

“ELLA” AND “WASSI”

The Lovers as Tourists

Our sketchbooks and studies—as well as the paintings and photos—convey the detail of our Tunisian impressions. At times we got along well—at times not at all—we took walks in the city and also in the Belvedere Park—it was never boring with my beloved but we didn’t make contact with any other people: he never wanted it.

GABRIELE MÜNTER, MEMOIR ENTRIES FOR 1905

Little is known about the private lives of Kandinsky and Münter during the three and a half months they spent in Tunisia. Because they were together, no letters between them survive, and none to third parties has been traced. Their situation in Tunis contrasts starkly to the period of the preceding year when, after a month-long trip with Kandinsky to Holland, Münter was living with her elder sister in Bonn, and Kandinsky, in Munich and Odessa. Gisela Kleine, whose biography of the two artists is constructed around their correspondence, points out that they wrote letters almost daily, conducting an intense long-distance conversation.¹ In Tunisia neither of the lovers kept a diary, although at some point between late 1905 and 1911 Münter wrote a few hundred words of recollection that provide valuable information.²

Kandinsky, in his extensive writing before World War I, made scant mention of his travels of the years 1904–7. After he separated from Münter during the war (when, as a Russian citizen and enemy alien, he was obliged to leave Germany) and remarried the much younger Nina Andreevsky in 1917, he may not have been able to dwell on that phase of life. Only in 1938, when preparing a curriculum vitae to apply for French naturalization, did he write: “1904, voyage to Tunisia, strong impressions of the phantasmatic [*sic*] environment, numerous studies, drawings, Sheep Festival.”³

Most biographers see in the long period of travels in the years 1904 to 1907 the new couple’s desire to spend time alone together. Kandinsky’s personal situation was complicated: in 1892 the young academic had married his Russian cousin Anja Chimiakin, who accompanied him when he went Munich in 1896 to train as an artist. Although the

marriage seems to have run its course by the time he met the twenty-five-year-old art student Gabriele Münter in 1902, Kandinsky remained very fond of Anja and, according to Münter, suffered from guilt regarding his treatment of her throughout the new relationship.⁴ The correspondence between Was (as he called himself) and Ella (her family nickname) reveals him as a high-strung individual, who seems to have found in Münter a calming presence. Münter evidently had to put up with his regular crises of nerves. That Kandinsky experienced a sense of freedom in his new life with her, however, is expressed in a letter he wrote her in July 1904: "In three months we will be together forever and go wherever we want."⁵

Wassily and Anja Kandinsky dissolved their marital home in Munich in September 1904. But not until four years later did the new couple have anything resembling a home together, when Münter purchased the house in Murnau that, as the so-called Russians' House, became famous in the annals of modern German art. Both of them suffered from uncertainty in the interim, and Kandinsky wrote to Münter on November 2, 1904, that he felt "homeless, like the perennial Jew—the houseless and rootless wanderer."⁶ Kandinsky's divorce, for Münter, proceeded at a frustratingly slow pace in the Russian courts; he obtained it only in 1911. Münter meanwhile became quite close to Anja Kandinsky, visiting her often when Kandinsky was in Russia on an extended stay in 1911.⁷ In the end, Kandinsky and Münter never married; Kandinsky's second marriage, to Nina Kandinsky, lasted until his death in 1944.

The early letters show that Kandinsky pressed harder in the affair. Münter's reticence is understandable in light of the conventions of about 1900, when a young middle-class woman of good family who became involved with an older, married man placed herself in a socially precarious position and courted disgrace. Yet her family (her parents had both died before 1900) seemed liberal enough to allow her continued access to her private income. (The estate was managed by her elder brother.) Kandinsky also had a comfortable private income from Russian sources.⁸ These funds enabled travel away from Munich (where Anja Kandinsky remained). The first of their productive trips together, in May–June 1904, was to Holland, where they spent a month visiting a dozen towns, always taking in the museums.⁹ They stayed longest in The Hague and Scheveningen, he painting and she taking photographs.¹⁰ The professionally ambitious Kandinsky undertook many shorter trips in these years, exhibiting widely in Russia and Germany, crisscrossing Europe from Odessa to Paris via steam train. His sizable first exhibition in Paris was in 1904 at the Salon d'Automne (founded in 1903), where he showed nine gouaches on "folkloric" themes and nine of the twelve black-and-white woodcuts that made up his 1903 suite *Verses without Words* (*Stichi bez slov*).¹¹

In the aftermath of that exhibition (where he was honored by election as a *sociétaire* of the Salon d'Automne) the pair began to plan their North African trip. As for the idea of visiting Tunisia itself, it had many possible instigations. Munich, the Bavarian capital, during the reign of the Prince Regent Luitpold (r. 1886–1912) enjoyed a rich vein of Islamophilia. At the populist level, the annual Oktoberfest usually had an "Arabian" café

Zweites Blatt.
Neues Münchener Tagblatt.

