

Morgan Russell's Notebooks : an American Avant-Garde Painter in Paris

Synchromism, the first avant-garde American style of painting to attract attention in Europe, was founded in Paris in 1913 by Morgan Russell and Stanton Macdonald-Wright, both of whom had moved there from the United States a few years earlier. Synchromism began with exhibitions in June, 1913, at the Neue Kunstsalon in Munich and the following October at the Bernheim-Jeune Gallery in Paris. In their exhibition catalogues, these two young artists adamantly stressed the distinction between their art and Orphism.¹

Noting superficial similarities in their colorful abstractions, critics have persisted in dismissing Russell and Macdonald-Wright as followers of Robert Delaunay. Macdonald-Wright and Russell did share with Delaunay a deep interest in light, color, and the theories of Michel Eugène Chevreul.²

Yet, extensive documentary evidence exists indicating that Morgan Russell developed his synchromies from a broader variety of sources.

The purpose of this paper is to examine a selection of the wealth of significant material found in Russell's unpublished notebooks.³ These notebooks record Russell's dramatic breakthrough toward the realization of totally abstract compositions as early as the late spring and summer of 1912. This previously unknown evidence indicates both Russell's originality and his independence from any single influence.⁴ Russell's notebooks illuminate the development of Synchromism with remarkable clarity. They reveal that the emergent Synchromist style evolved for Russell in a logical and personal manner.

In the Spring, 1909, Russell moved permanently from New York to Paris in order to study sculpture with Henri Matisse. Russell enthusiastically visited the Louvre, commercial art galleries and private collections (such as that of Leo and Gertrude Stein) of Paris. His enthusiasms, apparent both in his sketches and in the letters he wrote, included the art of Monet, Cézanne, Michelangelo and Picasso.⁵

* Information concerning the Canadian painter and color theorist Ernest Percyval Tudor-Hart (1873-1954) is being sought in connection with the exhibition Synchromism and Color Abstraction, 1910-1925 to take place at the Whitney Museum of American Art during the spring, 1978. Of particular interest are letter and manuscripts in the artist's hand as well as works of art. Born in Montreal, Tudor-Hart taught color theory classes in Paris attended by Morgan Russell and Stanton Macdonald-Wright. Please contact Gail Levin, Associate Curator, Whitney Museum of American Art, 945 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10021.

1. Published literature on Morgan Russell is limited. Cf. William C. AGEE, *Synchromism and Color Principles in American Painting 1910-1930*, exhibition catalogue, M. Knoedler and Co., Inc., New York, October 12 — November 6, 1965 and Michel SEUPHOR, *Abstract Painting Fifty Years of Accomplishment from Kandinsky to the Present*, New York, n.d., 52-53. Orphism or Orphic Cubism was a label applied by the poet Guillaume Apollinaire in 1912 to the art of Robert Delaunay, Fernand Léger, Francis Picabia, and Marcel Duchamp. Apollinaire singled out Delaunay as the leading Orphist in his book *The Cubist Painters: Aesthetic Meditations* (New York, 1913; 2nd revised ed., 1949).
2. Michel Eugène CHEVREUL, *De la Loi du contraste simultané des couleurs et de ses applications* (Paris, 1839).

3. The notebooks discussed in this article are in the collection of Mr. and Mrs. Henry M. Reed, Caldwell, New Jersey. They are quoted with the kind permission of the owners and Mme Morgan Russell. Most of the notebooks were dated on the cover. Some notebooks extended for several months. Occasionally the individual entries were dated as well.
4. Published here for the first time, Russell's notebooks and other studies were shown at the Museum of Modern Art, New York from March 16 to May 25, 1976 in the exhibition "Morgan Russell: Synchromist Studies, 1910-1922," organized by the author.
5. Morgan Russell to Andrew Dasburg, unpublished letter of August 1908 expresses his enthusiasm for Monet's paintings. Morgan Russell to Andrew Dasburg, unpublished letter of October 27, 1910 elaborates his great admiration of Cézanne's work. Both letters are in a private collection

By 1912, Russell's studies had begun to point in a new direction. He expected this development to lead to "a new vision in painting."⁶ At this time, Russell regularly kept a pocket-sized notebook with him and made copious written observations and sketches whenever an idea struck him. These notebooks include notes and sketches made in Paris cafes, the Louvre and the Durand Ruel Gallery. There are remarks on ancient art, color theory, music, philosophy and even health tips.

