

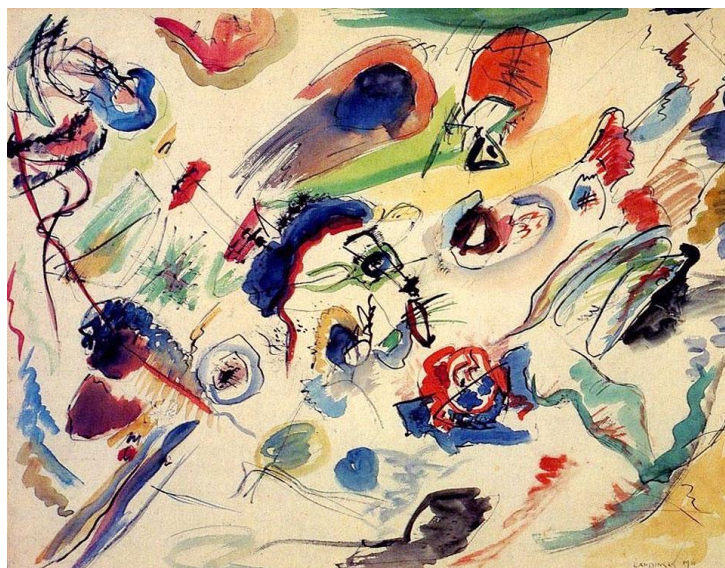
This essay will aim to describe and critically assess abstract art and geometric abstraction, a type of non-referential art that is often free of external influences. This essay will aim to provide an overview of this art movement, plus its development through history to present day. The essay will cover the emergence and importance of art of this kind and its influence within world cultures and other art movements. Describing this type of art can be challenging as it can use unrecognisable subjects and lines however, the essay will aim to give an overview of what abstract art and geometric abstraction are and what defines them, links them and separates them from other areas of art and design. This essay will introduce well known abstract artists such as Wassily Kandinsky, and Friedensreich Hundertwasser an architect and abstract artist and how the predecessors of abstract art helped to create abstract as a movement. In addition, other movements conceived as a result of abstract art like abstract expressionism and surrealism and why they were created. Thirdly, this essay critically assesses uses of abstract art through history and within modern design settings.

Modern Art Movements originated in France during the 1840s with a style of art commonly known as Realism (Gombrich, 2007). An art movement is defined as having a particular characterization and style with an underlying objective or philosophy, followed by artists and their own world views specific to periods and events in history. For example, movements could last a few months, years or even decades. However, the first art movement was thought to have started in the year 1000 until 1150, a style known as Romanesque (Gombrich, 2007), this style was closely related to roman architecture and religious imagery.



(Figure 1) Wassily Kandinsky - *Composition IV*, 1911, oil on canvas, 250.5 x 159.5 cm, Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf, Germany

Although abstract art is thought to have emerged around 1920 (Duchting, 2020) (Karmel, 2020), some say the first true abstract painting was made in 1910-1911 by Kandinsky, “Untitled watercolour” the exact date is unclear (Duchting, 2020), see figure 2.



(Figure 2) Wassily Kandinsky – *(untitled) IV*, 1910-1911, oil on canvas, 49.6 x 64.8 cm, Paris, Centre Pompidou

Abstract as a term that implies something exists in concept or an idea, non-representations with no physical existence. Abstract art, however, exists in a physical plane but does not capture or represent visual reality, only using shapes, forms, marks, textures, and colour to achieve its effect and motive (Moszynska, 1990). Abstract art is an umbrella term, combining four other art movements: Surrealism, Dadaism, Cubism, and Fauvism (Gombrich, 2007). Subsections of abstract art exist, one being geometric abstraction, which combines geometric shapes.



(Figure 3) Fernand Leger (*Mechanical Elements*) 1921, oil on canvas, 92.1 x 59.7 cm, France

Geometric abstraction is a form of abstract art which utilises geometric and mathematical shapes into a non-objective composition where linearity is the primary concern, colour secondary. The colours used since its inception appear to have evolved from mainly primary colours to using more colours to provide emotional impact and depth however some artists such as Victor Vasarely (B1906-D1997), the leader of the Op art movement, mainly use black and white.

Geometric abstraction is a combination of simple and complex shapes that develop into an art piece with a story or motive hidden behind simple observation. All art can be interpreted by the viewer, some pieces being obvious to what they are and what they mean. However, abstract art and geometric abstraction cannot always be as simple as knowing the meaning,

it is personally interpreted with the individuals view, meaning that an abstract art piece is subjective, and can represent anything. On the other hand, abstract art could also lack any meaning, and just be visually beautiful or created with a specific purpose such as going on a design for a product (Auping, 1989). The origins of abstract art were simply a spontaneous moment in history where multiple artists broke away from traditional painting style and moved toward an uninhibited, free expression initiating the beginning of the predecessors of the abstract movement and later the emergence of abstract art (Karmel, 2020). Despite the first dated abstract piece of art being 1910 by Kandinsky, abstract as a movement was declared in 1920 due to a theme and motion becoming established, describing abstract art as, a non-objective, non-representative style based around uninhibited shape, pattern, and colour.

