

Konrad Cramer: Link from the German to the American Avant-Garde

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As fate would have it, Konrad Cramer was to know artists of the avant-garde in both his native Germany and in the United States, to which he immigrated in September 1911.¹ When he arrived in America, he brought with him ideas he had picked up in Munich, then a center of artistic unrest and experimentation. Though the period Cramer resided in Munich was brief, its impact was lasting. His life's work reveals a continuing openness to both new techniques and styles.

It is likely that when Cramer visited Munich from Karlsruhe in 1910, he was already open to the new developments underway there. From 1906-1908, he had studied at the Karlsruhe Academy with Ludwig Schmid-Reutte² and from 1908-1909, with Ernst Schurth. Wilhelm Trübner, another professor then at the Academy, had exhibited in the spring of 1902 in Munich in the third exhibition of the Phalanx, a new artists' society founded and organized by the Russian expatriate artist Wassily Kandinsky.³ A member of the liberal Berlin Secession, Trübner, who had lived and studied in Munich, may have represented a more open attitude which encouraged students at the Academy to explore developments in contemporary art in the Bavarian capital.

Cramer probably saw the second exhibition of the Neue Künstlervereinigung in Munich which opened in September 1910 at the Neue Galerie Thannhauser. International in scope, this exhibition included the members of the association (such as Kandinsky, Jawlensky, or Kanoldt) as well as many others, including the Cubists (such as Picasso and Braque), who were given ample exposure.

In Munich, in February 1911, Cramer met the young American artist Florence Ballin whom he would marry the following June in Greenwich, England. Born in Brooklyn in 1884, Ballin had studied in Woodstock, New York at the Art Students' League summer school with the liberal landscape painter Birge Harrison. When she left for Europe in July 1910, Ballin was already well acquainted with modernist-leaning artists such as the future set designer Lee Simonson, painter Andrew Dasburg and his future wife, the sculptor Grace Mott Johnson. She also was familiar with the more established avant-garde, from Ruth St. Denis' dancing to Matisse's exhibition at Alfred Stieglitz's New York gallery "291."⁴

In Europe Ballin visited Paris and traveled around Switzerland before arriving in Munich in January 1911. Not long after she met Cramer, she noted in her diary that she was reading Gauguin. On March 14, 1911, Ballin and Cramer went to the *Neue Munchner Verein*—and visited the studios of Adolf Erbslöh and Franz Marc, which she described as "very interesting and enjoyable." This was just months before the breakup of the Neue Künstlervereinigung in December 1911, when Kandinsky, Gabriele Münter, Franz Marc, and Alfred Kubin withdrew. The main issue in the split of this artists' association was Kandinsky's belief in "inner necessity" and his attempts to paint freely without clearly representing objects in his pictures. Otto Fischer, who with Alexander Kanoldt and Adolf Erbslöh was opposed to Kandinsky's (and his friends') radical aesthetic ideas and art, in his book *Das neue Bild* of 1912 stated his views following the split within the association:

A painting is not solely the expression, but also representation. It does not express the soul directly, but the soul in terms of the object. A painting without object is senseless....

These are fallacies of empty fanatics and imposters. These confused individuals may talk about the spiritual—but spirit makes for clarity, not confusion. A few colors and dabs, a few lines and notches are by no means art....⁵

Kandinsky and Marc had begun working on the almanac *Der Blaue Reiter* as early as April 1911. Word of their efforts probably spread quickly in Munich as other artists were invited to participate as contributors to the almanac. Although Cramer departed before the first exhibition of the group *Der Blaue Reiter* held at the Galerie Thannhauser in December 1911, he was in Munich long enough to become interested in the creative vitality of the artists who were to participate. Of these artists, Kandinsky, of course, exerted the largest influence in liberating his fellow artists (including Marc, whom Cramer met) from the weight of tradition. Before Cramer left Munich for America, he had already grasped the importance of Kandinsky and the emerging group *Der Blaue Reiter*. What he learned was to influence not only his own development, but also that of some of the artists he was to meet in America.