It is well-known that Morgan Russell did not exhibit his first purely abstract painting until the Bernheim-Jeune exhibition of October, 1913. Yet, his notebook dated May, 1912, contains a tiny pencil sketch (Fig. 1) for this first abstract painting

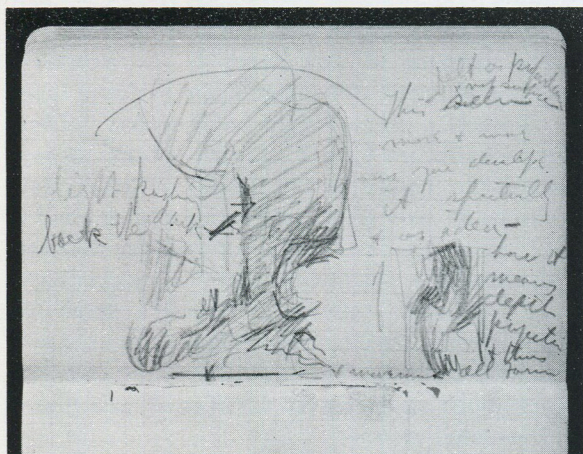


FIGURE 1. Morgan Russell, *Sketch for Synchronie en bleu violacé*, notebook dated May 1912, pencil, $3\frac{1}{2} \times 5\frac{3}{8}$ ", Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Henry M. Reed, Caldwell, New Jersey.

Synchronie en bleu violacé. Russell's notes added adjacent to this sketch confirm that it was executed preparatory to the painting he dedicated to his patron, Mrs. Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, and subtitled a "Synchronie to light." Referring to the quotation which he chose from *Genesis* to illuminate the *Synchronie en bleu violacé* in the Bernheim-Jeune catalogue, Russell has noted next to a larger, roughly executed sketch of an unidentifiable subject on this same page: "light pushing back the dark." Russell wrote in the marginal areas

in New York. Russell sketched many of Michelangelo's sculptures as indicated below. He sketched 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 sold it to the Russian collector Sergei Shchukin).

6. Morgan Russell, unpublished notebook dated July 1912. In notes for a letter he planned to send his patron Mrs. Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, Russell mentions that he intends to realize "a new vision in painting."



FIGURE 2. Morgan Russell, *Sketch for Synchronie en bleu violacé*, notebook dated July 1912, crayon, $5\frac{3}{4} \times 3\frac{3}{8}$ ", Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Henry M. Reed, Caldwell, New Jersey.



FIGURE 3. Morgan Russell, *Sketch for Synchronie en bleu violacé*, notebook dated July 1912, crayon, $5\frac{3}{4} \times 3\frac{3}{8}$ ", Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Henry M. Reed, Caldwell, New Jersey.

7. Lost for many years, *Synchronie en bleu violacé* was recovered after Russell's death by Stanton Macdonald-Wright who repainted the damaged canvas before his own death in 1973.



FIGURE 4. Morgan Russell, *Synchronie en bleu violacé*, 1913, oil on canvas, 10'4" X 7'6", collection of Mrs. Stanton Macdonald-Wright.



FIGURE 5. Morgan Russel, *Sketch for Synchronie en bleu violacé (Synchrony to Light)*, 1913, oil on canvas, 13" × 9½", Los Angeles, County Museum of Art, gift of Mr. and Mrs. David E. Bright.

around the tiny sketch for the *Synchronie en bleu violacé*: "This felt as profondeur and not surface seen — more and more as you develop it spectrally and as idea — have it mean depth, projection and movement and thus all form."

Russell worked further on his design for the *Synchronie en bleu violacé* by adding color in two crayon sketches (Fig. 2 & 3) found in his notebook dated July, 1912. The colors he chose were those of the spectrum as he had noted on the sketch of May, 1912. The final version of *Synchronie en bleu violacé* (Fig. 4), which measures 10'4 × 7'6" and is composed mainly of pure spectral colors, was conceived in a pencil sketch no bigger than a postage stamp. An oil study for the final composition (Fig. 5) and *Synchrony No. 2, To Light*, a smaller, perhaps later version of *Synchronie en*

bleu violacé, also remain. A reading of his notebook dated April, 1913, leaves no doubt that Morgan Russell was seeking a new and personal style of art. He noted:

The necessity of being strongly of one's own time — your work to reflect intensely *le rythme* [sic] of our time and not be retrospective, or neo-this and that — and the influences must be completely assimilated to this end — one does art but this art must be isolated from life — even tho it may not be understood by the masses of one's own time it can still have quality to the greatest degree and will always be appreciated by the leading spirits of the time.

