

ART HISTORY RESEARCH

VASILY KANDINSKY'S GLASS PAINTING (1909-1914)

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Vasily Kandinsky's paintings were the direct expression of his maturing philosophy of art. In such writings as Concerning the Spiritual on Art (1912) and The Blaue Reiter Almanac (1911), the artist documented his developing thoughts on art. These theories may have as much significance for art as do the paintings that emerged from his philosophy.

This paper will examine one period of this evolution of philosophy and painting from 1909 when Kandinsky, while in Germany, experimented with the Bavarian technique of "Hinterglasmalerei" (glass painting). The religious imagery of this Bavarian craft furnished points of departure for Kandinsky's glass art. Having roots in Russian folk life, glass painting allowed Kandinsky to maintain a hold on his own spiritual world through a medium and technique directly related to religious content.

Wassily Kandinsky was born in Moscow, Russia, on December 4, 1866. His father, a successful tea merchant, was from a family who had for many years lived in exile in Eastern Siberia near the Mongolian frontier. There seems to have been a mixing of royalty in the Kandinsky bloodline; one of Kandinsky's great-grandmothers is said to have been a Mongolian princess. His mother was a true Muscovite, and this no doubt added to her son's sentimental attachment to the city of his birth.¹

At the University of Moscow Kandinsky was a student of economics and ethnography and graduated with a law degree.² This could be said to be his outward appearance. Inwardly Kandinsky was moved by the profound impressions found in his faith associated with the Orthodox Church. The rituals and icons of that tradition, the Russian fairy tales, folk paintings, and the color and form of Moscow's architecture all added to a rich and abundant inner self.

In 1896 Kandinsky was a 30-year-old student of art living in Munich, Germany. He stayed there until 1914 when Germany declared war on Russia.³ While in Munich between 1909-1914, Kandinsky created some of his finest masterpieces incorporating such varying stimuli as symbolism, Jugendstil, occultism, theosophy, fauvism, primitive art, and folk art.

Literally translated, "Hinterglasmalerei" breaks down into "behind or back of glass painting."⁴ Another associated term is "Hinterglasbilder," "behind (back of) glass picture."⁵ Both terms seem interchangeable. "Hinterglasmalerei" is a painting in which painted images are applied to the back surface of a clear glass pane. The resulting effect when viewed from the front is a painted surface, sealed opaquely from behind and projecting itself forward through the transparent glass. In Kandinsky's glass paintings, the glass pane is held within an elaborate frame which has been decorated by the artist. (Figure I)

The first application of paint on the glass includes details of drawing, highlights, and glazings. Secondly, the

