

Art Story: *Improvisation 31 (Sea Battle)* by Wassily Kandinsky

Read by Julie Carmean

What's going on in *Improvisation 31 (Sea Battle)*?

Are you wondering what exactly is going on in this painting? Between 1909 and 1913, Kandinsky made a series of abstract paintings entitled, "*Improvisation*." An improvisation is a musical term that means an unplanned or unpracticed performance that involves imagination and creativity. Though, Kandinsky made sketches, he wanted it to feel spontaneous. Kandinsky gave *Improvisation #31* an additional title, "*Sea Battle*", which might help us understand the painting. Do you see two battling ships in the center marked by their vertical masts and billowing sails?

Now look for cannons that fire at each other creating the smoky cloud in between. Then turn your eyes to the scribbled loops. They suggest the splashing sea. And towards the top, a group of smaller shapes might represent a distant city being demolished by huge waves. Though the painting was made in the years before WWI, Kandinsky claimed he was not referring to "war talk," but instead using these motifs to suggest what he called "a terrible struggle going on in the spiritual atmosphere."

He believed that art had great spiritual potential, that it could help people cut ties to material concerns and bring a new spirituality to the world, making it a better place.