This book has been published in conjunction with the exhibition *Paris Modern: The Swedish Ballet 1920-1925*.

The Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology
New York, New York
9 October 1995–15 January 1996

The McNay Art Museum
San Antonio, Texas
12 February–12 May 1996

Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco
15 June–September 8 1996

The exhibition and catalogue are made possible by support from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Federal agency; the Bernard Osher Foundation; the Rolf de Maré Foundation; Franklin/Templeton Funds; and the American-Scandinavian Foundation. SAS Airline provided transportation for the exhibition.

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Library of Congress No. 95-61830
ISBN 0-88401-081-3

COVER:
Fernand Léger, set design with three godlike figures for *La Creation du monde* (detail), 1923, cat. no. 79.

PAGE 1:
Audrey Parr, costume design for the Cymbals in *L'Homme et son désir*, 1921, cat. no. 110.

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Marie Vasilieff, program cover design for Ballets Suédois, ca. 1924, cat. no. 138.

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Printed and bound in Hong Kong

The BALLETS SUÉDOIS and American Culture

Gail Levin

Several Americans interested in new forms of performance were attracted to the innovative reputation of Rolf de Maré, the young Swedish impresario of the Ballets Suédois, who commissioned ballets integrating the latest developments in music, poetry, drama, and film. An American tour resulted for the company, as well as the production of an American ballet and two little-known projects that were intended for the troupe but never completed. The history of the Ballets Suédois thus came to reflect some of the most significant intellectual forces in American culture of the early 1920s.

The Swedes were not chauvinistic, nor did they harbor nostalgia for their homeland. Enjoying artistic freedom at home, they went to Paris for cultural stimulation. Although their repertory included a few works with Swedish elements (such as sets by the painter Nils Dardel or the folk dances that inspired dancer-choreographer Jean Börlin), de Maré chose instead diverse collaborators, among them by 1923 the American team of Gerald Murphy and Cole Porter.

In early 1923 Murphy received a commission to create an "American" ballet through Fernand Léger, who was designing sets and costumes for the Ballets Suédois production *La Création du monde* (The Creation of the World) and needed a curtain raiser. Murphy was encouraged to find an American to compose a score in the American idiom. He chose Cole Porter, who had not yet achieved his popular success on Broadway. The two expatriates worked on the project for three weeks during the summer of 1923 in Porter's palazzo in Venice (Fig. 1). Jean Börlin was responsible for the choreography. They turned out an eighteen-minute piece, *Within the Quota*.

If the vogue for America in 1920s Paris moved Léger to turn to Murphy, the outcome must have been hugely satisfying. *Within the Quota* looks and sounds typically American. To be sure, Murphy had decided in September 1921 to escape to Paris and was living luxuriously in the tradition of wealthy American expatriates. He was motivated no doubt by dour assessments of the American scene like those of the critic Waldo Frank, who inveighed against America's "spiritual Puritan negation."[1] In the wake of the First World War Frank and other cultural commentators, like Matthew Josephson and Paul Rosenfeld, were crying out for the creation of a genuinely indigenous and modern culture in America; this rise of nationalist sentiment at home had echoes in Murphy's project.

Cinema took pride of place in Frank's assessment of American cultural inventiveness: "The true popular Theater of the American masses is . . . the Movie. Before

Fig. 5
Program cover for the 1923 American tour of the Ballets Suédois.

F. LEGER

the Movie, the American masses had no theater." Frank went on to descry the need for further invention: "The whole world now has its cinemas. America alone has nothing else. America alone has nothing better."[2] Thus it hardly comes as a surprise that cinema figures not only in Murphy's *Within the Quota* but in the two unrealized American projects for the Ballets Suédois.

