

'Please don't say synchronisme...

Clara Marcellán



Patrick Henry Bruce
Painting. Still Life, c. 1923-24
(detail)

[\[+ info\]](#)

fig. 1

Patrick Henry Bruce**Painting. *Still Life*, c. 1923–24****Oil and pencil on canvas, 64.5 × 80.6 cm****Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid, 481 (1980.31)**[\[+ info\]](#)

... which doesn't apply to painting, the termination is "chrome", color'.¹ Of all the isms of modern art, one is less familiar to the European public: Synchronism.² Its creators, Americans Morgan Russell (1886–1953) and Stanton Macdonald-Wright (1890–1973), resided in Paris when they publicly showed their works under this name. Despite being short-lived, this movement, which was mainly active from 1912 to 1916, has gone down in history – or at least in some art histories – as the first American abstract trend and the first to make an impact on Europe.

1

Letter from Morgan Russell to Andrew Dasburg, 12 March 1914. Cited from Gail Levin, *Synchronism and American Color Abstraction, 1910–1925* [exh. cat.], New York, Whitney Museum of American Art–Braziller, 1978, 20.

2

Works by Russell and Macdonald-Wright have previously been featured in Madrid in 2003 at the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza exhibition *Analogías musicales*, as well as in major shows such as *Vom Klang der Bilder: die Musik in der Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts* [exh. cat. Staatsgalerie Stuttgart], ed. Karin von Maur, Munich, Prestel, 1985.

In the summer of 2022, the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza is hosting a small exhibition of eight works from the collection of the Vilcek Foundation in New York that offer an insight into the gestation and evolution of this artistic experiment. What set it apart from the other isms such as the Orphism/Simultanism practised by Robert and Sonia Delaunay, with whose works there is an evident similarity? What impact did these artists make on their counterparts on this side of the Atlantic? And in their own country? American artist Patrick Henry Bruce (1881–1936), one of whose works is housed in the museum's collections [fig. 1], is commonly linked to this movement. Yet he never considered himself a Synchronist and neither subscribed to its theories nor showed his work together with Russell and Macdonald-Wright. Why, then, have their names become intertwined in art history?



fig. 2

Morgan Russell

***Synchronist Still Life*, c. 1910**

Oil on canvas, 41.6 × 33.3 cm

The Vilcek Foundation Collection,

New York, VF2016.02.01

© Courtesy Jean-Pierre Joyce

Paris, an Art Lab

Morgan Russell and Stanton Macdonald-Wright began their artistic careers in the United States before they met in Paris in 1911. Russell had taken up residence in the French capital around 1908 to study sculpture at Henri Matisse's academy with the financial support of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney.³ There he filled the post left vacant by fellow American artist Max Weber and coincided with another compatriot, Patrick Henry Bruce. Bruce was not just a pupil: he had been one of the founders of the school together with Leo and Sarah Stein, and was then also its treasurer.

The students used a rented space and Matisse looked over their work on Saturdays. The class often went to Leo and Gertrude Stein's apartment on the Rue de Fleurus, where the Steins used to entertain. Artists, enthusiasts and expatriates gathered to view and discuss the works of Cézanne, Matisse and Picasso in the only place in Paris where they were permanently on view.

Macdonald-Wright and Russell probably met through Lee Simonson, an American painter and stage designer who was a friend of Leo and Gertrude Stein. The starting point for their artistic explorations and experiments was the colours of Fauvism and the structure of Cubism [fig. 2],⁴ of which there were plenty of examples in the Steins' collection: there they had the chance to see Picasso's *Glasses and Fruit* (1908), now part of the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza's holdings; Morgan Russell asked to borrow Cézanne's *Five Apples* (1878–79) to analyse it; and he and Macdonald-Wright bore Matisse's *Blue Nude (Souvenir of Biskra)* (1907) very much in mind when studying the contortions of the sculptures of Michelangelo, whose *Dying Slave* [fig. 3] they repeatedly went to see in the Louvre.