After their marriage on June 24, 1911, Florence and Konrad Cramer spent a week in England and ten days in Paris before returning to Karlsruhe. In September, they went to America and settled in Woodstock, where Florence had been studying before going to Germany. It was not long before Konrad Cramer began to communicate his imported ideas about the possibilities of abstraction to the other local artists. He reportedly “sowed the first seeds of discord in the ranks of the Woodstock painters” and participated in forming an art gallery in the dining room of Rosie McGee’s boarding house, which at the time was the local gathering place for artists.⁶ The motto of this group of Woodstock artists was reportedly: “Modern Art or Die!”⁷ Before the end of the year, Cramer also had become acquainted with Alfred Stieglitz and the circle of his gallery “291” in New York City.⁸ On August 31, 1912, Florence recorded in her diary that she and Konrad got together in their attic with Andrew Dasburg, Grace Mott Johnson, and Henry Lee McFee and “looked over books and read aloud—Gertrude Stein’s article ... on Matisse and Picasso” which appeared in the *Camera Work* Special Number just published that month. By 1914, Stieglitz had photographed Cramer and Cramer had written a letter in answer to Stieglitz’s query, “What is 291?” Cramer’s reply, subsequently published in *Camera Work*, was appropriately abstract:

It is like a straight line rising, a line of living red, rising above gray formlessness, and other straight lines run towards the big, straight, rising line at many angles. Some almost run parallel, others melt gradually into it: some meet it at right angles; others cross it like the slash of a sword. Towards the bottom, some undefined lines of insipid colors, but only a few. But all is rising, is straight—but not the line of least resistance.⁹

Cramer was perhaps influenced here by Kandinsky’s language in the essay “On the Question of Form,” published in *Der Blaue Reiter*. (Cramer had obtained a copy of the almanac, which was published in May 1912, after he had already arrived in the United States.¹⁰) Kandinsky had written of the straight line in a different sense:

The viewer can and must follow the artist, and he should not be afraid of being misguided. Man cannot move in a straight line physically ... much less spiritually. And on spiritual paths especially, the straight line is often the longest because it is false, and the apparently false path is often the right one.¹¹

In another sense, Cramer may have been describing “291” in terms of the abstract forms and lines of his own nonrepresentational paintings.

With the exception of some academic work on paper from art school, Cramer’s earliest surviving art is Expressionist rather than purely, or even nearly, abstract. It is an oil painting of a female nude reclining in a landscape; she rests her head pensively, leaning on one elbow. The bright colors are applied in large solid areas often outlined in

heavy black, resembling the work of Gabriele Münter of about 1910 more than the looser style of Kandinsky at that time. Since Cramer's papers seem to indicate that he did not include paintings among his belongings shipped from Karlsruhe to America in 1911, this small canvas may have been painted in late 1911 not long after he settled in America.

Cramer's developing interest in Kandinsky's style of painting (which he had seen in Munich) was pursued in America and is demonstrated in his painting **Improvisation**, probably finished in late 1911 or early 1912 (pl. 5). Related to any of a number of paintings by Kandinsky in 1910, such as **Improvisation No. 9** or **Church in the Mountains**, Cramer's **Improvisation** retains aspects of landscape although it approaches pure abstraction with its rhythmic curves of green heavily outlined in black. Low pink hills across the bottom before a yellow highlighted mountain peak remind one that this painting still represents a landscape—and is not just an arrangement of forms and colors. Cramer's palette is also close to Kandinsky's work of 1910, with rich purples and deep greens predominating as well as dramatic insertions of yellow, orange, and pink strategically placed. Cramer was well on his way here to evolving pure abstraction and he soon proceeded to do so. After exploring Kandinsky's more representational landscapes, Cramer investigated the seemingly abstract Improvisations; meanwhile, he read the Russian painter's theories in *Der Blaue Reiter* (and probably in *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*), and finally, he developed purely abstract compositions of his own. An early untitled Expressionist abstraction may reflect Cramer's interest in works by Kandinsky which were concerned with The Apocalypse (pl. 6).¹² Cramer's canvas is divided into several registers which contain chaotic activity including bolts from across the blue heaven and devouring flames.

