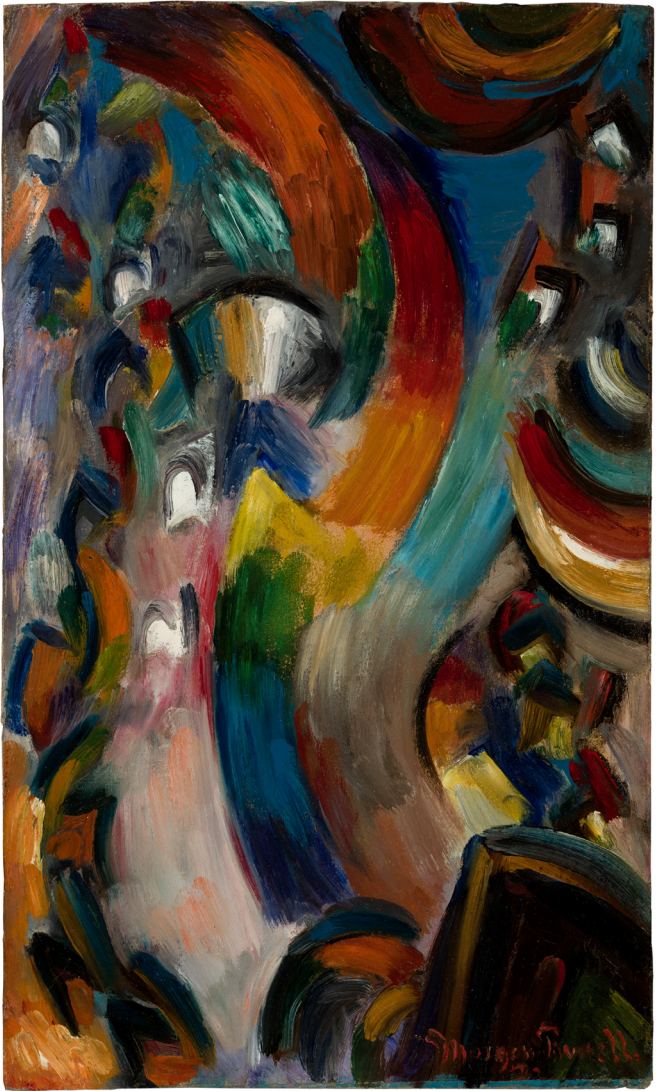


# About the Artwork



Morgan Russell, *Synchronie en orange* [*Synchromy in Orange*], 1922, Oil on canvas on board, 18 x 11 in. The Buck Collection at UCI Institute and Museum of California Art

## About the Artwork

In Morgan Russell's *Synchronie en orange* [*Synchromy in Orange*] (1922), curved lines, strong patches of brushstrokes, and bright colors create a steady stream of energy. As one of the founders of the Synchromist movement, Russell advanced a style that connected music to color. He made this painting while living in isolation in post-war France and returning to the abstract style of his pre-war years. During this later period of abstraction, his experiments in color became more free-flowing and liberated from the color scales he had previously used to structure his paintings. He wrote to a fellow Synchromist co-founder, Stanton Macdonald-Wright, to explain this shift:

“Color-harmony in a picture, if the latter is dealing with any kind of complexity must be handled in a free and untrammled manner. In other words, all the infinite number of colors and tints known, will slip into the picture in the

Synchromy in Orange

course of work and besides one likes to be free in the choice of subject, objects and colors (and also as to their shape too—straight or curved as one fancies!) ... I have about 30 colors on my palette and can't be happy with less."<sup>22</sup>

His new paintings, as Russell explained to Macdonald-Wright, had also become more complex compositionally. Whereas his pre-war

**Russell was one of the founders of the Synchromist movement, a style that connected music to color.**

abstractions had one center, these had multiple. Thinking that these new compositions had metaphorical significance, he wrote, "Life is that way, the mind is that way, there is no center, there are centers

everywhere, and overlapping each other and changing and dying and reshaping, etc."<sup>23</sup>

Still, these later Synchromist paintings maintained their connection to music. In particular, Russell remained inspired by the classical works of Beethoven; before the war in Paris, he and Macdonald-Wright often painted to Beethoven's symphonies. Russell wanted to match the emotional intensity of the orchestral compositions in his artwork.

By the end of the 1920s, Russell had abandoned the style again and was painting exclusively with figuration.



# About the Artist

# Morgan Russell



Morgan Russell, *Morgan Russell Self-Portrait*, circa 1907, Oil on canvas. 27 x 21 in. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; gift of Howard Weingrow, © Estate of Morgan Russell

## About the Artist

The Synchronies are “probably the one completely original contribution I’ll ever make to an art and more important than all that, they correspond exactly to me.”

