup> Although these works were never shown in her lifetime and were kept hidden at her own instigation, her example is one of many that show theosophically inclined artists shared an ambitious vision to produce non-figurative works, to give shape to invisible contexts and make them visible.<sup>11</sup>

5 With the term 'sounding abstraction' I am also referring to Sixten Ringbom's groundbreaking study *The Sounding Cosmos: A Study in the Spiritualism of Kandinsky and the Genesis of Abstract Painting* (1970). Acta Academiae Aboensis, A: 38, 2. Åbo: Åbo Akademi.

6 Abel Warshawsky, an American painter living in Paris, interviewed Kupka for the *New York Times*, 19 October 1913. Allusions to the fugue are found only occasionally in 19th-century writings on art. The German Romantic painter Philipp Otto Runge (1777–1810) described his picture, *The Nightingale's Lesson* (1804–05), as 'the same thing as a fugue in music', letter 4 August 1802. In Peter Vergo 2013 (2010), *The Music of Painting. Music, Modernism and the Visual Arts from the Romantics to John Cage*. London: Phaidon Press, 205, 251.

7 Tuchman 1986, 35.

8 Quoted in Mladek 1975, 26; Tuchman 1986, 36.

9 Robert P. Welsh 1986, 'Sacred Geometry: French Symbolism and Early Abstraction.' In *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985*, 80–81.

10 Tessel M. Bauduin 2017, 187–224.

11 Iris Müller-Westerman & Jo Widoff (eds.) 2013, *Hilma af Klint – A Pioneer of Abstraction*. Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 33–35, 145.



František Kupka, *Discs of Newton I, Study for Fugue in Two Colours*, 1911–12,  
oil on canvas, 49.5cm x 65cm  
Centre Pompidou, Musée national d'art moderne, Paris

Photo: Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Bertrand Prévost

## Colour and the sounding cosmos

*Music is the only art of sounds that are not in nature and almost entirely created. Man created the articulation of thoughts by words. He created writings, he created the airplane and the locomotive. Therefore, why may he not create in painting and sculpture independently of the forms and colours of the world about him?* (Kupka, 1913)<sup>12</sup>

This statement by František Kupka reflects his appreciation of music and how music differs from the other arts by being purely humanly created and immaterial. However, this was by no means a new idea as it had been an important current throughout the 19th century. One of the first to convey musical elements in painting was the American-born James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834–1903), who began giving musical titles to his paintings in the 1860s.<sup>13</sup> *Symphony in White No. 1: The White Girl* (1862) is Whistler's key work, initiating him into colour and meaning. Further paintings followed, such as *Symphony*, *Arrangement* and specifically *Nocturne*, which suggest dusk or darkness and the compositions of Frédéric Chopin (1810–49).<sup>14</sup>

12 A. W. Warshawsky, "Orpheism" Latest of Painting Cults.' Interview with Kupka. *The New York Times* 19 October 1913.

13 Richard Dormant and Margaret F. MacDonald (eds.) 1994, *Whistler*. London: Tate Gallery Publications, 77.

14 Anna-Maria von Bonsdorff 2012, *Colour Ascetism and Synthetist Colour: Colour Concepts in turn-of-the-20th-century Finnish and European Art*. Doctoral thesis, University of Helsinki. Porvoo: Unigrafia, 135–36.

Many artists who followed Whistler were interested in chromatic and tonal compositions. Although various views emerged regarding musicality in art, in the 1890s the treatment of the subject of a painting began moving towards a simplified idiom; the reductive synthetism of artists as varied as Paul Gauguin (1848–1903) or Mondrian highlighted the potential of painting as both a visual motif and a source of emotional response, allowing artists to simplify and organise, alter and harmonise.<sup>15</sup> In addition, European artists were now interested in their past and mystical heritage, and Kupka was no exception. His years in Vienna, from 1892–96, only strengthened his theosophical attitude and his interest in decorative and synthetist geometrical forms and colours, which can also be seen in the decorative tradition of his native Bohemia. Thus his ideas are more mystical and less futuristic.<sup>16</sup>

