

BACKGROUND READING FOR PRESENTERS*Victor Vasarely (1908 – 1997) – “Kiu-Siu”*

Hungarian-born Victor Vasarely is known as a founder of optical art. Vasarely was born Hungary. In 1925 he took up medical studies at Budapest University. In 1927 he abandoned medicine to learn traditional academic painting at the private Podolini-Volkman Academy. In 1928/1929, he enrolled at Sándor Bortnyik's Műhely (lit. "workshop", in existence until 1938), then widely recognized as the center of Bauhaus studies in Budapest. Cash-strapped, the műhely could not offer the whole range of its illustrious Bauhaus model, and concentrated on applied graphic art and typographic design.

Vasarely's excellence in drawing was quickly noticed. In 1929 he painted his *Blue Study* and *Green Study*. In 1930 he married his fellow student Claire Spinner (1908-1990). Together they had two sons, Andre and Jean-Pierre. In Budapest, he worked for a ball-bearings company in accounting and designing advertising posters. Victor Vasarely became a graphics designer and a poster artist during the 1930's who combined patterns and organic images with each other.

Vasarely left Hungary and settled in Paris in 1930 working as a graphic artist and as a creative consultant at the advertising agencies Havas, Draeger and Devambez (1930-1935). His interactions with other artists during this time were limited. He played with the idea of opening up an institution modeled after Sándor Bortnyik Műhely's and developed some teaching material for it. Having lived mostly in cheap hotels, he settled in 1942/1944 in Saint-Céré in the Lot *département*. After the Second World War, he opened an atelier in Arcueil, a suburb some 10 kilometers from the center of Paris,

Over the next three decades, Vasarely developed his style of geometric abstract art, working in various materials but using a minimal number of forms and colours:

He has used the income from the sale of these "investigations," as he calls his prints, to establish a socio-cultural foundation in Aix-en-Provence, France, for the study of the integration of plastic beauty at all levels of the urban environment. He is represented in major museums all over the world and has received many artistic and honorary awards. Among these distinctions are the French Legion of Honor, the Guggenheim Prize, and the Gold Medal of the Triennale in Milan.

On 5 June 1970, Vasarely opened his first dedicated museum with over 500 works in a renaissance palace in Gordes (closed in 1996). A second major undertaking was the Fondation Vasarely in Aix-en-Provence, a museum housed in a distinct structure specially designed by Vasarely. It was inaugurated in 1976 by French president Georges Pompidou. Sadly the museum is now in a state of disrepair, several of the pieces on display have been damaged by water leaking from the ceiling. Also, in 1976 his large kinematic object *Georges Pompidou* was installed in the Centre Pompidou in Paris and the Vasarely Museum located at his birth place in Pécs, Hungary, was established with a large donation of works by Vasarely. In 1982 154 specially created serigraphs were taken into space by the cosmonaut Jean-Loup Chrétien on board the French-Soviet spacecraft Salyut 7 and later sold for the benefit of UNESCO. In 1987, the second Hungarian Vasarely museum was established in Zichy Palace in Budapest with more than 400 works.

He died in Paris on 15 March 1997.

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Victor Vasarely (1908 – 1997) – “Kiu-Siu”

This painting needs a period of 3 – 5 minutes concentrated study in viewing before discussion begins.

1. Describe in detail what you see.
2. This painting is done on a flat surface. Does it appear flat to you?
3. How many different colors can you find here?
Was it hard or easy to locate them? Why?
How many shades of one color can you find? (this is very important)
4. How many examples of the same geometric shape can you find?
Are the areas covered by these shapes all the same size?
Do they overlap? Intermingle? Blend?
Are they sharp? Fuzzy? Are the edges hard or soft?
5. How many different geometric shapes can you find?
How do they work together to form new shapes?
(for example: triangles to squares, stripes to triangles)
6. What does the term “balance” mean? Is this painting balanced?
How is balance achieved in a painting?
By the cooperation of these as a unified whole:
 1. Color
 2. Line
 3. Shape
 4. Form
 5. Volume
 6. Area
 7. Size
 8. Texture
7. What does the term “optical illusion” mean to you?
What are some ways Vasarely creates optical illusions in this painting?
(Relate numbers 2 – 6 to each other)
When you stare at this for a period of time, is it possible to become confused?
8. Do you find yourself trying to piece together shapes and colors?
Do you suppose the artist intended that to happen?
Would you call this effort planned or spontaneous?
9. What is your reaction to this painting/

SUGGESTED EXTENDED ACTIVITIES

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1. Geometric Pictures

Materials: rulers, pencils or markers

Make your own geometric designs using only a ruler and pencil or marker to draw lines. Markers are most effective and colorful.

2. Paper Strip Design

Materials: White or black construction paper for a base, construction paper of various tones cut into $\frac{1}{2}$ inch strips, glue

Each child should choose two color families for the picture. Find several tones within those families. Cut the $\frac{1}{2}$ inch strips into desired lengths. Glue on the base paper to make a geometric design.

3. Grid Pictures

Materials: Graphing paper, markers or crayons

Using graphing paper, have students make a geometric pattern design. Using the squares as a guide.