By Kathleen McShane – October 2026

Visual Artists Inspired by Music

"A painting is music you can see, and music is a painting you can hear."

Miles Davis

The visual arts have a lot in common with music. Both artistic mediums evoke human emotions and psychological responses. They share a vocabulary: rhythm, movement, harmony, composition. The visual arts and music both stem from the impulse to create, in a manner which cannot be captured in words. Visual artists often draw inspiration from music, perhaps translating the rhythms and harmonies they hear into brushstrokes on canvas.

Among the artists whose paintings are associated closely with music is the American artist, **James McNeill Whistler** (1834-1903). Whistler was a leading proponent of the Aesthetic movement, whose philosophy was based on "Art for Art's Sake". His series of paintings, Nocturnes, were atmospheric representations of nighttime. Whistler adopted and adapted the term "Nocturnes" from the piano compositions of Fryderyk Chopin. Whistler would often be rowed out on the Thames River, memorized the scene, then painted it in his London studio. Whistler believed that paintings were like musical compositions: "As music is the poetry of sound, so is painting the poetry of sight…"



James Whistler, *Nocturne: Blue and Gold – Old Battersea Bridge*, c. 1872-75



James Whistler, *Nocturne in Black and Gold*, 1875

To **Vincent Van Gogh** (1853-1890), music was the ultimate form of artistic expression. He felt that music was one of the art forms that most comforted people. As he said in a letter to his brother, Theo, "And in a painting I'd like to say something consoling, like a piece of music'. Among his favorite composers was Richard Wagner. In 1888, Van Gogh planned a series of sunflower paintings, which he intended as decoration for the guest bedroom in his home in Arles for his fellow artist, Paul Gaugin. He wrote his brother, Theo, "If I carry out this idea there will be a dozen panels. So the whole thing will be a symphony in blue and yellow."

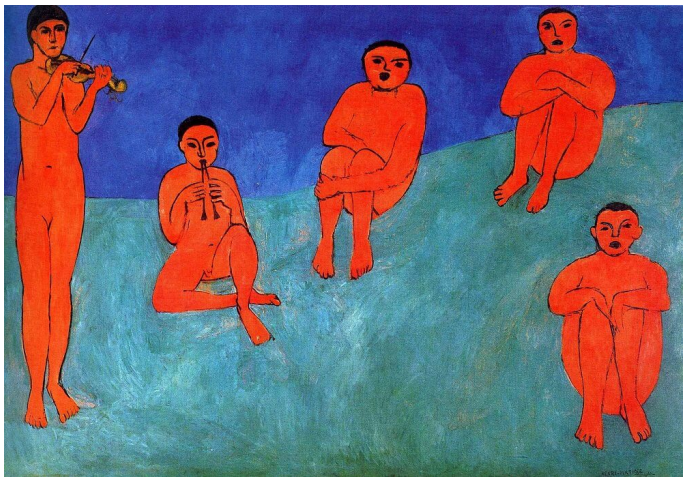


Vincent Van Gogh, *Sunflowers*, 1888



Vincent Van Gogh, *Sunflowers*, 1888.

Music played a major role in the life of the French artist, **Henri Matisse** (1869-1964). Matisse played the violin on a daily basis, requiring the rigorous structure and precise technique that corresponded to his artistic methods. Music was a family affair; his children were also taught to play the violin, as well as the cello and the piano. Early on in his artistic career, Matisse incorporated musical subjects into his paintings. The painting below, entitled *Musique* (1910), features several male figures which have been interpreted as musical notes on a staff, along with a violinist perhaps as a treble clef.



Henri Matisse, *Musique*,1910

Matisse was also fascinated by dance; his works frequently incorporate themes of both music and dance, as illustrated the painting below. This painting has been described not only as pivotal in Matisse's career but also in the development of modern art.



Henri Matisse, *La Danse*, 1910

Matisse would continue to incorporate musical themes into his work, even late in his career when he could no longer paint and turned to vibrant cutouts, which he called “painting with scissors”. In the mid-1940s, Matisse created a book entitled *Jazz*, comprised of cut paper collages along with the artist’s own written commentary. The title was suggested by Matisse’s collaborator and art publisher, Tériade, because it suggested a connection between visual art and musical improvisation. The picture below is the cover of the limited-edition book published in 1947.



Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) was profoundly inspired by music throughout his life, using it as both a visual subject and a structural muse for his revolutionary artistic styles. While he did not play instruments himself, he famously stated, "I paint what music sounds like," and compared his creative process to the rhythm of a jazz tune. Just as a composer arranges notes to create a melody, Picasso arranged shapes and colors to create visual harmony. He was particularly drawn to the lively rhythms of flamenco music, a traditional Spanish genre that he grew up with.