Russell experimented with the idea that he could begin a painting by interpreting the forms of a great work of sculpture. He wrote in his notebook dated July, 1912, (Fig. 6):

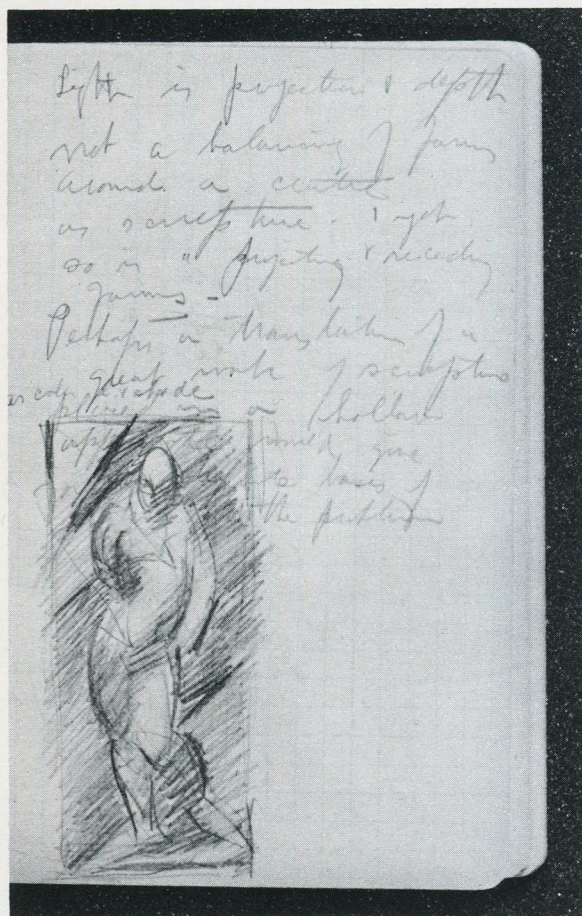


FIGURE 6. Morgan Russell, *Page from notebook dated July, 1912*, pencil, $5\frac{3}{4} \times 3\frac{3}{8}$ ", Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Henry M. Reed, Caldwell, New Jersey.

Light is projection and depth — not a balancing of forms around a center as sculpture. And yet so in 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.

Russell may have followed this plan in a watercolor sketch which until the present has remained untitled (Fig. 7). On first glance, this work does not appear to represent a natural subject. However, such a subject is detectable if one looks at a *Pencil Sketch after Michelangelo's Florence Pietà* (Fig. 8) found in his notebook dated August, 1912, and thus executed just a month after he had recorded this idea in the quotation cited above. Russell recorded some of the projecting and receding forms of the model Pietà in his sketch, yet he omitted as much detail as he included.⁸ He emphasized the 'V'

shaped cowl and collar, and the shoulders of Joseph at the top; below he barely indicated the limp body of Christ with the right leg projecting. He has included little more than the supporting arm of either the Magdelene on the left or the Madonna on the right. From this sketch, it appears that Russell was interested only in the rhythmic flow of the three-dimensional forms and in their projections and recessions. In this same notebook he wrote:

Place in mind or vision clearly the subject as form — the points nearest you in projection — those furthest and the side projections and seize [sic] the order of this... the sentiments of the whole as color and as line. And in the working ignore, forget the linear outlines of objects — never will you arrive at complete expression in painting until this habit is lost...