—Morgan Russell<sup>24</sup>

Morgan Russell (1886–1953) was born in New York City. The son of an architect, Russell initially studied architecture as a potential career path but decided to pursue painting and sculpture after travelling in 1906 to Europe where he encountered French Impressionism and European Renaissance art. Upon returning to New York, he took up studies with artists Robert Henri (1865–1929) and James Earle Fraser (1876–1953) at the Art Students League and the New York School of Art.<sup>25</sup>

During the early 1900s, Russell traveled frequently between the United States and Europe. While living in Paris, he studied sculpture with Henri Matisse (1869–1954) and learned about **avant-garde** movements like Cubism, Orphism, and Futurism.

In 1911, Russell met fellow American artist Stanton-Macdonald

Wright (1890–1973), who was also living in Paris at the time. Both artists were intensely interested in the science of color. Within a year, the two founded the **Synchromist** movement, a modernist art movement devoted to color abstraction. Synchromism was based on Russell and Macdonald-Wright’s shared belief that color should be central to the expression of space, time, and motion in painting, rather than merely serve as a decorative element. Linking color arrangements to musical structures, they used musical metaphors to illustrate Synchromist ideas, often referring to the “rhythm” of color and its “undulations.” In fact, the name of the movement—which lasted from 1912 to the 1920s—stems from a term Russell coined himself, “synchromy,” meaning “with color”

**Russell coined the term synchromy, meaning “with color” just as symphony means “with sound.”**

just as “symphony” means “with sound.”<sup>26</sup> The two painters exhibited their Synchronist paintings together, first in Europe and later in New York, in 1914 and 1916.<sup>27</sup> Their modernist artwork and ideas had a major impact on other American artists, particularly in California, where Macdonald-Wright taught art for a number of years.

By 1930, Russell had abandoned the style. After almost four decades living in France, he moved back to the United States in 1946 and died in Pennsylvania in 1953. The Museum of Modern Art in New York devoted an exhibition to him in 1976, more than two decades after his death.<sup>28</sup>



# View and Discuss

## View and Discuss

Ask students to write down three adjectives that come to mind when they look at this painting. Talk about which words or ideas came up more than once. What impressions does this painting make on the viewer and why?

Ask students to describe any motion they see in this painting. Tell them that the artist, Morgan Russell, helped found a movement or style based on the notion that time and motion can be expressed through color arrangements. Ask students how Russell's color arrangements in this painting contribute to a feeling of motion or the passage of time.

Tell students that Russell believed abstract art and music were connected and compared sounds in symphonies to colors in paintings. Ask students to concentrate on one part of the painting and think about how it might sound if it became part of a symphony. Have students describe or make the sounds of the painting and explain their thinking.

Play a selection from one of Beethoven's symphonies. Tell students that Russell was inspired by his music and often painted while listening to it. Ask students what they think Beethoven's music and Russell's painting have in common.

Russell planned out his abstract paintings with preparatory studies in pencil. For his largest painting, also called *Synchromy in Orange: To Form* (1913–1914)—<https://www.albrightknox.org/artworks/k195816-synchromy-orange-form>—he made this sketch to work out the shapes and lines—<https://www.albrightknox.org/artworks/197817-study-synchromy-orange-form>. Notably, this sketch does not have any color, a key element of Russell's theory, but he used pencil marks to indicate value. Challenge students to make a pencil sketch of at least one section of *Synchromie en orange* [*Synchromy in Orange*] (1922). What do they notice about the shapes and lines and forms he used as they draw? How can they represent elements of his color choices without using any color?

# Activities

## Activities

### Bodies and Motion

Morgan Russell wrote, “I always felt the need to impose on color the same violent twists and spirals that Rubens and Michelangelo imposed on the human body.”<sup>29</sup> (Sir Peter Paul Rubens [1577–1640] was a Flemish painter whose Baroque style of painting the human figure emphasized movement. Michelangelo [1475–1564] was an Italian sculptor and painter of the High Renaissance whose famous works include the Sistine Chapel and *David*.) Challenge students to represent the motion in Russell’s painting by using their bodies. Start by asking for a student volunteer to pick a section to represent through motion. Then talk about how they were able to capture that section—line, mark, shape, color, etc.—through their motion. Next, divide the class into small groups and ask students to string together their movements to create a choreographed “dance” representing the painting. Perform these dances in front of a projected image and compare the two.

### Abstraction as Narrative

In describing Russell’s *Synchromy in Orange: To Form* from 1913–14, one writer referred to the color orange as “in the role of protagonist.”<sup>30</sup> Look together at *Synchromie en orange [Synchromy in Orange]* (1922). Ask students to think of orange as the main character. If orange is the main character, what is the story? Challenge them to write down their ideas about the narrative in the form of a short story or poem. For further inspiration, watch this video from the Museum of Modern Art in which comedian Steve Martin, who is a serious art collector, and curator Ann Temkin contemplate a Russell painting and its unfolding narrative possibilities together: <https://bit.ly/2WJFOo6>

### Music and Abstract Art

Russell believed that art and music were connected forms. He and his fellow Synchromist, Stanton Macdonald-Wright, often painted while listening to Beethoven. Challenge students to explore the analogies between music and abstract art. First, ask students which parts of Russell’s painting might correspond to loud sounds, quiet sounds, fast sounds, or slow sounds. Then play them a selection of short sounds—like a drum beat or a horn blasting—and ask them to represent those sounds using only lines, shapes, and colors. Finally, play selections of music or songs, including one of Beethoven’s symphonies. Ask students to move their bodies to the music first to understand the energy and rhythm. Then challenge them to make completely abstract drawings or paintings inspired by what they hear. Reflect on the process. Which elements of the music did they pay most attention to? How did they analogize those elements to the visual realm?