Cramer first exhibited his abstract paintings (including **Improvisation No. 1** (pl. 7) of 1912-13 and **Improvisation No. 2** (pl. 8) of 1913) in a group show at The MacDowell Club of New York on West 55th Street, from November 13-23, 1913. In choosing to title the six paintings he exhibited there **Improvisation No. 1-6**, Cramer was once again paying homage to Kandinsky by choosing one of the three categories the Russian artist used to describe his own paintings. In his treatise *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, Kandinsky defined an Improvisation as "A largely unconscious, spontaneous expression of inner character, non-material nature."¹³ Indeed, Cramer's picture, devoid of reference to any particular material object, recalls as well Kandinsky's statement in *Der Blaue Reiter*:

In a painting, when a line is freed from delineating a thing in itself, its inner sound is not weakened by minor functions, and it receives its full inner power.¹⁴

Yet Cramer's Improvisations also refer to Cubism in both their forms and structural organization. Cramer was certainly familiar with the reproduction of Picasso's Cubist **Woman with Mandolin at the Piano**, which was reproduced in his copy of *Der Blaue Reiter*, and with reproductions of Cubist works in *Camera Work*.¹⁵ He had also read Gertrude Stein's 1912 article on Picasso. Cramer's **Improvisation No. 2** of 1913 contains heavy diagonal lines, striated shading, and a substructure derived from Cubism (pl. 8). Cramer's manner of striated shading which occurs in several of his Improvisations is related not only to that found in Picasso's Cubist painting, but also to his drawings such as the 1910 **Nude** (fig. 1) purchased by Stieglitz out of the Picasso exhibition held at "291" in April 1911 and reproduced in the October 1911, August 1912, and June 1913 issues of *Camera Work*. Cramer's abstraction of 1912-13 now known as **Blocks** is even more obviously Cubist, with its geometric forms and their interlocking organization (pl. 9). His early work seems to reflect two disparate influences: Cubism and Expressionism, which merge in some of his Improvisations.

One of Cramer's most abstract paintings, **Strife**, of 1913, may have been one of the six

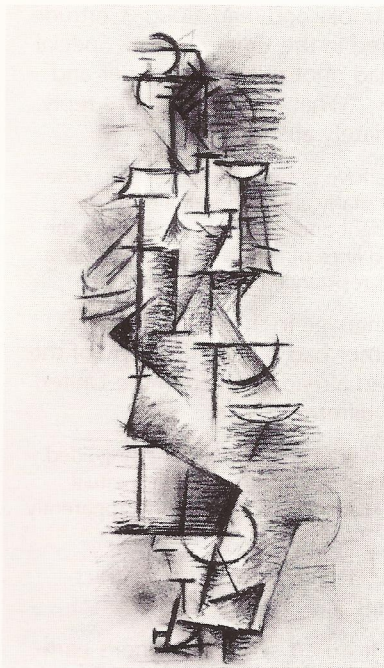


Fig 1 Pablo Picasso **Nude**
The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
The Alfred Stieglitz Collection, 1949



Fig 2 Konrad Cramer *Strife* (cat. 10)



Fig 3 Wassily Kandinsky
Improvisation No. 27
The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
The Alfred Stieglitz Collection, 1949

Improvisations he exhibited at The MacDowell Club (fig. 2). This work is strikingly close to Kandinsky's work of 1911-1912, when Kandinsky sometimes referred to his Improvisations with subtitles revealing content, such as **Improvisation No. 27 (Garden of Love)** of 1912 (fig. 3). Comparing *Strife* to representative works of the Russian artist's production at this time, one is impressed by the facility with which Cramer has absorbed Kandinsky's style. Cramer's colors are rich and bright with soft edges merging into one another in the manner of the fluid colors in the background of Kandinsky's Improvisations. The heavy black lines that Cramer superimposed over the liquid color in *Strife* are typical of Kandinsky's work in 1911-1912 and appear, for example, in his **Improvisation No. 19**, in his **Composition No. 4**, and in **Improvisation No. 27**. Most of these black lines in the latter painting are utilized on a diagonal and serve to create a sensation of movement, a mannerism that Cramer has adapted in *Strife*. Indeed, even as an abstract composition, *Strife* expressed a sense of the fleeting moment, the flux of a Kandinskyesque kaleidoscope. Here Cramer came closest to the essence of Kandinsky's Improvisations.