³

The future founder of the Whitney Museum of American Art. They probably met in New York when she was taking sculpture classes at the Art Students League, where Russell worked as a model around 1904.

⁴

William C. Agee and Barbara Rose, *Patrick Henry Bruce, American Modernist: A Catalogue Raisonné*, New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 1979, 2.

fig. 3

Michelangelo
***The Dying Slave*, 1513–15**
Marble, 227 cm
Musée du Louvre, Paris,
MR 1590



1911 marked a turning point in both men's artistic ideas as a result of the classes taught by Percyval Tudor-Hart, who ran an academy in Paris from 1903 to 1913. They combined the colour theories of Michel Eugène Chevreul and Hermann von Helmholtz, which Matisse shared with his students, with the complex theory of Tudor-Hart, who proposed a geometric colour scale, modifying its luminosity and establishing equivalences with musical tones. Macdonald-Wright and Russell devised a simplified system that enabled them to create colour scales and harmonies, analogous to musical chords. The extremes were yellow (which to Russell represented light in its full force) and violet, the complementary colour that embodies the opposite, shadow [see fig. 4]. Russell wrote in his notes in August 1912: '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...'⁵

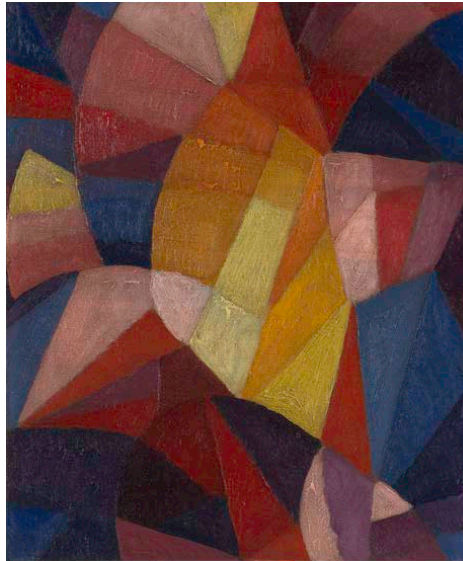
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Cited from Gail Levin, 'Morgan Russell's Notebooks: An American Avant-Garde Painter in Paris', in *RACAR: Revue d'Art Canadienne / Canadian Art Review* 3:2 (1976), 73–75, 77–87, here 81.

How to create an artistic group

fig. 4

Morgan Russell
***Synchromy*, c. 1913–14**
 Oil on canvas, 45.7 × 38.1 cm
 The Vilcek Foundation Collection,
 New York, VF2019.01.03
 © Courtesy Jean-Pierre Joyce



As a critic writing in the German magazine *Kunstchronik* pointed out in connection with the Synchromist exhibition of 1913, artistic revolutions occurred in Paris at least twice a year:⁶ Marinetti published the Manifesto of Futurism in *Le Figaro* in 1909; Metzinger saw his article 'Note on Painting' printed in *Pan* in 1910, followed by 'Cubism and Tradition' in *Paris-Journal* in 1911; Robert Delaunay wrote one of the five versions of his article 'Light' in the summer of 1912 and saw its German edition, translated by Paul Klee, published in *Der Sturm* in January 1913. In September 1913, Leo Stein, whom Russell had asked to collaborate in the edition of the catalogue of the Synchromist exhibition, summed up the many art groups in Paris as follows:

6

Albert Dreyfus, 'Die Synchronisten', in *Kunstchronik* 9 (21 November 1913), 141. The following issue of the magazine published a correction and indicated that the name of the group was Synchromisten, though it was commonly misspelled.

7

Cited from Brenda Wineapple, *Sister Brother: Gertrude and Leo Stein*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press; London–New York, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1996, 372.