Nr. 270.

Montag den 26. September 1904.

28 Jahrgang

„Tunis in München.“

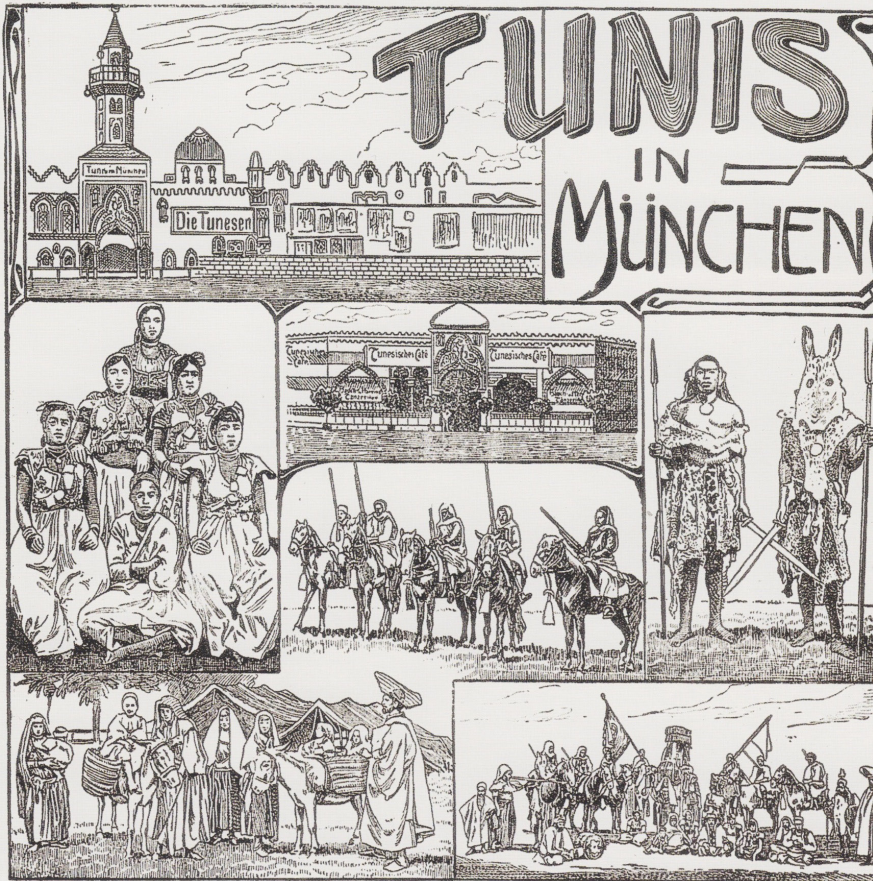
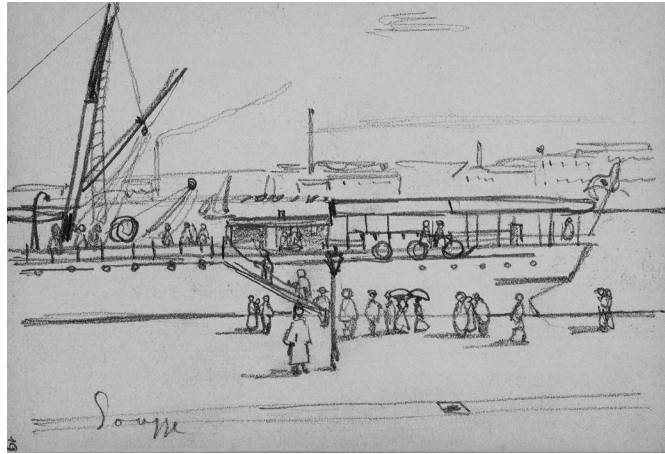


FIGURE 7

Anon., *Tunis in Munich*, illustrated front page of *Neues Münchener Tagblatt*, September 26, 1904, Bavarian State Library.

