

# Morgan Russell's Synchromy in Orange: To Form

by Gail Levin, Associate Curator  
Whitney Museum of American Art

Writing from Paris on September 9, 1913, in a letter to his friend the painter Andrew Dasburg, Morgan Russell, then only twenty-seven, referred to himself as: "the first American known to have started a movement in painting capable of influencing Parisian efforts." Russell's proud claim was not unjustified. By the following spring at the *Salon des Independants*, when he exhibited his monumental painting *Synchromy in Orange: To Form* (Fig. 1), critics grouped the artists working with pure color around either Robert Delaunay as the *Simultanistes* or around Morgan Russell as the *Synchromists*.<sup>1</sup>

Another young American artist, Stanton Macdonald-Wright, had joined forces with Russell in an attempt to launch a new style of painting in Europe and, later, in America. Russell and Macdonald-Wright first exhibited together at the *Neue Kunstsalon* in Munich in June of 1913. As Russell explained to Dasburg just after the opening of the Munich exhibition: "The object is less to sell . . . than to get our work, which presents a particular and new interest, before the public before imitators clever at assimilating and very numerous get a hold of it."<sup>2</sup> By October of 1913, these two energetic young artists were again exhibiting, this time in Paris at the *Bernheim-Jeune Gallery*. Morgan Russell

described this exhibition as the, "biggest and most seriously attended since [the] Futurist [exhibition] of two years ago" and himself as, "carried inevitably into the whirlpool of Modern painting and its issues."<sup>3</sup> Catalogues with very emphatic statements by the artists were distributed in both Munich and Paris.

The "new interest," about which Russell had written in 1913, had actually developed gradually. Russell had first traveled to Paris and Italy during several months in 1906. Returning to New York City, where he was born in 1886, Russell decided to turn his attention from the study of architecture to sculpture and painting. He began to study painting with Robert Henri and sculpture at the Art Students League with James Earle Fraser. Russell pursued these studies, spending each spring and summer in Europe until he settled in Paris in the spring of 1909. The previous year, Mrs. Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney had begun giving Morgan Russell a monthly allowance which she continued until 1916.

By 1908, Russell had met Leo and Gertrude Stein, and through them, he was first introduced to Matisse and Picasso. During the Spring, 1909, Russell studied sculpture with Matisse; he worked primarily in this medium until Autumn, 1910. In 1908, he had also met and admired Rodin who had a studio near the Matisse school. Russell's early development as an artist was based, then, on his feeling for three-dimensional form. In the Louvre, he studied ancient

Assyrian and Egyptian sculpture, as well as the two slaves by Michelangelo, whose work he knew well from his travels in Italy. Russell regarded Michelangelo's *oeuvre* with awe and long strived to measure up to this artist he considered a genius.

Russell also began to attend the classes of Ernest Percyval Tudor-Hart (1873-1964), a Canadian painter in Paris who taught him color theory. In early 1911, Russell first made the acquaintance of Stanton Macdonald-Wright who also joined the classes of Tudor-Hart. Under his teacher's guidance, Russell developed an interest in Michel Eugene Chevreul's *De la loi du contraste simultane des couleurs*, Ogden Rood's *Modern Chromatics*, and other color treatises.<sup>4</sup> Although when writing to Macdonald-Wright in December of 1922, Russell referred to: "old Tudor-Hart and all his complicated systems and academic humbug," he was willing, even then, to grant that he had probably assimilated much from Tudor-Hart's teachings.<sup>5</sup> Inventing a name for his new style of painting rhythmic color, Russell had initially considered the word "symphony." He settled on *Synchromism* with its second syllable derived from chromatics to express his emphasis on color.

By the time of the *Synchromist* exhibition in Paris in October, 1913, Russell had created only one purely abstract painting, *Synchromie en bleu violace*. In his book, *Modern Painting*, Willard Huntington Wright,

1. Louis Vauxcelles, "Les Arts," *Gil Blas*, May 7, 1914. 4. Marc Vromont, *Comoedia*, April 15, 1914. Andre Salmon, *Montjoie*, March, 1914. *Synchromy in Orange: To Form* was catalogue no. 2970 in the *Salon des Independants* of 1914.