History changed the emergence of abstract art. World War 2 (1939-1945) caused the world to become a dark and difficult environment, sparking a subsection of Abstract art known as abstract expressionism (Moszynska, 1990). This resulted in the need for more than nude paintings, fruit, and painted cellos which had been created throughout history. The world craved an array of color and positivity where an observer could appreciate an art piece without objective imagery with the expression of emotion and feeling. This contradicts the idea of abstract not representing reality, as reality was portrayed in abstract expressionism art pieces as a reaction to the world and the minds of people after World War 2 (Orminston, 2020) (Emmerling, 2003).

Originating from Eastern Europe in 19th century, abstract art began with the Russian painter Kandinsky (B1866-D1944). Kandinsky was closely tied with the Avant-garde movement, a French term meaning advanced guard, introduced in the 19th century promoting art as being ground-breaking and innovative in art and its processes (Moszynska, 1990). Kandinsky used these principles of the Avant-garde movement to kick start the abstract movement that is currently present today, other artists of varying fame and talent jumped aboard this new style and movement of art as its popularity grew alongside its meaning and effect on the world (Karmel, 2020).

The Avant-garde ways of working are an inspirational way to follow for surface pattern design practice. Kandinsky's work in particular, his example and ways of thinking encourage designers to break boundaries and experiment further, thus creating motifs that inspire, break the norms of the art world and pattern design. To this day, Kandinsky's style of thinking and practice of free-flowing shapes, geometrics, randomness while still following conformity and form, with precise marks and shapes is influencing modern art, design practices (Duchting, 2020).



(Figure 4) Luca Hawkins, (*for the eyes*) 2021, pen and ink on paper, 53 x 90 cm
Swansea

Friedensreich Hundertwasser (B1928-D2000) is prime example of an artist who shaped and altered the art world and more specifically the abstract art movement. Hundertwasser was an Austrian visual artists and architect who in most of his life assisted, volunteered, and worked in the field of environmental protection (Rand, 2017). His early life consisted of him learning artistic skills at the Academy of fine arts in Vienna, carrying around small pack of paints and working freelance start his career in art for many years. Producing his first commercial painting successes in (1952-53). The early 1950s was an important year for Hundertwasser as he entered the field of architecture while also working in applied art. Designing stamps, coins, and flags, and is most famous flag being the Koru flag which was designed in 1983 (Karmel, 2020).

Hundertwasser's artistic vision comprised in pictorial art, environmentalism and applied art among others, being fascinated by spirals and other shape formations and how design, art and abstract can be applied into the real world to help and support people physically and mentally (Rand, 2017). His theory on art being called transautomatism which is focusing on the experience of the viewer rather than the artist. Hundertwasser was an important member of the avant-garde in Paris during the 1950s, developing a unique visual language and style seen in many of his paintings (Rand, 2017).



(Figure 5) Friedensreich Hundertwasser, *Flying Skyscrapers*, 1987, Multi-media.

An example of his work is 330/1 *flying skyscrapers* (See fig 5). This was formerly known as 330 floating town which was later changed to *flying skyscrapers*, made in 1957 originally as a textile design, however, was repainted in 1987 with a watercolour, egg tempera, acrylic, oil, and gold/silver leaf. Hundertwasser's comment on his own work was "the picture has two equivalent 180-degrees sides. The sky is at the top and at the bottom" (Rand, 2017). A very colour heavy art piece with a lot of life for an image that represents urban buildings.

Another example of Hundertwasser's estranged and unique style is his painting is called 87 *Part of a steamer* (see figure 6)



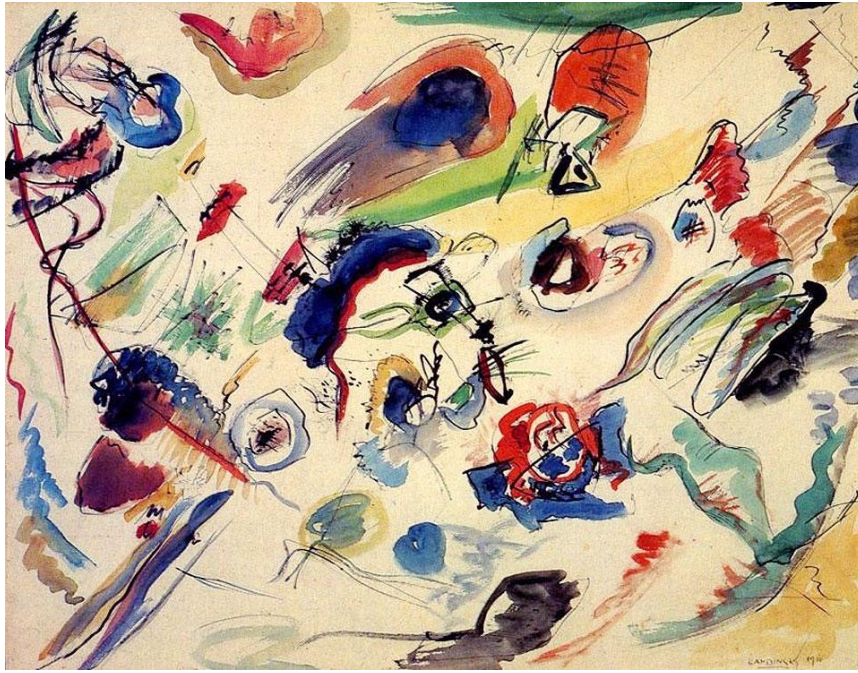
(Figure 6) Friedensreich Hundertwasser, (*Part of a Steamer*) 1950, St Mande - Seine