In the *Watercolor Sketch after Michelangelo's Florence Pietà* (i.e. Fig. 7), Russell also emphasized a double 'V' shape at the top of the composition

8. For an illustration of this Pietà, see Charles DE TOLNAY, *Michelangelo* (Princeton, 1960), V, Fig. 77.



FIGURE 7. Morgan Russell, *Watercolor Sketch after Michelangelo's Florence Pietà*, 1912, 12 × 6½", watercolor on paper, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Henry M. Reed, Caldwell, New Jersey.

which corresponds to the cowl and collar of Joseph in his pencil sketch based on the same monument. A red, orange, and yellow projecting curve approximates the form of Christ's limp left arm in the original Pietà. Below Russell has painted forms which might relate to legs; however, only Christ's right leg was visible in the sculpture itself. Russell's unusual means of creating an abstract composition of color and light by extracting his composition from a three-dimensional model perhaps owes something to his conception of himself as a "sculpteur manqué."⁹

In a notebook dated August, 1912, Russell confidently wrote:

There is a need for form that has not existed since the Renaissance. One point of real departure in color like the manifestation of light — by consequence the kind of light which has never been done — of a sublime beauty...

He followed this thought with notations remarking on: "the struggle of life against materiality — straight lines and curved lines — colors and grayness. The struggle of light against obscurity and shadow." Russell exhorted himself to "make the form and the space with waves of color — as Michelangelo does with waves of form." On



FIGURE 8. Morgan Russell, *Pencil Sketch after Michelangelo's Florence Pietà*, from notebook dated August 1912, 6¼ × 3¾", Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Henry M. Reed, Caldwell, New Jersey.

9. Morgan Russell to Stanton Macdonald-Wright, unpublished letter of August 4, 1921, private collection, New York. Willard Huntington Wright, *Modern Painting Its Tendency and Meaning*, New York, 1915, 299. Wright pointed out a similar use of sculpture by Russell as the basis of an abstract painting: "In his *Synchronie en bleu violacé* 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..."