One of Picasso's most famous musically inspired works is *The Old Guitarist* (1900-1901), painted during his so-called Blue Period.



Pablo Picasso*, The Old Guitarist*, 1900-1901

Some twenty years later, in a style that has been dubbed Synthetic Cubism, Picasso painted *The Three Musicians* (1921), featuring three masked musicians, Pierrot, playing the clarinet, Harlequin on the guitar, and a monk, singing as he holds sheet music.



Pablo Picasso, *The Three Musicians*, 1921

Several years thereafter, in a similar Synthetic Cubist style, Picasso painted *Mandolin and Guitar* (1924), a reaction to critics who had pronounced that Cubism was dead.



Pablo Picasso, *Mandolin and Guitar*, 1924

As early as the 1920's **Georgia O'Keeffe** was recognized as one of the most important and successful American artists, known for her paintings of skyscrapers and enlarged flowers. Influenced by the theory of Kandinsky, for a time, O'Keeffe was occupied with "the idea that music could be translated into something for the eye." This led to the creation of several abstract works inspired by music including the two pictured below. When painting the first, O'Keeffe said, "What I wanted to express was a feeling like wonderful music gives me."



Georgia O'Keeffe, *Music, Pink and Blue No 2*, 1918



Georgia O'Keeffe, *Blue and Green Music*, 1919-1921

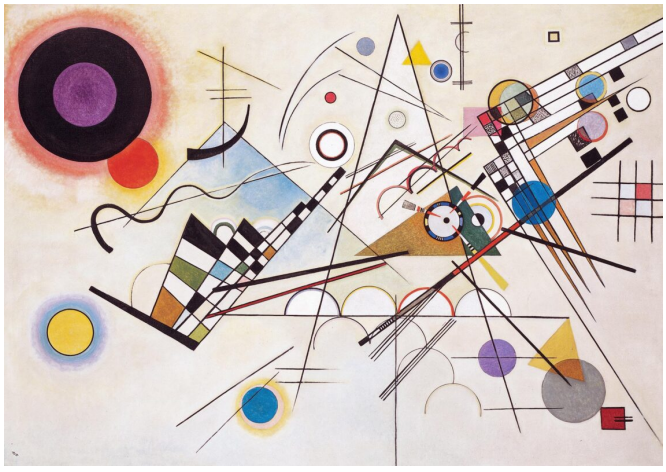
The Russian artist, **Wassily Kandinsky** (1866-1944), was a pioneer of abstraction in Western art and cofounder of the Der Blaue Reiter (The Blue Rider) group. Kandinsky compared color and art to a musical instrument. In his own words, “Color is the keyboard, the eyes are the hammers, the soul is the piano with many strings." The artist suffered from a rare neurological condition, chromesthesia, where hearing sound triggers the involuntary perception of colors and shapes. Kandinsky assigned specific instruments to particular hues. Yellow sounded like a trumpet; red was associated with the cello; violet’s sound was the bassoon. Kandinsky literally saw colors when he was listening to music and heard music while he was painting.

In 1911, Kandinsky was at a concert in Munich listening to music by the Austrian composer, Arnold Schoenberg. The music inspired him to create the piece below, *Impression III: Concert*. The central image of the painting, the piano, appears to be surrounded by sound.



Wassily Kandinsky, *Impression III: Concert,* 1911

In Kandinsky’s groundbreaking painting, *Composition VIII* (1923), the geometric forms appear to function as musical notes and chords.



Wassily Kandinsky, *Composition VIII*, 1923

The French-Russian artist, **Marc Chagall** (1887-1985) loved Bach and Mozart, but it was the music of his Hasidic community in what is now Belarus that first influenced him. Early on in his career, he was particularly entranced by the idea of the floating fiddler, as captured in the painting below. This painting is thought to be the inspiration for the title and imagery of the 1964 musical, *Fiddler on the Roof*.



Marc Chagall, *The Green Fiddler*, 1923-24

Later in his career, Chagall would create the ceiling of the Palais Garnier (Paris Opera House). The work was commissioned in 1962 by the French novelist, André Malraux (then the French Minister of Cultural Affairs). Malraux considered Chagall to be "one of the greatest colorists of our time". Completed in 1964, the work consists of 12 removable panels, covering some 2,500 square feet. Divided into distinct color sections, Chagall's painting honors 14 great composers, including Mozart, Wagner, Berlioz, Debussy, Ravel, Stravinsky, Tchaikovsky, Verdi, and Beethoven.