The title of *Strife* perhaps results from Kandinsky's remark about "an inner feeling expressed by nature's forms (as we say a picture of a 'mood')." The strife referred to here might reflect Cramer's own inner struggle to come to grips with abstraction. This direction of the avant-garde evidently created an aesthetic conflict for Cramer, whose wholehearted espousal of purely abstract art was short-lived. Perhaps his earlier, more conservative training at the Fine Arts Academy in Karlsruhe prompted him to turn to more traditional means. Years later, Cramer stated:

In the beginning, I consciously broke away from painting "reality" in order to explore the extent to which communication between painter and beholder could be maintained when painting became more and more abstract.¹⁷

In his Improvisations of 1912-13 and in *Strife*, Cramer had experimented with pure abstraction. In the paintings that followed in 1914-16, Cramer began to explore the use of abstract symbols. He had realized: "When the point of contact with the beholder was lost entirely, the painting itself seemed to become sterile."¹⁸ This statement reflects his change by the 1920s from the radical nonrepresentational art of his youthful Improvisations to landscapes, still lifes, and occasional portraits. Yet before Cramer replaced his early enthusiasm for Kandinsky's theories, he had managed to interest others in them, including his friend and fellow painter in Woodstock, Andrew Dasburg. Dasburg showed his abstract **Chromatic Chiaroscuro Improvisations** in the same group *Exhibition of Paintings and Sculpture* held at The MacDowell Club in 1913. As late as October 5, 1913, less than six weeks before his exhibition, Dasburg wrote to his wife Grace Mott Johnson: "I saw Florence and Konrad today. He is pursuing the thing in itself and has made some very interesting ones this last week—"¹⁹

Dasburg was already fascinated with Cézanne's art, a preoccupation he shared with his friend Morgan Russell, whose color experimentation and invention, Synchronism, briefly held his interest.²⁰ Dasburg also wrote to his wife that "Konrad became interested in color charts and chromatic scales, complementaries, etc. which led to a discussion..."²¹ In an article he wrote in 1923 entitled "Cubism—Its Rise and Influence," Dasburg criticized the synthesis that he, Cramer, and other American modernists had attempted from so many European sources:

We lack the intellectual integrity to work logically within the limitations inherent in an idea. We want instead to gather the best from many sources, forgetting that art is not compounded from extracts of different significant qualities in great art.²²

Nonetheless, Dasburg communicated his deep interest in Cézanne to Cramer, who began to produce work under this influence about 1919.

Cramer's strong interest in Kandinsky's Improvisations made him compatible with

members of the Stieglitz circle, including Stieglitz himself, who, in March 1913, purchased **Improvisation No. 27**, Kandinsky's only painting in the New York Armory Show. This was the first example of Kandinsky's work ever exhibited in the United States, but eight months earlier, in July 1912, Stieglitz had published in *Camera Work* translated excerpts from Kandinsky's treatise, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*.²³ Among those artists who showed in Stieglitz's gallery "291" and who read Kandinsky's writings were Oscar Bluemner, Abraham Walkowitz, Arthur Dove, and Marsden Hartley. Stieglitz gave a copy of *Der Blaue Reiter* inscribed: "Mar. 19, 1913 from Mr. Stieglitz" to Dove, who also owned a copy of the first German edition of *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*. But of these artists in the Stieglitz coterie, it was Hartley who developed the most profound interest in Kandinsky's art and theory.²⁴

Hartley, who learned of Kandinsky in Paris in 1912, traveled to Germany and met the Russian artist in Murnau in January 1913. In his painting, which had already been influenced by his acquaintance with Kandinsky's art through the almanac *Der Blaue Reiter*, he continued to utilize an abstract symbolism ultimately owing to Kandinsky's influence.²⁵ These canvases from Hartley's European trips in 1912-13 and 1914-15 were exhibited at "291" in January 1914, at the Forum Exhibition in March 1916, and at "291" in April 1916. Although Cramer never exhibited at "291," by 1914 he had visited the gallery often enough to answer Stieglitz's query "What is 291?" Cramer's paintings which follow his *Improvisations* appear to reflect the influence of Hartley's first European work, which Stieglitz admired and promoted.



Fig 4 Marsden Hartley **The Warriors**
Collection of Max Zurier, Palm Springs, Ca.