In November 1922 Matthew Josephson sounded another call for a new American culture in *Broom*, the dada magazine he coedited with fellow expatriate Harold Loeb. Josephson challenged Americans to create an indigenous art by drawing on popular culture; the artist needed to "plunge hardily into that effervescent revolving cacophonous milieu. . . where the Billposters enunciate their wisdom, the Cinemas transport us, the newspapers intone their gaudy jargon. . . and skyscrapers rise lyrically to the exotic rhythm of jazz bands."[3]

Josephson's smorgasbord of Americana reads like a manifesto for *Within the Quota*.[4] As a backdrop Murphy designed a giant front page in a parody of Hearstian yellow journalism (Fig. 2). Ears trumpet "EXTRA! FINAL EDITION" and mock banners flaunt sensationalist themes such as "Ex-Wife's Heart-Balm Love-Tangle" and "UNKNOWN BANKER BUYS ATLANTIC." Other juxtaposed headlines leave the eye uncertain whether to read across columns or simply down: "RUM RAID" could be followed by "LIQUOR BAN" or "ROMANCE." At top left an illustration compares an ocean liner tipped on its end to the Woolworth building. Built in 1913, it was in 1923 still the highest structure in the world, overshadowing the Eiffel Tower. As a symbol of America it had already attracted American modernist artists such as John Marin.

To one reporter Murphy explained that his set was "not Cubism, but its composition was inspired by Cubism,"[5] suggesting its relationship to Pablo Picasso's collages containing newsprint. Picasso was said to have returned the compliment, remarking of Murphy's set, "C'est beau, ça."[6] Murphy told a different story to American reporters, claiming that the set represented "a composite of 250 American newspapers that I have studied. . . The object is to get the quintessence of Americanism out of its newspapers."[7] The set design clearly shows that Murphy measured the American anatomy with an eye made all the sharper by the detachment of the expatriate.

Murphy's story line satirizes the impressions of a naive young Swedish immigrant to the United States, whose experiences range from victimization in New York (Fig. 3) to triumphant metamorphosis into a Hollywood movie star. French readers would see a parallel with Voltaire and the tribulations of Candide. The scene of arrival in New York may be reflected in the colossal painting *Boatdeck*, which Murphy exhibited in the Salon des Indépendants of 1924 and which, as William Rubin has suggested, may have been designed as an opening curtain for *Within the Quota*.[8] Murphy's scenario expands into a humorous picture of popular American stereotypes as observed through foreign eyes. Each of the characters and episodes draws on the American vernacular:

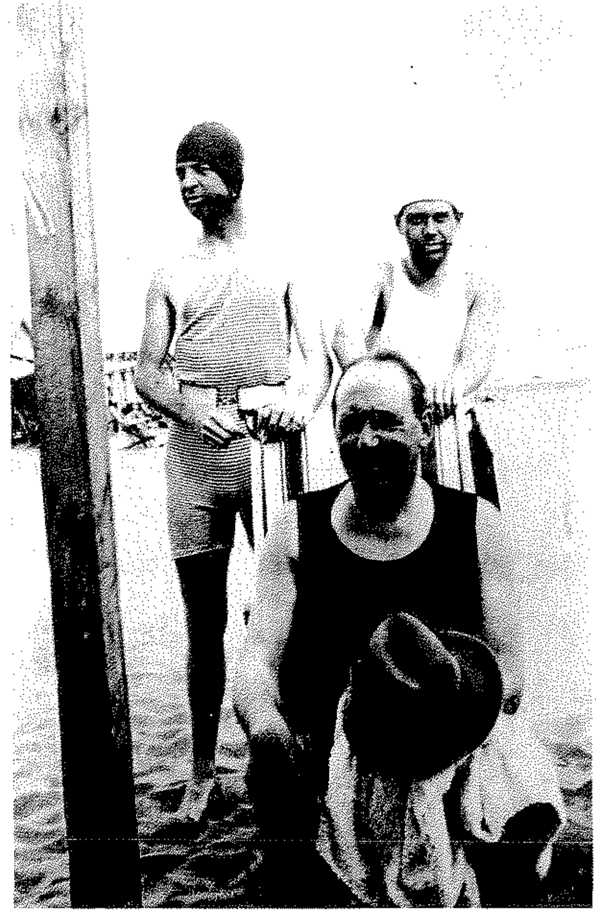


Fig. 1
Left to right: Gerald Murphy, Cole Porter, and the Porter's friend Sir Charles Mendl, The Lido, Venice, summer 1923.
Collection Honoria M. Donnelly, New York

