

# Exhibitionary Practice of Wassily Kandinsky and Jackson Pollock from the Comparative Perspective

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## ABSTRACT

This comparative study investigates the practice of solo exhibitions of Wassily Kandinsky and Jackson Pollock. Initially, it examines the two artists' biographies, artwork styles, influences, criticisms, and reviews. On this basis, it provides the necessary context for the remaining debate, in which it explores its core question on similarities and differences concerning their exhibitionary activity from the start to date according to three main analytical units, namely, geographical location, type of venue, and exhibition title. Additionally, it also relates these patterns to the framework of contemporary cultural diplomacy players, discusses their role in the exhibition-making processes and relates it to both artists' stances towards materialistic values. The study collected and comparatively analysed a variety of archival and present-day documentary and other sources, such as exhibition catalogues and press releases, monographs including the two artists' interviews, statements, writings, etc., scholarly and newspaper articles, blogs, relevant websites, etc. Along these lines, it provides unique comparative insights on the exhibitionary practice of the two selected artists from both the historical and present-day viewpoint, opens up new possibilities for comparative research and, as such, contributes to the advancement of knowledge and the international exchange of ideas in this field.

**Keywords:** Cultural diplomacy, exhibitionary practice, Jackson Pollock, Wassily Kandinsky.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper approaches abstract art and Abstract Expressionism from the comparative standpoint of art exhibitions of their two representing artists, namely Wassily Kandinsky and Jackson Pollock. Abstract art, which can be defined as “[a]rt that does not depict recognizable scenes or objects” (Chilvers & Glaves-Smith, 2009, p. 2), emerged in the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with artists, such as Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, and Kazimir Malevich. According to American art critic Barr (1936), abstract paintings can be classified as pure abstractions, which include “geometrical or amorphous shapes”, and near abstractions, which are transformed from natural forms “into abstract or nearly abstract forms” (Shapiro, 2013, p. 12–13). As such, the term abstract represents a move “away from ‘nature’” (Barr, 1936, p. 11), while the term Abstract Expressionism also considers “supernatural experiences” (Rosenblum, 1961, as cited in Kozloff, 1973, p. 46). In 1919, the latter term first appeared in the German magazine *Der Sturm* in relation to Kandinsky's pioneering work, whereas in the United States, it was similarly used in 1929 by Barr in relation to stylistic resemblances to Kandinsky's initial improvisations (Chilvers & Glaves-Smith, 2009; Sandler, 1970). However, Abstract Expressionism was primarily associated with post-World War 2 American art, when it also appeared under the name of the New York School. In the early 1950s, it evolved into action painting, representing Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, etc., who expressed on canvas their differentiating “tension, energy, and emotion” (Steckline, 2019, p. 2), and colour field painting, including Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, and Clyfford Still, whose work was characterised by large canvases and fields of more or



less a single colour with no subject matter. In this decade, the heterogenous movement received the mainstream popularity yet in the 1960s, when it was already an established tradition, it was replaced by pop art and conceptual art.

Given the existence of Abstract Expressionism's stylistic similarities with Kandinsky's early works and by considering that in the new millennium, scholarly attention on exhibition-making processes notably increased, this paper explores them from historical and present-day viewpoint by asking about similarities and differences in the exhibition activity of the two selected artists from their start to date. Initially, it also situates both artists within a more general framework of their personal and professional biographies, adopted styles and techniques, main influences on their work, and critics' and reviewers' stances towards the two artists. On this basis, it provides the necessary introductory framework for the continuing investigation of 362 solo exhibitions of the two selected artists from the comparative perspective, of which 223 by Wassily Kandinsky (1912–2024) and 139 by Jackson Pollock (1943–2024). As claimed by [Bjerregaard \(2020\)](#), “exhibitions can effectively work as a particular way of doing research, [and as] a way of exploring the world around us rather than mirroring it” (p. 1).

Additionally, the paper positions the selected solo exhibitions within the context of (contemporary) cultural diplomacy players; as argued by [Cummings \(2003\)](#), cultural diplomacy represents “the exchange of ideas, information, art, and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding” (p. 1). It mostly entered into governmental discourses in the last decade of the previous century ([Ang et al., 2015](#)) but resulting from globalisation, the authority is now shifting from nation-states to diverse supra- and sub-national institutions ([Valtysson, 2010](#)). Among them are also contemporary museums, which stress efficiency, as they frequently adapt organizational models from the private sector and organize exhibitions “with clear-cut aims, exact progression plans and milestones and, as far as possible, a plan for the involvement of the various participants” ([Bjerregaard, 2020](#), p. 12). In the concluding part, the paper further addresses this issue by also reporting on both artists' stances towards materialistic values, at times associated with the prevailing exhibitionary practice.

## 2. METHODS

To adequately address the main research question, the study makes use of a novel comparative case study approach, which reflects “two different logics of comparison”, namely, “across individuals, groups, sites, and time periods” and through the identification of “specific units of analysis” ([Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017](#), p. 8). As also noted by [Ragin \(2014\)](#), comparative methodologists, especially those who are qualitatively oriented, predominantly focus their attention to particular cases and their historical practices.

Based on this understanding, the author collected qualitative data from a multitude of archival and present-day documentary and other available sources, such as exhibition catalogues and press releases, monographs including both artists' interviews, statements, writings, criticisms and reviews, scholarly and newspaper articles, blogs, etc. In addition, the study thoroughly examined available online information on both artists' solo exhibitions from museum, gallery, and other relevant websites (such as [Artfacts, 2025](#); [Kandinsky Experts, 2024–2026](#)), finding that with the advancement of technology, information stored on the Internet considerably increased and, as such, provided new opportunities for thoroughly exploring the exhibitionary practice of the two selected artists.