Cramer's **Abstraction** (pl.1) can be best dated 1914, after he saw Hartley's **The Warriors** of 1913 (fig. 4). Cramer's central orange peak (containing smaller interior vertical forms) resting on top of a larger curved form and containing a pale cloud-like formation is closely related to the composition of **The Warriors**. Cramer's cloud-like form seems to represent a reclining couple embracing; this is suggested by the two signs for the female located on a blue or heavenly ground and placed on either side of the centralized phallic imagery. While Hartley's composition referred to the masculine splendor and the pageantry of the German military that he so admired, Cramer's painting appears to extoll the physical and spiritual unity of love between man and woman, as in Kandinsky's **Improvisation No. 27 (Garden of Love)** which also depicts a couple embracing.



Fig 5 Marsden Hartley **Portrait of Berlin**
Yale University Art Gallery, gift of Mabel Dodge Luhan for the Marsden Hartley Collection,
Yale Collection of American Literature

The largest of Cramer's symbolic abstractions (pl. 11) of 1914 also refers to Hartley's paintings of 1913, shown at "291" in January 1914, such as his **Portrait of Berlin** (fig. 5), which was owned by Mabel Dodge, whose salon was frequented by Dasburg and which Cramer surely visited. As in the Hartley, Cramer's picture features a large upright triangle located in the center of the painting, a cross, several circles, and a cloud form. Kandinsky wrote of the square, the circle, the triangle, the rhombus, and the trapezoid as "abstract entities" which have life in themselves,²⁶ and wrote that "an upright triangle is more steadfast and quiet than one set obliquely on the surface."²⁷ Both Hartley and Cramer have used forms discussed by Kandinsky, but Hartley's canvas celebrates a handsome young officer whom he adored, while Cramer's depicts the erotic dichotomy of the male/female polarity.

Cramer's centralized equestrian figure also reminds us of Hartley's Prussian military officers. Yet on the top left Cramer depicted an emblematic sign for the female next to a mirror (vanity) and on the upper right side he placed a sign for the male next to a book (intellect). On the lower left by the equestrian figure is a sword, a medieval sign of "conjunction," because of its composition of a blade and a guard; perhaps here it also symbolizes a woman's power to wound, for it is curved or lunar and therefore feminine in its shape. It is flanked on the right by a set of scales, the mystic symbol of justice. In the center of the cosmos symbolized by the clouds and the sun disc at the



Fig 6 Konrad Cramer *Untitled* (cat. 53)

top, the male and female are united in a mystic cross, the ladder reaching to God. Below this celestial world, we find the earthly sphere symbolized by the trees.

This same sun disc above a cloud formation with a female sign recurs in another abstract painting from this period (pl. 12). Before the radiating sun is a male symbol in the shape of a cross. A linocut of about this same period contains the same male and female emblems beneath a bird in flight within an archway placed below an ascending triangle and sun disc (fig. 6). The triangle is flanked by clouds and rays of light and the earth rises up below.

Yet Cramer's interest in such symbolic imagery did not endure. By 1917, he had turned to his surroundings for more tangible subject matter. He produced a linocut of the dramatic New York City skyline (pl. 13). The buildings seem to surge with an energy recalling the urban compositions of Cramer's American contemporary in the Stieglitz coterie, John Marin. But an even more likely influence can be found in Cramer's now well-thumbed almanac *Der Blaue Reiter*: Robert Delaunay's **The Eiffel Tower** of 1911 and his **St. Severin** of 1909. Cramer appears to have adapted Delaunay's vertically-piled forms gracefully tumbling toward the center as in the former work, and the repeated gothic arches are close to those in the latter. Here Cramer found in European art inspiration which enabled him to convincingly convey the energy he felt in New York City, the art center of his adopted country.

As Cramer settled down in Woodstock with his wife and two daughters, he had to work in commercial art to support his family. In 1917, Stieglitz closed "291." In January 1918, Cramer's close friend Dasburg visited Mabel Dodge in New Mexico for several months and began to spend more and more of his time there. A more conservative aesthetic tide swept across America after the first World War and many modernist artists (including Hartley, Dasburg, Stanton Macdonald Wright, and Thomas Hart Benton) who had once produced bold abstractions returned to representation in the 1920s. Cramer was among them. Although he would never again produce paintings that could be called avant-garde, Cramer continued to experiment, employing a number of different techniques and styles, and working in different mediums. Yet his role as catalyst, mixing the latest ideas of the German and the American avant-garde, had come to a close.



KONRAD CRAMER