A millionairess, bedecked with immense strings of pearls, ensnares him; but a reformer frightens her away. Then a Colored Gentleman appears and does a vaudeville dance. He is driven away by a "dry agent" who immediately thereupon takes a nip from his private flask and disappears, to the immigrant's increasing astonishment. The Jazz Baby, who dances a shimmy in an enticing manner, is also quickly torn from him. A magnificent cowboy and a sheriff appear, bringing in the

Fig. 2
Within the Quota, Paris, 1923, cat. no. 228.

element of Western melodrama. At last the European is greeted and kissed by "America's Sweetheart"; and while this scene is being immortalized by a movie camera, the dancing of the couples present sweeps all the troubles away.[9]

Many of Murphy's character types and their costumes were borrowed directly from American cinema. Gerald and his wife Sara, who had both studied briefly with Natalia Gontcharova, together produced the costume designs, according to their daughter, Honoria.[10] America's Sweetheart appears dressed in tiers of ruffles, carrying a basket of flowers and looking a bit like Little Bo Peep. Murphy intended to evoke Mary Pickford's film image as a dimpled darling with golden curls, which earned her the moniker "America's Sweetheart." The Cowboy, sporting fur jodhpurs and a typical Texas ten-gallon hat, was modeled after popular western stars of the silent screen such as Fred Thomson and Tom Mix.

Murphy also drew upon other performing arts pivotal to American popular culture. The Colored Gentleman, with spats, a straw boater, and a cane, stepped right out of a vaudeville number. Murphy shared an admiration of vaudeville with some of his American avant-garde contemporaries, notably Man Ray and Marsden Hartley, whose essay "Vaudeville" appeared in 1921.[11]

Murphy personified the rhythm of jazz bands in the Jazzbaby, while Porter's score reiterated the allusion to the African American music that inspired so many contemporary American and European artists, including Albert Gleizes, Francis Picabia, and Man Ray. The Murphys themselves sang Negro folk songs and spirituals, which Gerald had collected for years, charming the French, especially the composer Eric Satie.[12] Jazzbaby attempts a sultry look, with a slinky gown slit up the side, a bracelet pushed above her elbow, and her cigarette thrust into the air (Fig. 4).

Porter's score also cleverly parodied the music playing in silent-movie theaters, where the orchestra

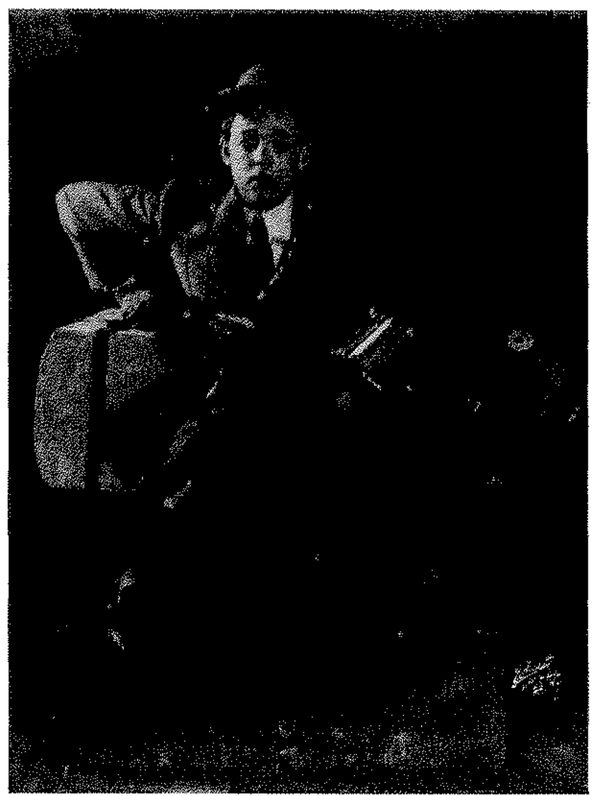


Fig. 3
Jean Börlin as the Immigrant in *Within the Quota*, New York, 1923, cat. no. 231.