and restaurant and frequently featured displays of North African riders and Sudanese villagers in the “Bedouin Encampment” arranged by the entrepreneur Carl Gabriel.¹² At about the time the Kandinsky-Münter trip was being planned, the leading attraction of the 1904 Oktoberfest was Tunis in Munich, an imposing set of temporary buildings with a large minaret, covered souks, a “Tunisian Café,” and a wide range of “ethnic”

FIGURE 8
Wassily Kandinsky, *Steamship in Sousse Harbor*, March 1905, pencil in sketchbook, 16.5 × 11.2 cm, GMS 324/19, Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus und Kunstbau, Munich.



performers. The advertisement boasted of “Bedouins, Moors, Berbers, and Negroes. All of these Orientals are deeply interesting, interesting in countenance and movement, and still more interesting when they invite us to share in their arts and their ways of life.”¹³ If seeing Tunisian people and handcrafts at an exhibition sparked artists’ ideas about travel, it was not the first time: Paul Gauguin was famously inspired to visit the South Seas by the displays on French Polynesia he studied at the 1889 Universal Exhibition in Paris.¹⁴

On a more personal level, Kleine points out that at least one of Kandinsky’s Russian friends, the artist Vladimir von Bechtejeff, had recently traveled in Sicily and Tunisia.¹⁵ By November 1904, when Kandinsky was visiting his family in Odessa, he was able to propose a notional itinerary to Münter: from Paris they would “travel to Marseille and take a steamer to Africa. Winter there, and spring in Spain and France. Finally, summer in Sweden. We’ll get, if it’s available, a Bae[deker] for North Africa: Tunis, Tangère (I have no idea how the Devil to write these correctly, but you’ll understand me), and eventually Egypt. If for the first two there is no Bae[deker], then we’ll buy something French.”¹⁶

That is, a steamer trip along the North African coast (where neither of them had been before), stopping at the main cities visited by tourists, then on to Egypt for the coldest months, and home in spring via Spain and France.¹⁷ In short, Kandinsky proposed the exotic version of the grand tour that had become popular in the later nineteenth century.¹⁸ The itinerary he outlined apparently overwhelmed Münter, who had hoped for Egypt, where at least she could speak English.¹⁹ Kandinsky’s expected reliance on the famous guides of Karl Baedeker of Leipzig is explicit here, and he was right in assuming there was as yet no comprehensive guide in German for the Maghreb: that appeared only in 1909, with the publication of *Das Mittelmeer*; prior to that Baedeker had featured Tunis as a brief section in the volume on Southern Italy.²⁰

Co-ordinating their rendezvous by letter (and presumably telegram), the couple traveled by train through Switzerland, stopping to visit the museums.²¹ They stopped in

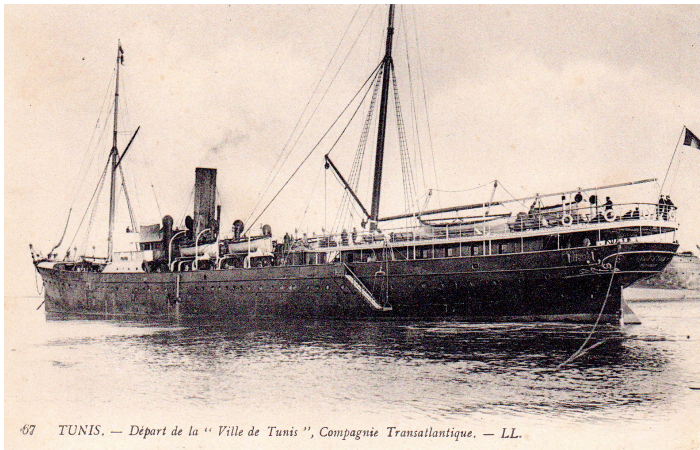


FIGURE 9
Léon and Lévy, Tunis—Departure of the
“*Ville de Tunis*,” Compagnie Générale
Transatlantique, postcard, ca. 1904,
DORA Collection, Sydney.