2. Morgan Russell to Andrew Dasburg, unpublished letter of June 15, 1913, from Switzerland, George Arentz Research Library, Syracuse Univ., Syracuse, New York.

3. Morgan Russell to Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, unpublished letter of December 1913, from Paris, Private Collection, New York.

4. Michel Eugene Chevreul, *De la loi du contraste simultane des couleurs*, Paris, 1839. Ogden Rood, *Modern Chromatics*, New York, 1879.

5. Morgan Russell to Stanton Macdonald-Wright, unpublished letter, December, 1922, Archives of American Art, Washington, DC.



Fig. 1

brother of Stanton Macdonald-Wright, wrote:

In his *Synchronie en Bleu Violace* the composition was very similar to that of the famous Michelangelo Slave whose left arm is raised above the head and whose right hand rests on the breast. The picture contained the same movement as the statue, and had a simpler ordonnance of linear directions; but, save in a general way, it bore no resemblance to the human form.<sup>6</sup>

Wright was, of course, referring to Michel-

angelo's *Dying Slave* in the Louvre which Russell sketched many times. In these sketches (e.g. Fig. 2) Russell has concentrated on the figure's contrapposto, fascinated by the imaginary spiral running through the entire figure.

These same sketches provide a clue to the organization of *Synchrony in Orange: To Form*, Russell's major project following the Bernheim-Jeune Gallery exhibition. The figural basis of this, Russell's largest and most famous painting, has never been understood. This is particularly surprising in that Russell originally listed his painting in the catalogue of the *Salon des Independents* as "*Synchronie en Orange: La creation de l'homme concue le*

*resultat d'une force generatrice naturelle.*"<sup>7</sup>

Russell had earlier conceived of a method of creating abstract paintings by interpreting the forms of sculpture. He wrote in his notebook of July 1912: "Light is projection and depth . . . sculpture projecting and receding forms. Perhaps a translation of a great work of sculpture, as color and shade, placed in a hollow would give the basis of the problem."<sup>8</sup> Comparing Russell's sketch after Michelangelo's *Dying Slave* (Fig. 2) with the painting *Synchrony in Orange: To Form* (Fig. 1), one can easily recognize the form of this figure in contrapposto in the center of Russell's colorful composition. The form of the lower left leg is an emphatic purple curve and continues up to a two-toned blue thigh. This curve is worked out in Russell's smaller outline sketch of the slave on the lower right. Higher up, the belly area is given a striped treatment with a curvilinear rhythm. Above the lower torso, an explosion of wedge shapes conceals a more direct relationship to this figure. Indeed, the raised arm of the slave would seem to have broken through the top of the picture. Only the painted frame serves to contain the surging rhythm of these abstract shapes.

Although one can see faint diagonal lines across the torso of Russell's sketch of the *Dying Slave*, his pencil sketches, many of which are found in his notebook dated February-March 1914, provide the clearest indication of his method in designing this composition. Several of these small sketches (Fig. 3 right) seem to relate to one of Russell's life sketches (Fig. 3 left). Actually Russell first sculpted this same figure; he then painted it as sculpture in his studio in his *Synchronie en Vert* (Fig. 4) of 1913, his first Synchronist painting. Exhibited first in the *Salon des Independents* in 1913, and later in the Bernheim-Jeune exhibition, *Synchronie en Vert* is now lost, but a photograph serves to remind us that this first Synchronist painting

7. Donald Gordon, *Modern Art Exhibitions, 1900-1916, Selected Catalogue Documentation*, March, 1974, Vol. II, 807.

8. Morgan Russell, unpublished notebook, July 1912, Collection Mr. and Mrs. Henry M. Reed, Caldwell, N.J.

6. Willard Huntington Wright, *Modern Painting Its Tendency and Meaning*, New York, 1915, 299.



was not only representational, but depicted a seated female figure reading and three of Russell's sculptures.<sup>9</sup>