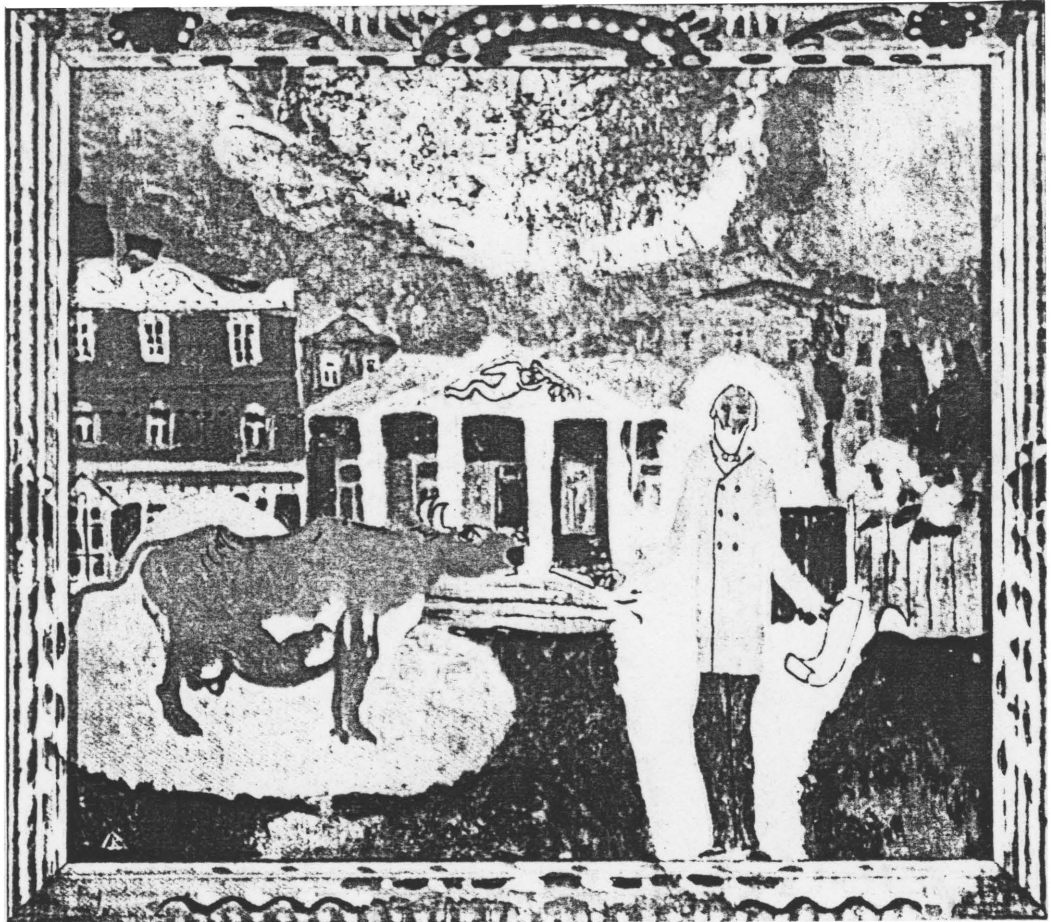


Figure I. Kandinsky, Cow in Moscow, 1912. 11 x 12 5/8".
Guggenheim, Solomon R. Vasily Kandinsky: Painting on Glass. New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1966. Plate 22.

pigments are applied. This sequence of paint application is in direct reversal to the process of painting on canvas where pigments are applied first and details, highlights, and glazings come second.

There are a multitude of substances and techniques used to enrich the picture surface and its effect. For instance, colors may be scratched off and the empty spaces covered with other colors. To simulate precious stones, metal foil covered with transparent hues may be applied. An effect of particular interest is obtained by covering the glass with such reflective substances as mercury, tinfoil, or gold leaf which creates a mirrored surface. (Figure I)

The final application is an opaque paint layer which forces the paint to illuminate from the front. This frontal illumination and the use of oil paint are the only aspects that directly relate this form of painting to painting on canvas. Once the painting is completed, the panel is turned, unpainted side forward, so the viewer sees the composition in reverse, lighted from the front.

Examples of "Hinterglasmalerei" have existed throughout Europe since the fourteenth century. A book from this time period on the art of painting titled Il Libro d'Arte, by the Florentine writer Cennino Cennini, devotes a special chapter to the subject.⁶ Throughout Europe most of the known samples belonged to the decorative arts and were related to goldsmith's work. The works, small in size, depicted scenes of a religious nature and were usually used in a stained

glass manner. The imagery was of saints and madonnas painted in bright colors and outlined in black. (Figures II and III)

Maintaining this same religious content, "Hinterglas-malerei" continued into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It was embraced by amateur painters and flourished in the rural regions of Italy, Germany, England, and Russia.⁷ It was here in rural Germany that Kandinsky was first introduced to the technique.

Generally in this Bavarian tradition, the designs employed were copies from prints. Motifs and compositions were retained for generations with minor changes. The craftsmanship was often the heritage of certain families who continued to produce these pictures. Through the sale of these objects, the country folk who produced them supplemented their meager income during the winter months. The number of themes was limited to religious subjects, mainly consisting of saints, who had some connection with a particular region or village. (Figures IV and V)

Kandinsky's experiments with glass paintings based on this Bavarian folk tradition began in the early 1900s. At this same time Kandinsky had been living with Gabriele Munter, an artist with whom Kandinsky had lived for over ten years without a formal certificate of their union.⁸ Kandinsky, along with Gabriele Munter, was reported to have been interested in Bavarian paintings on glass as early as 1908 when they first began spending their summers in the



Figure II. William Morris, 1871. Adam, Stephen. Decorative Stained Glass. New York: Rizzoli International Inc., 1980. Plate 5.