Fig. 4
Jean Börlin as the Immigrant and Ebon Strandin as the Jazzbaby in *Within the Quota*, New York, 1923, cat. no. 229.

attempted to dominate but the piano always won out. Although Porter borrowed from jazz, he also drew from a variety of other sources, such as a Salvation Army chorale, a fox trot, a Swedish waltz, and the cacophony of New York taxi horns.

With his skyscraper, jazz, movie-style Wild West, vaudeville, and whiff of yellow press, Murphy was serving up in style what the Parisian avant-garde of the 1920s expected from America. "No one talked art in the group; it was simply not done. Vaudeville, the latest Argentinean tango, American jazz, skyscrapers, machinery, advertising methods — these were the new gods here," remembered poet Alfred Kreymborg (the original coeditor with Loeb of *Broom*).[13] Kreymborg described the French painter André Derain as "a magnificent figure of a man who wore a tremendous black sombrero which he removed with the majestic sweep of a cowboy in a wild-western movie,"[14] an image similar to Murphy's costume design for the cowboy of *Within the Quota*. The French enthusiasm for "a romantic America of cowboys, skyscrapers, and jazz" also impressed Frank when he reported the influence of American culture in France.[15]

Before the premiere on 25 October 1923 at the Théâtre des Champs-Elysées, Léger had de Maré change the order of performance lest such a lively curtain raiser steal the thunder from *La Création du monde*, which was also making its debut. As Léger suspected, critics loved the jazz elements of Porter's music. Gilbert Seldes had earlier characterized jazz as "the symbol, or the byword, for a great many elements in the spirit of the time — as far as America is concerned it is actually our characteristic expression."[16] He praised the production particularly for its music: "*Within the Quota* is actually an American ballet, the first to be produced by a foreign organization and the first in which popular American music exclusively has been used in connection with an American theme. Under the action lies the chief interest — that into eighteen minutes is 'collapsed' the small comedy of 'including the Scandinavian.'"[17]

Seldes identified the characters encountered by the immigrant as "the mythical heroes of contemporary American life, partly as the average European conceives them to be from acquaintance with our moving pictures, and partly as they are. The intention is satirical, the indicated method is exaggeration."[18] He admired Cole Porter, noting that "parody and comic exaggeration come naturally to him. In the cowboy, the 'colored gentleman,' and the finale, he has summed up nearly everything there is in the use of syncopation."[19] Seldes was also enthusiastic about Börlin's choreography, which he claimed was "made up of the characteristic steps of American dances, and the gestures of American everyday life." He dismissed Murphy's decor and costumes as being inconsequential except that they did not "distract from the story and the music."[20]

When the Ballets Suédois began its American tour in New York City in the autumn of 1923 (Fig. 5), it was Gilbert Seldes who was instrumental in recommending as a publicity agent the young literary critic Edmund Wilson, who remembered seeing the company not long after arriving in Paris on 20 June 1921: "Jean Cocteau took me to lunch and of course was gratified by my admiration. I had enormously enjoyed his *Mariés de la Tour Eiffel* (The Newlyweds on the Eiffel Tower), performed by the Swedish ballet, . . . with its ostrich and hunter in the Eiffel Tower and its general, a guest at the wedding, who is eaten by a lion. . . ."[21]

Wilson, who was then "very hard up," seems to have done his job well, for the invitation-only dress-rehearsal at the Century Theater on 25 November 1923 attracted

critics as influential as Frank; society patrons of the arts such as Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney (the sculptor and future founder of the Whitney Museum), Otto Kahn, and the Damrosch sisters; writers Edna Ferber, Carl Van Vechten, and John Dos Passos; and noted artists George Bellows, William Glackens, Childe Hassam, and Boris Grigorieff, a Russian émigré painter.