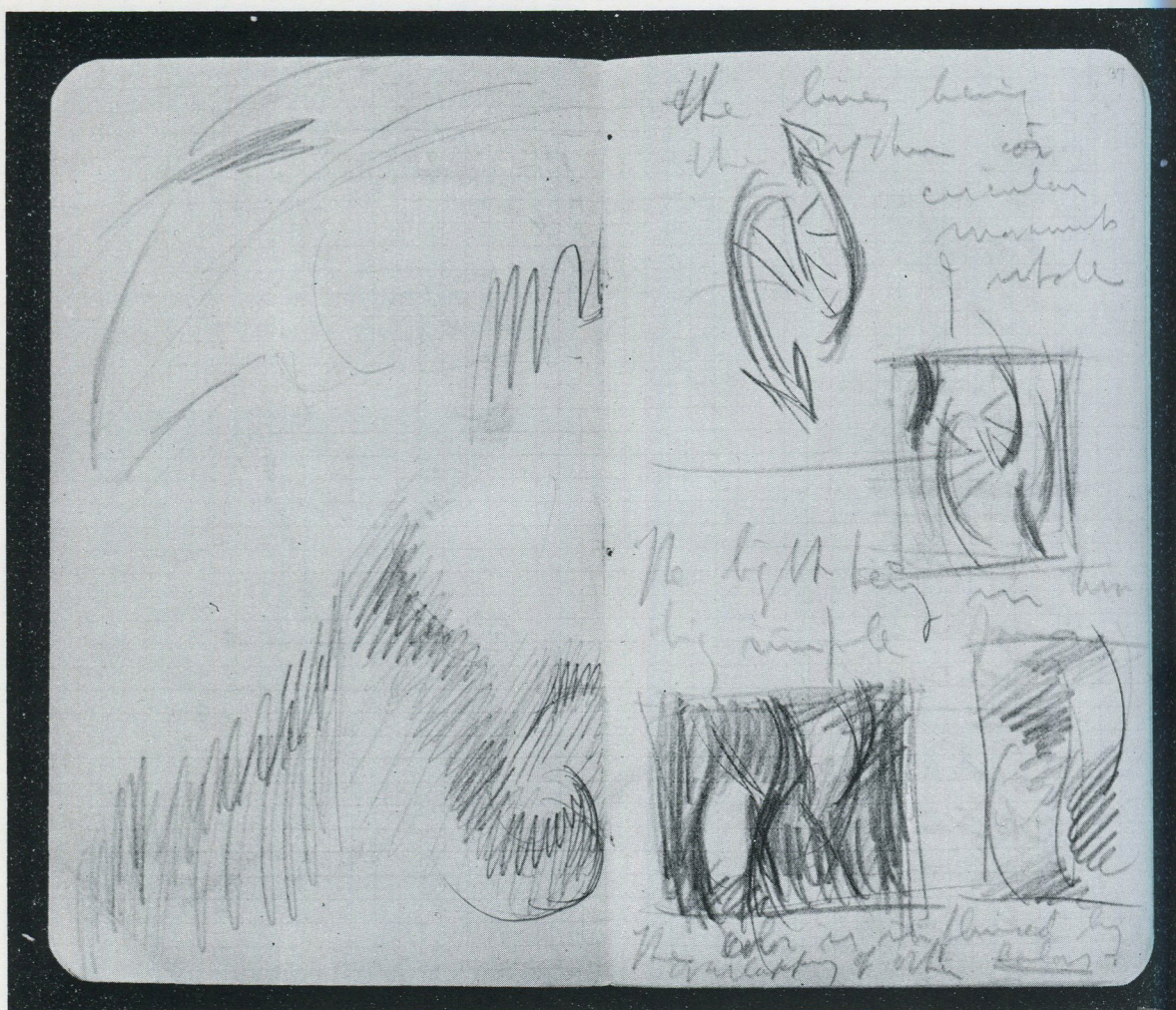


FIGURE 9. Morgan Russell, *Notebook pages of August 1912*, pencil, $6\frac{1}{4} \times 3\frac{3}{8}$ " each page, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Henry M. Reed, Caldwell, New Jersey.

the following page (Fig. 9), Russell executed various pencil sketches which develop further the concept of rhythmic color that eventually was to result in his first abstract synchromies. He noted: "the lines being the rythm [sic] on circular movements of the whole." As he pointed out that "The color is influenced by overlapping of other colors," Russell was beginning to consider color theory. The pages of crayon sketches (Fig. 10) which follow directly are the undulating "waves of color" he sought, while on the following two pages (Fig. 11), Russell experimented with a central whirlwind and intersecting waves of spectral colors.

Russell, who had been studying color theories ¹⁰

10. In addition to Chevreul, Russell knew about the color theories of Hermann von Helmholtz and Ogden Rood. He may have first learned of their theories in the Paris classes of Ernest Percyval Tudor-Hart (1873-1954), rather than by reading such theories in the original.

and their application in the Paris classes of the Canadian theorist Ernest Percyval Tudor-Hart,¹¹ summed up his own aims and methods of using color in his notebook dated August, 1912:

The thing that led me to this discovery and this method was 1st the search after a rationale of color—above the servile copying of local color—reflected light and the illusion of the complementaire. A rationale that would satisfy my longing for a vision of color that would enable me to render form by

11. Morgan Russell to Stanton Macdonald-Wright, unpublished letter of December, 1922, private collection, New York. Russell admitted to Macdonald-Wright, that he had learned a great deal from Tudor-Hart. For information on Tudor-Hart, see *Thieme-Becker Künstler-Lexikon*, XXXIII, 472 (Leipzig, 1939); Hans Vollmer, ed., *Allgemeines Lexikon der Bildenden Künstler, des XX Jahrhunderts* (Leipzig, 1953-1962), IV; Adrian Bernard Klein, *Colour Music: the art of light* (London, 1930), 102-106.

composing the force of the light as naturally and as clearly as when painting in monochrome —.

2nd the search for a rhythmic [*sic*] basis to color — the struggle of warm and colds — ups and downs — ins and outs — and by the means giving the full power and richness possible with paint to expression of color emotions...

What Russell wrote in August, 1912, of his aims in painting thus places him securely among the avant-garde. He reminded himself to:

Make lines colors... never paint "the thing" or the subject. Paint the emotion not illustration... a few curly lines and to depth, rythm [*sic*] light... a few little spectrums, dark violets and lights...

Russell's attempts in this direction are represented by his simple, yet rhythmic crayon study (Fig. 12) composed of two overlapping spirals of spectral hues, a work presumably also dating from summer, 1912.

