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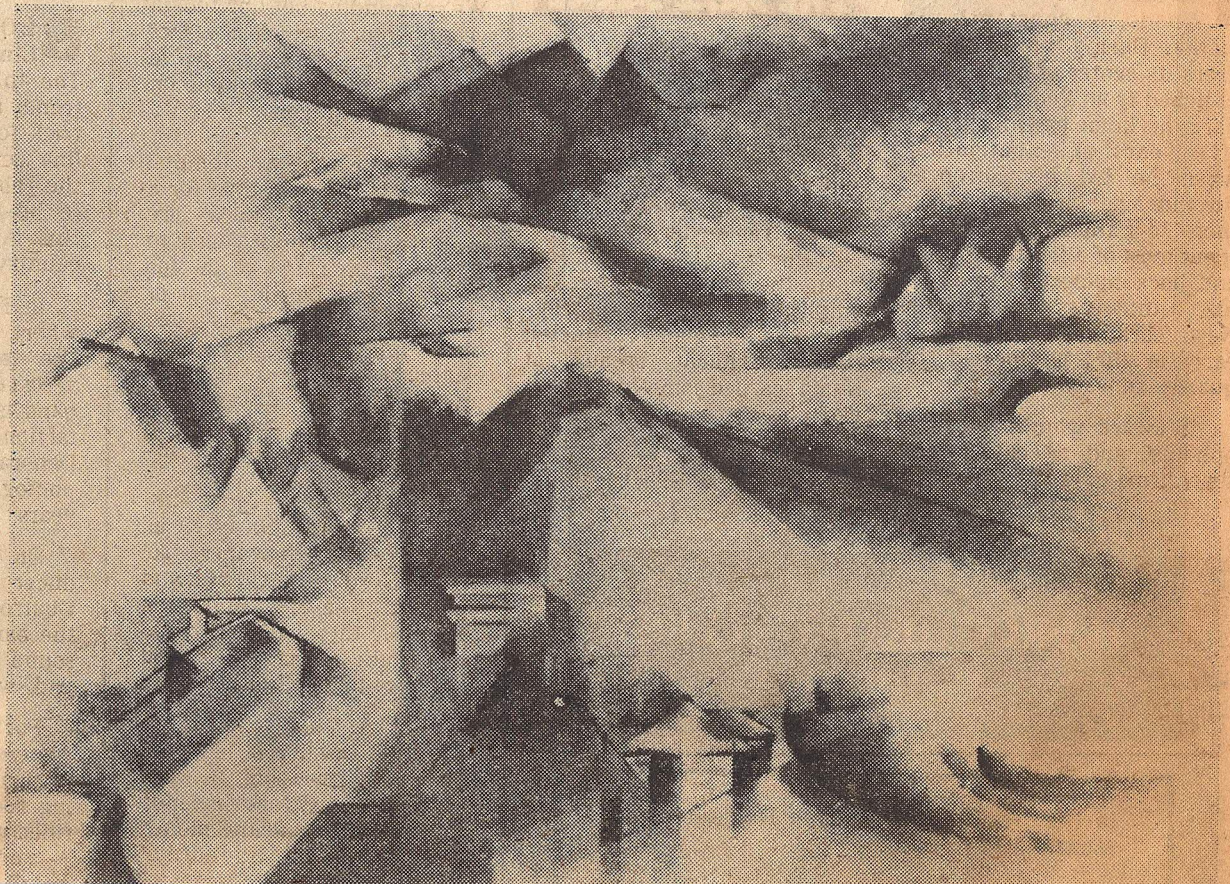
A Fine Exhibition of Artistic Modernism

By Alfred Frankenstein

THE MYTH is that artistic modernism was introduced to the United States at the Armory Show of 1913, was promptly rejected with horror and loathing, but has flourished mightily in this country ever since. The myth is refuted by its own absurdity, and the exhibition called "Synchronism and American Color Abstraction, 1910-25," currently at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, points up the fact that Americans made distinguished contributions to the modernist ferment well before the Armory Show was ever thought of.

The fact that they were Americans is in itself of no great importance, since Morgan Russell and Stanton Macdonald-Wright, the founders and leaders of the Synchronist movement, did all their most original work in Paris and that work is inconceivable without the Parisian background. But our sedulously cultivated habit of thinking that all artistic innovation must be credited to foreigners has served to delay recognition of the contribution of Russell and Wright, and the current show, organized by Gail Levin of the Whitney Museum of American Art, is the first to demonstrate their widespread influence.

My own views of this history are slightly different from those Miss Levin sets forth in her admirable and finely illustrated catalogue. In the last years of his life — he died in 1973 — MacDonal-Wright and I were on very good terms, and he told me many things about Synchronism and his own career, some of which have yet to reach general circulation.