The *New York Evening Star* reviewed the American debut with this headline: "Parisian Impressionism in Many Distended Moods, Including the Scandinavian; Imagery, Travesty and Eiffel Towerism." The company performed four works for the New York debut: *L'Homme et son désir* (Man and His Desire), based on a symbolist poem by Paul Claudel; *Skating Rink*, a one-act ballet based on a poem by Ricciotto Canudo with sets and costumes by Léger; *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel*, a farcical spectacle by Cocteau; and *Les Vierges folles* (The Foolish Virgins), a biblical parable recounted in the manner of a Swedish folktale.

America's mood of nationalism predisposed critics and audiences to appreciate evidence of particular traditional ethnic cultures. Thus the same critic who praised *Les Vierges folles* for its "Northern crispness," Swedish charm, and "tang of folk songs and hymns," panned Léger's modernist *Skating Rink* for its "scrambled paint," calling it grotesque and hoping that it would not "influence women's clothes."[22]

Murphy's *Within the Quota* was first performed in New York three days after the company's American debut. Deems Taylor, the critic in the *New York World*, pronounced it "at least amusing and colorful, blessedly brief, and spiced with the satire that consists in presenting slightly exaggerated facts," praising both Murphy's scenery and Porter's music.

The Ballets Suédois toured America, performing not only in East Coast metropolitan centers such as Washington, Philadelphia, and New York, but also in many other smaller cities and towns, through 1 March 1924. Conservative audiences caused de Maré to eliminate *La Création du monde* from the remaining performances because he believed it simply too modernist for the American public.

When the Ballets Suédois returned to New York for a Christmas-night performance it announced that "the 'ultra-modern' numbers in the repertory which aroused so much discussion. . . have been entirely eliminated and that the new program will include a number of the more traditional ballets which have been popularized by the organization in Europe."[23] *Within the Quota* was the only modernist ballet retained.[24] Murphy's piece was called "an ironical ballet sketch," and Murphy was said to have "availed himself of the privilege of an American to make good tempered fun of his own country."[25]

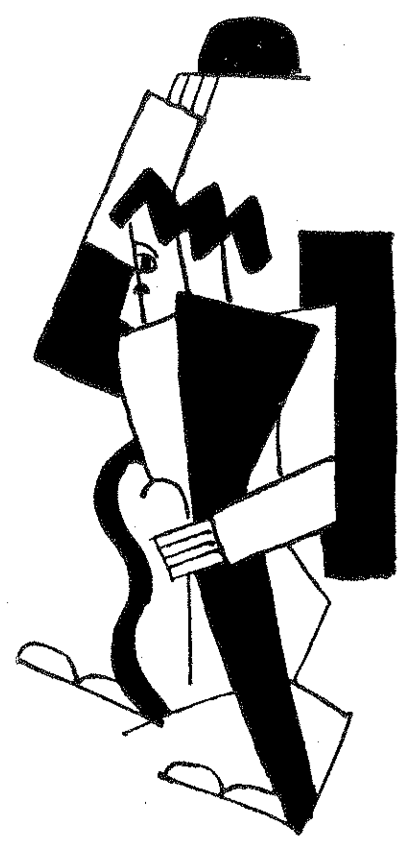
The success of *Within the Quota* encouraged other Americans to envision projects for the Ballet Suédois. One was conceived by none other than the company's American publicity agent, Edmund Wilson, who recalled, "I had the idea that it might be possible to induce Charlie Chaplin to perform in one of the pantomime ballets, and I convinced the impresario, Rolf de Maré, of the feasibility of this. He paid my expenses for a trip to California [in 1924] to try to persuade Chaplin."[26]