Even in these two rough pencil studies (Fig. 3) for *Synchrony in Orange: To Form*, Russell has used the figure in contrapposto as the focus of cascades of rhythmic lines and shapes. He conceived of the navel (indicated by the circular lines) as a kind of central vortex from which the various other forms extended. This can be seen most clearly on two facing pages (Fig. 5) in his notebook dated February to March 1914. While the left-hand figural sketch leaves the central area empty, the right-hand sketch develops for this space what Russell referred to as the central "whirlwind." In another notebook dated 1914, Russell wrote:

The aim of modern painting must necessarily be the placing of the looker into the middle of the "whirlwind" of the picture. For this there must be points of convergence or lines in more than one direction—toward as well as from the looker [sic] and top and bottom and each side as well as in front of him.<sup>10</sup>

Above this spiral "whirlwind," Russell has sketched a tiny version of the central figure of *Synchrony in Orange: To Form*. On this tiny figure, the substitution of a cluster of triangular wedges for the top half of the figure (as is the case in the final painting) is more clearly visible.

Several other pages of Russell's notebook dated February to March 1914 contain studies for *Synchrony in Orange: To Form*. Two such pages (Fig. 6) show his attempt to breakdown the figure and the surrounding space into wedges. The representation of the lower torso on the left also includes an oval belly similar to that striped area in the finished painting.

Russell's predilection for the interlocking wedges that comprise *Synchrony in Orange: To Form* appears to derive from the Cubist paintings he saw in Paris. He especially liked Picasso's *Three Women* of 1908 which he saw at the home of Gertrude and Leo Stein (before they sold it to Daniel Henry Kahnweiler who later sold it to the Russian collector Sergei Shchukin). Russell's pencil sketch after this painting (Fig. 7) reveals his concentration on a series of triangular wedges delineating a woman's thigh in the lower right corner. Similar arrangements of wedges are apparent in *Synchrony in Orange: To Form* especially to the left of the figure's legs. Russell even created a small oil study composed only of these wedge shapes painted in rhythmic brushstrokes. In his notebook dated May 1912, Russell referred to the usefulness of Cubism: "The cubist method [is] a means of keeping a firm tight grasp on the organization as a whole—the parts being strongly and intimately held together in this whole and never as isolated representational detail."<sup>11</sup>

Russell's notebook dated February-March 1914 would seem to indicate that much of the basic work on the *Synchrony in Orange: To Form* was not finished until the early months of 1914, just before the painting was first exhibited at the *Salon des Independants* that March. Certainly this work was not complete enough to have been included at the Bernheim-Jeune exhibition the preceding October. Although Russell may have incorrectly dated some of his notebooks months or years later, an early photograph of this

painting exists containing extensive notes. It indicates many proposed changes some of which he eventually made in both shapes and colors. This photograph does not include the painted frame-like border. It is inscribed on the verso: "*Synchronie faite a Paris l'hiver 1913-1914 - Expose Salon 1914 - Morgan Russell.*"<sup>12</sup> Indeed, it is unlikely that this struggling young artist would have had a photograph of his work made before its earliest exhibition in March of 1914. Thus, Russell apparently continued to revise his largest canvas after its controversial debut. Still visible today are his faint pencil notes "BV-RO" (blue-violet-red-orange) and other less legible writing found on the white rectangle to the right of the word "orange" and directly under "Morgan."

In addition to this early photograph (which also contains a very rough sketch of

12. Photograph of *Synchrony in Orange: To Form* with Morgan Russell's notes and inscription is in the Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Henry M. Reed, Caldwell, NJ.



Fig. 2

9. Bernheim-Jeune and Cie., *Les Synchronistes Morgan Russell et S. Macdonald-Wright*, Paris, 1913, lists *Synchronie en Vert* as number 13. *Synchronie en Vert* was also shown in Munich and is listed and reproduced in the exhibition catalogue as number 10 *Synchronie in Grün*. Der Neue Kunstsalon, Ausstellung Der Synchronisten Morgan Russell S. Macdonald-Wright, Munich, June 1913. The photograph of *Synchronie en Vert* from the artist's papers has a rough pencil sketch for *Synchrony in Orange: To Form* on the verso.

