

The New Art of Color

The Writings of Robert and Sonia Delaunay

EDITED AND WITH AN
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I love Art today because I love above all the light and all men love light above all.

They invented Fire.²

2. Added in pencil: "The impressionists are the primitives of light. The light. Simultaneity. Harmony. Inequality." In the margin of the last paragraph of the text: "Guillaume." This text is the echo of a conversation in the form of a dialogue with the sculptor Pevsner, the architect Nelson, and a Hungarian painter, Lux. [P.F.]

Delaunay, Klee, Apollinaire

LIGHT (1912)

An article written by Robert Delaunay in 1912, translated into German by Paul Klee, and published in Der Sturm (No. 144-145, February 1913). Written while the Delaunays were at La Madeleine in the Chevreuse valley during the summer and fall of 1912, the essay is in poetic form, recalling the characteristic devices familiar to Delaunay from Cendrars's "Easter in New York" (which Delaunay had called the first simultaneous poem) and Apollinaire's Alcools. Cf. Francastel's discussion, pp. 144-45.

Impressionism is the birth of Light in painting.

Light reaches us through our perception.

Without visual perception, there is no light, no movement.

Light in Nature creates color-movement.

Movement is provided by relationships of *uneven measures*, of color contrasts among themselves that make up *Reality*.

This reality is endowed with *Depth* (we see as far as the stars) and thus becomes *rhythmic simultaneity*.

Simultaneity in light is the *harmony*, the *color rhythms* which give birth to *Man's sight*.

Human sight is endowed with the greatest Reality since it comes to us directly from the contemplation of the Universe.

The Eye is our highest sense, the one which communicates most closely with our *brain and consciousness*, the idea of the living movement of the world, and its movement is *simultaneity*.

Our understanding is *correlative* with our *perception*.

Let us seek to see.

Auditory perception is insufficient for our knowledge of the Universe. It lacks depth.¹

Its movement is *successive*. It is a species of mechanism; its principle is the *time of mechanical* clocks which, like them, has no relation to our perception of the visual movement in the Universe. This is the evenness of things in geometry.

Its character makes it resemble *the Object conceived geometrically*.

The Object is not endowed with *Life or movement*.

When it has the *appearance of movement*, it becomes *successive, dynamic*.

Its greatest limitation is of a *practical order*. Vehicles.

The railroad is the image of this successiveness which resembles parallels: *the track's evenness*.

So with Architecture, so with Sculpture.

The most powerful object on Earth is bound by these same laws.

It will become the illusion of height:

The Eiffel Tower

of breadth:

Cities

length:

Tracks.

Art in nature is *rhythmic and abhors constraint*.

If Art is attached to *the Object*, it becomes *descriptive, divisive, literary*.

It stoops to imperfect modes of expression, it condemns itself of its own free will, it is its own negation, *it does not liberate itself from mimesis*.

If in the same way it represents *the visual relationships* of an object or *between objects* without *light playing the role of governing the representation*.

It is conventional. It does not achieve *plastic purity*. It is

1. Variant: "since it lacks duration." [R.D.]

a weakness. It is life's negation and the negation of *the sublimity of the art of painting*.

For art to attain the limits of sublimity, it must approach our *harmonic vision: clarity*.

Clarity will be color, proportions; these proportions are composed of various simultaneous measures within an action.

This action must be representative harmony, *the synchromatic movement (simultaneity) of light*, which is the *only reality*.

This synchromatic action will thus be the Subject which is the representative harmony.

[On the back]

Auditory perception is insufficient for our knowledge of the Universe since it lacks duration.

Its successiveness fatally commands evenness;

it is a kind of mechanism where depth, and therefore rhythm, become impossible.

It is a mathematics where there is no space.

Its law is the time of mechanical clocks, where there is no relationship at all to the movement of the Universe.

It is the evenness of things of this kind that condemns them to nothingness.

Its quality resembles the Object.

The object is not endowed with life.

When the object is . . . there is the successive dynamic, but no rhythm. It becomes a similitude of movement.²

Its greatest limitation is of a practical order. Vehicles.

The railroad track is the image of the successive approaching the parallel: the tracks.

Thus Architecture.

These are only appearances.

The greatest object on Earth is subject to the very same laws:

it will become a record appearance of height or breadth or length, etc.

Art is rhythmic as Nature, that is to say, eternal.

If it begins with an object, Art is descriptive, stooping to assume weak functions.

2. Variant: The object is not endowed with life or movement. When the object has an appearance of motion, it becomes successive, dynamic, but not rhythmic. Its greatest limitation is of a practical order. [R.D.]