Lyon, where Münter bought silk, glass beads, and seed pearls for embroidering the decorative art designs Kandinsky had been actively working on throughout 1904. Taking the train down the Rhône valley, they reached Marseille, sailing from there on December 23, 1904, on the *Ville de Tunis*, an aging but solid steam packet of the Compagnie Générale Transatlantique.²²

Münter recorded being fearful during her trip across the Mediterranean. She and Kandinsky made landfall at the north Tunisian port of Bizerte and arrived in the Gulf of Tunis on December 25, 1904.²³ Midwinter was an inauspicious time to arrive on the Maghrebian coast, and the first month of their visit was plagued by wind, cold, and rain—precisely the adverse conditions met by the winter tourists Pierre-Auguste Renoir in Algiers (in 1881 and 1882) and Henri Matisse in Tangier (in 1912 and 1913).

Münter and Kandinsky booked into the Hôtel Saint Georges, an almost-new establishment on the northern fringes of the European section of Tunis. Münter recalled: “Lovely room with two balconies to the south and the north. 2 days of beautiful summer weather—then came the horrible winter—almost always storms.” Because this hotel was too expensive for a long-term stay, the couple moved to the “dependency” of the same business, the Hôtel Suisse, probably next door: “After a couple of days we moved into the Dépendance Hôtel Suisse where we had two rooms for 8 or 9 (?) fr[ancs].”²⁴

Although Kleine based the rather depressive account of Münter’s first month and a half in Tunis on Münter’s memoir, she did so without revealing that in fact Münter, the daughter of a dentist, had an infected wisdom tooth, as the original text makes clear: “At this time I had a constant toothache and could barely tolerate the wind. Finally I went a couple of times to that fine dentist M. Patricot who in the end, at my request, pulled out the old wisdom tooth, and I was blissfully cured—I had always considered it to be neuralgia until I noticed that the tooth was *kaputt*. My chap was with me at the dentist and had to translate as the man did not know German.”²⁵

Münter spent long hours in their hotel room embroidering with glass beads and seed

pearls. This beadwork, known in German as *Perlenstickerei*, was an old Russian tradition rooted in the decoration of ecclesiastical robes for the Orthodox Church.²⁶ Kandinsky's designs encompass abstracted landscape motifs, snow scenes, and Biedermeier motifs. The largest that Münter produced is a wall hanging of Viking *drakkars* on the open sea; although the work is known as *Volga Ships*, Kandinsky was quite likely aware that the Vikings traded in the Mediterranean and that Tunisia, once the rich Roman province of Africa Proconsularis, had been conquered and then settled by an eastern European people, the Vandals, for more than a century (ca. A.D. 429–533).

In any case, Münter proudly displayed her embroidery in a photograph taken on her roof terrace in Tunis. She is carefully dressed, but the young woman's facial expression betrays a combination of pride and possible irritation at the cameraman, surely Kandinsky; Kleine sees in it the visible strain of her embroidery work.²⁷ The rooftops of the *ville européenne* stretch out toward the telltale double peak of Djebel Bou Kornine in the far distance.

With the exception of two or three small gouaches, Münter's pictorial activity in Tunisia was limited to the media she was most familiar with. These were landscape oil sketches (which she had begun painting under Kandinsky's tutelage in Bavaria on art class trips of 1902 and 1903) and drawings. She had been drawing since childhood, becoming highly accomplished during her yearlong sojourn in the American Midwest in 1898–99, before her move to Munich to study art.²⁸ Anne Mochon has commented that Münter "had evolved an approach to recording landscape views in her sketchbooks. . . . She noted areas . . . in contour lines, within which she placed numbers keyed to specific colors and values." By the summer of 1903, "she was clearly at home with the sketchbook," whereas her paintings remained "exploratory attempts to come to terms with the technique of outdoor painting."²⁹ Münter's ease with the notebooks is evident in a photograph showing her drawing while standing on a rocky outcrop in the vicinity of Tunis.³⁰

One remarkable caricature drawing from the Tunis stay parodies the master-student relationship between the couple. Although it is usually attributed to Kandinsky, Shulamith Behr has argued that Münter herself was the more likely author of this unflattering self-image.³¹ The petite and retiring woman stands deflated before the overdressed, puffed-up aesthete providing criticism. Mochon, considering the artistic role of Münter in the 1905 *Tunisreise*, remarks that she was then an "apprentice" artist, whose first public exhibition was not to occur until the Paris Salon des Indépendants of early 1907. There, six strong landscapes "established her identity as a professional artist."³² In her later life Münter insisted on her great debt to the teaching of Kandinsky, a foreigner in the city of Munich, where there were very few encouragements for female artists.³³