Composers were also influenced by the principles of colour, music and higher being. The Finnish composer Jean Sibelius (1865–1957), who was synaesthetic, is known to have read Schopenhauer's *On Vision and Colours* (1816), which discusses colours and their experience from an entirely new perspective.<sup>17</sup> This kind of artistic interdisciplinarity was also advocated by others, such as Claude Debussy (1862–1918), who wrote music to the texts of Symbolist poets and was also deeply inspired by contemporary painting.<sup>18</sup> Composers' interests in correspondences reverberated with cross-overs of all kinds between music, theatre, literature, applied art and, of course, visual art. In music, the daring orchestral colour experiments of Richard Wagner (1813–83), and Alexander Scriabin (1871–1915) exploded in the late-19th century.<sup>19</sup> The Lithuanian artist and composer Čiurlionis, was a theosophist who wrote music in response to his own paintings and developed a unique style of abstraction. In his brief lifetime the work he made from 1903 to 1909 came to be admired by Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971) and Kandinsky. Čiurlionis produced painted sonatas and fugues as conscious fusions of musical ideas into visual form. *Sonata of the Stars No.6, Allegro and Andante* (1908) is a combination of landscape elements, cosmic features, such as stars and planets, and architectural forms.<sup>20</sup>

## 'The titanic keyboard of colour'

After Kupka settled in Paris in 1896, he attended lectures, worked in a biology laboratory at the Sorbonne and frequented the Paris Observatory, devoting his time to scientific studies. This interest in science was underpinned by his belief in the interconnectedness of all things.

15 Anna-Maria von Bonsdorff et al. 2012, 'Preface.' In Frances Fowle (ed.), *From Van Gogh to Kandinsky: Symbolist Landscape in Europe 1880–1910*, Exhibition catalogue, National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, Ateneum Art Museum, Helsinki. Brussels: Mercatorfonds, 14–15.

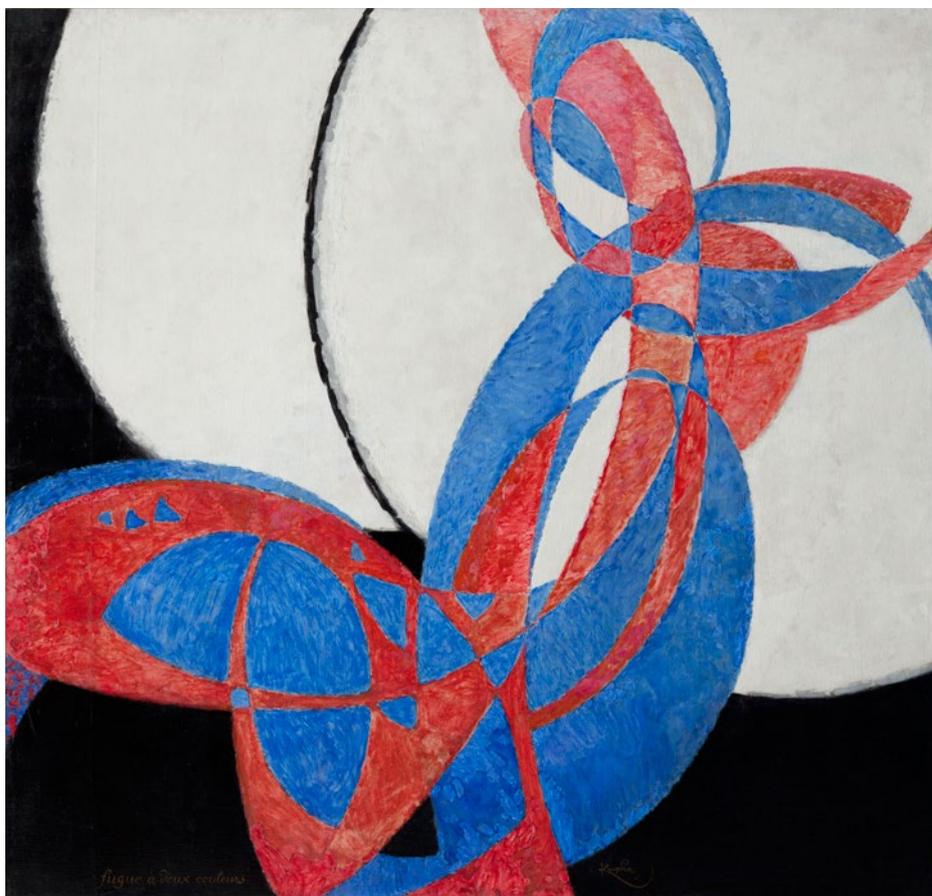
16 Herschel B. Chipp 1996, *Theories of Modern Art. A Source Book by Artists and Critics*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 311.