The collected data were analyzed with the help of content analysis or “the systematic, objective, quantitative analysis of message characteristics” ([Neuendorf, 2002](#), p. 10). This means that larger amounts of data on solo exhibitions were divided into smaller groups and on this basis, three main units of analysis were established, namely, their 1) geographical location, 2) type of venue, and 3) exhibition title; after, the content was also compared and then summarized into meaningful assumptions ([Cohen et al., 2007](#)). As argued by [Sartori \(1991\)](#), it is always necessary to pose the question of “comparable with respect to which properties or characteristics, and incomparable (i.e., too dissimilar) with respect to which other properties or characteristics?” (p. 246).

Moreover, existing studies predominantly focus their research attention either on a particular time period of one artist's work or movement ([Dossin, 2012, 2014](#); [Kangaslahti, 2017](#); [Shi, 2023](#)) or comparatively explore two (or more) artists according to other characteristics ([Wünsche, 2016](#)). This study complements previous scholarship with a systematic longitudinal comparison of both artists' solo exhibition trajectories, covering a broad historical scope up to the present (1912–2024), with which it contributes to the advancement of knowledge and the international exchange of ideas in art history and cultural diplomacy. By combining different concepts, perspectives, disciplines, and data sources, it ensures interdisciplinary insights, which may form a theoretical basis for exploring further exhibition-making processes ([Pleiger, 2020](#)).

On the other hand, the study also acknowledges its limitations in the collection of data, as it relies on available Western-centric records and may therefore exclude relevant data from non-Western sources. Another limitation is in its focus on solo exhibitions only, albeit cross-temporal analyses of joint exhibitions of two or more abstract artists, together with the role of market forces or curatorial preferences on exhibition-making processes, can represent a possible future venue of research.

### 3. BACKGROUND

In this section, the paper establishes the necessary context through a literature review of each artist's personal and professional biographies, styles and techniques, influences, criticisms, and reviews of their work.

#### 3.1. Wassily Kandinsky

Wassily Wassilyevich Kandinsky was born on December 4, 1866, in Moscow.<sup>1</sup> After moving to Odessa (1871), he attended high school where he learned to play the piano and cello and, as he stated in his autobiography, at the age of thirteen or fourteen, he bought himself “a box of oil paints. And to the present day I can still feel the emotion that I experienced on first seeing the fresh paint coming out of the tube” (Kandinsky, 1918, as cited in [Rebay, 1945](#), p. 62). Between 1886 and 1892, Kandinsky studied law (with Political Economy as his chosen subject) at the University of Moscow, where he lectured on law after graduation. At the age of thirty, he moved to Munich to study painting at the private school of a Slovenian painter Anton Ažbe (1897–1898) and in 1900, he also began to study at the Munich Academy of Art. In 1901, the artist co-founded the Phalanx Art School, where he taught painting and drawing and was elected the group's president. But in 1911, after rejecting one of his paintings (*Composition V*), he founded with Franz Marc the *Blaue Reiter* (*Blue Rider*) group, named after one of his paintings ([Barnett et al., 1983](#); [Chilvers & Glaves-Smith, 2009](#); [Dabrowski, 1995](#); [Kandinsky Experts, 2024–2026](#)).

Around 1910, when he created his first *Compositions* paintings, the artist started to advance his abstract style, but at that time, he was already painting for a decade and also created many *Improvisations* paintings (1909–1917) and graphic works (1901–1925). In 1911, the artist published his famous theoretical book *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (*On the Spiritual in Art*), in which he wrote about “observations and spiritual experiences which have been assembled gradually during the last five, six years” (Kandinsky, 1911, published in [Rebay, 1946a](#), p. 6). In August 1914, on the outburst of World War I, Kandinsky returned to Moscow where he also taught art workshops for the government; in 1921, however, he departed to Germany and joined the artistic association Bauhaus. In 1933, when he moved to Paris, the Bauhaus was closed by Nazis and in 1934, he wrote to his American curator friend Hilla Rebay about his situation in Germany, which turned out to be very challenging “because [...] (1) I am not a born German (even a ‘former Russian’), (2) a former Bauhaus teacher [...], (3) an abstract painter. I have, so to speak, three vulnerable spots [...] [and] I was ‘given the cold shoulder’” ([Rebay, 1945](#), p. 93; [Rebay, 1946b](#), p. 7). In 1939, when he also became a French citizen (before, he was given a German citizenship), he completed his last *Composition X* painting, whereas during World War 2, he still painted and wrote but in 1944, he became ill and at the age of 78, he passed away in Paris on December 13, 1944.

Kandinsky's work was inspired by several influences, including Russian folk art and Symbolism, German philosophical beliefs, French Symbolism and Impressionism, Art Nouveau, and Fauvism, whilst mysticism and Theosophy inspired his theoretical writings and also his interpretations of “the nature of [abstract] art” ([Chilvers & Glaves-Smith, 2009](#), p. 355). He was also deeply inspired by the emotional power of music after seeing Richard Wagner's performance of *Loehrin* at the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow (1896) and later, concerts of the Austrian composer Arnold Schoenberg ([Dabrowski, 1995](#); [Rothman, 2002](#)). As the artist stated,

[w]ith the passing of time [...] my ever-growing tolerance towards the work of others was not only harmless but even beneficial to me [...] [making] my own soul more receptive, more capable of vibration [...] [and] thus more capable of reaching its ultimate goal (Kandinsky, 1918, as cited in [Rebay, 1945](#), p. 70).