Russell continued to study the forms of Michelangelo's sculpture. His notebook dated September, 1912, begins with sketches after Michelangelo's *Pietà* in the Vatican and *Lorenzo de' Medici* from the Medici Tombs in Florence. However, his belief is now even stronger that significant artistic expression would focus not on objective reality, but on formal considerations. He wrote in this notebook of the following necessity:

... to forget the object entirely, yes to forget it — to put it out of our mind entirely and think only of planes, lines colors, rythms [*sic*] etc. emotional visual quality... Some artists sacrifice or ignore these qualities and accent the fact — but one must do the contrary, accent the rythm [*sic*] the rapport and *let the object suffer*. Keep the "music" at all costs — the palpitation or undulation — sacrifice the fact. [*italics mine*]



FIGURE 10. Morgan Russell, *Notebook pages of August 1912*, crayon and pencil, 6¼ × 3¾" each page, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Henry M. Reed, Caldwell, New Jersey.

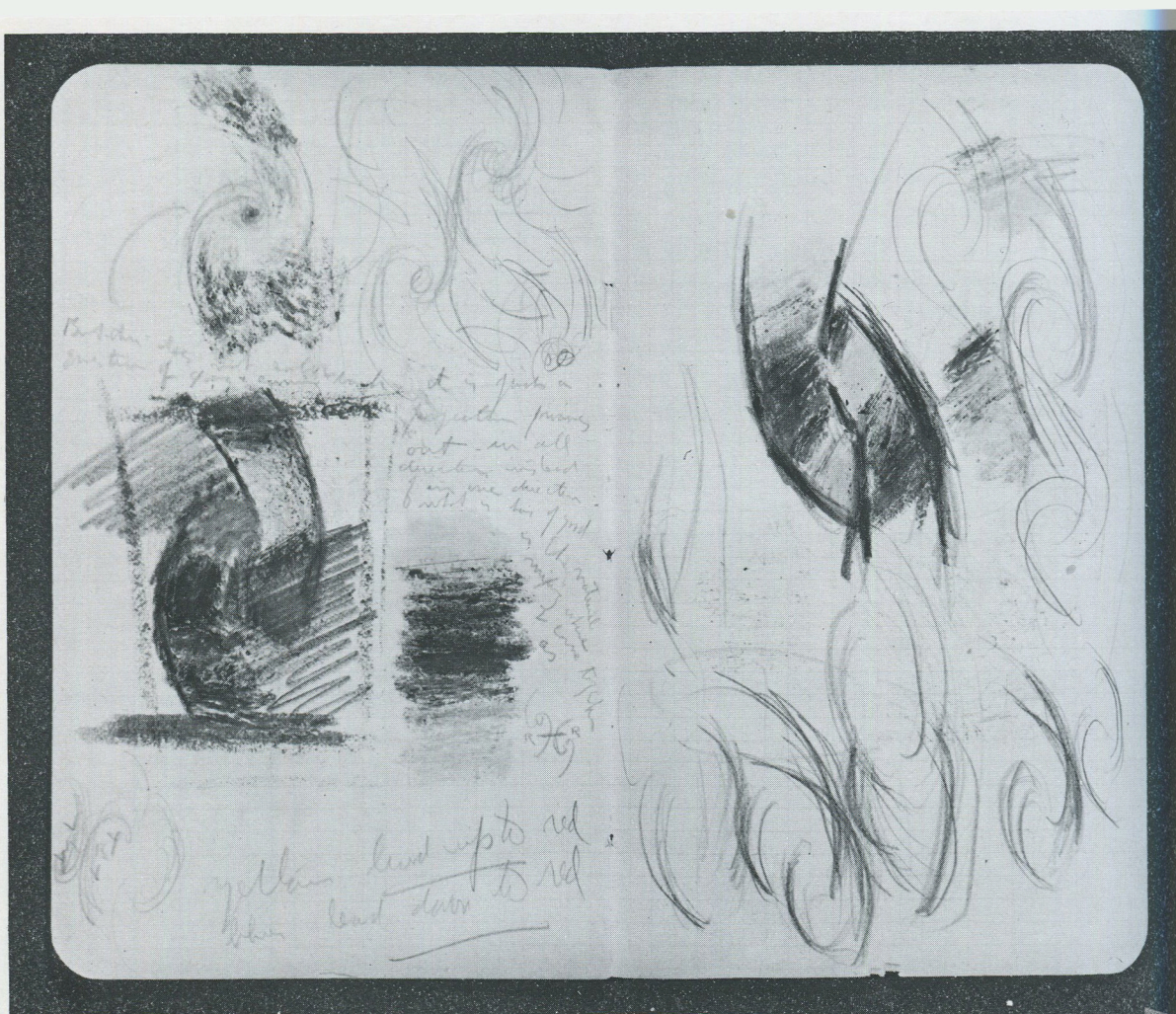


FIGURE 11. Morgan Russell, *Notebook pages of August 1912*, crayon and pencil, $6\frac{1}{4} \times 3\frac{3}{8}$ " each page, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Henry M. Reed, Caldwell, New Jersey.

In a watercolor representing a *Pot of Geraniums* (Fig. 13), Russell has allowed the forms of the top of the plant to blend with their surroundings while leaving the pot and stem more distinct. This work shows a departure from Russell's previously more traditional attempts at still life. He is beginning to "let the object suffer," as he indicated in the quotation above. While other watercolor studies (Fig. 14) still appear to have evolved out of nature, the specific subject forms are no longer recognizable.

In August, 1912, with the idea of an abstract synchrony firmly in mind, Russell wrote of his plans:

I propose to exhibit to the interested public certain things, which I have believed to be of paramount importance and which until now have been ignored in painting... at the same time opening a field of richness unknown until now in this art... I address myself to the intuitive appreciation of the public in

an artist capable of feeling more profoundly than the paintings of the two great salons and I believe to give them that which they have awaited for many years...

With this mission in mind Russell strove to achieve rhythmic effects of color and light in his abstract synchronies. Among the several watercolor sketches in his notebook dated August, 1913, one finds a colored spiral rhythm (Fig. 15) similar to that which flows along the right side of his large painting *Synchrony in Orange: To Form* (Fig. 16) of 1913-1914.¹² Comparing Russell's attempt to