10. Morgan Russell, unpublished notebook, 1914, Collection Mr. and Mrs. Henry M. Reed, Caldwell, NJ.

11. Morgan Russell, unpublished notebook, May 1912, Collection Mr. and Mrs. Henry M. Reed, Caldwell, NJ.





Fig. 3

*Synchromy in Orange: To Form* on the verso), two interesting line drawings (e.g. Fig. 8) on thin brown paper have survived. Russell appears to have traced the outlines of the central figure of *Synchromy in Orange: To Form* from a photograph, probably with the intention of revising these shapes. The shapes in this line drawing (Fig. 7) are not exactly those of the finished painting. Interestingly, the shapes at the top of the line drawing extend beyond those of the painting in its final version, raising the possibility that Russell originally conceived of an extended curve at the top corresponding to the form of the forearm of Michelangelo's *Dying Slave* (Fig. 2).

Russell carefully considered each passage of *Synchromy in Orange: To Form*. At least two pencil drawings of specific passages have survived. One, working out the serpentine curves that flow vertically down the right side of the painting, further develops an idea

evident in a watercolor sketch in Russell's notebook dated August 1913. Another drawing (Fig. 9) is of the upper left corner of the painting. This sketch also indicates his concern with color values and light contrasts.

Russell's organization of color in *Synchromy in Orange: To Form* appears to have been influenced by Rood's *Modern Chromatics*. Rood suggested that color harmony could be obtained through the use of triads of colors which are located within areas divided by 120 degrees on the color wheel. Thus, an artist could choose a dominant color triad or keynote and then minor color chords or triads from the rest of the color circle. From the title of this painting, one is informed that orange is the principle color; the dominant triad, then, is red-orange-yellow as it appears emphatically just to the right of the figure in the center of the composition. Elsewhere, the minor triads of yellow-green-blue and blue-violet-red occur and refer to the dominant

triad. These color combinations are particularly apparent along the right side of the canvas where the familiar "S" curve or spiral rhythm undulates from the top down. Russell has varied this scheme specifically with the introduction of white and black which he liked to use to emphasize projection and recession respectively.

In spite of the emphasis Russell placed on color and its importance in *Synchromy in Orange: To Form*, only one color study (Fig. 10) for this major painting is known to exist. This oil sketch is so roughly executed that it is not easily recognizable as a color study for the carefully organized painting. The verso (Fig. 11) another pencil sketch of the central figure in *Synchromy in Orange: To Form*, provides a clue. Yet if one begins at the blue circle in the center of this study and compares this focal point to the abdomen area of the painting's central figure many of the forms and colors correspond. The central



yellow triangle is immediately obvious, as are the cascading curves of color along the right side. The white triangular space peaked in black (then bordered by blue and brown) is also clear on the left side of the composition. This loosely painted study indicates succinctly the basic color rhythms of the finished painting.

Although Russell probably rushed to complete his largest Synchronist painting in time to show it in the *Salon des Independants*, his revisions may also have been in response to some of the negative criticism the picture received in the French press. For example, Arthur Cravan had written: "Morgan Russell tries to veil his impotence behind the processes of synchronism. I have already seen his conventional canvasses, of an obscenity of repulsive colors at his exhibition at Bernheim-Jeunes. I do not discover any quality in him."<sup>13</sup> Roger Allard, writing for *Les Ecrivains Français* had evidently not grasped the figural basis of the painting: "M. Morgan Russell has maliciously dedicated 'à la Forme' a vast synchrony which celebrates in an orange mode the creation of man conceived as the result of a natural generating force."<sup>14</sup> Others viewed Russell's painting with less seriousness. The newspaper *Le Matin* reported on its front page the reaction of Raymond Poincaré, the president of France on viewing *Synchrony in Orange: To Form* in the course of his visit to the *Salon des Independants*.<sup>15</sup> Poincaré was described as stopping in perplexity in front of Russell's imposing painting and demanding to be told what it represented.