Part of a steamer (above) was painted in 1950 in St. Mande/seine March, it's a 520mm by 740mm mixed media painting utilising watercolour, charcoal, and oil on primed wrapping paper. This piece is visually grid based with columns and rows painted within sections of a ship, with the use of shapes, tones, and textures to achieve its effect (Rand, 2017).

The works of Hundertwasser has been very inspirational to surface pattern practice, that his work can be appreciated and prioritised first and foremost by the viewer and not for the artists. The aim to accomplish his methods is to look at market demands, follow a brief and seeing what the best situation for a design would be, rather than opting for the easiest, and being methodical in design practice. Careful consideration to the placement of motifs and

their orientation, together with the way that Hundertwasser amalgamates colour to balance, the simplicity of the artwork are important factors to create a successful design. Despite the complexity of his designs, they can be easy to interpret. On a personal level, his compositions are very inspirational.

Abstract art as a movement officially began in 1920 however the style and movement it self-took over 70 years to form and become what it is today. Going through many changes and passing many restrictions in the art world. Estimated From about 1850s to 1870s a style and movement of art called the Aesthetic movement allowed artists to be directed and motivated by only creating purely aesthetic art pieces, staying away from subject matter much as culture, society, and politics (Karmel, 2020). By the time 1880s came around some artists were looking more at depicting the world around them and their own lives in a movement called the impressionists, who were staying away from typical subject matter which led to the creation and direction of Pointillism. This is an art form based solely on dots and dotted marks with the use of experimental brush strokes and techniques. The movement Pointillism was the first steps towards abstraction with art that comprised of less traditional imagery and subject matter (Auping, 1989). In the 1900s a new form and movement of art had begun being called the Expressionists, which turned towards the idea of pure abstraction with their directive and focus on subjectivity, which is opposed to fact but instead the development of personal opinions and feeling of the viewer. The expressionist movement originated from the artists personal view and represented emotion. This led to the creation of abstract art in 1910 with Kandinsky's *Untitled* watercolour (below).



(Figure 2) Wassily Kandinsky – *(untitled) IV*, 1910-1911, oil on canvas, 49.6 x 64.8 cm, Paris, Centre Pompidou

The expressionist movement led to artists having the freedom to leave subjective art and remove any references to the observable world. After World War 1, subsections of abstract art cropped up, such as cubism, futurism, surrealism and dadaism, which arrived through artist using this freedom to explore the depth and length of abstract art and all that it could offer. After two world wars, abstract art started to evolve into a more modern setting, being abstract expressionism. A major figure in this movement and the individual thought partly responsible for the creation of this new subsection was Jackson Pollock (1912-1956). He was an American artist seeking a more primal and natural way of working, whilst looking into the subconscious mind (Emmerling, 2003). The history of abstract art is one of enabling artists to have full freedom and autonomy to express and make whatever they choose to imagine and create.

The concept of art having a use or function is a hazy subject. Some parts of art have clear definitions of its use and purpose, whereas others are not so clear. Specific genres of art acquire its directive and use from an individual's viewpoint, which can vary or completely differ from one person to another, for example abstract art falls into that category to a certain degree. However, it relies on not telling any story or having clear imagery, but the involvement of an audience and their imagination and observable opinion on the world, and the meaning of colour, shape, and form. This means that watching and observing abstract art is more of an emotional, subjective experience rather than an intellectual one (Auping, 1989) (Moszynska, 1990).

In conclusion, the origins of abstract art were simply a spontaneous moment in history where multiple artists broke away from traditional painting style and figurative art and moved toward an uninhibited, free expression (Karmel, 2020). To many, abstract art can appear eccentric and purely for visual purposes, challenging the viewer and causing more questions than providing answers. Despite its often-challenging nature, it has attracted a loyal following and inspired others. Significant graphic designs have been inspired through the use of abstract art. For example, the 1950s Swiss style, or the 1990s minimalism styles. Taking key components of abstract art such as the simplicity of shapes and geometric forms used in abstract art, not to miss out the bold use of color and minimal layouts.

One of the key reasons why artists and designers follow and use the inspiration of abstract art could be its lack of objective imagery, meaning no places, figures, or things within the abstract art, allowing designers to focus on; colour, lines shapes, depth, mood, feelings, and objective of a design rather than pure realist content or representational art. This has subsequently provided freedom and inspiration for today's designers and artists to also play with the manipulation of colour, form, and pattern. Abstract art is a prominent style allowing artists and designers to express their understanding of their world experience. Designers use abstract art to evoke an emotional and expressive response whilst being innovative and contemporary (Gombrich, 2007).

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