

# ROBERT DELAUNAY

## RYTHMES SANS FIN

15 OCTOBER 2014 – 12 JANUARY 2015

Since the exhibition "Robert Delaunay, 1906-1914. De l'impressionnisme à l'abstraction", staged by the Centre Pompidou in 1999, nobody would now argue that Robert Delaunay (1885-1941), inventor of the Orphic movement and "pure painting", has established a position as one of the pioneers of abstraction. For some years, he has also been acknowledged as a forerunner of kinetic art, where the viewer's eye becomes the driving force of the work.

Based on the donation made in 1964 by Sonia Delaunay (1885-1979) and their son Charles, this exhibition explores another aspect of his work, when he broadened his scope in the Twenties and Thirties to the everyday world, making it own his responsibility as a modern artist to speak to the community and structure the urban landscape.

This exhibition contains works ranging from the *Paysage au disque* of 1906 to the *Reliefs* and *Mosaïques* of 1935-1937, all illustrating his gradual move from the canvas to the stage, applied arts and the architectural space, while finally committing himself to abstraction. It also reveals the interior design projects he produced with the architect Félix Aublet for the Palais des Chemins de Fer and the Palais de l'Air at the International Exhibition of 1937, when he realised his great ambition: merging colour and space. Presented at the same time as the retrospective dedicated to Sonia Delaunay's work at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, this exhibition continues to explore the major monographic collections donated to the Museum.

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# THE ACT OF SEEING AS THE SUBJECT OF PAINTING

For a long time, Robert Delaunay, both a figurative and abstract artist until the late Twenties, was a conundrum for criticism and the history of art. How should his work of 1912-1913, the so-called "Orphic" period, be situated? Was the painter one of the pioneers in the adventure of the abstract? The exhibition of 1999 showed that his "colour vibrations" were another path towards abstraction. This exhibition now aims to give its proper due to another aspect of his approach, where he experiment with new materials and opened out his work into the architectural space.

While Robert Delaunay theorised about the reality of colour, its periods of vibration and its capacities for contrast, his aim was not to abstract the phenomenon of colour but to express modernity. From the electrification of street lighting to the rise of aviation, and from the gigantism of the Eiffel Tower to the new advertising panels, he perceived modernity as visual excess – a submersion by optical sensations. Unlike Kandinsky with his spiritual abstraction and search for a "vibration of the soul", Delaunay wanted to make "colour vibration" and the act of seeing the very subject of painting. Very rapidly, his quest for a kind of painting that put the viewer's eye in direct contact with turbulent reality came up against the limits of the canvas. Easel painting as a medium was now called into question. This is already evident in *Paysage au disque*, 1906, with its coloured circles that broaden and reflect each other in the sea and on the shore, and in *Formes circulaires, Soleil n°2*, 1912-1913, one of his first "inobjective paintings", which produced an effect of forward propulsion – a kind of "optical frisson".

## FROM SIMULTANEOUS PAINTING TO THE STAGE AND THE APPLIED ARTS

At the same time as optical explorations that sought to express the turmoil of modern life, Delaunay transposed his colour contrasts into different fields. In 1913, he began to collaborate with the filmmaker Abel Gance on his "light organ" project: a huge screen

consisting of light bulbs that went on and off to the rhythm of the accompanying music, for which he proposed a woman's face composed of red, white and blue signals.

Stranded in the Iberian Peninsula since the beginning of the First World War, Robert and Sonia began a collaboration with Serge de Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes in Madrid in 1915, designing sets and costumes that later appeared in London in a 1918 revival of the ballet *Cléopâtre*. With Léonide Massine, one of the star dancers of the troupe, and the Spanish composer Manuel de Falla, Robert worked on another project, *Football*, which came to nothing but remained an intense experience for him. Here the bodies of the dancers, dressed in simultaneous colours, moved in a setting of concentric circles to syncopated rhythms similar to jazz, creating a "total performance" that merged the sensations of sight and sound.

On their return to Paris at the end of 1921, the couple joined forces with artists of the avant-garde. The poet Iliad and the painter Mikhaïl Larionov asked them to design three stands for the grand ball to be held at the Bal Bullier on 23 February 1923 on behalf of the Union of Russian Artists. The evening was to focus on "transmental" poetry – a poetry without images or the usual words. The study for the *La Baraque des poètes* reflects one of Robert's projects, where the idea was to project this poetry towards the viewer by means of some fifty horn gramophones. Here the conical forms of the horns (in alternating black and white) were propelled forwards in an attempt to transpose the noise of these unintelligible voices into a retinal sensation.

From late 1921 to 1924, Robert Delaunay produced some 30 studies in pencil, gouache or Indian ink, where he associated his simultaneous forms (circular forms, helices and discs) with the dynamic energy of modern life, embodied by car wheels, traffic signs and the optical effects of neon signs. In his article *L'Art de la devanture*, he concluded, at the same time as his friend Fernand Léger, that his art of colour should be used to serve the "visual reorganisation of the contemporary world".