Undoubtedly the ambitious young American took this criticism combined with ridicule quite seriously. Russell did not regard his *Synchrony in Orange: To Form* as a completely successful work. In a notebook dated 1914, he wrote:

The particular sort of joy or ecstasy that a certain chord and form combination is capable of arousing can not be produced if you give it but once surrounded on all sides by other combinations just as interesting and of more or less the same size and attractiveness. It is better to repeat them perhaps slightly varied. . . Also interesting parts that is your intention to convey must be isolated by more or less neutral or negative surroundings—i.e. lacking contrasts and rich variety of form. If the *Syn. in Orange* with its powerfully balanced tonalities had been worked with regard to this last observation it would have produced a much greater effect and would have done justice to itself. [Italics mine]<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless, Russell continued to paint abstract Synchronisms through the spring of 1915. Unfortunately, by September 13, 1915, Russell wrote to his patron Mrs. Whitney that he had, at the advice of a specialist, found it necessary to give up his "vivid color work" of

the previous winter due to eye strain and headaches.<sup>17</sup> Over the summer, he had turned once again to his sculpture with himself as model through the use of three big mirrors. He also found "drawings and modestly colored still-life after nature" restful.<sup>18</sup> Yet, in a letter to Mrs. Whitney, dated November 7, 1915, Russell affirmed that he planned to "continue unflinchingly. . . to work out the art that I have given birth to, come what may."<sup>19</sup>

When he resumed painting abstract Synchronisms in early 1922, Russell chose to call this series *Eidos*, after the Greek word meaning "shape" or "form".<sup>20</sup> One notice-

17. Morgan Russell to Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, unpublished letter of September 13, 1915, Private Collection, New York.

18. Morgan Russell to Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, unpublished letter of September 13, 1915, Private Collection, New York.

19. Morgan Russell to Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, unpublished letter of November 7, 1915, Private Collection, New York.

20. These were exhibited in Paris from May 4-27, 1923 at the Galerie La Licorne, *Exposition de Tableaux et Synchronismes par Morgan Russell*, Exhibition catalogue with an introduction by Elie Faure.

16. Morgan Russell, unpublished notebook, 1914, Collection Mr. and Mrs. Henry M. Reed, Caldwell, NJ.

13. Arthur Cravan, *Maintenant*, March 1914, no. 18.

14. Roger Allard, "La 30<sup>e</sup> Exposition Des Artistes Independants," *Les Ecrivains Français*, March 1914, 12.

15. "Ou l'on voit les statues perdre la tête et les tableaux s'affoler sur le passage de M. Poincaré," *Le Matin*, March 25, 1914, 1.



Fig. 4





Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7

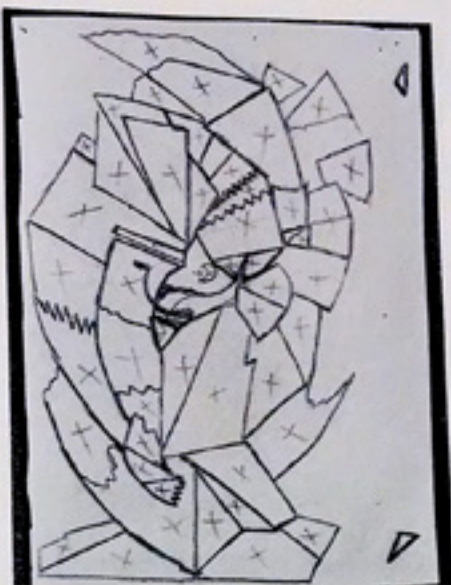


Fig. 8



Fig. 9





able development in these and other works after the spring of 1914 is the illusion of a vast blue or empty space receding behind the predominant floating shapes of color. In the early abstract Synchronisms such as *Synchronisme en bleu violace* and *Synchronisme in Orange: To Form*, Russell had extended the shapes of color to the edges of the frame, letting the color properties alone give the illusion of recession and projection. In a sense Russell succeeded in the *Eidos* series in isolating the interesting parts by "more or less neutral or negative surroundings" thus correcting what he considered to be the fault of the *Synchronisme in Orange: To Form*.