I don't believe that ever before have there been so many cliques and such little ones. Russell and Wright find virtue in each other's work and in none other, Picasso and Braque are a world apart, the six futurists form an independent system. [Robert] Delaunay stands in lonely grandeur on a mountain top. For a while he had [Patrick] Bruce in his train but Bruce has ruptured the bond that left him revolving in Delaunay's sphere of influence and he is now a system all by himself. If Russell has invented the ugliest art form Bruce has achieved [one] that is by all odds the stupidest. One could list these systems almost indefinitely.⁷

Name and manifesto

Engrossed in a search based on colour and abstraction, which they considered original and different despite Leo Stein's scepticism, Russell and Macdonald-Wright set about finding a name to identify their art and devised a theory with which to present themselves. In a similar way to the word 'symphony', which means 'with sound', 'Synchromism' means 'with colour'. Russell used the term 'synchromy' in his notes and artistic writings in October 1912, and soon became involved in a quarrel with Sonia and Robert Delaunay over who had been the first to coin and employ it.

Their manifestoes were published in the catalogues accompanying the two shows they organised in 1913. In them they explained that 'they chose the name Synchromism not to designate a school but to avoid being misclassified under some inappropriate label'⁸ such as Orphism. Russell and Macdonald-Wright considered the movement headed by Robert Delaunay to be too flat, superficial, decorative and incapable of using colour abstractly.

They did acknowledge their debt to the groundbreaking shift led by Impressionism and its study of light as their starting point, which entailed establishing colour relationships rather than colouring with a decorative or dramatic intent. In their view, Orphism had not progressed beyond what Monet and the Impressionists had achieved. They found the Futurist and Cubist efforts to be both superficial and of secondary interest. Russell even referred to Picasso as a mere vulgariser of Cézanne. Russell later toned down these statements, which should be taken in the context of the string of manifestoes published during those years, which were predominantly arrogant and messianic.

Russell announced in his manifesto that they were incorporating the notion of time into painting and hoped that viewers would feel that a development was taking place when they viewed it. The *Kunstchronik* magazine noted the parallels between Synchromist painting and dance, the creation of forms through colours, which 'dance with each other like a prima ballerina'.⁹

⁸

Cited from Levin, *Synchromism and American Color Abstraction*, n. 1, 24.

⁹

Dreyfus, 'Die Synchronisten', n. 6, 142.



fig. 5
Jean de Paleologu
La Loïe Fuller. Folies-Bergère
 poster, 1890s
 Colour lithograph, printed
 by Paul Dupont, Paris

It is interesting to consider this visual experience in the context of what was going on in the world of the theatre: the projection of coloured lights onto backdrops; the swirling coloured fabrics used by pioneering American dancer Loïe Fuller, who began to enjoy success on the Parisian stages in 1892 [fig. 5], constantly innovating in the use of pigments, chemical products¹⁰ and coloured lights; and urban lighting itself. It should be remembered that Paris was one of the first cities to have street lighting,¹¹ and the Steins' apartment was fitted with electric lighting around 1913, when Synchronism was in full swing.

10
 Loïe Fuller had a close relationship with Marie and Pierre Curie.

11
 See the *Electric Paris* exhibition at the Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, 17 February to 21 April 2013.

fig. 6

Gabriele Münter
Still Life with Little Birds, 1914
 Oil on canvas, 60.5 × 78 cm
 Private collection



The Synchronists made their German début at Der Neue Kunstsalon in Munich from 1 to 30 June 1913. The gallery had been founded in October 1912 by Max Dietzel and Paul Ferdinand Schmidt, and closed around September 1914. During its short lifetime it displayed the work of Emil Nolde, Paul Gauguin, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso and another American, Marsden Hartley, among others. The Synchronists' show was preceded by an exhibition of the work of Gabriele Münter, who probably visited that of Russell and Macdonald-Wright. Two of her paintings from that period may have been influenced by the pictures she saw there [fig. 6].¹² The German artist was intensely involved in the activities of the Blue Rider group around that time and collaborated closely with Wassily Kandinsky, who published *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* in 1911. Münter had spent two years in the United States, from 1898 to 1900, and her command of English facilitated her relationship with artists such as Marsden Hartley, whom she helped introduce to German painters. Both she and her Blue Rider colleagues kept abreast of the novelties from Paris and were in contact with Robert Delaunay. The year the Synchronists made their appearance in Munich, Delaunay showed his work with critical acclaim at the Erster Deutscher Herbstsalon in Berlin, where two pieces by Bruce were also included by arrangement of the Simultanist artist.

