



COSMIC AWE

Art and the Universe in the Early Twentieth Century

A Survey of Fifty-Three Works

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Introduction: The Sublime Reimagined

Between roughly 1900 and 1935 a remarkable number of artists, working in cities as far apart as Kaunas, Moscow, Paris, Munich, New York and São Paulo, turned their eyes from the horizon to the heavens. They painted suns, comets, eclipses, spiral nebulae, invented planets and the first moments of creation. What they sought was not astronomical illustration but an experience: the feeling of vastness, wonder and a little terror that the philosophers of the eighteenth century had called the sublime, and which we now call awe. This book calls that impulse **cosmic awe**.

The period has sometimes been named the Radium Age, a term applied to the decades after the Curies' isolation of radium in 1898. It was an age in which invisible forces suddenly became real. X-rays, radioactivity, the electron and the quantum showed that solid matter was a dance of energy; Einstein's special relativity (1905) and general relativity (1915) dissolved Newton's fixed space and time; Eddington's observation of starlight bending during the eclipse of 1919 made the new physics a public sensation; and in the 1920s Edwin Hubble demonstrated that the Milky Way was only one galaxy among many. Popular astronomers such as Camille Flammarion, and Percival Lowell with his supposed canals on Mars, had meanwhile populated the solar system in the public imagination, and H. G. Wells and his successors gave those neighbours teeth.

Science was only one current. Theosophy and Anthroposophy, with Helena Blavatsky's cosmic cycles and Rudolf Steiner's spiritual evolution, taught that the visible world was a veil over a vast living order, and they deeply affected Kandinsky, Kupka, Čiurlionis, Mondrian and Klee. In Russia the philosophy of Cosmism, from Nikolai Fedorov to Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, the father of astronautics, envisaged humanity's destiny among the stars, an outlook that fed directly into Suprematism and the post-revolutionary avant-garde. In Germany the poet Paul Scheerbart and the Crystal Chain correspondents, including Bruno Taut and Wenzel Hablik, imagined architecture as a means of transforming human consciousness through light and the cosmos. The older Romantic inheritance of Burke, Kant and Caspar David Friedrich lingered behind it all.

Artistic movements supplied the grammar. Symbolism offered dreamlike cosmic allegory; Neo-Impressionism and Orphism supplied a science of colour and optical vibration; Futurism celebrated speed, light and the astronomical as technological spectacle; Expressionism turned the sun into an emotional force; and abstraction, the great invention of the age, provided a way of depicting what could not be seen. The circle, disc, spiral and ellipse became the common currency: cosmic form in its purest geometry. Later, Dada and Surrealism reintroduced myth, play and the unconscious, so that creation could be imagined as a dream or a game of signs.

Cosmic awe in this period is therefore never merely decorative. It expresses a crisis and a hope at once. After the discovery that the universe was immensely larger, older and stranger than had been supposed, and after a world war that had shaken faith in human progress, artists searched for a new spiritual ground. Some found consolation, others vertigo, others humour. The works that follow, grouped here into four themes (*Genesis, Sun, Moon and Stars, Other Worlds* and *The Abstract Cosmos*), show how many different answers a single question could receive. A note on method: dates are given where they are firmly established;

for some lesser-documented works only approximate periods are offered, and readers should verify such details against museum catalogues before citing them.

I. Genesis: Creating the World

M. K. Čiurlionis

Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis (1875–1911) was a Lithuanian composer and painter, one of the first European artists to attempt a true synthesis of music and image. He painted for only about six years before illness ended his career, yet produced some three hundred works, many in cycles named after musical forms. His paintings treat the cosmos as a symphony: fugues of waves, sonatas of stars.

Creation of the World – II, 1905–06

From a cycle of twelve tempera panels, in which Čiurlionis imagines cosmogenesis as a sequence of movements. Early panels show primordial waters and shifting light, and the series is a landmark in the history of abstracted, near-abstract painting before Kandinsky.