Ironically this major Synchronist painting fell into obscurity after its noisy debut in Paris in 1914. Russell returned to the United States in 1946. In 1951, the Museum of Modern Art presented *Synchronisme in Orange: To Form* in its exhibition *Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America*. The Albright-Knox Art Gallery acquired it in 1958 five years after the artist's death in 1953.<sup>21</sup>



Fig. 10

It should be remembered that while Morgan Russell was exhibiting his *Synchronisme in Orange: To Form* in the *Salon des Independants*, Stanton Macdonald-Wright had returned to New York and arranged a brief exhibition of their Synchronist paintings at the Carroll Galleries from March 2-16, 1914. This exhibition represented the first opportunity for many young American artists to see Synchronist paintings which would prove influential in encouraging a preoccupation with color principles.

I gratefully acknowledge the generosity of Henry Reed who has made both his knowledge and his collection of Synchronism available to me.

21. Andrew Camduff Ritchie, *Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America*, exhibition catalogue, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1951, catalogue no. 89, listed as "Synchronisme To Form."

List of Illustrations  
(All measurements are in inches)

- Fig. 1. Morgan Russell, *Synchronisme in Orange: To Form*, 1913-14, oil on canvas, 130x123, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo.
- Fig. 2. Morgan Russell, *Sketch after Michelangelo's Dying Slave*, c. 1912, pencil on paper, 12x8 1/4 (irregular), Collection Mr. and Mrs. Henry M. Reed, Caldwell, NJ.
- Fig. 3. Morgan Russell, *Three Sketches*, Collection Mr. and Mrs. Henry M. Reed, Caldwell, NJ. Left: *Sketch after Life Model*, 1913, pencil on paper, 5 5/8x3 5/8; Center: *Sketch for Synchronisme in Orange: To Form* (notebook of February-March, 1914), pencil on paper, 5 7/8x3 11/16; Right: *Sketch for Synchronisme in Orange: To Form*, 1913-14, pencil on paper (presumably torn from notebook), 5 3/8x3 7/16 (irregular).
- Fig. 4. Morgan Russell, *Photograph of Synchronisme en Vert*, 1913, from Morgan Russell papers, Collection Mr. and Mrs. Henry M. Reed, Caldwell, NJ, whereabouts and dimensions of painting unknown.
- Fig. 5. Morgan Russell, *Studies for Synchronisme in Orange: To Form* (notebook of February-March, 1914), pencil on paper, 5 15/16x7 1/4 (open) (irregular), Collection Mr. and Mrs. Henry M. Reed, Caldwell, NJ.
- Fig. 6. Morgan Russell, *Studies for Synchronisme in Orange: To Form* (notebook of February-March, 1914), pencil on paper, 5 15/16x7 5/16 (irregular), Collection Mr. and Mrs. Henry M. Reed, Caldwell, NJ.
- Fig. 7. Morgan Russell, *Sketch after Picasso's Three Women*, c. 1909, pencil on paper, 11 1/2x9 (irregular), Collection Mr. and Mrs. Henry M. Reed, Caldwell, NJ.
- Fig. 8. Morgan Russell, *Line Drawing for Synchronisme in Orange: To Form*, 1913-14, pencil on brown tracing paper, 7 7/8x5, Collection Mr. and Mrs. Henry M. Reed, Caldwell, NJ.
- Fig. 9. Morgan Russell, *Sketch for upper left corner of Synchronisme in Orange: To Form*, 1913-14, pencil on paper, 5 3/4x3 11/16 (irregular), Collection Mr. and Mrs. Henry M. Reed, Caldwell, NJ.
- Fig. 10. Morgan Russell, *Color Study for Synchronisme in Orange: To Form*, 1913-14, oil on canvas, mounted on cardboard, 7 1/2x5 5/8, Collection Mr. and Mrs. Henry M. Reed, Caldwell, NJ.
- Fig. 11. Morgan Russell, *Study for Synchronisme in Orange: To Form*, 1913-14, pencil on cardboard, 7 1/2x5 5/8, Collection Mr. and Mrs. Henry M. Reed, Caldwell, NJ. This is the verso of Figure 10.