# Vocabulary

## Vocabulary

*Source: adapted from Merriam-Webster (unless otherwise noted)*

**Automatic processes:** procedures that suspend the conscious mind to release subconscious images

**Avant-garde:** an intelligentsia that develops new or experimental concepts, especially in the arts

**Calligraphy:** artistic, stylized, or elegant handwriting or lettering

**Duality:** the quality or state of having two different or opposite parts or elements

**Esoteric:** designed for or understood by a limited circle of people with special knowledge or interest

**Occult:** of or related to matters regarded as involving the action or influence of supernatural or supernormal powers or some secret knowledge of them

**Olmec:** an ancient people of the southern east coast of Mexico who flourished about 1200 to 400 BC

**Mayan:** a member of the peoples speaking Mayan languages, a language family of Central America and Mexico

**Patronage:** the support or influence of a wealthy or influential champion of an artist or writer

**Shamanism:** a religion practiced by Indigenous peoples of far northern Europe and Siberia that is characterized by belief in an unseen world of gods, demons, and ancestral spirits responsive only to the priests or priestesses who use magic for the purpose of curing the sick, divining the hidden, and controlling events

**Surrealist:** member of a movement of European poets, painters, and filmmakers founded in 1924 called *Surrealism*. Their central idea was that the unconscious mind was the source of all imagination, and that art should try to express its contents. The unconscious, they believed, revealed itself most clearly in dreams.

**Symbolist:** one of a group of writers and artists in France after 1880 reacting against realism, concerning themselves with general truths instead of actualities, exalting the metaphysical and the mysterious, and aiming to unify and blend the arts and the functions of the senses

**Synchromist** (*adapted from Britannica.com*): member of an art movement begun by American painters Morgan Russell and Stanton Macdonald-Wright in 1913–14 that focused on color

**Theosophy:** the teachings of a modern movement originating in the US in 1875 and following chiefly Buddhist and Brahmanic theories—<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/theories>—specially of pantheistic evolution and reincarnation

# Notes

- 1 Zakian, Michael. Agnes Pelton: Poet of Nature, Palm Springs Desert Museum, 1995, p. 70.
- 2 Ibid., p. 70.
- 3 Ibid., p. 70.
- 4 Ibid., p. 15.
- 5 Ibid., p. 18.
- 6 Ibid., p. 11.
- 7 Middleman, Rachel, "Outlying Modernism: Agnes Pelton, Theosophy and Gender." *Enchanted Modernities: Theosophy, the Arts and the American West*. Christopher M. Scheer, Sarah Victoria Turner, and James G. Mansell, eds. Fulgur Press, 2019, p. 66.
- 8 Ibid., p. 67.
- 9 Ibid., p. 67.
- 10 Gawboy, Anna. "Agnes Pelton and the Musicalization of Colour." *Enchanted Modernities: Theosophy, the Arts and the American West*. Christopher M. Scheer, Sarah Victoria Turner, and James G. Mansell, eds. Fulgur Press, 2019, p. 72.
- 11 Middleman, p. 63.
- 12 Ibid., p. 66.
- 13 Didactic text for *The Resonant Surface: Movement, Image, and Sound in California Painting*, University of California, Irvine, Institute and Museum of California Art.
- 14 Capkova, Helena, "The Dynaton." *Enchanted Modernities: Theosophy, the Arts and the American West*. Christopher M. Scheer, Sarah Victoria Turner, and James G. Mansell, eds. Fulgur Press, 2019, p. 103.
- 15 Wenger, Michael and Kaz Tanahashi. "Creation in the Instant: An Interview with Painter Gordon Onslow-Ford." May 1991. <http://www.cuke.com/pdf-wb2/91-2-fall-onslow-ford.pdf>, p. 39.
- 16 "Gordon Onslow Ford." *Guggenheim Museum Collection Online*. <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/artist/gordon-onslow-ford>. Accessed Apr 2021.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Capkova, pp. 95, 98, 100.
- 19 "Gordon Onslow Ford." *Guggenheim Museum Collection Online*. <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/artist/gordon-onslow-ford>. Accessed Apr 2021.
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- 21 Wenger and Tanahashi, p. 38.
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- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Kushner, p. 131–2.
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- 28 Ibid.
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- 30 "Synchromy in Orange: To Form." Audio Stop. *Albright-Knox Art Gallery*. <https://www.albrightknox.org/artworks/k195816-synchromy-orange-form>. Accessed Apr 2021.