17 Adolf Paul to Jean Sibelius, 23 November 1894. Quoted in Minna Turtiainen 2014, 'Adolf Paul – Farmer, Musician, Author and Dramatist in Between Identities.' In *Between Light and Darkness: New Perspectives in Symbolism Research. Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, vol. 1. The Birch and the Star – Finnish Perspectives on the Long 19th Century. <http://birchandstar.org/vol-1-between-light-and-darkness-new-perspectives-in-symbolism-research/>, 85–86.

18 Anna-Maria von Bonsdorff 2014, 'Correspondences – Jean Sibelius in a Forest of Image and Myth.' In Hanna-Leena Paloposki (ed.), *Sibelius and the World of Art*. Ateneum Publications vol. 70. Helsinki: Finnish National Gallery, 91–95.

19 Charles A. Riley 1995, *Color Codes. Modern theories of color in philosophy, painting and architecture, literature, music and psychology*. University Press of New England, 2.

20 Rasa Andriušytė (ed.) 1997, 'The Work of Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis.' *Verkelytė-Federavičienė*. Verkelytė-Federavičienė, Birutė, *Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis: Printings, Sketches, Thoughts*. Vilnius, 17–19, 25; Richard Thomson 2012, 'Into the Mystic.' In Frances Fowle (ed.), *From Van Gogh to Kandinsky: Symbolist Landscape in Europe 1880–1910*, Exhibition catalogue. National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, Ateneum Art Museum, Helsinki. Brussels: Mercatorfonds, 166–68.



František Kupka, *Amorpha, Fugue in Two Colours* 1912,  
oil on canvas, 211 cm x 220 cm  
National Gallery in Prague

He believed that the principles of spiritual reality and cosmic order were implicit in nature and that the role of the artist's higher consciousness was not to copy nature but to create a parallel order. Kupka subscribed to the notion of superconsciousness, a visionary state in which objects are without gravity or spatial position.<sup>21</sup>

In 1909, Kupka painted a strange hybrid work, *Piano Keys, Lake*. The upper half of this composition is a park-like scene, peopled with richly coloured figures, enhanced by a dark background. At the lower edge are the black and white keys of a piano, some of them drifting upwards to merge with the landscape, the social setting and music (we see the pianist's fingers). These interplay visually, the verticals of the ivories echoing the trees, the repetition of the keys rhyming with the ripples on the lake. Kupka wrote about how the vertical 'connotes both above and below', with the suggestion of different states of consciousness and the aspiration to rise, like the verticals in *Piano Keys, Lake*.<sup>22</sup> Even though this painting still has a descriptive, mimetic colour scheme, all this would soon change. The same year, he painted works that were built on a new understanding of colour. *Nocturne* (1910), like *Piano Keys, Lake*, fused the vertical, keyboard-like mark, but with the deep soft

21 Margit Rowell 1975, 'František Kupka: A Metaphysics of Abstraction.' In *Frank Kupka: a Retrospective*. New York: New York Guggenheim Museum, 76; Mladek 1975, 25–26, 29.