In terms of early criticisms of Kandinsky's works, [Fineberg \(1979\)](#) maintains that already in 1906, the French critic Gerôme-Maësse commented on his “richness of design, his facility, and his ‘extreme originality’”, which leaves the viewer “with the impression of things appearing in a dream [...] [and the] author appears something of a magician”. However, although some critics were amazed by

<sup>1</sup> According to some, possible dates of birth are also December 5, 1866 ([Rebay, 1946b](#)) and December 6, 1866 ([Kandinsky Experts, 2024–2026](#)).

Kandinsky's abstract paintings, the artist was also "condemned [...] for his 'slovenly, crying colors' and 'exaggerated design'" (Rebay, 1946b, p. 5). The American art critic Greenberg, for example, viewed him "as a painter with the 'bad luck' [...] [and his] paintings appeared to him to be 'pocked with 'holes'" (Greenberg, 1993, as cited in Rothman, 2002, p. 1–3). But as claimed by the artist, "intelligent artists are so indifferent to even the most ferocious critical assaults" (Kandinsky, 1918, as cited in Rebay, 1945, p. 58).

### 3.2. Jackson Pollock

When Kandinsky was forty-five years old, Paul Jackson Pollock was born on January 28, 1912, in Cody, Wyoming, and lived in Arizona and California during his childhood and adolescence. In 1927, he enrolled in high school but left in 1928 to study at the Manual Arts High School, where he also learned to model clay (O'Connor, 1967). In 1929, he moved to New York to study painting at the Art Students League (1930–1932) under the supervision of a regionalist painter Thomas Hart Benton, for whom he noted that working with him "was important as something against which to react very strongly, later on; in this, it was better to have worked with him than with a less resistant personality who would have provided a much less strong opposition" (*Arts and Architecture*, 1944, as cited in Karmel, 1999, p. 15). In the early 1930s, Pollock worked as a stonecutter assistant and later, for the federal art project (1935–1942) with which he was given financial safety to develop his personal style (O'Connor, 1967). In 1949, the article published in *Life* magazine was, for example, already questioning "*Jackson Pollock: Is he the Greatest Living Painter in the United States?*", since he was still quite unknown in the mid-1940s, but at the end of the decade, five museums and forty private collections already had his paintings (Chilvers & Glaves-Smith, 2009, p. 562). On August 11, 1956, at the age of forty-four, he died in a car crash and even before his passing, his wife Lee Krasner remembered that he doubtfully asked her about one painting: "[i]s this a painting?"—not, is this a good painting, or is this a great painting—he wasn't even sure [...] if it was a painting" (Harris, 2010).

Before 1947, Pollock was inspired by mythical and ritualistic experiences but in 1947, he started to rely on gestures and adopted the so-called 'drip' technique.<sup>2</sup> With his works from 1947 to 1950, the artist renounced the rise of Abstract Expressionism; however, by 1953, he already abandoned the 'drip' technique and started to paint more classic works (Sandler, 1970). As he underlined in an interview for the journal *Possibilities* (1947–48), he continuously moved "further away from the usual painter's tools such as easel, palette, brushes, etc. [...] [and preferred] sticks, trowels, knives and dripping fluid paint or a heavy impasto with sand, broken glass and other foreign matter added" (n.d., as cited in O'Connor, 1967, p. 40).

During his career, Pollock experimented with diverse styles and the early influences from the 1930s came from his mentor Benton, Mexican muralists (such as Orozco and Siqueiros), and American Indian motifs, while the later were derived from Surrealism, School of Paris Modernism, Cubism, and Picasso in particular. Kandinsky had also represented a notable influence on Pollock's work as he was familiar with his paintings at the Museum of Non-Objective Painting, where he worked as a custodian in 1943 (Chilvers & Glaves-Smith, 2009; Sandler, 1970).

Furthermore, the artist was frequently championed by American art critics and reviewers and the preface to his first solo show in 1943, written by James Johnson Sweeney, revealed his appreciation of the artist whose "talent is volcanic. It has fire. It is unpredictable. It is un-disciplined. [...] It is lavish, explosive, untidy" (Sandler, 1970, p. 79). But contrary to Kandinsky, Greenberg's assessment of Pollock from 1943 was (much) more favourable, as he contended that his works showed particular American qualities: "[h]e is the first painter I know of to have got something positive from the muddiness of color that so profoundly characterizes a great deal of American painting" (n.d., as cited in O'Connor, 1967, p. 30–31). Conversely, some art critics outside the United States, such as Bruno Alfieri, underlined that "[i]t is easy to detect the following things in all of his paintings: chaos / absolute lack of harmony / complete lack of structural organization / total absence of technique, however rudimentary / once again, chaos" (n.d., as cited in O'Connor, 1967, p. 54–55). However, in a 1950 interview, Pollock noted that "[t]here was a reviewer a while back who wrote that my pictures didn't have any beginning or any end. He didn't mean it as a compliment, but it was. It was a fine compliment" (n.d., as cited in O'Connor, 1967, p. 51).

## 4. RESULTS

In the continuation, the paper responds to the main research question by comparatively exploring similarities and differences concerning Kandinsky's and Pollock's exhibitionary performance from

<sup>2</sup> According to Barr (1959), Pollock showed his first abstract painting around 1945, although his later exhibitions would confirm that he already used the 'drip' technique in 1937 and Hans Hoffman in 1940.