It condemns itself freely—it is its own negation. Its most representative mode is wax sculpture.

If Art is the visual relations of an object or between objects themselves, without light playing the role of *governing the representation*, it is conventional, and turns out to be a language like any other, and by consequence, successive. Thus literature, which has no plastic purity.

It is a weakness of Plastic Art. It is the negation of life, a negation of the sublimity of art.

Art comes from the most perfect organ of Man

The Eye. The eyes are the windows of our soul.

It can become the living harmony of Nature

and it is then a fundamental element of our judgment toward purity. To see becomes the comprehension [of the] good.

[in pencil]

The idea of the living movement of the world which passes judgment upon our soul.

Our understanding is thus adequate to our sight. It is necessary to look in order to see.

An auditory perception is not sufficient in our judgment to know the universe, because it does not abide within duration.

Its successiveness leads fatally to its death.

It is a species of mechanism where there is no depth, and therefore no rhythm. It is a mathematics that lacks space.

It is evenness of this sort that is condemned to death

Its quality resembles the Object. The Object is eternally committed to death and its greatest limitation is of a practical order.

So with Architecture. These are only appearances.

The greatest object on earth is obliged by the same law.³

3. The drafts of this text have at the head of the page the following:

Art as nature abhors constraint.

I love the art of today because

I love Light, above all and all men

love light above all

They have invented Fire

Aesthetic meditations

G.A.

Light comes to us from perception, etc.

[This is Delaunay's rhapsodizing of the closing sentence of Apollinaire's essay, "Modern Painting," *infra*, p. 98.]

The following is a variant of preceding text, dated 1912.

Auditory perception is insufficient for our understanding of the Universe since it is a mode that lacks duration.

Its motion is one of successiveness and it thus fatally orders an evenness and a kind of mechanism that lacks depth. It is a mathematics where there is no *space*, and consequently *no rhythm, no movement*.

Its law is the time of mechanical clocks which, like them, have no relationship at all with the *movement of the Universe*.

It's the evenness of things that condemns them to nothingness. Its quality resembles the *object*.

The object is not endowed with life or movement. When the object is a pretense of motion, it becomes *successive, dynamic*, but not *rhythmic*.

Its greatest limitation is of a practical order. Vehicles, railroad tracks are the image of the successive verging upon the parallel: *the evenness of the tracks*.

Thus Architecture.

These are only appearances.

The greatest object on the earth is likewise bound by the same law. It becomes an appearance. The Eiffel Tower: a record in height; the tracks: in length, etc.

Art, like nature, is rhythmic, that is to say, eternal. If art is connected with the object it becomes *descriptive*. It stoops toward imperfect instrumentalities, condemning itself of its own free will. It is its own negation. Its most representative mode is in sculpture in wax where it becomes an art of mimesis. Light does not impart life rhythmic to it. In the same way, if it represents the visual relations of an object or of objects among themselves, without light playing the *role of ordering the representation*, it is conventional and does not culminate in *poetic purity*. It is a weakness. It is the negation of life and of *the sublimity of art*.

Art arises from the most perfect organ of man, the eye. *The eyes are the windows of our soul and our eyes see the light*. Art can become the living harmony of nature and is thus a *fundamental element of our view of Reality. Representation*.

It is the voice that the Light causes to be heard and of which Hermes Trismegistus speaks in his Pimander.

"Soon"—one reads in the *Pimander*—"the shadows will descend . . .

and from them came an inarticulate cry which seemed to be the Voice of light."

This voice of light, is it not drawing, that is to say, line? And when light expresses itself completely, all is color. Painting is in fact a luminous language.

GUILLAUME APOLLINAIRE:
THE BEGINNINGS OF CUBISM
REALITY, PURE PAINTING (1912)

A slightly different version of this essay, written in two parts, appeared in Le Temps (October 1912) and is published in Apollinaire on Art: Essays and Reviews 1902-1918, pp. 259-61. The second part, entitled Pure Painting, was translated into German and published in Der Sturm 138-139 (December 1912).

The Beginnings of Cubism

In the early autumn of 1902, a young man set up his easel on the isle of La Grenouillère. He was painting the Pont de Châtou. He painted rapidly, using pure colors. His brightly colored painting was almost finished when, hearing someone cough behind him, the young artist, whose name was Maurice de Vlaminck, quickly turned around and saw a tall young man examining his work with interest.

The newcomer, whose name was André Derain, apologized for his curiosity and explained that he was a painter. The ice had been broken. They began to talk about painting. Maurice de Vlaminck was familiar with the works of the impressionists: Manet, Monet, Sisley, Cézanne, of whom Derain was as yet quite unaware. They also spoke of van Gogh and of Gauguin. Night came and amidst the fog that now rose from the Seine, the two artists went on talking until midnight when finally, recrossing the bridge, they made their way home.