12. *Synchrony in Orange: To Form*, in the collection of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York, is perhaps Russell's best known work. It was first exhibited as *Synchronie à la forme: Orange* in Paris in the Spring, 1914 in the *Salon des Indépendants*. For a detailed examination of this painting, cf. "Morgan Russell's *Synchrony in Orange: To Form*" by the author in the forthcoming bulletin of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery.

convey rhythm with line and shading alone in the adjacent pencil sketch, one grasps the importance to Russell of color as a vehicle for the expression of dynamism. By now Russell's waves of color have evolved into more complex interwoven spirals. He also utilized color principles by suggesting the projection of the warm colored shapes and by juxtaposing complementary colors for greater contrast.



FIGURE 12. Morgan Russell, *Crayon Study with Spectral Spirals*, c. 1912, crayon on paper, $6\frac{1}{2} \times 4\frac{1}{4}$ ", Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Henry M. Reed, Caldwell, New Jersey.

On November 5, 1912, Russell noted: "Color and light must be entirely melted into one and felt as such — and light must be expressed as it is felt in us as color." He wrote here of seeking to create "painting capable of moving people to the degree that music does." At this time, he proposed to achieve this effect in painting by the: "Division of canvas in the sense of the movement of the light in measures of equal distance but broken up variously with a certain rhythmic [*sic*] character."



FIGURE 13. Morgan Russell, *Pot of Geraniums*, c. 1912, watercolor on paper, 6×4 " Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Henry M. Reed, Caldwell, New Jersey.



FIGURE 14. Morgan Russell, *Untitled Study after Nature*, c. 1912, watercolor on paper, $5\frac{3}{4} \times 3\frac{3}{4}$ ", Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Henry M. Reed, Caldwell, New Jersey.



FIGURE 15. Morgan Russell, *Pages from Notebook dated August 1913*, watercolor and pencil, $6\frac{1}{4} \times 3\frac{3}{8}$ ", Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Henry M. Reed, Caldwell, New Jersey.

As Russell sought a means to merge color with light, he began to conceive of a new medium beyond traditional painting. As early as September, 1912, he had dreamed in a notebook annotation of "something that is entirely in character with modern development" in order to express his "new vision." His idea for a light machine was first expressed in this notebook. He reminded himself:

Have but one but [i.e. goal] — that of (as result of confidence in new vision) bringing it forth, or perfecting it — of making it take form. It is so closely connected with modern tendency, as for instance, even if art should take a form other than canvasses [*sic*], it would give in part the solution. Imagine waves of light — color — divided in measure for the composer and executant and given in time as well as space...