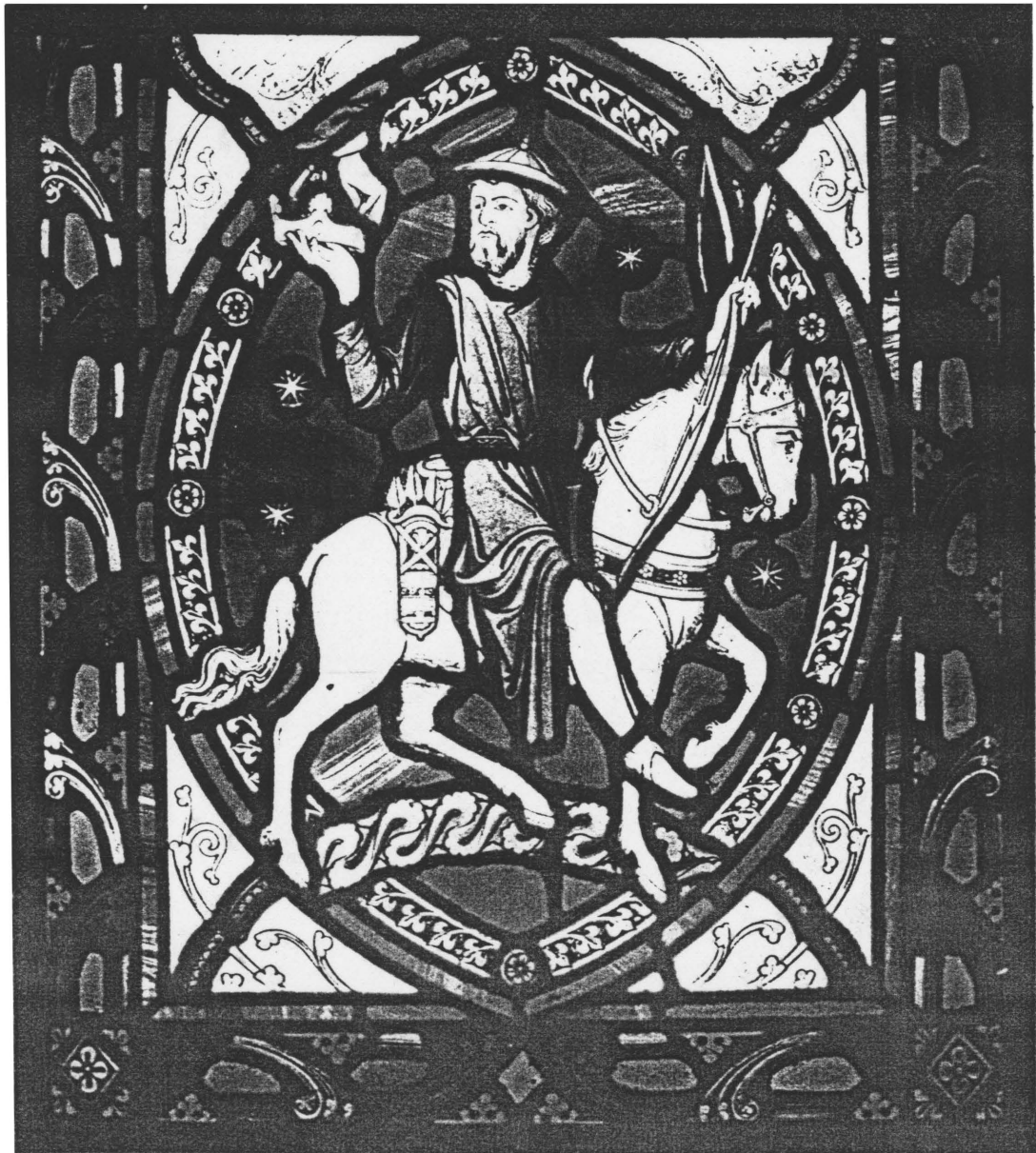


Figure III. J. H. Powell, c. 1855. Adam, Stephen. Decorative Stained Glass. New York: Rizzoli International Inc., 1980. Plate 1.