## MONUMENTALITY AND ARCHITECTURAL SPACE

From the very beginning, his painting constantly sought to escape the canvas. Monumental painting was one of the solutions he found in this respect. *La Ville de Paris*, 1910-1912, which belongs to his Orphic period, is a speaking example – as it is from other points of view in this exhibition. Intended to illustrate his journey from Cubism to abstraction through citations of his own paintings of the city or the Eiffel Tower, with the Three Graces making reference not only to the antique theme, but also to *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, this monumental canvas introduces the notion of temporality into the work: an idea he would further explore after 1930 in the abstract series *Rythmes sans fin*. Treating it as a modular work that could be adapted to the space, the artist used it again in various projects: in 1925, in a totally vertical version entitled *Ville de Paris. La Femme et la Tour*, for the lobby of an embassy designed by Mallet-Stevens as part of the International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts; and in 1937, in a huge fresco hung above a locomotive, *Air, Fer et Eau*, for the Palais des Chemins de Fer at the International Exhibition of Art and Technology in Modern Life. He also used the 1925 vertical version of *Ville de Paris. La Femme et la Tour* and the 1922 *Manège de cochons* to decorate a modern apartment for René Le Somptier's film, *Le P'tit Parigot*, in 1926.

## TOWARDS A RADICAL ABSTRACTION

The beginning of the Thirties marked a new turning point. With *Rythme, Joie de vivre*, 1930, Robert Delaunay, convinced of the constructive power of colour, returned to the theme of discs and circular forms, making no reference to reality. In this manifesto work, the colours (the last four of the rainbow: green, yellow, orange and red), laid out around invisible axes, emit circular waves that are retained by a disc in colder shades at the top right of the painting. Delaunay's rapprochement with the "Abstraction-Création" group created in 1931, which aimed to limit colour to its decorative function, was only a brief affair. The painter then began a new series in 1934, *Rythmes sans fin*, where the black and white and the colour contrasts constructed and energised the entire surface of the painting. Here the circle is the sole module, laid out around an invisible axis which leads the eye beyond the canvas.

In the following series of *Reliefs*, 1935, and *Mosaïques*, 1935-1937, moving still further towards the architectural space, the painter – who had never been interested in sculpture – experimented with materials such as cement and ceramics: materials that could be adapted to all the constraints of a building in a public space. At an exhibition he presented at the Art et Décoration Gallery in the spring of 1935 ("Les revêtements muraux et en couleur de Robert Delaunay"), he met Félix Aublet, a young architect, interior designer and painter. Aublet and Delaunay began a collaboration, joined by Sonia, for the Salon de l'Art Mural and the Salon de la Lumière. They then created an association called "Art et Lumière" especially for the 1937 International Exhibition competition.

## A TOTALLY DEMATERIALIZED POLYCHROME SHOW

In 1937, alongside Félix Aublet and other architects, and with the participation of some fifty painters including Sonia Delaunay, Roger Bissière, Albert Gleizes, Léopold Survage and Raymond Duchamp-Villon, Robert Delaunay designed the layout of two pavilions dedicated to transport for the International Exhibition of Art and Technology in Modern Life: the Palais des Chemins de Fer and the Palais de l'Air. For the former, with a railway symphony as theme, he painted *Air, Fer et Eau* (there was nothing symbolic in these terms; they referred to the different means of transport) and ten or so frescoes, where sinusoidal rhythms and colour contrasts mingled with symbols of "the new language of the age of speed": traffic signs, semaphore signals, gear wheels, clocks, and so on. For the Palais de l'Air, he produced, among other things, a *Rythme sans fin* of 780 m<sup>2</sup> and a cosmic composition: an entirely dematerialised polychrome show involving projected light and a new transparent material: Rhodoid. In the middle of coloured ellipses evoking the rings of Saturn and flight paths, a gangway attached to the roof timbers enabled the public to look down on an aeroplane suspended in the air. In the evening, the transparent walls of the hall revealed this fairyland of light to the outside world, while the lights of three turning beacons intensified the chromatic vibration of the colours.

In the Galerie d'Art Graphique, two slideshows of period photographs show the extraordinary success of these two pavilions, their interior design and their complex circuits leading from the halls to the rooms and exhibition galleries.

## EXHIBITION

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## AROUND THE EXHIBITION

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Further information on the exhibition and Robert Delaunay's work, from his first colour contrasts to the realisation of his main ambition: the merging of colour and space, demonstrated in his designs for the Palais de l'Air and the Palais des Chemins de Fer. A body of work halfway between avant-garde and popular art, re-situated in the artistic context of the Thirties. Biography. Bibliography.

## CATALOGUE

Robert Delaunay. Rythmes sans fin

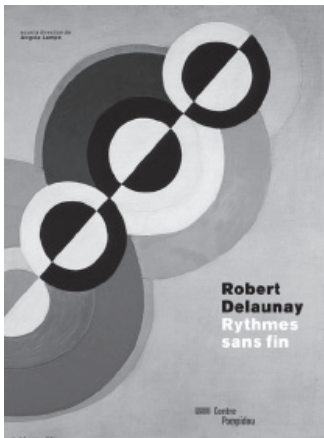
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## INFORMATION

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### EXHIBITION OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

15 October 2014 to 12 January 2015  
Museum, level 4.

Every day except Tuesdays from 11.00  
a.m. to 9.00 p.m.

Ticket offices close at 8.00 p.m.

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