Then, as if writing a manifesto for an upcoming exhibition, Russell explained:

What gave birth to this idea — first — simply a vague image of that which I felt a painting should or at least might be — Next the search for a solution of the problem of color and light or a "rationale" to color.

Russell concentrated, however, on his Synchronist canvases until the spring of 1914. He then made further plans for the light machine. Russell intended to combine music with color and light. He adored music, particularly Beethoven's symphonies, which he often listened to while working out color harmonies.¹³ He composed

13. John Alan WALKER, "Interview: Stanton Macdonald-Wright," *Southwest Art Gallery Magazine*, May 1973, reprinted in *American Art Review*, January-February 1974, 65. Wright remarked: "... we [he and Russell] used to sit on the floor with a score of Beethoven and work out certain color harmonies according to the Beethovenian format."

music and used musical principles in arranging chords of colors. Even the name Synchronism, meaning "color synthesis" was suggested to him by the word symphony.

Russell's main problem in developing his light machine was a lack of financial support. In Fall, 1913, he optimistically wrote of inviting financial collaboration and of exhibiting the machine "in the principle cities of Europe and America." He intended to request backing in Paris, London, St. Petersburg and Moscow. He noted the necessity to "explain clearly about the aim which will give birth

to a new art but at the same time renew and deepen an enjoyment of the old."

Russell's project for the light machine never progressed much beyond his extensive notes and related paintings. He conceived of "an apparatus that by reducing the luminosity of the screen, or of the lamps... will reduce that of the colors..." He also made a number of studies of oil paint on tissue paper (Fig. 17). These are meant to be viewed with a light shining from behind the abstract images as if projected on an illuminated screen. The effect, in a properly darkened room, is dramatic. Some of the



FIGURE 16. Photograph (c. 1951) of Morgan Russell and his wife in front of *Synchrony in Orange: To Form*, 1913–1914.

ensemble to indicate both rhythmic movement and spatial depth. Delaunay's flatness, such as that in his *Le Premier Disque*²¹ of 1912, did not appeal to Russell at this time although he shared the Frenchman's preoccupation with a central vortex. It was, in fact, Russell's desire to transcend the limitation of the canvas, that led him to experiment with creating rhythmic color with actual lights combined with music.

The early interest Russell had in Michelangelo's sculpture and the use he made of these forms as the

basis of abstract color paintings are evidence of the independent development of his Synchronist style. Although the figurative basis of Russell's Synchronist paintings has not been sufficiently appreciated, their sculptural solidity has been recognized.²² Russell's interest in sculptural and figural forms as a basis for abstract painting was first shared by Stanton Macdonald-Wright. This idea was later communicated to Thomas Hart Benton who experimented briefly with Synchronism around the time of the Forum exhibition in 1916. Benton then went on to develop his own style of heroic figurative painting. The notebooks also indicate that by May 1912, Russell's important stylistic development had progressed considerably further than those who have previously placed the artist as a mere footnote to Delaunay have ever realized. Now that this evidence has become available, one must acknowledge the originality of Russell's Synchronist style. Russell was by 1913, not just another young American artist in Paris, but among the forefront of the abstract avant-garde.

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21. Robert DELAUNAY's *Le Premier Disque*, 1912, is in the collection of Mr. and Mrs. Burton Tremaine, Meridan, Conn. and is reproduced in color in *Robert Delaunay (1885-1941)*, exhibition catalogue, Orangerie des Tuileries, May 25 - August 30, 1976, Paris.

22. For example, Barbara ROSE, *American Art Since 1900 A Critical History*, New York, 1967, 93, states: "Although they were partners in their enterprise, Russell and Macdonald-Wright had different interpretations of Synchronism. Russell's work was more clearly abstract; behind Macdonald-Wright's forms there is usually some structure in nature that has been idealized in the rhythmic coordination of the muscular organization of the human body... In place of Russell's opaque planes and sculptural forms — Russell had worked on sculpture with his friend Matisse — Macdonald-Wright preferred the diaphanous quality of intersecting transparent planes."