Figure IV. St. Martin. Bavarian glass painting, 7 7/8 x 5". Guggenheim, Solomon R. Vasily Kandinsky: Painting on Glass. New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1966. Page 9.



Figure V. St. George, Bavarian glass painting, c. 1900.
Long, Rose-Carol Washton. The Development of an
Abstract Style. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980.
Plate 50.

small village of Murnau, outside of Munich where examples of the tradition still could be found.⁹ In 1912 Michael Sadler, Kandinsky's first collector in England, gave a vivid description of his visit with Kandinsky and Munter at Murnau. "They showed us the church, with eighteenth century votive pictures in it--some like little Giotto's painted by Pestalozzi. Then we went to see the glass-painter--the last of his kind--in his workshop near the post-office. He was out but his brother showed us the work. Madonnas and saints in bright Byzantine colours."¹⁰ Munter began to experiment with this technique during the summer of 1909, the second summer she and Kandinsky spent in Murnau.¹¹ Roethel, in an exhibition catalog, dates "The Yellow Horse" (Figure VI) at 1909 and cites the inscription by Munter on the reverse. It reads, "Kandinsky, erstes Glasbild." (Kandinsky, first glass picture).¹²

Behind their interest was a deep belief that the works of these Bavarian folk artists, untrained in the academic manner, represented a purer tradition than the mainstream of western art. By this time Kandinsky had traveled all over Europe and was becoming increasingly aware of the new impulses such as symbolism, Jugendstil, and primitivism, which motivated modern painting. Artists in Russia, as well as Europe, had been involved in a resurgence of interest in primitive art.

By 1911, when he and Franz Marc were preparing material for the Blaue Reiter Almanac, Kandinsky was ready to include



Figure VI. Kandinsky, *The Yellow Horse*, 1909. Guggenheim, Solomon R. Vasily Kandinsky: Painting on Glass. New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1966. Plate 2.

not only examples of Bavarian glass painting but also reproductions of Russian lubki (icons), African art, children's art, and samples of "Gothic" art. Characterized by Kandinsky, under the general term of "primitive," he regarded all of these examples as significant alternatives to the academic tradition of western art.¹³ This interest in primitive art coincided with Kandinsky's emphasis on myth in the glass paintings. In particular, Kandinsky was aware of this interest in primitive myth on the part of such French painters as Matisse and Picasso and German artists of the Brücke Group. A short trip to Russia in 1910 had reinforced his own interest in folk art already evident in his experiments with glass painting.

A short comparison of Kandinsky's 1910 glass painting "The Last Supper" (Figure VII) to his "Angel of the Last Judgment" (Figure VIII) dated 1911 indicates a development on the part of the artist towards greater "Primitivizing." The earlier work is treated more like an oil painting in execution; whereas, the later work reveals closer attention to the methods of the folk artists in its simplified and flatter patterns, brighter colors, and bolder outlining. (Figures IV and V)

There were many external influences which must have helped Kandinsky in his slow, deliberate, and continuous evolution of an abstract style like the folk art he had seen during his early years in Russia and the Bavarian craft of painting on glass. However, Kandinsky himself came to