12

Annegret Hoberg, 'Gabriele Münter in München und Murnau 1901-1914', in *Gabriele Münter, 1877-1962. Retrospektive* [exh. cat. Lenbachhaus], Munich, Prestel, 1992, 27-46, here 42. I am grateful to Marta Ruiz del Árbol for this reference.

fig. 7

Morgan Russell
Bernheim-Jeune & Cie. Galleries
 exhibition poster, 1913
 Gouache, oil and letterpress printing
 on paper, 84.8 × 51.8 cm
 The Vilcek Foundation Collection,
 VF2015.05.10
 © Courtesy Jean-Pierre Joyce



From 27 October to 8 November 1913, the Bernheim-Jeune gallery hosted a show of 29 Synchronist works, 17 by Russell and 12 by Macdonald-Wright.¹³ Both this and the Munich show were publicised with posters designed by them with a combination of letterpress printing, drawings and gouaches. Macdonald-Wright recalled how the posters, displayed on walls and kiosks, had disappeared the day after they were put up in Munich, as people had taken them away as souvenirs.¹⁴ Three examples are currently known, two of them in the Vilcek Foundation. The one advertising the Paris exhibition [fig. 7] features as a motif a variation on the *Study for Synchrony in Blue-Violet* where, starting from blue, the artist constructs a large inverted S shape with a series of contrasting colour planes and light gradations. This work sums up the movement's principles: evocation of form and space through colour.

13

There is a copy of the catalogue of this exhibition in the library of the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid.

14

John Alan Walker, 'Interview: Stanton Macdonald-Wright', in *American Art Review* 1:59 (January–February 1974), cited from Levin, *Synchronism and American Color Abstraction*, n. 1.

fig. 8
Stanton Macdonald-Wright
**Conception Life-Cycle Series No. II:
Tinted Sketch for Synchrony
in Blue-Violet, 1914**
Watercolour, pen and carbon black
ink on paper, 58.4 × 44.8 cm
The Vilcek Foundation Collection,
New York, VF2016.03.13
© Courtesy of the Estate
of Jean Macdonald-Wright



The media reproduced the messages conveyed by the manifestoes published in the catalogues, though a few expressed their disappointment at the works. They did not always find in them the promised emotion¹⁵ – an emotion that was supposed to be musical according to Macdonald-Wright [fig. 8]. The goal they had set themselves was not completely clear or tangible: to explore in depth the mysterious connections between colour, form and space, and their organic rhythm, density, transparency and luminosity, in order to penetrate reality and transmit the excitement of their discoveries. The self-assurance both artists showed in their results led a few critics to leave it to viewers to decide whether they had succeeded.¹⁶

¹⁵
'Les "Synchronistes" Morgan
Russell et S. Macdonald Wright',
*La Chronique des Arts et de la
Curiosité* 34 (8 November 1913),
269.

¹⁶
*Journal des Débats Politiques
et Littéraires*, 21 October 1913, 2.

