

Art: Dawn of Abstr

By HILTON KRAMER

MODERN ART, as we now see it tidily arranged in museum collections or read about it in carefully plotted textbooks, has acquired for many people—especially those who have grown up with it as a fixture of our culture—a certain air of inevitability. There are times when all of its developments are made to seem, if not exactly predictable, somehow foregone. It requires only a moment's reflection, of course, to realize how false this assumption really is. Yet our experience tends to enforce it. Familiarity, which is one of the functions of museums and textbooks to establish for us, often has the effect of blurring our sense of the intellectual adventure that lies at the heart of the modernist movement. We are tempted to forget how much risk and imagination, how much thought and testing and even failure were invested in the decisions that produced the art that is now offered up to us as an orderly sequence of events.

One of the virtues of an exhibition like "Synchronism and American Color Abstraction, 1910-1925," which has just opened at the Whitney Museum of American Art, lies precisely in the way it revivifies this sense of artistic struggle and uncertainty. Focusing on one of the most creative periods in the entire history of modernist art, it gives us an unfamiliar perspective—and a peculiarly American perspective—on an epoch we may have thought we knew very well.

Synchronism—a coinage that in the beginning meant simply "with color," but that quickly came also to suggest pure color abstraction—was the creation of two young American artists, Morgan Russell (1886-1953) and Stanton Macdonald-Wright (1890-1973), working in Paris in the years immediately preceding World War I. This was the period in which some of the most gifted and original minds of the international avant-garde produced the first examples of abstract art. Out of the analysis of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist art, and the then more recent innovation of Fauvism and Cubism, a new art was emerging—the art of abstraction—and these American artists were helping to create it.

That they played a role in this fateful history has long been known, of course, but the exact scope of their achievement, their relation to other artists working along similar lines, the nature of their ideas and their influence on others—these and other questions crucial to any proper judgment of their work have tended, until recently, to be neglected. William C. Agee shed new light on the subject with his essay "Synchronism and Color Principles in American Painting, 1910-1930," in 1965, and now Gail Levin, the curator at the Whitney who organized this new show and wrote its very substantial catalogue, has brought us the most



Morgan Russell's "Synchronie Cosmie" American Color Abstraction, 1910-19

comprehensive account we have yet had. She has turned up pictures and documents we have not seen before, and she has studied all the relevant materials more meticulously than anyone else has done. The result is a show of absorbing interest.

It is important, however, to pay attention to the little word "and" in the title of this exhibition, for "Synchronism and American Color Abstraction" often strays quite far afield from the Synchronism of Russell and Macdonald-Wright. Other painters who fell within the Synchronist orbit—Thomas Hart Benton, for example—are included, often with quite interesting examples of their work (there is a Benton abstraction here that H. L. Mencken gave to the Baltimore Museum), but much of the exhibition is devoted to color painting derived from other sources, and not all of it is "abstract" by any standard. The paintings of

action at Whitney



que" (1915) from "Synchronism and 25" at the Whitney Museum

Marsden Hartley, H. Lyman Saven. Patrick Henry Bruce, Morton L. Shamberg, Joseph Stella and Max Weber, among others, are often of remarkable quality and considerable historic interest, but as Miss Levin is well aware, they do not belong to the history of Synchronism.

In a sense, then, we are in the presence here of not one but two exhibitions—it might have been called "Synchronists and Others"—and it is the Synchronist component that is the more important. Particularly in the figure of Morgan Russell—a much better painter than Macdonald-Wright, in my opinion—Miss Levin has done a solid job in reconstructing for us a very important artistic career. The very first gallery in the exhibition, focusing on Russell's early development, is the most moving in the show. She has got hold of the little Cézanne still-life that Russell and his friend Andrew Dasburg

borrowed from Gertrude and Leo Stein to study, and we see Russell struggling to derive from this picture, and from his passionate devotion to Michelangelo, too, the principles and the pictorial practice that led to his first abstractions. In this gallery, especially, the struggle of the pioneer modernist lives again with a special vividness.

Russell had a gift for pictorial construction—the result, perhaps, of his training as a sculptor—that was both more confident and more fully realized than Macdonald-Wright's, and he was therefore better able to make something pictorially solid of his structures of color. Macdonald-Wright's was a softer sensibility, and his devotion of pure abstraction was more tenuous. But both artists produced important work in those early years of abstract art, and we are now at last in a position to judge what they did.

The question of course, is: How important is their work in relation to the pioneers of abstraction already well-known to us: Mondrian, Kandinsky, Kupka, and Robert and Sonia Delaunay? The Delaunays are both represented in this exhibition, for their own pioneer version of color abstraction, called Orphism, has enjoyed a greater visibility in the history books than Synchronism, and indeed, some scholars have believed (mistakenly, it now appears) that Synchronism was actually derived from Orphism. Certainly some of the other American color-abstractions were influenced by Orphism, as Miss Levin again makes clear.

For myself, the sheer power and authority and energy that radiate from Robert Delaunay's painting, "The First Disc" (1912), provide a definitive answer to the question of the Synchronists' relative importance. Much as I admire Morgan Russell, his art is simply not in the same class with Delaunay's, not to mention Mondrian or Kandinsky. The Synchronists were very important, and we have neglected them for too long, but they cannot be placed in a class with the greatest modernist masters.

Miss Levin's exhibition is not concerned with this question, nor is her valuable catalogue. This is very much an art historian's exhibition, concerned to reconstruct the accomplishments of an era we have heretofore understood very imperfectly. In this sense, certainly, the show and the catalogue are an unquestioned success. But now the subject needs to be taken a stage further, and the question of quality needs to be seriously confronted. It is one of Miss Levin's achievements in "Synchronism and American Color Abstraction, 1910-1925," that she has now made it possible for us to proceed on more solid ground.

The exhibition remains at the Whitney Museum, Madison Avenue at 75th Street, through March 26, and then will travel to museums in Houston, Des Moines, San Francisco, Syracuse and Columbus, Ohio.