Creation of the World – XII, 1905–06

The final panel of the cycle shows the formed world, with a luminous, spherical presence in a dreamlike space. It completes a narrative in which creation unfolds as a musical resolution, and shows the debt to Symbolism and theosophical ideas.

Eternity, 1906

A mysterious landscape of vast scale in which tiny human traces face an immensity of sea and sky. It is among the most direct expressions of the sublime in the artist's work, equating the infinite with calm rather than fear.

Sonata of the Stars (Sonata No. 6): Allegro and Andante, 1908

Two panels from a three-movement sonata in paint. The Allegro presents turbulent, rising forms; the Andante is slow, glowing and contemplative. The cycle is among the clearest early demonstrations of the idea that painting could have musical structure.

The Sun Is in the Sign of Pisces, 1907

One of the Zodiac series, in which astrological symbolism combines with a seascape of luminous depth. It shows the artist's interest in the ancient mapping of the heavens and in cyclical time.

The World of Mars, c. 1909

Mars, a planet made vivid by Lowell's speculations, appears as a place of strange, imagined architecture and landscape. It belongs to the late Čiurlionis's turn to visionary cosmic subject matter (dating to be verified).

Aaron Douglas

Aaron Douglas (1899–1979) was the leading visual artist of the Harlem Renaissance. His signature style combined Art Deco geometry, silhouetted figures and concentric bands of light, inspired by African art and by modern design.

The Creation, 1935

Douglas reimagines the biblical Genesis in layers of luminous concentric circles, with dark figures receiving the divine radiance. It gives cosmic awe a distinctly African American voice, linking spiritual origin, ancestry and modernity.

František Kupka

František Kupka (1871–1957) was a Czech painter who settled in Paris and, around 1911–12, became one of the pioneers of pure abstraction. Trained in spiritualism and mediumship, he brought a mystical sense of cosmic order to his work and later wrote on the nature of creation in the plastic arts.

The Beginning of Life, c. 1900

An early Symbolist work in which forms rise out of a watery primordial dark, evoking the earliest stirrings of life. It shows the cosmic evolutionary thinking that underlies his later abstractions.

The Way of Silence, 1900

A dark, Symbolist vision of a path through eerie, silent space, reflecting the artist's occult interests. Its sense of mystery makes it a bridge from nineteenth-century Symbolism to later abstraction.

Study for Cosmic Spring, c. 1911

A study for the large painting *Cosmic Spring*, in which circular and arc forms suggest the unfolding of new life and energy. It belongs to the moment at which Kupka's work abandons representation.

Creatio, c. 1920

A radiant composition of rhythmic planes that relates directly to Kupka's book *Creation in the Plastic Arts* (1923). Creation here is not a single event but a continuing process that the artist is able to mirror.

Fernand Léger

Fernand Léger (1881–1955) was a French painter who developed a muscular, machine-influenced Cubism, later bringing it to theatre and film.

The Creation of the World, 1923

Designs for the Ballets Suédois production, with a score by Darius Milhaud and scenario by Blaise Cendrars based on African creation myths. Léger's monumental, totemic figures show the origins of the world as a theatrical, rhythmical event, and an important meeting point of modernism and non-European myth.

Joan Miró

Joan Miró (1893–1983) was a Catalan painter, a central figure of Surrealism, who developed a personal language of floating signs and biomorphs.

The Birth of the World, 1925

Poured and stained pigment, with a few delicate lines and shapes, suggests a universe coming into being from nothing. Miró said he began with accidents of paint, and the picture is often cited as a key precursor of later gestural abstraction.

Blue Star, 1927

A tiny, fragile star in an expanse of luminous blue. Here the cosmos is a poetic space of dream, with Miró's deceptively simple signs evoking vast silence.

Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz

Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, known as Witkacy (1885–1939), was a Polish painter, playwright, philosopher and photographer, prone to metaphysical anguish and the grotesque.

Creating the World, c. 1921

A visionary, fantastical composition in which creation appears as a turbulent event of form and colour. It reflects Witkacy's theory of Pure Form and his belief in the 'metaphysical feeling of strangeness of Existence' (date to be verified).