22 František Kupka 1923, *La Création dans les Arts plastiques*. Paris: Cercle d'art, 168.

tones of night-time. Indeed, painters of musical visions were interested not only in the motif itself, but in its construction and they cultivated references to music using musical devices, systematic horizontal lines, harmonic tones or vibrating colours – creating chromatic and tonal compositions.<sup>23</sup>

The interest in musicality that is an essential part of Kupka's art is also intertwined with the history of colour. Kupka's early art studies in Prague had provided him with a good grounding in the principles of colour theory and he also learned about complementarity, as described in Newton's *Opticks* (1704). The teaching was based on observation of Newton's colour theory and thin colour plates, and on the study of Wilhelm von Bezold's *Farbenlehre* (1874), one of the earliest books by a scientist to be directed specifically at artists.<sup>24</sup>

Kupka was evidently familiar with Newton's colour-circle: in his own colour diagram, a white centre is surrounded by progressively saturated circles of ten named hues, including 'indigo', a clear indication of the artist's knowledge of Newton's theory of colour. According to this theory, colour had opacity as well as transparency, could be shiny or matt, had surface texture as well as hue, as well as an intrinsic tonal value (saturated yellow, for example, was lighter than saturated blue).<sup>25</sup> It is, however, interesting that perhaps the only series of paintings in European art to be based directly on these Newtonian ideas are Kupka's *Discs of Newton* (1912).<sup>26</sup>

In *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1911), Wassily Kandinsky similarly states: 'Colour is the keyboard, the eyes are the hammers, the soul is the piano with many strings (...). The artist is the hands that play, touching one key or another, to cause vibrations in the soul.'<sup>27</sup> However, Kandinsky's chromatic ideas differed from Kupka's and were derived from Goethe's theories, as Kandinsky used complementary pairs of colours, for example classifying yellow as disruptive and aggressive, in contrast with blue, the 'heavenly colour', which was restful and had 'the power of profound meaning'.<sup>28</sup> Kupka, on the other hand, had a very different approach towards yellow. In *Yellow Scale* (1907) he turns to the colour itself, by giving meaning through one singular colour – a colour in the major key. In an interview given in 1913, he summarised his ideas:

*I take care of the morphologic units of the relations between different forms. (...) This is why I use together with the rectangular lines all the rounding angles. It is the same with colours, which must all be either in the major or minor key. (...) The public certainly needs to add to the action of the optic nerve those of the olfactory, acoustic and sensory ones.*<sup>29</sup>

When Kupka's completely non-figurative canvases, including *Amorpha*, *Fugue in Two Colours* and *Amorpha*, *Warm Chromatics*, shocked viewers at the Salon d'Automne in 1912, it marked an artistic 'counterpoint', as in a Bach fugue.<sup>30</sup> For Kupka, the essence of nature manifested as a rhythmic geometric force, therefore he was producing visual, graphic forms

23 von Bonsdorff 2012, 140.

24 Mladek 1975, 18–20; Von Bezold's book, English translation *The Theory of Colour in Relation to Art and Art-Industry* (1876). John Gage 2006, *Colour in Art*. World of Art series. London: Thames & Hudson, 8–9.

25 This side view of two thin transparent plates pressed together and producing what came to be known as 'Newton's Rings', shows the opposite colours by transmitted and reflected light, and is probably the first illustration of what came to be known as complementarity. Sir Isaac Newton 1704, 'Colours of Thin Plates.' In *Opticks*; John Gage 2005, *Colour and Culture: Practice and Meaning from Antiquity to Abstraction*. London: Thames & Hudson, 153–54; Gage 2006, 36, 143, 313.