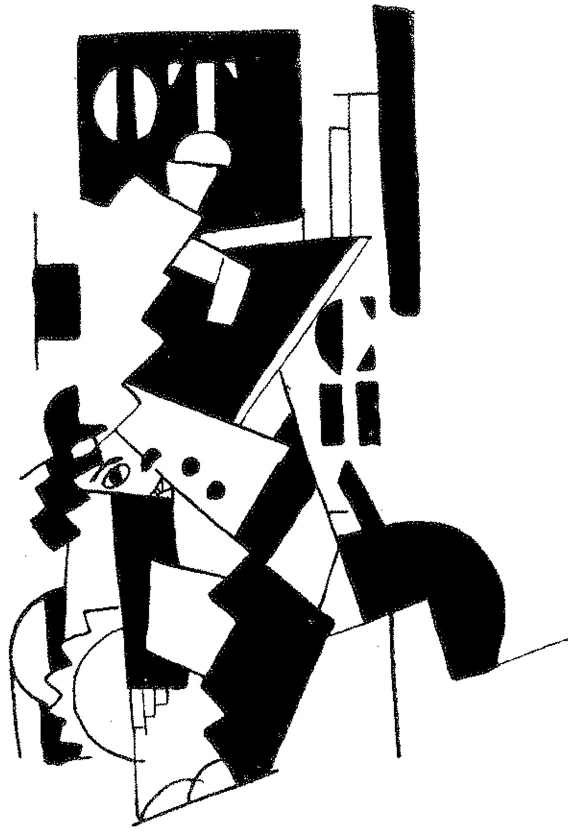
Wilson's esteem for Chaplin was widely shared. Frank had called him "our most significant and most authentic dramatic figure."[27] Since 1916 Léger too had admired the versatile American actor and, in 1920, he illustrated Ivan Goll's *Die Chaplinade*.[28] Four years later Léger asserted in an essay, "Le Ballet-Spectacle, l'objet-spectacle," that Chaplin was the film actor most able to employ the antiliterary, anti-individualistic potential of film.[29] Wilson may well have known Léger's drawings of Chaplin that appeared in *Broom* (Figs. 6–7). Unfortunately for Wilson, Chaplin declined to participate in the project, saying that he only performed in shows that he himself created.[30] Wilson concluded that Chaplin was "jealous of his independence. . . .[H]e is very unlikely to allow himself to be written for, directed, or even advised."[31]

Chronkhite's Clocks was the title of the ballet that Wilson had written for Chaplin. Wilson wrote to his friend the critic and poet John Peale Bishop on 15 January 1924, describing his creation as "a great super-ballet of New York for the Swedish Ballet" and explaining that it would include

a section of movie film in the middle, for which [Leo] Ornstein is composing the music and in which we hope to get Chaplin to act. It is positively the most titanic thing of the kind ever projected and will make the productions of Milhaud and Cocteau sound like folk-song recitals. It is written for Chaplin, a Negro comedian, and seventeen other characters, full orchestra, movie machine, typewriters, radio, phonograph, riveter, electromagnet, alarm clocks, telephone bells and jazz band.[32]

The idea of using machines recalls both the inventive experimental music of Edgar Varése and the visual images of New York dada, particularly those in little magazines such as *291* and *The Soil*. Marcel Duchamp's recent experiments with moving images may have suggested "movie machines," while Picabia had already depicted an alarm clock in *291*. When Wilson met Cocteau in Paris he had letters of introduction from Frank Crowninshield, his editor at *Vanity Fair*, to Mme





Figs. 6–7
FERNAND LÉGER
Charlie Chaplin, 1922. Published in *Broom*, vol. 1, no. 3 (January, 1923).