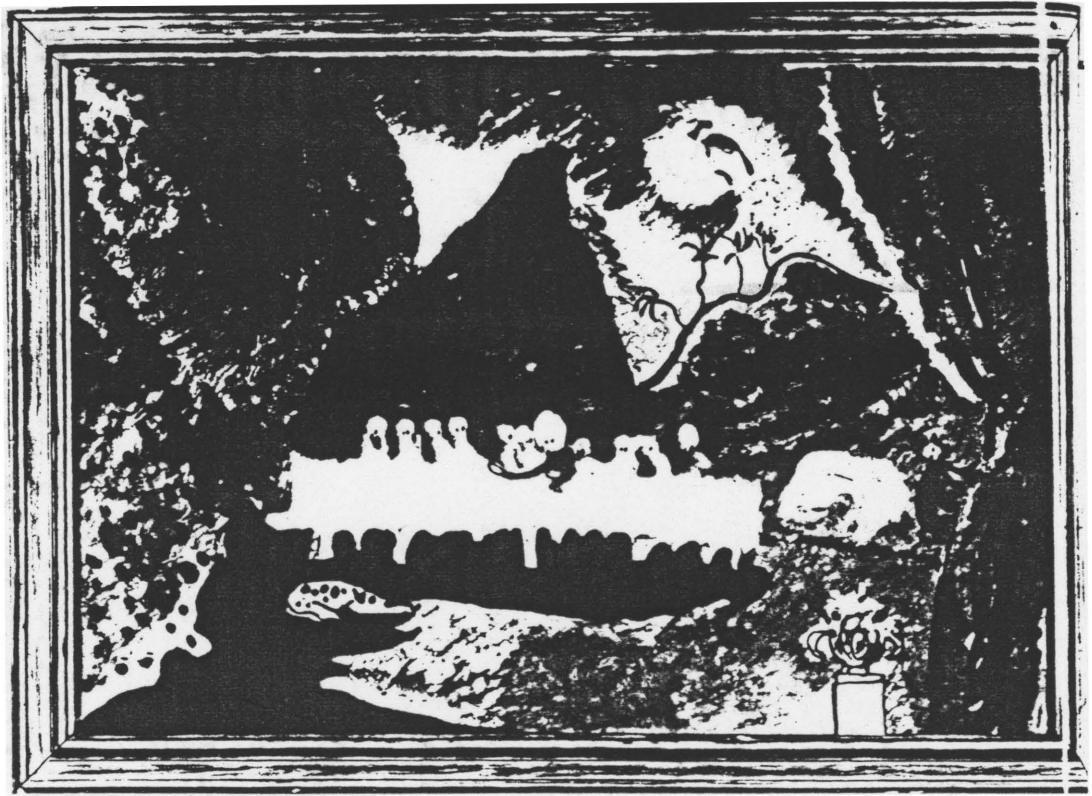


Figure VII. Kandinsky, Last Supper, 1910. 9 1/4 x 13 1/4".
Guggenheim, Solomon R. Vasily Kandinsky:
Painting on Glass. New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1966. Plate 2.



Figure VIII. Kandinsky, Angel of the Last Judgment, 1911. 10 1/4 x 6 3/4". Guggenheim, Solomon R. Vasily Kandinsky: Painting on Glass. New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1966. Plate 12.

insist that for the development of his abstract style, folk and primitive art would not be the only elements.

Another strong Russian influence derived from his study of peasant law in the north. Kandinsky maintained that the primitive form of peasant law had much in common with his attitude toward art. Both were typically Russian as noted in Kandinsky's own words, "The sense of inner qualifications, exactness, and depths of precision; lack of rigid and absolutistic notions; and hatred of immutable forms."¹⁴

Important as these external influences must have been on Kandinsky's development, there were other factors more directly connected with his own esoteric visual sensibility--the personal intense visual experiences and images he seems to have had as a child and a young man. Kandinsky was not a mere picture maker. To him each work of art at its inception was a revelation of the spirit, a spirituality whose substance fed on more than the range of a single source.¹⁵

"The artist must have something to communicate, for mastery over form is not his goal, but rather the adopting of the form to inner significance."¹⁶ This comes from undoubtedly Kandinsky's finest and most famous nonvisual work, Concerning the Spiritual on Art. With all his exceptional force, Kandinsky was driven to introduce this spirituality, this spiritual essence which always existed in Kandinsky's art, into the far-reaching dominion of world art. He expressed by the most concrete and material art

that of which western painting had always reserved, more or less, for a representation transposed from the real.