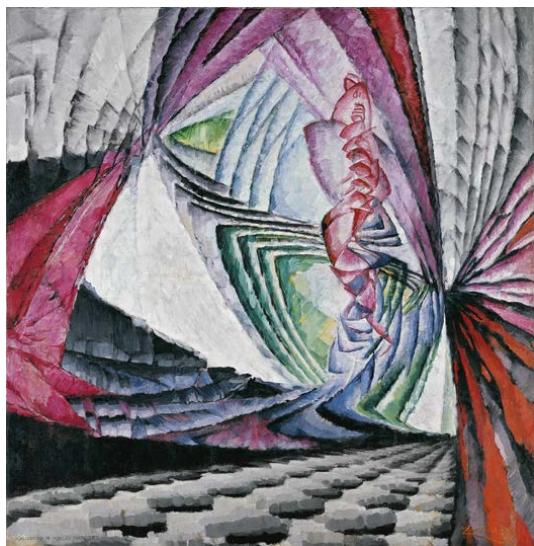
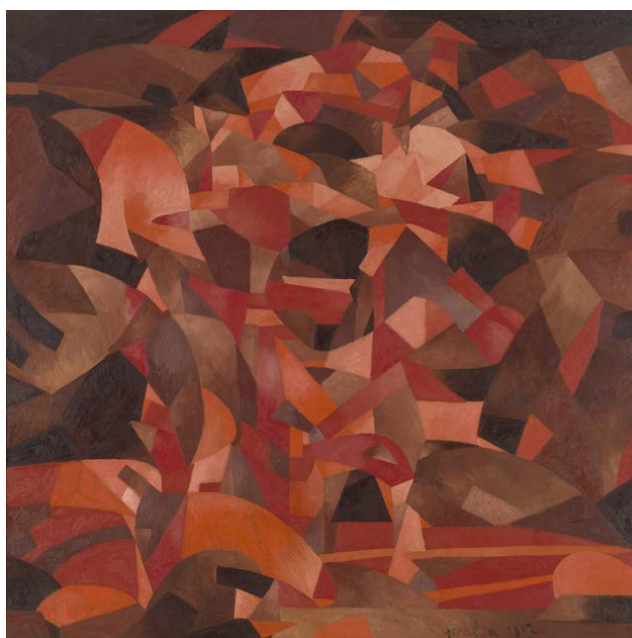


fig. 9
František Kupka
Localization of Graphic Motifs I, 1912–13
Oil on canvas, 200 × 194 cm
Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza,
Madrid, 634 (1980.55)

[\[+ info\]](#)

fig. 10 →

Francis Picabia
Dances at the Spring [II], 1912
Oil on canvas, 251.8 × 248.9 cm
The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Eugene and Agnes E. Meyer Collection,
given by their family, 1412.1974



That same year František Kupka showed at the Paris Salon d'automne *Localization of Graphic Motifs I* [fig. 9], now in the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza. Kupka used colour swirls to recreate the vital energy of the universe, which according to his theory was expressed through vibration and radiation. As with Orphism, the visual result was similar to the Synchronists' own experiments. And it is likely that, in his eagerness to set himself apart from Delaunay and his followers, Russell closely observed Kupka's paintings, as well as Francis Picabia's oeuvre.¹⁷ Picabia's *Dances at the Spring [II]* [fig. 10], for example, was displayed in the Section d'Or in 1912, and at the Armory Show in 1913.

The Synchronists in the United States

Shortly after their Paris show, the Synchronists chose a friendlier environment where odious comparisons were less likely. The Carroll Galleries presented the work of Russell and Macdonald-Wright in March 1914 in a New York still under the influence of the Armory Show and the emergence of European abstract art. In their native country the Synchronists also had the support of critic Willard Huntington Wright (aka S. S. Van Dine), Stanton's brother, who in *Modern Painting, Its Tendency and Meaning*, published in 1915, presented Synchronism as a more advanced movement in pursuit of the purity of art, with colour as the sole expressive element.

