History of Art Dissertation prize winner

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This year, the Sam Beighton Prize for the best BA dissertation in History of Art was awarded to Catherine Cook for her study of Wassily Kandinsky's, *Murnau-Staffelsee I*. The dissertation was supervised by **Dr Camilla Smith (/staff/profiles/historyofart/smith-camilla.aspx)** and received a mark of 84.

Catherine has written the following description of her dissertation:

Title: **Wassily Kandinsky's *Murnau-Staffelsee I*, (1908) (http://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/yourpaintings/paintings/murnau-staffelsee-i)**

There were two main reasons that I chose to focus my dissertation on Wassily Kandinsky's *Murnau-Staffelsee I* (1908). First, I had taken a course on 'Art and Architecture in Austria and Germany 1885-1930' in my second year which had given me a broad understanding of the period. Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, however, it's a painting I have visited intermittently for several years and so I knew that my interest in it was sustainable and enduring. I was particularly interested in the painting as an early example of experiments with the abstract qualities of colour. Although at this stage in his career Kandinsky was still largely dependent on figurative representation, there are small areas of *Murnau-Staffelsee I* which reveal themselves as colour tensions entirely separate from both the objects presented and the overall sense of perspective.

My main line of enquiry was, therefore, tracing the origins of abstraction. I started by looking into the recurring themes in scholarship on Kandinsky including, Expressionism, Fauvism, Symbolism, Russian Theosophy and the early stages of Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophical society. However, I found little interpretive material to satisfy what interested me in the observations I had made from *Murnau-Staffelsee I*. I also found that most scholarship on Kandinsky encouraged the enmeshment of Kandinsky's texts and his paintings, thereby inadvertently supporting the assumption that Kandinsky accurately anticipated his art historical achievements. I decided quite early on, therefore, to examine the aesthetic theories from and previous to 1908 with a view to critically engaging with the potential consequences of Kandinsky's reception of such texts.

Through research into contemporaneous aesthetical enquiry, I found that the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer's discussion on the concept of abstraction in music, the ontological qualities of colour and the metaphysical act of creativity, provided an original and significant aesthetic theory which promoted the messianic role of art in its ability to communicate metaphysical truths. In chapter one I outline the climate of spiritual crisis and aesthetical enquiry in Germany,1908 before detailing the significance of Schopenhauer's aesthetic theory for Kandinsky in chapter two. Through a close analysis of *Murnau-Staffelsee I*, I show in chapter three how Kandinsky absorbed what he learnt from Schopenhauer in order to begin grappling with the idea of visual abstraction.

I found through closer research into the reception of Schopenhauer's aesthetic theory that his cultural reception was significant and that he was widely read in avant-garde circles. Despite this, and despite growing scholarship on the philosopher, there is no extensive study on how Schopenhauer was received by artists. I will therefore be focusing on Schopenhauer's reception amongst German artists for my MRes starting in September. The research skills and opportunities encouraged by the University of Birmingham's art history department and the support of my supervisor Dr Camilla Smith in particular, allowed me to find an area of independent research that I feel is both worthwhile and personally, enthralling.

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