Picabia and others.[33] Wilson's interest in dada, nowhere more apparent than in *Chronkhite's Clocks*, is also evident in his play *The Poet's Return*, with its conversations between the critics Rosenfeld and Josephson, and by the subsequent inclusion of Tristan Tzara's "Memoirs of Dadaism" in Wilson's influential 1931 book *Axel's Castle*.[34]

Wilson's characters include Mr. Chronkhite, who "has a time-clock dial for a face and time-clock indicators for hands; his shirt-front is a time-clock chart and he wears gun-metal clothes."[35] The office setting is in the "Bedlam Building." Other characters include "Cavan, The Can-Opener King," who sports "a flat beaked head like a can-opener blade," "O. J. Stuck," with "a head like the top of a glue-pot," and other equally absurd figures.[36] The pantomime pokes fun at new American technologies: the "Elevated Express" with "Electro-Pneumatic Sliding Doors" is supposed to offer "Increased Service" but instead jumps the track and "topples."[37] Despite the dadaist origins of his scenario, Wilson sought out the innovative set designer Robert Edmond Jones to create his sets instead of a dada artist such as Picabia or Duchamp.

Although Wilson failed to realize the production, he was nonetheless early to see the value of writing "a ballet on an American theme using authentic American material."[38] He admired Murphy's *Within the Quota*, claiming that it "had a certain finish and point" though it "scarcely pretended to be more than [a] trifle."[39]

At least one other American became involved in an unrealized idea for the Ballets Suédois: the expatriate American painter Morgan Russell. In early 1925 the poet Blaise Cendrars, who produced the scenario *La Création du monde*, wrote to Russell, encouraging him to develop the concept of a synchromist ballet.[40] Cendrars and Russell met in the south of France in 1917; Cendrars's poem "Ma danse" had appeared in 1914 on the same page as one of Russell's drawings in the review *Montjoie!*[41]

Synchromism was a style of colorful abstract painting, often with a figural basis, which Russell, together with a fellow expatriate American, Stanton Macdonald-Wright, had invented and promoted in Paris before the First

Fig. 8
MORGAN RUSSELL
Syncromy in Orange: To Form, 1913–14
Oil on canvas (135 x 121.5 cm)
Albright-Knox Art Gallery

World War (Fig. 8). The abstract quality of synchromism gave it international resonance, especially given certain resemblances to the work of the Parisian artists Sonia and Robert Delaunay.[42] A synchromist ballet could not have conveyed the same kind of pointedly American qualities as *Within the Quota* or Wilson's plans for a New York theme, even through synchromism was technically an American style, invented by expatriates living in Paris.

The notion of a synchromist ballet harmonized with Russell's interest in experimenting with ideas related to film. What he envisioned must have been a ballet of moving colored shapes similar to his unrealized idea for a kinetic light machine, which was to be a cinematic projection of abstract colored forms. Lacking funds for equipment, he produced studies for his machine in oil paint on tissue paper so that they could be illuminated from behind, as if projected. Cendrars's thoughtful advice to Russell on developing a synchromist ballet was:

forget the anecdotal aspect (. . . we can always think about it at the very last minute and then choose a subject which can be indicated by the dancer) but keep on with Synchromism, structure, the superhuman, the cosmic and by thinking of all this, it will all come together in your mind and some day soon you will find how to achieve all this technically.[43]

Since the Swedish company was on tour he advised Russell, "[y]ou have the time." Russell was enthusiastic about the project of collaborating with Cendrars, but his loyalties to Macdonald-Wright, his former partner in synchromism, caused him to hesitate. The old collaboration proved unobtainable, with Macdonald-Wright then living in southern California. Russell described Cendrars and his ballet proposal in a letter to his colleague:

His taste and work is very modern and he is one of the few who don't understand why I didn't persevere in painting Synchromies. . . . Of course, I've never considered a Synchromist ballet — but at once saw how it could be done and encouraged by his enthusiasm. Now, as you know — I don't wish to noisily resurrect Synchromism with you out of it, any more than you do, by leaving me out in [the] U.S. . . .[44]

As luck would have it, Börlin fell ill and de Maré consequently decided to disband the Ballets Suédois,

making it impossible for either Wilson or Cendrars and Russell to accomplish their projects for the company. The realization of Russell's conception might have broken new ground for visual spectacle in dance. Although Wilson's plans certainly could have resulted in another American ballet, the premature demise of the company left *Within the Quota* to stand alone.