Max Ernst

Max Ernst (1891–1976) was a German Dada and Surrealist who invented new techniques such as frottage and decalcomania.

The Sea (Marine), 1920s

The ocean as primordial source: a world of shifting forms in which land, water and sky have yet to separate. It illustrates the Surrealist view of the cosmos as an image of the unconscious (attribution of date to be verified).

II. The Sun, Moon and Stars

Edvard Munch

Edvard Munch (1863–1944) was the Norwegian painter of *The Scream* and a founder of Expressionism.

The Sun, 1910–11

The central painting in the murals for the University of Oslo's Aula. A blazing disc radiates over a fjord, treated as a source of life and force. Munch replaces his earlier anxiety with an almost pantheistic affirmation, informed by contemporary ideas of energy and light.

Robert Delaunay

Robert Delaunay (1885–1941) was a French painter who founded Orphism, using colour contrasts as the sole structure of painting. His wife Sonia was his close collaborator.

Simultaneous Contrasts: Sun and Moon, 1912–13

Concentric discs of colour show sun and moon as pulsing, intersecting energies. Inspired by Chevreul's colour theory and by contemporary astronomy, it is one of the first fully abstract cosmic images.

Circular Forms: Moon No. 1, 1912–13

A closely related Orphic canvas in which the moon is dissolved into spinning arcs of prismatic colour. It shows how the circle became a language for light and movement.

Giacomo Balla

Giacomo Balla (1871–1958) was an Italian Futurist who explored motion, speed and light.

Planet Mercury Passing in Front of the Sun, 1914

Inspired by the transit of Mercury on 7 November 1914, Balla paints the event as a dynamic abstraction of radiating rays. Where the Romantic sublime stood back from nature, the Futurist tried to ride it.

Georgia O'Keeffe

Georgia O'Keeffe (1887–1986) was an American modernist, a member of the Stieglitz circle, who found the abstract in the natural world.

Blue II, 1916

A watercolour of flowing blue forms that evokes sky, water and energy without describing any. It belongs to the first group of abstractions she made in a burst of invention.

Evening Star, No. III, 1917

From a series painted in Texas, watching the evening star over the plains. A glowing orange and yellow orb dissolves into waves of watercolour, evoking the vast skies of the American West and offering a personal, intensely felt cosmic encounter.

Arthur Dove

Arthur Dove (1880–1946) was among the first American abstract painters, working in a bold, organic style inspired by nature.

Silver Sun, 1929

A glowing disc, ringed with metallic tones and cloudlike forms, hovers above a landscape. Dove depicted energy and sensation rather than appearance, and his sun is an elemental force.

Wassily Kandinsky

Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944), a Russian painter working in Germany, wrote *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1911) and is usually credited as a founder of abstract painting.

The Comet, 1900

An early, Symbolist work, painted in tempera, in which a comet hangs over a fairy-tale landscape. It reveals the romantic and mystical roots of his later abstraction.

Blue, c. 1920s (verify)

Blue was for Kandinsky the colour of the infinite and the spiritual. In this abstract composition, geometry and colour combine in the mode of his Bauhaus years, evoking an ordered, cosmic space.

Henri-Edmond Cross

Henri-Edmond Cross (1856–1910) was a French Neo-Impressionist who developed Seurat's divisionism in a more decorative, luminous manner.

Landscape with Stars, c. 1905–08

A Mediterranean landscape beneath a sky filled with points of colour. Cross suggests the Neo-Impressionist idea of a harmonious, scientifically understood cosmos, and the work looks forward to Fauvism.

Marianne von Werefkin

Marianne von Werefkin (1860–1938), a Russian-born Expressionist, co-founded the Blue Rider circle in Munich and championed colour as emotional symbol.

Solar Eclipse, c. 1910s (verify)

The eclipse, a moment when day turns to night, becomes a symbol of existential unease. Werefkin's saturated colours and flat forms make nature's drama a psychological one.