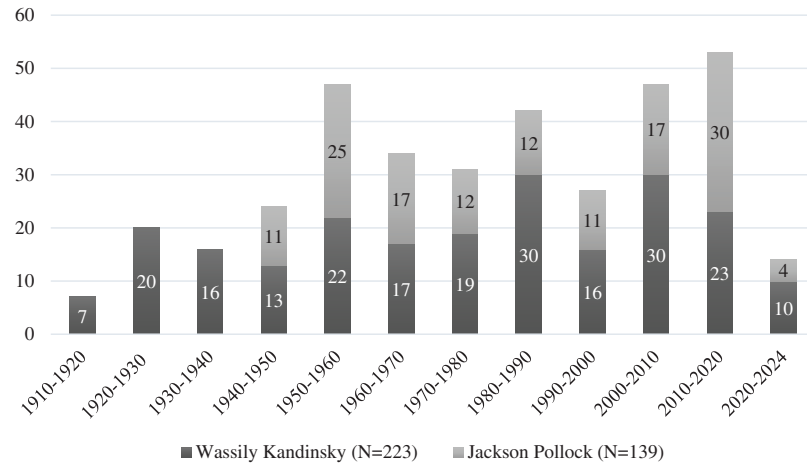


Fig. 1. Solo exhibitions of Wassily Kandinsky and Jackson Pollock by individual decade, quantitative comparison.

the beginning to the present. More specifically, it addresses their solo exhibitions according to three distinctive analytical units: 1) geographical location, 2) type of venue, and 3) exhibition title. Initially, it also presents a quantitative comparison of solo exhibitions by individual decades (Fig. 1) to show their continuing relevance and influence and hence the potential for comparatively investigating both artists' historical and present-day exhibitionary contexts and practices. As it is argued, "exhibitions bring up problems. They ask questions [...] [but] still possess their full expressiveness, their aesthetic power" (Rauff, 2010, as cited in Bjerregaard, 2020, p. 9).

As shown in the above figure, the two artists were constantly represented in their individual shows both during lifetime and after passing (in 1944 and 1956, respectively). According to the collected data, Kandinsky inaugurated in the previous century one hundred sixty (72%) of all his one-man exhibitions and Pollock eighty-eight (63%), which can be attributed to the gap of around thirty years concerning their first individual shows (1912 and 1943, respectively). This also means that in the present century, Kandinsky opened sixty-three (28%) and Pollock fifty-one (37%) of all solo exhibitions; to explore them altogether more thoroughly and adequately, the continuing analysis comparatively examines them according to the above-mentioned analytical units.

#### 4.1. Solo Exhibitions by Geographical Location

The first unit of comparative analysis concerns geographical location (main countries, cities, and regions) of both artists' solo shows. As revealed by the collected data, the two artists individually exhibited to date in the same twelve countries but in total, Kandinsky opened his one-man shows in nineteen and Pollock in fourteen different countries, as demonstrated in the next figure (Fig. 2).

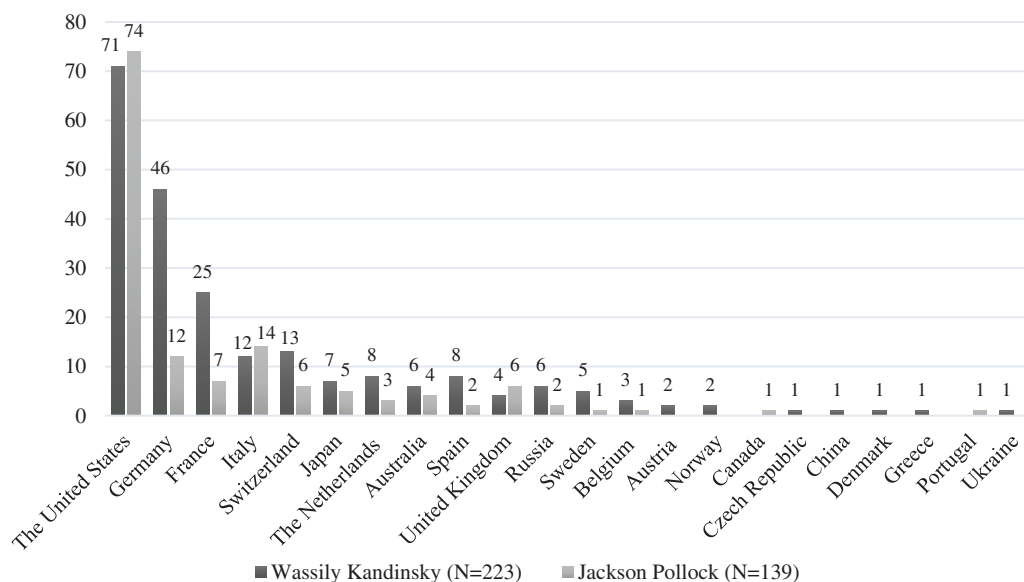


Fig. 2. Solo exhibitions of Wassily Kandinsky and Jackson Pollock by country, comparatively.