Maurice de Vlaminck in Reuil, Derain in Châtou. They saw each other every day and their passion for innovations in painting steadily increased. Maurice de Vlaminck was always on the lookout for artistic oddities. During his many trips through the villages that border along the Seine he had bought from pawnbrokers various sculptures, masks, and fetishes carved in wood by Negro artists of French Africa which had been brought back by sailors or explorers. Doubtlessly he found analogies in these grotesque and boldly mystical works with Gauguin's paintings, engravings, and sculptures that had been inspired either by the Breton Calvaries or by the primitive sculptures of the South Sea islands where he sought refuge from European civilization.

IMAGE AND CRAFT (1938–1939?)

From purely internal evidence—the summary rehearsal of points made earlier in his writings—this brief essay would appear to be from the period of summation and reprise before World War II. Francastel does not date this essay.

In painting the simultaneous is adequate to the image and to the craft [*métier*].

The real means [*moyens*] must reinforce the representative function.

The real means are colors in their contrasts, in their movements.

Their movements exist really only in the functions of simultaneous surfaces, with depths (depths of material, which is the beginning of methodology) obtained by the creator with simultaneous contrasts.

Simultaneous contrasts are absolute in the direction that actual painting takes.

And it is here that the initial difference, beyond the sundry schools of painting, is to be located in the craft of simultaneous contrasts. Simultaneity—say certain painters oriented to a dynamic sense—is but a word which has no representative value and they end (futurism) presently in their fatal position: geometry, mechanics, geometric dance, etc. . . .

There is no geometry in the simultaneous craft (*Fenêtres*, 1909–1910–1911–1912, *Saint-Séverin*)—no longer an abstract object as in cubism.

The world is not our image re-created through reason (cubism). The world is our *métier*.

From this start a new inspiration works through towers, bridges, houses, man, women, playthings, eyes, windows, books, New York, Berlin, Moscow. I am at St. Petersburg, in my bed, in Paris, my eyes see the sun.

Everything has its value through contrast. There is no fixed color. All is color through contrast. All is color in movement. All is depth.

Contrasts, assuredly, appear in all painting up to our own times, in Venetian paintings, in Persian, Chinese, Hindu, African, in modern French painters, and in those from every country.

These contrasts are on sequential or geometric surfaces (of the sequential: the essay on light, synchronized movement, a note that appeared in the *Soirées de Paris* and translated in *Der Sturm*, the lecture in St. Petersburg, simultaneous contrast).

Masterpieces attest to a definite movement of surfaces. Veronese's *Wedding at Cana* shows mastery even in the authoritative use of color on surface planes.

Depth, however, is absent. Since colors are employed by him in a linear manner, sequentially, when Veronese wants to seek depth, he has recourse to perspective (sequential mechanism).

SONIA DELAUNAY
BY SONIA DELAUNAY (1967)

This autobiographical text, which appeared in the catalogue of the retrospective of Sonia Delaunay's work at the Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris, 1967-1968 (pp. 13-15), moves from the third person, in which it begins, to the first. This flavor of the original has been preserved without alteration.

Since she began to paint, the pictorial research of Sonia Delaunay has been directed toward the purity and exaltation of color. From her very first works, she has tried to impart the maximum of intensity to color. Her spiritual masters were van Gogh for intensity and Gauguin for the investigation of planar colored surfaces.

1903-1904

Happily, before her arrival in Paris in 1905, she had spent two winters in Karlsruhe in Germany studying with a professor of drawing. He taught not only drawing, but the structure of plastic expression in a highly disciplined manner. She even attended courses in anatomy in order to study skeletal structure and musculature of the corpses. This discipline has marked her work thereafter, forcing it to have a constructive basis which imparts force to plastic expression, and eliminates chance, indecision, and mere facility.

During this period all sorts of artistic movements had their day. There was impressionism, which spread like a flower in full maturity and was of a sublime purity. But its foundation was old-fashioned and descriptive. It is only with Seurat that color dominates the subject with its purity of expression.

1907

In her pictures of 1907, Sonia Delaunay achieved an extreme exaltation of color with complete flatness. Even Matisse had not yet freed himself from chiaroscuro in his beautiful pictures of that time. Linear contour persisted in his work. Such linear contour—the thread which connects the new vision to the past—is broken by the cubists who destroyed the vision of the object by attempting to seize it from all sides, pursuing even the ungraspable fourth dimension.