Fantastic Night, c. 1910s (verify)

A nocturnal scene in which the night is alive with colour and spirit. It shows her conviction that painting should express inner life and mystery.

Pablo Picasso

Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) was the Spanish co-inventor of Cubism and the most influential artist of the century.

Constellation Drawings, 1924

A group of drawings in which stars joined by lines make abstract figures. They treat the night sky as a drawn diagram, and are playful meditations on the ancient practice of imagining pictures in the stars.

Tarsila do Amaral

Tarsila do Amaral (1886–1973) was a leading Brazilian modernist who combined European Cubism with Brazilian colour and folklore.

Setting Sun, 1929

A bold, simplified landscape in which a sun sinks over a stylised tropical scene, in the vein of her Anthropophagic phase. It translates the cosmic sublime into a distinctly Latin American idiom of colour.

Henrietta Shore

Henrietta Shore (1880–1963), Canadian-born, was a California modernist known for magnified, sculptural studies of natural forms.

Two Worlds, 1930s (verify)

The title points to an encounter between realms, often read as the intimate and the cosmic. Shore's monumental scale and organic abstraction show a distinctive feminine modernism.

Paul Klee

Paul Klee (1879–1940), a Swiss-German painter and Bauhaus teacher, believed that art makes the invisible visible, and he treated creation as a model for the act of painting.

In the Land of Precious Stones, 1920s (verify)

A shimmering, gem-like world of coloured facets that echoes crystal visions of the time. It conveys the mystery of an inner cosmos.

Untitled, (verify)

A cosmic composition, in line with Klee's concern with growth, orbits and rhythmic forces. Klee's lines are always in motion, and his universe is an ongoing process.

III. Other Worlds

Alfred Kubin

Alfred Kubin (1877–1959) was an Austrian illustrator and Symbolist, associated with the Blue Rider, whose dark visions inform his novel *The Other Side* (1909).

The Creature from Mars, (verify)

An eerie imagining of a being from another world, typical of Kubin's fascination with the uncanny. It shows that the cosmos could inspire dread as readily as wonder.

David Burliuk

David Burliuk (1882–1967), a Ukrainian-Russian Futurist known as the 'father of Russian Futurism', emigrated to the United States in 1922.

Fifty-Thousand-Year-Old Woman on Mars, (verify)

A comic, fantastical vision of life on another planet. It reflects the cultural fascination with Mars and the avant-garde taste for provocation.

Jean Crotti

Jean Crotti (1878–1958) was a Swiss painter active in Paris and New York, close to Duchamp and the Dada circle.

Cosmic Voyage, (verify)

A work that evokes travel across space, imagining journeys that technology and popular science made thinkable. It shows modernist mechanical imagery blending with cosmic fantasy.

Konstantin Yuon

Konstantin Yuon (1875–1958) was a Russian painter, usually associated with luminous landscapes and who made a surprising foray into cosmic allegory after the Revolution.

The New Planet, 1921

Painted in the aftermath of revolution, it shows a new world appearing to a crowd of people. It treats the Revolution as a cosmic event, its conviction embodying the optimism of the early Soviet years.

People, 1923

A companion cosmic allegory in which humanity is placed among swirling planetary forces. It expresses Cosmist thinking about humanity's place in the universe.

Ivan Kudriashev

Ivan Kudriashev (1896–1972) was a Russian avant-garde painter, a member of UNOVIS in Vitebsk under Malevich.

Luminescence, 1920s (verify)

An abstract exploration of light, as geometric forms radiate through space. It reflects Suprematism's aspiration to a universal visual language.

Orbital Trajectory of a Planet Hurtling toward the Sun, 1920s (verify)

A dynamic composition of curving paths and colour in which a planet is shown on a collision course. It combines astronomy with the Futurist love of motion.

János Mattis-Teutsch

János Mattis-Teutsch (1884–1960) was a Transylvanian painter and sculptor, a leading figure in Central European Expressionism and Constructivism.