Most frequently, both artists were individually represented in the United States, where they opened almost the same number of solo exhibitions (seventy-one and seventy-four, respectively), although Kandinsky opened in the country approximately one-third and Pollock one-half of his one-man shows. In 1923, Kandinsky's first individual show was at the galleries of *Société Anonyme* in New York with the help of his friend Katherine Sophie Dreier, who was, like the artist, interested in Theosophy and saw him as his "north star" (Myers, 2006, September 29).<sup>3</sup> In 1913, the artist also participated in three group exhibitions in the United States (in New York, Chicago, and Boston) and this year, he sold one of his paintings for \$800 to Alfred Stieglitz, who was the first collector in the country to obtain it (Rebay, 1945).<sup>4</sup> In 1931, the artist was also invited to teach at the Art Students League in New York (where Pollock was studying at that time) and in 1941, he declined twice to come to the United States (Barnett et al., 1983). Pollock, on the other hand, inaugurated his first one-man exhibition *Jackson Pollock, Paintings and Drawings* in 1943 at Peggy Guggenheim's gallery Art of This Century in New York and then again in 1945 and this year, he, for example, also opened his third solo show at the Arts Club of Chicago, where Kandinsky was already exhibiting in 1913, as already stated.

In Kandinsky's case, the second most frequent country of his one-man shows is Germany (approximately one-fifth of his solo exhibitions) and the third one is France (approximately one-tenth), corresponding with his periods of living in the two countries. In 1912, he opened his first solo show *Kandinsky Kollektiv-Ausstellung 1902–1912* in Berlin, at the Galerie Der Sturm, which showed his sixty-four artworks and later, from 1912 to 1916, toured throughout Western Europe (the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Sweden).<sup>5</sup> However, in 1907, the artist had already participated in France at one of his first (international) group exhibitions of *Les Tendances Nouvelles* (at the Musée du Peuple in Angers), where he exhibited over one hundred works (paintings, coloured drawings, and woodcuts) (Fineberg, 1979). In 1920, the artist also inaugurated his first one-man exhibition in Moscow and in 1929 of his watercolours and gouaches in Paris, at the Galerie Zak.

In the case of Pollock, Italy represents the second and Germany the third most common country of his individual shows (both with approximately one-tenth of all exhibitions). In 1948, when the artist showed his first 'drip' paintings at the Betty Parsons New York gallery, he also internationally debuted at the group exhibition at *XXIV Venice Biennale*, where Peggy Guggenheim's collection of his six artworks was exhibited together with works from other artists, including Kandinsky's abstraction. For Kandinsky, the analyzed data reveal that in Italy, he opened twelve solo exhibitions; in 1905, he already participated at the International Exhibition in Rome and in 1934, the artist showed over seventy watercolors and drawings at Galleria del Milione in Milan, which was "putting on one abstract show after another", so Kandinsky was hoping that "in a few years Italy [might] be an important art market" (Kandinsky to Albers, 25 January 1935, as cited in Kangaslahti, 2017, p. 72).

As also shown in Fig. 2, the two artists most frequently exhibited solo in the same five countries (the United States, Germany, France, Italy, and Switzerland), which represent the vast majority of their solo shows (75% and 81%, respectively). Accordingly, the study also identified New York as their most common city (thirty-one and forty solo exhibitions to date), then Paris (twenty and seven), and after Berlin and Munich (both eight) in Kandinsky's case and Venice (six) in Pollock's case. Such a distribution of solo exhibitions expresses their geographical favourism, especially in Western European countries (where almost half of Kandinsky's and a quarter of Pollock's solo shows were inaugurated) and the United States, since in this study, Australia, Japan, and China were identified as the only three countries where the two artists exhibited to date outside Europe or North America.

#### 4.2. Solo Exhibitions by Venue Type

In the next figure (Fig. 3), the paper further displays main types of venues of both artists' solo exhibitions, the second analytical unit of this comparative study.

As Fig. 3 shows, Kandinsky's most frequent venues are museums, representing almost half (47%) of all his of individual exhibitions. Among them is the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, which, according to the collected data, inaugurated to date his seventeen one-man shows. In 1945, when the museum opened his first memorial exhibition of 227 works, it was detailed that with the exhibition "a dream of Kandinsky is to come true, though he did not live to see it, he knew of it before he died" (Rebay, 1945, p. 99).<sup>6</sup> In Europe, the artist's first individual museum exhibitions opened a decade earlier (in Bochum, Düsseldorf, and Erfurt) (Dabrowski, 1995). Pollock, on the other hand, most usually inaugurated his (six) one-man shows at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), for the first time in 1956 with his memorial retrospective. This also means that before, no main American

<sup>3</sup> Kandinsky was also elected the vice-president of *Société Anonyme*.

<sup>4</sup> Afterwards, German, Austrian, Dutch, and English collectors also began to show interest for Kandinsky's paintings (Rebay, 1945).

<sup>5</sup> As already noted, *Der Sturm* was also the first German magazine relating Kandinsky's pioneering abstract art to (the term of) Abstract Expressionism in 1919.

<sup>6</sup> To date, Kandinsky was also represented at seven solo shows at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (Pollock exhibited there (only) twice), which was the first museum in the country showing his abstract works in 1935 (Artfacts, 2025).