1909

Though I did not participate in it, cubism excited me and I knew its development and its history in great depth. I had lived it. I had followed it, beginning with Derain and Vlaminck, who, influenced by Negro art, had exhibited large and beautiful canvases at the Indépendants, along with the first cubist suggestions of Braque and Picasso . . . (I was still married to Uhde and we had thirteen canvases of this period by Braque which I loved enormously). At the same time Picasso painted his *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, clearly influenced by the canvases of Derain and Vlaminck. He possessed a character and force which was only betokened by these painters.

It was during this period that I met Delaunay and our lives became tied together. The passion of painting was our principal bond (Apolinaire, who lived with us later for several weeks—before he moved to 202 Boulevard Saint-Germain—said, "When the Delaunays wake up they talk painting."

At this time, after a neoimpressionist period, Delaunay began his *Tours*, his *Villes*, *Saint-Séverin*. Little by little, the realistic subject disappeared and its place was taken by color, which itself became the subject. I did not take part in these investigations, but they inspired me to play freely with color: a coverlet for the bed of my child, book bindings, *papiers collés* and the *Transsibérien*, the beautiful poem of Cendrars where colored rhythms accompanied the poem in complete harmony. (It was the first picture-poem.) There were also a considerable number of studies for the large picture—including the *Tango* (those which are in the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris and at the Museum in Bielefeld). In the fall of 1913, there was a large exhibition in Berlin—the Herbstsalon—where my works of this period were shown: pictures, book bindings, *Transsibérien*, along with works by Robert Delaunay, the futurists, the German painters, Marc, Macke, Klee; and Chagall, whom we had arranged to be invited, etc.

1914

The following year was the *Prismes électriques* with its numerous studios, the large picture, *Prismes électriques* (Musée d'Art Moderne, Paris) was shown at the Salon des Indépendants at the same time as Robert Delaunay's *Hommage à Blériot*.

1915

Then came the trip to Spain. Revelation of Spanish light which caused every color to vibrate, without the gray haze that envelops them in

France. It was the point of departure for a new song celebrating colors, their contrasts and dissonances. Studies after nature. I took up the movements of dance (tango, flamenco), which means the movement of color. *Rhythm* was introduced into painting by color (Gleizes spoke much later about "time" in painting. He had discovered rhythm). This movement was not descriptive as it was with the futurists, but purely plastic, optical, and lyric. The stay in Spain and Portugal intensified this vision, enriching it with the violence of the light—stripped as it is of gray—of these countries. Color was exalted. I discovered the truth of what Delacroix had written in his Journal—even though I had never read it—that in every pictorial rendering—even in the white of the painting ground—purity and transparency of colors enrich and enhance the possibilities of pure expression. In this spirit, I painted *Le Marché au Minho* [The Market of Minho], a picture inspired by the beauty of the countryside. I also undertook a series of studies in order to realize a more balanced and severe construction, never descriptive, only plastic, colored.

In 1917, having lost (without regrets) our regular income from the rents of eighty apartments in a building in St. Petersburg that had assured us a certain wealth, we persevered despite the difficulties of living in a country (Spain) where we had no home, knew no one, did not speak the language, and had no money. Our ingenuity and talent enabled us, however, to make things that enjoyed a great reception in that country.

Having met Diaghilev, who liked us, in Madrid, I was introduced by him to two persons eminent in Spanish society, and through them I was able to work at earning our livelihood.

Delaunay rented an atelier immediately since his pessimistic nature was not suited for difficult times. He plunged into making large works. In contrast, I was very successful, and, finally, through the intermediation of an English bank, a silent partner (who owned thirteen Goyas and a Velázquez) offered me a store in one of his buildings in the best section of the city. I furnished it in a completely modern style, simple and white, but the prospect of remaining in Spain, where modern painting was ignored and had no share in life, did not delight us.

At this time we came into contact with the surrealists who had been corresponding with us. We had read the first manifestos of Tzara, which were completely in accord with our own ideas.

In 1921 we left Madrid for Paris (I reimbursed the backers of the

boutique, which had not opened). I continued to make sketches for the dance and dress-poems (*robes-poèmes*).

In 1922 Delaunay had an exhibition at Paul Guillaume, Rue de la Boétie, with prewar pictures and those done in Spain and Portugal. The whole surrealist group was at the opening. Having kept only the atelier at Rue des Grands-Augustins, where we had lived since 1910, we looked for an apartment for nine months and finally set ourselves up on the Boulevard Malesherbes, where I resumed the activities I had started in Spain in order to support us. Delaunay, who was working only when he had something new to add to his development, uncompromising, had realized after his first sale to Léonce Rosenberg that we couldn't live on his art. It was the era of the surrealists: Soupault, Aragon, Breton, Tzara—all of whom became our friends.