At 8 p.m. on October 12 I shall give a lecture on Synchronism at the museum in which, among other things, I intend to discuss that strange, underground period when Wright withdrew from galleries and museums, and the art world in general thought he was dead. But that's not for now.

What is for now is that around 1910 a considerable number of painters in Paris became obsessed with problems of color. A variety of movements sprang up around this issue: Orphism, Simultanism, this-that-and-the-other-ism. The differences between these movements were often so slight as to defy definition. Wright was fond of saying that to identify Robert Delaunay's Orphism with his own Synchronism because they both took color as their point of departure was like identifying a zebra as a tiger because both animals wear stripes, but this tells us only that he was sure who the tiger was. (So much for you, Monsieur Delaunay!)

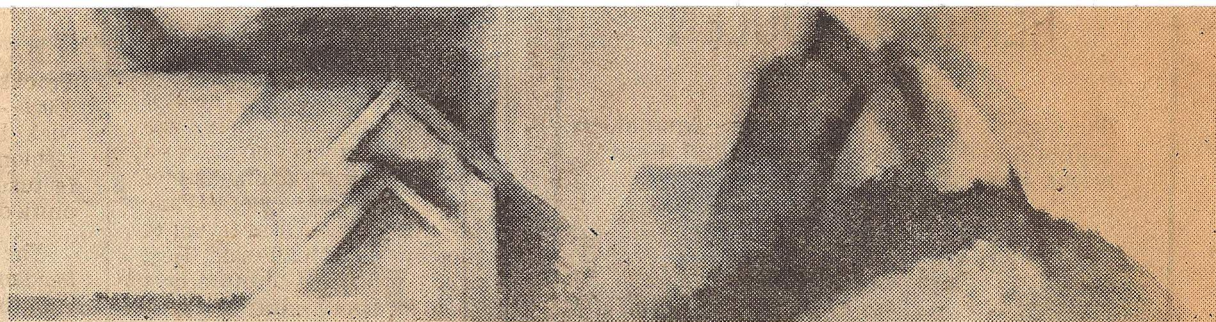
To be sure, some efforts were made to take the differences between the movements outside the arena of name-calling. One of these, which the Synchronists liked, was to draw analogies between color and sound. Macdonald-Wright told me that at one time he was certain that the spectrum could be tuned and notated as precisely as music. Which was nonsense, but widespread nonsense; and it hasn't died down yet.

One thing Macdonald-Wright emphasized, which Miss Levin does not stress, was the negative, anti-Cubist orientation of Synchronism. In order to analyze formal relations to the utmost, the Cubists favored an essentially monochromatic palette, with extremely subtle nuances of tan, gray, and silver which to the eye of the present day seems one of the major achievements of modern art, especially as used by Picasso. But when everybody was doing it — and there could be as many as 3000 canvases in the annual shows of the *Independants* in those days — it became a bore and a nuisance to forward-looking spirits.

Eventually it became a bore to Picasso himself, and color made a blazing comeback in that phase of his work known as Synthetic Cubism. Miss Levin, who

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STANTON MACDONALD-WRIGHT'S 'CANYON SYNCHROMY (ORANGE),' CIRCA 1919

spreads her net very wide, might even have included a Synthetic Cubist Picasso or two in her exhibition.

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WRIGHT and Russell were particularly interested in the spatial implications of color: how warm colors seem to come forward and cold ones to recede, thereby opening up the possibility of an infinite perspective free of drawing, of vanishing points, of what Hans Hofmann was later to call holes in the canvas. This, of course, is what led them to

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abstraction. But observe that while, except for a few sketches based on the rhythms of Michelangelo's sculpture, all the Russells in the current show are entirely abstract and do not as much as hint at a buried subject, the completely abstract Wrights are in the minority.

For all his railing against the descriptive uses of color (in the manifestos reprinted in the catalogue), Wright could seldom get along entirely without the figure, still life, or, when he came to California around 1919, a touch of landscape.

To be sure, he modeled these subjects entirely in color, often using the impinging edges of color areas as a means of drawing. But his relatively few totally abstract works, like the "Abstraction on the Spectrum" and the "Conception Synchronomy" in the current show, are his masterpieces and the best things there.

Russell is not as well represented in the current show as is Wright. The Russells are all quite small and they place very heavy emphasis on little wedge shapes that seem to waver back and forth over the picture plane. But he was capable of big pictures. There is a grand, heroic block-buster of a synchronomy by Russell in the Albright-Knox Gallery in Buffalo which completely revises one's view of him; how many such big Russells there are I cannot say. What we need now is a Morgan Russell show.

Russell's surfaces are thick, painty, brushy and radiant. Wright's surfaces are much more restrained and elegant. Russell's surfaces insist upon the painting as painting. Wright's surfaces, for all their abstraction, recall the uses of paint as visual illusion.

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