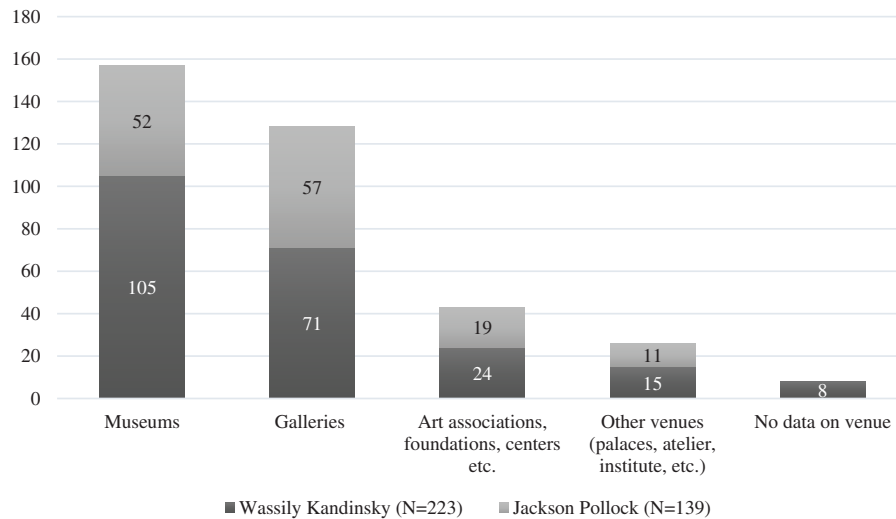


Fig. 3. Solo exhibitions of Wassily Kandinsky and Jackson Pollock by type of venue, comparatively.

museums organized any complete exhibition of the Abstract Expressionist movement (Ruby, 1999). However, as demonstrated in Fig. 3, Pollock's individual shows most usually opened at galleries (41%), especially in New York, where he inaugurated his very first solo shows (at Art of This Century, Betty Parsons Gallery, and Sidney Janis Gallery).

Additionally, Fig. 3 shows solo exhibitions of the two artists at other venues, including art associations, foundations, societies, centres, clubs, institutes, etc., such as Centre Pompidou in Paris, Foundation Beyeler in Basel, Palazzo Reale in Milan, Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center in East Hampton, etc.). In both cases, they altogether represent approximately (only) one-fifth of all their solo shows.

#### 4.3. Solo Exhibitions by Title

The last unit of comparison concerns the most usual titles of both artists' individual exhibitions, which are revealed in the next figure (Fig. 4).

The above figure discloses that the most usual titles of Kandinsky's solo shows are titles including the artist's name (23%; e.g., *Wassily Kandinsky*), his retrospective, memorial, and jubilee exhibitions (19%; e.g., *Kandinsky Retrospective*) or those related to the type of works exhibited (16%; e.g., *Kandinsky Watercolours*). In the case of Pollock, most common titles are those concerning the type of exhibited works (38%, e.g., *Jackson Pollock: New Oils*), titled after his name (19%, e.g., *Jackson Pollock*) or have other titles (9%, e.g., *The Persistence of Pollock*). For example, both artists individually exhibited their mural paintings (in 1956, MoMA showed *Kandinsky's Murals*, whereas from 2012 to 2020, eight *Jackson Pollock's Mural* solo shows were inaugurated at various American and Western European venues (Berlin, Venice, and Malaga), according to the collected data. For the 1956 *Kandinsky Murals* exhibition, the press release, for instance, stated that four large panel paintings were "reunited through

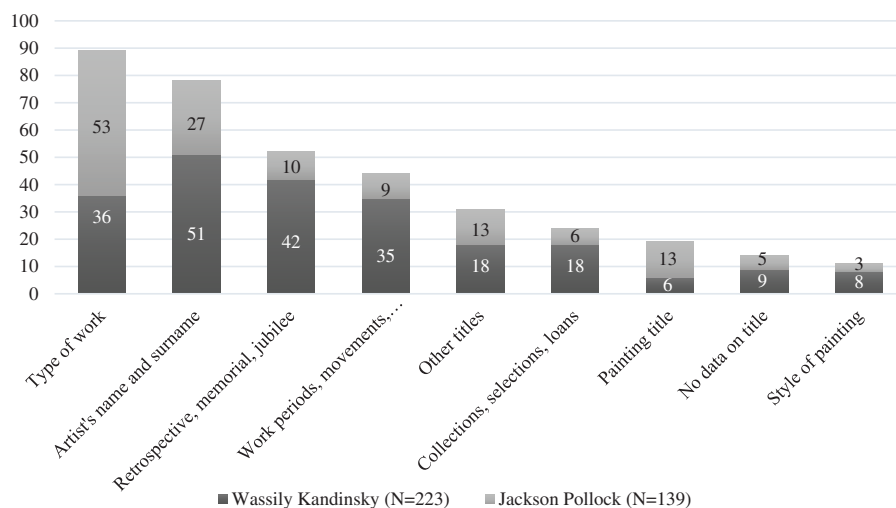


Fig. 4. Solo exhibitions of Wassily Kandinsky and Jackson Pollock by title, comparatively.

a series of coincidences, a country auction, a television show and scholarly research in Europe and this country [...] [and are] valued at tens of thousands of dollars [and belonging] to the Museum of Modern Art” (MoMA, 1956). Next to Pollock’s exhibitions titled after his *Mural* painting, the artist also held his solo shows titled after other paintings, such as *Alchemy* (1947), *Number 1* (1949), and *Blue Poles* (1952), which is his most expensive painting and is currently estimated to value \$500 million. Therefore, Pollock’s success, especially after his (early) passing in 1956, is to be associated with the United States’ (international) cultural policy/diplomacy initiatives promoting “an appetite for American culture” (Lewison, 1999, p. 221; Shi, 2023) and influencing the geographical spread of exhibitions, as also exemplified in the continuation. Kandinsky, on the other hand, had to adapt to challenging conditions taking place both before World War 1, when he returned from Germany to Russia, and World War 2, when in 1937 over fifty of his artworks were nominated as ‘degenerate art’ and were detained by the German government (Dabrowski, 1995). In his 1918 autobiography, he spoke about his detours or “the ‘dead’ moments, during which I felt myself powerless and helpless [...] [although they] turned out to be new starting points, pauses to [...] collect my inner strength for [...] the next move in my development” (Kandinsky, 1918, as cited in Rebay, 1945, p. 73).