Little by little, with great difficulty and by selling the Empire furniture that we owned, I designed new furniture and we relocated ourselves in the echelons of the modern movement. The abbreviated history of my activities during this period are to be found in the volume *Sonia Delaunay* published in 1925.¹

In 1923, I was commissioned by a fabric house in Lyons to design some textiles. I made fifty designs—colored patterns with geometric forms, pure, rhythmic. For me they were and remained color scales, which were ultimately the purified conception underlying our painting. My studies were completely pictorial, and, from a plastic point of view, a discovery that helped both of us in our painting. Rhythm is based on numbers because color can be measured by its vibrations. This was a completely new concept that opened infinite horizons for painting and could be used by anyone who felt and understood it.

We felt it without being able to define it too clearly, since it occurred to me naturally, although I had been working unconsciously on these suppositions since 1916. They can be seen more clearly in my "rhythm-dance" pictures (1923) and Robert Delaunay's "endless rhythm" pictures of 1933 to 1934.

Having passed through this stage of inquiry which was never theoretical but based solely on my own sensibility, I acquired a freedom of expression that can be found everywhere in my recent work, in all the gouaches, which are expressions of states of soul; which are poems.

1. André Lhote, ed. *Sonia Delaunay, ses peintures, ses objets, ses tissus simultanés, ses modes* (Paris, Librairie des Arts Décoratifs).

The same simplification applies to the expression of objects, architecture, furniture, fashion, etc. Moreover, the aesthetic element accords with the practical.

The dynamism and speed of modern life require a synthesis. The example of mechanical achievements demonstrates that the true beauty of an object is not an effect of taste but is intimately tied to its function. Even this principle has been pushed to the absurd by theoreticians who proclaim the supremacy of utility while forgetting that the spiritual element has always been indispensable to man and that we owe to it the most beautiful human creations.

The simplicity of the forms and surfaces of objects leads to an inquiry into materials and the decorative dimension of surfaces. It is for this reason that we take part in the renaissance of the decorative dimension of cloth, fabric, and, in the near future, of mural painting.

Great plain surfaces, without any relief decoration, suggest an element of fantasy which is provided by textiles, wall hangings, etc. Small tables placed against walls do not go with architecture. Only wall decoration in its architectural form is impressive.

Planar decoration is connected with surfaces. It contributes to their expression; it creates forms which vivify the surfaces of objects. The elements of plane for decoration derive directly from pictorial research and are an integrating aspect of it. They are dependent upon the color relations between them.

Having conquered the opposition, the new style actually enters upon a novel and dangerous phase.

The diffusion of new forms and colors has its origin in the work of a small group of painters who, with different individualities, began about 1905 to free themselves from the worn-out forms of the past. Reaction against the decadence of complicated forms that had survived their time (until a period whose rhythm no longer corresponded at all to them) has led to a search for simplification.

The painters simplified the colored surface of objects by amplifying and exalting the splash of color, and the expression of drawing (Matisse and the fauves). This simplification evolved in the direction of expressing objects by planes. The object itself disappeared. The table became an abstract poetic composition. The object was more implied than expressed (Braque, Picasso, cubism).

But this period was destructive. Pictorial expression was simplified,

but it was negative. It prepared the ground for a new taste but it did not create a new vision, for it had destroyed expression of the object.

The true visionaries of modern times were Gleizes, Delaunay, and Léger. They were not stopped short by games of abstract forms. Freed from the past by their elders, they created a lyric vision, a vision of the future.

Delaunay discovered a technical means of giving new expression to color and form. By opposing planes through the principle of simultaneous contrast, he created a plastic means that expressed the profundity created by the relations of colors without having recourse to *clair-obscur* (chiaroscuro).

Plastic visions of modern cities, advertising, fashion—which had become the poetic leitmotif of our time—are now the basis of every visual expression of the applied arts and luxury industry. By trying to define the present style and indicating its origins it is necessary to recall those artists who have been denigrated and ridiculed for many years, and who were the anonymous precursors and inspirers of the contemporary style.

Certain artists try to rejuvenate their imagination or to hide their poverty of creation by employing geometry: new decoration applied to ancient foundations. Trapped like an arabesque, this approach is as false as every other derivative and new constructive ornament.

The characteristics of the new style in formation are, on the contrary, simultaneity of the colored expression of the surface forms of objects with maximum realization of their utilitarian employment.

LETTER (1926)

Letter from Sonia Delaunay, June 2, 1926.

Dear Sir,

As promised, I am writing in order to give you some technical information regarding my work.

The innovation of the designs that I sent you consists in the building