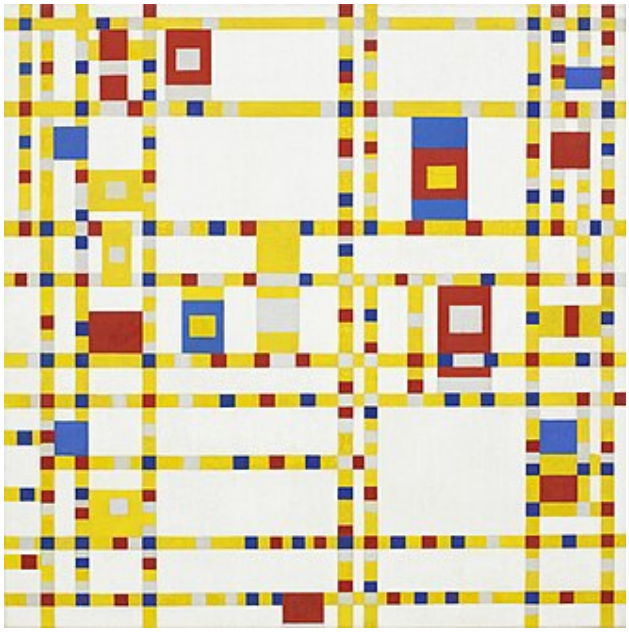


The Swiss-German artist, **Paul Klee** (1879-1940), grew up in a musical household; his father was a music professor and his mother was a singer. Klee himself was trained as a classical violinist. Despite his love for music, he chose painting over music as a career because he felt constrained by rigidity of musical notation. Johann Sebastian Bach was one of Klee's favorite composers; he was particularly moved by the polyphony of Bach's music. (Polyphony is where two or more melodic lines or voices are playing or singing at the same time). Klee translated musical polyphony into his painting through his overlapping lines, repeated motifs, and color progressions. His 1932 *Polyphony* is an example of this translation.



Paul Klee, *Polyphony*, 1932

Piet Mondrian (1872-1944) was a Dutch painter and art theoretician often considered one of the greatest artists of the 20th century. He was a pioneer of 20th-century abstract art, evolving from a figurative artist to an increasingly abstract style and ultimately to a style that incorporated simple geometric elements. Late in his life, he spent time in New York City, where he was captivated by the city's hustle and bustle and by boogie-woogie jazz music. While living in NYC, Mondrian created *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, incorporating "a little boogie-woogie" into the work. The painting combines the artist's fascination with the grid layout of the city with his love of that genre of blues music.



Piet Mondrian, *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, 1943

Jackson Pollock (1912-1956) was a major player in the abstract impressionist movement, best known for flinging and dripping thinned enamel paint onto an unstretched canvas laid on the floor of his studio. Pollock was deeply influenced by jazz music, particularly bebop and hot jazz, which mirrored the spontaneous, rhythmic, and improvisational nature of his action painting technique. He frequently listened to artists like Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and Duke Ellington, viewing jazz as a parallel form of creative freedom.

Pollock's 1943 *Mural* was commissioned by Peggy Guggenheim for the entrance hall to her townhouse. Apparently, Guggenheim told him to paint whatever he wished. The resulting painting is Pollock's largest canvas, measuring 8 feet X 20 feet. Art critics have frequently compared the work to jazz improvisation and free form composition. One art critic took one look at it and claimed, "Now that's great art…"



Jackson Pollock, *Mural,* 1943

The pioneering American modernist painter, **Stuart Davis** (1892-1964), drew his primary musical influence from jazz and swing. He viewed these genres as the musical equivalents of abstract art and Cubism. Davis is widely regarded as a forerunner to the Pop Art movement. In his work, Davis sought to translate improvisational nature and energy of the music onto the canvas. The painting below is one example; the monumental mural, measuring 7 ft x 14 feet, depicts the Gloucester, Massachusetts waterfront.



Stuart Davis, *Swing Landscape*, 1938

Also heavily influenced by jazz was the American artist, **Jean-Michel Basquiat** (1960-1988). He was passionate about Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonius Monk, Charlie Parker and Miles Davis. Basquiat effectively mirrored the improvisational style of jazz musicians, evidenced in his frenzied brushstrokes. The artist once said, "I wanted to be a jazz musician, but I couldn't play anything. So I became an artist, and my paintings became my music." Basquiat's 1983 triptych, *Horn Players*, is a homage to Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker.



Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Horn Players*, 1983