## 5. DISCUSSION

By now, results had exposed both similar and dissimilar patterns of the two artists’ exhibitionary practices. One notable similarity concerning the geographical location of solo exhibitions was found in the United States as their most frequent country of one-man shows, followed by Western European ones. In 1958, when MoMA organized a *Jackson Pollock: 1912–1956* traveling exhibition at several Western European venues (in Rome, Basel, Amsterdam, Hamburg, Berlin, London, and Paris), Pollock’s works were, together with other Abstract Expressionist artists, considered “as the most relevant art of the time” (Ruby, 1999, p. 10). For the 1948–1960 period, Dossin (2012) similarly confirmed that Western European had “more than four hundred opportunities [...] to see Pollock’s works, of which 42% were his ‘drip’ paintings [...] [and] 23% of the Pollocks shown [...] came from Peggy Guggenheim’s Collection” (p. 37). As such, Guggenheim’s Venice exhibitions significantly influenced European awareness of American art (Ruby, 1999) and as stated by Pollock in a 1950 interview for *New Yorker*, Miss Guggenheim “gave me my first show, in 1943. She gave me two more [...]. Also, somebody had bought one of my pictures. We lived a year on that picture [...]. Since then things have been a little easier” (n.d., as cited in O’Connor, 1967, p. 51–52). Additionally, the Italian press was also eager to promote his image through headlines, such as “The Volcanic Pollock” and “The Presley of Painting” (*Il Tempo Settimana*, 1958 and *Avanti*, 1958, as cited in Lewison, 1999, p. 227). On the other hand, Kandinsky experienced a different situation in a decade before World War 2, when he expressed: “museums have placed my paintings in storage. [...] Exhibitions, even in private galleries, became impossible for me. Therefore, also, the art dealers were no longer able to represent me energetically. In one word my hands were tied” (Kandinsky, 1934, as cited in Rebay, 1946b, p. 7).

In this respect, Ruby (1999) speaks about trends in Europeanization, Americanization, and Westernization of American (and hence of Pollock’s) art. Such international promotion was also enabled by MoMA’s International Program, which was, especially in its early years, primarily responsible for the country’s “representations at biennials, expositions, and other international gatherings” (MoMA Archives, 2014). From 1952 onwards, the program was, in the words of its director, “able to circulate [worldwide] an extraordinary number of shows [...]. This was possible because of the relatively low costs of shipping and installation, the sky-high dollar of the period, and insurance values [...] that were nothing like today’s” (Horschak, 2010, August 30). By 1956, thirty-three exhibitions were organized within the International Program, which, as such, assumed the protagonist’s role in making artworks accessible abroad (Cockcroft, 1974; Shi, 2023). But in the words of Kozloff (1973), this export was facilitated already in 1950 by private art dealers but with the help of MoMA, traveling exhibitions became “well organized and publicized” (p. 49).<sup>7</sup> However, especially in the first decade, works of other Abstract Expressionists were usually shown together with other styles and, as such, lacked “unity and coherence” (Dossin, 2014, p. 84). Additionally, New York was identified as the most frequent city of both artists’ solo shows but historically, Moscow was one of European centres of abstract art in the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and Paris in the 1930s (Chilvers & Glaves-Smith, 2009; Churchill, 2020), also corresponding with Kandinsky’s periods of stays in both cities. In his 1936 correspondence with Hilla Rebay, he wrote: “[m]y exhibitions, our course, are no excursions. [...] [T]he detours [...] are arranged for me in the shape of exhibitions [...] constantly since my return from Moscow in 1921,

<sup>7</sup> Today, the International Program is still “devoted to connecting MoMA to an international network of artists, scholars, and institutions” (MoMA, 2024). On the museum’s website, one can find diverse material on exhibitions organized by MoMA, including exhibition catalogues, documents, installation views, and a detailed information on artists; see <https://www.moma.org/artists/2981-vasily-kandinsky#exhibitions> for data on Kandinsky’s (117) and <https://www.moma.org/artists/4675-jackson-pollock#exhibitions> on Pollock’s (106) solo and group exhibitions.



in various countries — in Europe and America” (Kandinsky, 21 April 1936, as cited in [Rebay, 1946b](#), p. 8).

In terms of main types of exhibition venues, results disclosed museum dominance for Kandinsky’s and gallery dominance for Pollock’s case. As such, New York galleries were crucial for the success of Abstract Expressionist artists, since they guaranteed funding and “also generated buzz and later, market interest” ([Churchill, 2020](#), p. 2).<sup>8</sup> Other venues therefore represent (only) a fifth of both artists’ solo shows and often organize exhibitions in collaboration with museums and galleries, which hold vast collections of both artists’ artworks.<sup>9</sup>

In relation to most common exhibition titles, these include the artist’s name (Kandinsky) and the type of work exhibited (Pollock). As detailed by Kandinsky, “[e]very artist, as a creator, has to express his own personality” (1911, published in [Rebay, 1946a](#), p. 55), whereas Pollock similarly maintained: “[t]he source of my painting is the unconscious. I approach painting the same way I approach drawing. That is direct—with no preliminary studies” ([O’Connor, 1967](#), p. 40).