If Münter was suffering ill health, Kandinsky in Tunisia was in a state of distraction owing to the serious political events in Russia and his anxiety about his beloved half brother Vladimir. Kandinsky's stress during the Tunisian sojourn helps explain his limited productivity. Münter wrote in her memoir that Kandinsky went every morning to the newsstand to buy papers with the latest reports from the front in the Russo-Japanese



FIGURE 10
Wassily Kandinsky, *Gabriele Münter in Tunis*, 1905, photograph, GMS Image BDB 2704, Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus und Kunstbau, Munich.

war.³⁴ This was already a world of “globalized” communication, at least when urgent news was at issue. International wire services to Tunisia were well established. (The first submarine cable had been laid between Italy and Algiers in 1854.)³⁵ Stories in the Parisian newspapers that were reported by their correspondents in St. Petersburg could appear in the local broadsheets of their colonial affiliates in Algiers and Tunis within a day of being wired. Indeed, a French-language Tunisian newspaper such as the *Dépêche Tunisienne* for 1905 had a daily report from “notre correspondant à St. Petersburg.” Quite possibly one or two German newspapers were also on sale, but they were more likely to be out-of-date. (Germans were already the dominant nationality among tourists to Tunisia.)³⁶

The political events unfolding in czarist Russia during late 1904 and 1905 were more severe than those endured by any other European nation in the preceding decades. The

Revolution of 1905—a series of naval mutinies, student insurrections, peasant revolts, political assassinations, and severe repression—reached such a pitch that in October 1905 Czar Nicholas II was forced to sign into law a broad restructuring of the Russian political system.³⁷ The restructuring calmed liberal and peasant opposition (if not that of the nascent Bolshevik and Menshevik revolutionaries) to the extent that the czarist regime hung on until the chaos of World War I and revolutionary action brought it down.

Kandinsky, although a liberal émigré, was also a Russian citizen richly attached to this heritage. To give some sense of the extremity of the events that weighed on his mind, I recount them here, in order.³⁸ On January 2, 1905, the Japanese captured Port Arthur, the principal Pacific city of the Russian Empire, in the months-old territorial dispute known as the Russo-Japanese War. Between February 20 and March 10 the Russian army was defeated in the Battle of Mukden by the Japanese, losing eighty thousand troops. Back in eastern Europe, on January 22, the infamous “Bloody Sunday,” a large crowd of peasants and workers marched to the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg to present a petition to the czar. The czar’s troops fired on the protestors, killing between two hundred and a thousand people. On February 17 the unpopular Grand Duke Sergei Aleksandrovich (uncle of the czar) was blown to pieces by a nitroglycerine bomb, lobbed into his carriage. In March 1905, in a bid to quell student unrest, all institutions of higher education in Russia were closed for the remainder of the year. For Kandinsky, as a former lecturer at the University of Moscow who was still in touch with his old teachers, this closure would in itself have been distressing.³⁹

Kandinsky was personally involved because the eldest of his half brothers, Vladimir Kojevnikov (born to his mother during her second marriage), to whom Kandinsky was close, had been called up for military service in the Baltic Fleet.⁴⁰ The fleet left Russian waters on October 15, 1904, to relieve Port Arthur, but did not arrive until seven months later, after sailing around Africa, the British, as allies of Japan, having barred the Russians from the Suez Canal. The fleet refitted in the ports of their French military allies in French Indochina. The Straits of Tsushima, between Japan and Korea, however, were contested by the ultramodern Japanese navy, which inflicted a devastating defeat on the Baltic Fleet on May 27–28, 1905; the Russians sued for peace soon after. It was at Tsushima that Vladimir (from whom the Kandinsky family could have had but scant news) was killed.⁴¹ According to Münter, anxiety about Vladimir had led the couple to return to Europe earlier than planned, in early April 1905.⁴²

Against this background, it is surprising that Kandinsky produced as much art as he did. Despite his nervous disposition (he suffered a virtual nervous breakdown living in Paris with Münter in 1906–7),⁴³ he still had the drive to make some hundred and thirty sketch drawings in three notebooks, about thirty “colored drawings” (as he called his gouache paintings on tinted cardboard), some eight oil sketches on board, and a number of photographs with Münter’s camera. Having been an ethnographer in his earlier Russian life, Kandinsky was uniquely positioned to make the most of the scene that unfolded before him in Tunisia.