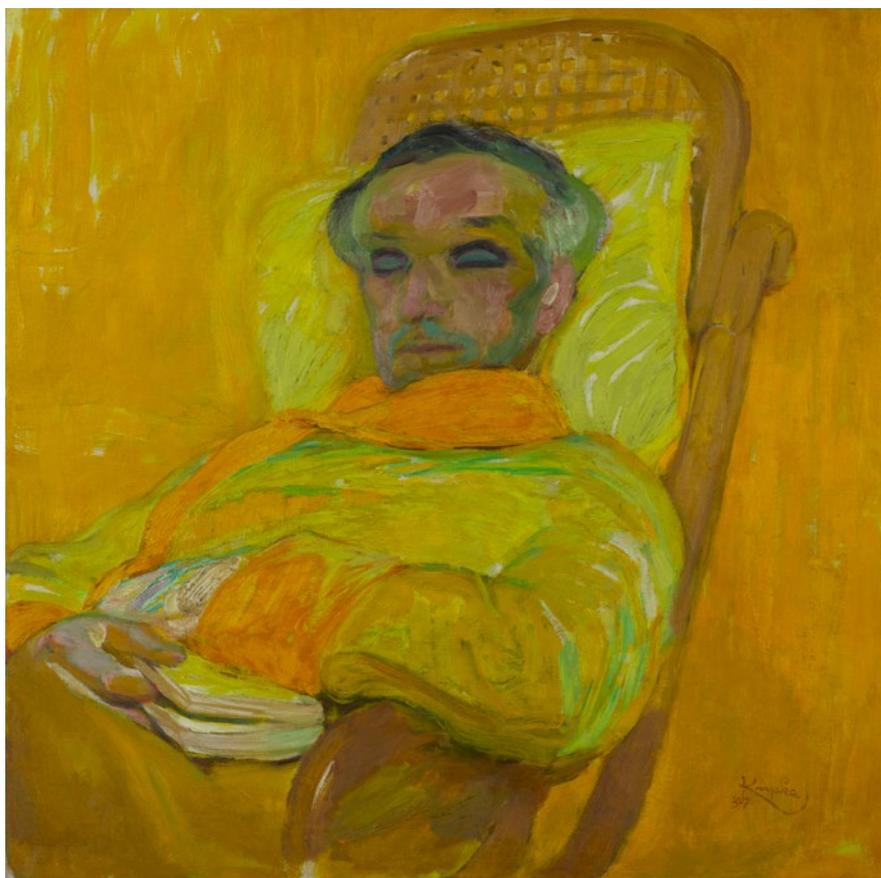
26 F. Kupka 1923, 156–57; Rowell 1975, 67–76.

27 Wassily Kandinsky 1911, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, Munich, transl. Michael Sadler, *The Art of Spiritual Harmony*. London, 1914; *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, 37–38.

28 John Gage 1980, 'The Psychological Background to Early Modern Colour: Kandinsky, Delaunay and Mondrian.' In *Towards a new art: essays on the background to abstract art, 1910–20*. London: Tate Gallery, 24–25; John Gage 1999, *Colour and Meaning. Art, Science and Symbolism*. London: Thames & Hudson, 250–52.

29 František Kupka, interview with A. W. Warshawsky. *The New York Times* 19 October 1913.

30 Vergo 2013 (2010), 205–206, 251.



František Kupka, *Yellow Scale II*, 1907,  
oil on canvas, 79cm x 79cm,  
Centre Pompidou, Musée national d'art moderne, Paris

Photo: Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Bertrand Prévost

representing movement,<sup>31</sup> or one could say, using the ongoing pattern of a fugue. His method of both simplifying the subject into geometric forms and using a combination of warm and cold 'sensory' colours, interacted affectively with the viewer – and this method also differed from that of other artists mentioned. This ambitious aim to create a painting based on musical abstraction was nurtured in a spiritualised environment which strove to give shape to invisible contexts and make them visible. Kupka's aim was to create a *balance* between multisensory elements and movement by modulating colour and form with translucent planes. This practice he created to make visible the experienced musical sensation, the '*genèse des disques et de la Fugue*'.<sup>32</sup> He made them interact by capturing the immersion of light and colour as seen in the dynamic movement in the spectrum of warm colour planes as seen in *Amorpha, Warm Chromatics* (1911–12).

31 Pierre Brullé 2002, 'Kupka et le rapport entre création picturale et modèle musical.' *Revue d'études slave* 2002, t. 74, fasc. 1, Paris, 110–114; Vergo 2013 (2010), 223. For the development of the *Amorphas* see Karel Srp 2012, 'Kupka's Defiance.' In Helena Musilová (ed.), *František Kupka: The Road to Amorpha. Kupka's Salons 1899–1913*. Prague: National Gallery Prague, 68–84.

32 Anne Schwartz 1993, 'A redating of Kupka's Amorpha: Fugue in Two Colours II.' *Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 80, 8, October, 350; Srp 2012, 80.