The following year, 1916, Macdonald-Wright and his brother promoted the *Forum Exhibition of Modern American Painters*. The selection committee included influential figures such as Robert Henri, a painter and master of artists such as Edward Hopper and Russell himself, and Alfred Stieglitz, the driving force behind the American avant-garde movements. Their aim was to assert the role of American Modernism in response to the Armory Show, where the European avant-gardes had eclipsed the North American artists. In addition to the two Synchronists, the list of participants in the Forum included Thomas Hart Benton, who was then experimenting with the Synchronist language before becoming one of the main practitioners of American regionalism, and many artists belonging to Stieglitz's circle such as Arthur Dove, Charles Sheeler, Marsden Hartley and John Marin. The catalogue reproduced Macdonald-Wright's 'Statement on Synchronism',¹⁸ in which he stressed the desirable path art should take, following the example of the best modern music, devoid of anecdote and illustration, abstract and purely aesthetic.

Macdonald-Wright showed his work in a one-man exhibition at Alfred Stieglitz's gallery, 291, in 1917, while Russell, who remained in France for most of his life, worked on his designs for a machine that combined light, colour and music. Macdonald-Wright succeeded in building the Synchronome Kineidoscope, a kinetic colour machine, in 1959, six years after Russell died.

¹⁸

Stanton Macdonald-Wright, 'Statement on Synchronism', in *Catalogue of the Forum Exhibition of Modern American Painters*, New York, Anderson Galleries, March 1916.

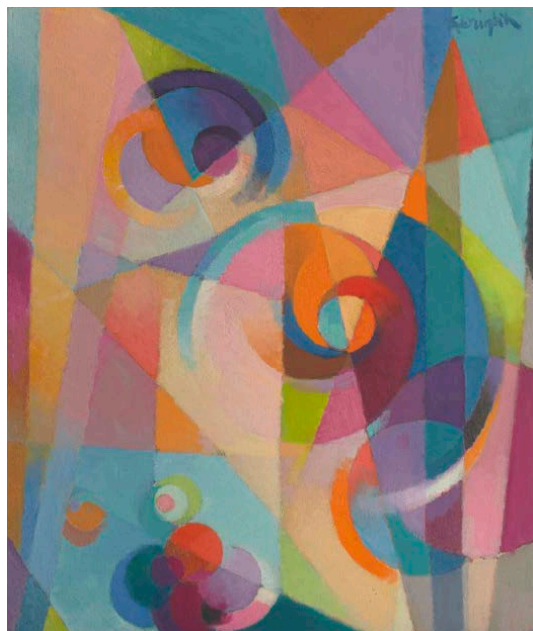


fig. 11
Stanton Macdonald-Wright
Gestation #3, 1963
Oil on panel, 59.7 × 50 cm
The Vilcek Foundation Collection,
New York, VF2016.03.14
© Courtesy of the Estate
of Jean Macdonald-Wright

They both returned to figurative painting in the 1920s, putting an end to the heroic years of Synchronism, though they occasionally revisited this language [fig. 11].

In the 1960s, their contributions began to be recalled in a string of exhibitions on American abstract art following the apogee of Abstract Expressionism: *Synchronism and Color Principles in American Painting, 1910–1930*, curated by William C. Agee in 1965 and shown at M. Knoedler and Co.; *From Synchronism Forward: a View of Abstract Art in America*, organised by the American Federation of Arts, which toured the United States from November 1967 to November 1968; and in 1978, *Synchronism and American Color Abstraction, 1910–1925*, which Gail Levin staged at the Whitney Museum of American Art after studying Morgan Russell's previously inaccessible archives. The latter exhibition travelled to five other venues in the United States.

Bruce was included in this revival and has commonly been linked to the Synchronists ever since. His progressive isolation in France eventually led him to become virtually unknown in the United States. In the 1930s, Bruce further impeded efforts to study his career by destroying most of his early works, including those closest to Orphism and Synchronism. The term that Russell and Macdonald-Wright had created to avoid being mislabelled ended up precisely being used to mislabel Bruce, though specialist scholars insist it should be avoided. And as Russell did on many occasions, it remains necessary to recall the etymology and correct spelling of this label: Synchronism, from 'syn-' (with) and 'chrome' (colour). ●