Nevertheless, there is one notable difference between the two artists, since Kandinsky was a devoted academic theorist of abstract art who published constantly during his career.<sup>10</sup> Besides, the artist also often noted on differences between his own origins and those of Western European Modernists ([Wünsche, 2016](#)), while Pollock was frequently promoted as being “notably free of European influence” (Heron, 1956, as cited in [Lewison, 1999](#), p. 209). But when he was asked in 1944 about the existence of “purely American art,” he responded that

[t]he idea of an isolated American painting [...] seems absurd to me, just as the idea of creating a purely American mathematics or physics would seem absurd [...] [since] the basic problems of contemporary painting are independent of any country (as cited in [Karmel, 1999](#), p. 16).

## 6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it should be additionally noted on both artists’ stances against materialistic values, which, in Kandinsky’s case, correspond with his views on “freedom as the liberation of men from material and spiritual constraints” ([Tunali, 2011](#), p. 219). As he wrote, “there are periods [...] [of] no spiritual nourishment [...] [when] men lay special and exclusive stress on outward success [...] [and] Art is [...] only used for materialistic purposes, [as] it [...] cannot imagine any finer aims” (Kandinsky, 1911, published in [Rebay, 1946a](#), p. 18–19). Similarly, Abstract Expressionism and its representative artists, including or especially Jackson Pollock promoted freedom of expression and individualism in times of the Cold War ideological competition for the world supremacy ([Shi, 2023](#)). As stressed by [Ruby \(1999\)](#), such promotion characterized “the idea of a new beginning [...] [in] transatlantic fine art discourse” (p. 16). However, the movement’s representatives, including Pollock, were “not politically engages” ([Barr, 1959](#), p. 16). As claimed by the artist in a 1956 interview, “I don’t care for “abstract expressionism” [...] and it’s certainly not ‘nonobjective,’ and not ‘nonrepresentational’ either. I’m very representational some of the time, and a little all of the time” (n.d., as cited in [O’Connor, 1967](#), p. 73).

Therefore, neither abstract art nor Abstract Expressionism are autonomous from their historical condition or the society in which they succeeded ([Shapiro, 2013](#)). As underlined in 1936 by Kandinsky, the artist should stay “above the complex political, social and moral-economic problems of the day” (as cited in [Kangaslahti, 2017](#), p. 64), while Pollock claimed in 1950 that “[m]odern art [...] is nothing more than the expression of contemporary aims of the age that we’re living in” (as cited in [Karmel, 1999](#), p. 20). As such, both artists’ exhibitionary practice should not be viewed as an independent activity, since from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, “the exhibitionary complex provided a context for the permanent display of power/knowledge” ([Bennett, 1988](#), p. 79). Within this setting, nation-states have also started to promote international cultural policy and diplomacy initiatives in accordance with their prevalent political and/or economic ambitions ([Grincheva, 2020](#); see also [Ang et al., 2015](#)). However, museums are also among such (historical and contemporary) cultural diplomacy players, and their efforts sometimes rely on their global partnerships ([Davidson & Pérez Castellanos, 2019](#); [Grincheva, 2020](#)).<sup>11</sup> The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, for example, established branches of satellite museums across the globe with which it is allowed to advance its brand name and consequently,

<sup>8</sup> The collected data, for example, also expose that between 1998 and 2019, Pollock most frequently inaugurated his individual shows at the Washburn Gallery in New York, which opened nine solo exhibitions of the artist in that period ([Artfacts, 2025](#)).

<sup>9</sup> For example, the founder of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation started to collect Kandinsky’s works in 1929.

<sup>10</sup> In addition to his theoretical book *On the Spiritual in Art* from 1911, he, for example, also wrote in 1913 a poetry book *Klänge (Sounds)* and an autobiographical novel *Rückblicke (Retrospect)* and in 1926, a theoretical text *Punkt und Linie zu Fläche (Point and Line to Plane)* in 1926.

<sup>11</sup> Already in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, museums and world fairs appeared as “a new form of representation” ([Davidson & Pérez Castellanos, 2019](#), p. 175).

obtain a generous financial sponsorship support (Grincheva, 2020).<sup>12</sup> But in the current exhibition-making processes, other specialised non-state players, such as professional networks, commercial entities and consultancies also emerged, and their success is similarly measured by the high number of visitors and the generated income (Davidson & Pérez Castellanos, 2019). Or, in the words of Kandinsky,

[t]he masses stroll through the rooms and state their opinion; some canvases are ‘nice,’ others, ‘splendid.’ The man who could have said something to the other man, did not say it, and he who could have heard, heard nought. This condition in art is called, ‘L’art pour l’art.’ [...] The artist seeks material reward for his skill, his power of invention, or vision. His purpose becomes the satisfaction of vanity and greed. Instead of intensified, cooperative work amongst artists, they scramble for possessions. There are complaints about too much competition and overproduction. Hates, partisanship, cliques, jealousy, intrigues are the result of this aimless, materialistic art. (1911, published in Rebay, 1946a, p. 12–13)

Therefore, despite the continuing growth of the exhibition market and the commercialisation of exhibitionary practices, there is also an increasing need for a greater variety, higher quality, and affordability of exhibitions. Or, according to Davidson and Pérez Castellanos (2019), these new exhibitionary contexts considerably increase the need to view exhibitions as “cosmopolitan ambassadors that offer a kaleidoscopic vision that is *polycentral* in nature” (p. 36–37).

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author has no conflict of interest to disclose.

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<sup>12</sup> In Venice (1951–), Bilbao (1997–), Berlin (1997–2013), Las Vegas (2001–2008), Guadalajara (2007–2009), and Abu Dhabi (scheduled to open in 2026); see <https://www.guggenheim.org/about-us>.

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