Red Landscape, c. 1920s (verify)

A landscape of simplified, rhythmic forms in glowing red. The scene reads as part earth, part cosmos, in an Expressionist approach where colour carries spiritual meaning.

Jens Lund

A lesser-documented artist; biographical details should be verified from museum records.

Jacob's Vision, (verify)

Presumably referring to the Old Testament dream of a ladder reaching heaven, a subject that links the earthly and cosmic realms. It shows how biblical imagery continued to serve modern visions of the heavens.

IV. The Abstract Cosmos

Bruno Taut

Bruno Taut (1880–1938) was a German architect and key figure of Expressionist architecture who later designed housing estates in Berlin.

Alpine Architecture, 1919

A series of drawings and a book proposing to reshape the Alps with crystalline glass structures. It reflects Scheerbart's ideas of glass as a means of spiritual elevation, imagining architecture on a cosmic scale.

Wenzel Hablik

Wenzel Hablik (1881–1934), born in Bohemia and based in Itzehoe in northern Germany, was a painter, architect and designer who drew crystalline utopian structures and star-filled skies.

Firmament, (verify)

A vision of the heavens as crystalline architecture. It exemplifies the Crystal Chain's belief that building could echo the cosmos.

Starry Sky, Attempt, (verify)

An experimental rendering of stars and the night sky, with mathematical clarity. It suggests that Hablik's cosmos is a constructed, geometric order.

Johannes Molzahn

Johannes Molzahn (1892–1965) was a German abstract painter and designer connected with Der Sturm, who later emigrated to the United States.

Cosmic Circles, c. 1919–20 (verify)

Intersecting circles and arcs fill the canvas with energy, indicating the circle as cosmic form.

Roar of Space, c. 1919–20 (verify)

The title joins sound and space. A turbulent composition of dynamic forms, it is typical of Expressionist abstraction.

Kurt Schwitters

Kurt Schwitters (1887–1948) was a German Dadaist from Hanover who created Merz collages from discarded materials.

Revolving, 1919

One of his most celebrated early works, built from fragments and set in a swirl of circular movement. Out of the debris of post-war Germany, he constructed a miniature cosmos in motion.

Ivan Kliun

Ivan Kliun (1873–1943) was a Russian Suprematist and associate of Malevich.

Red Light, Spherical Composition, c. 1923

A glowing sphere of red and shaded tones, evoking a star or planet in space. It shows Suprematism's transition from flat geometry to a dynamic, luminous space.

Il'ia Chashnik

Il'ia Chashnik (1902–1929) was a young Suprematist and pupil of Malevich who also designed ceramics and architectural models.

Kosmos, 1920s

A floating arrangement of geometric planes in a cosmic void. Chashnik's work translates Malevich's ideas into spatial, architectural terms.

Alexander Rodchenko

Alexander Rodchenko (1891–1956), a Russian Constructivist, worked in painting, design and photography.

Red and Yellow, c. 1918–21 (verify)

A pure abstract composition in primary colours from his reductive period, which leads to his famous monochrome paintings of 1921. It is included here for its spatial, planetary character.

Gerardo Dottori

Gerardo Dottori (1884–1977) was an Italian Futurist from Umbria, a leader of aeropittura (aerial painting).

Astral Rhythms (Ritmi astrali), 1930s (verify)

Flying and the view from above gave Futurists a new sense of space. Dottori's undulating curves present the cosmos as flowing rhythm.

Serge Charchoune

Serge Charchoune (1888–1975) was a Russian émigré in Paris, linked with Dada and later a poet of delicate abstraction.

The Small Black Holes, (verify)

Whatever its date, the title evokes the idea of cosmic voids. It demonstrates the continuing appeal of astronomy to abstract painters.

A Note on Sources

The list of works derives from a curated collection titled "Radium Age Art: Cosmic Awe". The commentary is an interpretive survey; dates marked "verify" are approximate or uncertain and should be checked against museum records. Reproductions are not included for copyright reasons.