1. Waldo Frank, *Our America*, (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1919), 225.

2. Ibid., 214.

3. Matthew Josephson, "The Great American Billposter," *Broom* 3, November 1922, 305.

4. Elizabeth Hutton Turner, *American Artists in Paris, 1919-1929* (Ann Arbor: UMI Press, 1988), 138 and 141, attributes Murphy's interest in advertising and headlines to his friend John Dos Passos, but such preoccupations were then widespread.

5. William Rubin, *The Paintings of Gerald Murphy* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1974), 16.

6. Calvin Tompkins, *Living Well Is the Best Revenge* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1982), 40.

7. Rubin, *Murphy*, 29.

8. Ibid., 20.

9. Ibid., 24 and 28.

10. Author's interview with Honoria Murphy Donnelly, August 1992.

11. Marsden Hartley, "Vaudeville," in Hartley, *Adventures in the Arts* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1921), 162-74.

12. Tompkins, *Living*, 28.

13. Alfred Kreymborg, *Troubadour: An Autobiography* (New York: Liveright, 1925), 366.

14. Ibid., 367.

15. Waldo Frank, *In the American Jungle: 1925-1936* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1937).

16. Gilbert Seldes, "Toujours Jazz," *The Dial*, August 1923.

17. Gilbert Seldes, "Within the Quota," *Paris-Journal*, 1923.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. Edmund Wilson, *The Twenties*, ed. Leon Edel (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), 91.

22. Jean Henry, "'Swedish Ballet' Dancers at Century are Free from Mannerisms," *New York Evening Journal*, 26 November 1923.

23. "Swedish Ballet Here Again Christmas Night," *New York Telegraph*, 23 December 1923.

24. "More Exotic Beauty," *New York Evening Mail*, 27 December 1923.

25. "Swedish Ballet in Fine Program," *New York Evening Telegram* 27 December 1923.

26. Wilson, *The Twenties*, 153.

27. Frank, *Our America*, 214.

28. See Christopher Green, *Léger and the Avant-garde* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 248.

29. Ibid.

30. See Martin Green and John Swan, *The Triumph of Pierrot* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1986), 47.

31. Edmund Wilson, "The New Chaplin Comedy," reprinted in Wilson, *The American Earthquake* (New York: Farrar, Straus Giroux, 1958), 71.

32. Wilson, *The Twenties*, 153, excerpts Wilson to John Peale Bishop, 15 January 1924, Special Collections, Princeton University Libraries.

33. See Frank Crowninshield's memorandum of 13 June 1921 telling Wilson that he will meet Ezra Pound, Romain Rolland, and others through Mme Picabia; Edmund Wilson papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University. I am grateful to the Wilson biographer Lewis M. Dabney for his generous help with research on Wilson's connections to dada.

34. Edmund Wilson, *Axel's Castle: A Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870-1930*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1931), 304-12.

35. Edmund Wilson, *Chronkhite's Clocks*, in *Discordant Encounters* (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1926), 131-2.

36. Ibid., 139.

37. Ibid., 149.

38. Edmund Wilson, "American Jazz Ballet," in Wilson, *The American Earthquake*, 67.

39. Ibid.

40. Cendrars to Russell, 10 January 1925; see Gail Levin, "Blaise Cendrars and Morgan Russell: Chronicle of a Friendship," in *Dada/Surrealism* 9, 1979, 16.

41. *Montjoie!*, January-February 1914, an issue devoted to modern dance.

42. Gail Levin, *Synchromism and Color Abstraction, 1910-1925* (New York: George Braziller, 1978).

43. Cendrars to Russell, 10 January 1925, in Levin, "Blaise Cendrars and Morgan Russell," 16.

44. Russell to MacDonald-Wright, undated letter of 1925, in Levin, "Blaise Cendrars and Morgan Russell," 17.