The struggle to create a religious nature through the painting itself (in the sense of the revelation of spirit) was more meaningful, however, than the role of the glass paintings which, at best, could evoke the icon or openly allude to religious themes. Through themes such as those represented in "The Deluge" and "All Saints" (Figures IX and X), Kandinsky formulated the content and form of his artistic goals, "mysteriously speaking of the mysterious."¹⁷

In keeping with his concept that representationalism had to be minimized if the work was to suggest spirituality, Kandinsky made the motif for the 1911 cover of the Blaue Reiter Almanac less distinctive than the image in his glass painting of St. George. (Figures XI and XII) Comparing the cover motif to the glass painting, one notices that the clear black outline of each image in the work on glass has either been partially eliminated or has been veiled by a blue wash which extends past the outline, especially evident in the area of the rider's back. In addition, features commonly associated with St. George such as his shield, lance, and the dragon have been obscured.

In aspiring from the material to the spiritual, Kandinsky found in his family background an important connection with a mythic past. This belief gave strength and validity to his artistic mission.



Figure IX. Kandinsky, *The Deluge*, 1912. Roethel, Hans K. *Kandinsky*. New York: Hudson Hill Press Inc., 1977, p. 98, Example 102.



Figure X. Kandinsky, All Saints' Day I, 1911. 13 3/8 x 16".
Guggenheim, Solomon R. Vasily Kandinsky: Painting on Glass. New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1966. Plate 8.



Figure XI. Kandinsky, Final Study for the Cover of the Blaue Reiter Almanac, 1911. Long, Rose-Carol Washton. The Development of an Abstract Style. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980. Plate II.



Figure XII. Kandinsky, St. George II, 1911. 11 3/4 x 5 3/4". Guggenheim, Solomon R. Vasily Kandinsky: Painting on Glass. New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1966. Plate 7.

During the tumultuous Blaue Reiter period when German critics and artists leveled nationalistic attacks against him and when he felt insecure about the extreme direction his art was taking, Kandinsky stated in the German version of Rückblicke (1913), "This entire interior and exterior Moscow I consider the root of my artistic ambitions. It is my artistic tuning fork."¹⁸

Although Kandinsky found a departure for his glass paintings through his own Russian background, "Hinterglasmalerei" was only a means to an end in his final goal of creating the spiritual in painting. In an unpublished manuscript Kandinsky wrote, "If destiny will grant me enough time I shall discover a new international language, which will endure forever and which will continually re-enrich itself."¹⁹

Through the study of the Bavarian craft of glass painting, Kandinsky was furnished with a full understanding of the particular meaning on which "Hinterglasmalerei" depends. Also, in a larger view, the brilliant performance that is Kandinsky's life work can be considered as the magnificent history of a unique spirit, animated by the highest and most original ambitions, fulfilling itself to the end.

ENDNOTES

¹ Benjamin Forgey, Kandinsky: The Visionary Artist Who Led a Quiet Revolution (Washington, DC: Smithsonian, 1984), pp. 84-92.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Solomon R. Guggenheim, Vasily Kandinsky: Painting on Glass (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1966), p. Intro.

⁵ Ibid., p. 14.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Rose-Carol Washton Long, Kandinsky, The Development of an Abstract Style (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 105.

⁹ Ibid., p. 78.

¹⁰ Paul Overy, Kandinsky, The Language of the Eye (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1969), p. 29.

¹¹ Long, Kandinsky, The Development, p. 78.

¹² Guggenheim, Kandinsky: Painting on Glass, p. 17.

¹³ Long, Kandinsky, The Development, p. 78.

¹⁴ Solomon R. Guggenheim, Vasily Kandinsky, 1866-1944: A Retrospective Exhibition (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1962), p. 18.

¹⁵ John E. Bowlt, and Rose-Carol Washton Long, The Life of Vasilii Kandinsky in Russian Art: A Study of "On the Spiritual In Art" (Newtonville, Massachusetts: Oriental Research Partners, 1980).

¹⁶ Herbert Read, Kandinsky (1866-1944) (New York: Wittenborn, 1959), p. 4.

¹⁷Guggenheim, Kandinsky: A Retrospective Exhibition,
p. 23.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 19.

¹⁹Hans Konrad Roethel, Wassily Kandinsky 1866-1944: The
Graphic Work of Kandinsky, A Loan Exhibition (Washington,
DC: Washington International Exhibitions Foundation, 1973),
p. 14.

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