
The Resonant Surface

Note to Teachers

UCI Institute and Museum of California Art (IMCA) aims to be a resource to educators and students by offering school visits, programs, digital tools, and activities designed for grades 3–12 that contribute to the development of strong critical-thinking skills, empathy, and curiosity about art and culture. When students are encouraged to express themselves and take risks in discussing and creating art, they awaken their imaginations and nurture their creative potential. School visits, whether in-person or virtual, offer opportunities for students to develop observation and interpretation skills using visual and sensory information, build knowledge independently and with one another, and cultivate an interest in artistic production.

This Teacher Resource Guide includes essays, artist biographies, strategies for interdisciplinary curriculum integration, discussion questions, methods for teaching with objects, a vocabulary list, and activities for three works in IMCA's collection that are included in the exhibition *The Resonant Surface: Movement, Image, and Sound in California Painting*.

About the Exhibition

The Resonant Surface encourages the viewer to slow one's gaze and experience paintings in an embodied and immersive way. Musical landscapes, rhythmic abstractions, sound and color experiments, and other multisensory subject matter play with the immediacy of visual perception. The exhibition considers these kinds of explorations in image, movement, and sound in early to mid-20th century California painting. It traces the ways artists have long used painting to investigate the complex nature of perception beyond vision, building connections across time, space, images, objects, and sensations.

Four main themes develop these connections: correspondences, rhythm and abstraction, dynamism and flux, and visual music. By activating multiple senses—looking, but also listening and feeling—the presented works of art can be experienced as vibrant, interconnected surfaces that “resonate” within and beyond the spaces they occupy.

Featured Works

Agnes Pelton, *San Geronio in Spring*, 1932, Oil on canvas, 24 x 30 in., The Buck Collection at UCI Institute and Museum of California Art

Gordon Onslow Ford, *Constellations and Grasses*, 1957, Casein on mulberry paper, 38 x 56 in., The Buck Collection at UCI Institute and Museum of California Art

Morgan Russell, *Synchromie 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

Learn More

For questions about scheduling a school visit, please contact the Education Department by email at imca@uci.edu or register online at imca.uci.edu.

About the Artwork



Agnes Pelton, *San Gorgonio in Spring*, 1932, Oil on canvas, 24 x 30 in.
The Buck Collection at UCI Institute and Museum of California Art

About the Artwork

Painted only months after Agnes Pelton settled in California, *San Gorgonio in Spring* (1932) captures the artist's profound engagement with the place where she would spend the rest of her life. Snow-capped mountain peaks rise in the distance, growing deeper blue in shadow as they approach the middle of the landscape's expanse. In the foreground, desert flora burst with life and color while cactus bloom rose pink. Pelton sought to intensify light, color, and detail in landscape painting. She accentuated visual and tactile elements to heighten the sensory experience of commonly overlooked features.

From her new town of Cathedral City, Pelton had views to the east of Mount San Jacinto, the steepest mountain in North America, and to the northwest, Mount San Gorgonio depicted in this painting, which rises 11,400 feet. These mountains shield the valley from rain for most of the year, creating desert conditions. The town itself was named for a canyon that resembled a cathedral. A sensitive observer of nature, Pelton was fascinated by the desert plants and how they flourished after winter rains, typically in April and May. For her, the blooming plants captured a "color radiance which I have tried to develop in my abstract painting."¹ In fact, her interest in desert plants dates to the 1910s, many years before she moved to California.

San Gorgonio in Spring

Pelton believed her paintings of nature had to reach a more immersive level, revealing the historical essence of the place.

Pelton likely referenced a photograph to paint this landscape, though did not copy the photograph directly. She believed her paintings of nature had to reach a more immersive level, revealing the historical essence of the place, and even what she thought of as the fourth dimension beyond what human senses could immediately access. To convey this metaphysical dimension, this landscape emphasizes “depth cues, heightening the spatial definition of every element. Every object appears more distinct than it would in nature,” writes art historian Michael Zakian. “The image invites a meditation on the deeper meaning of physical distance.”²





Agnes Pelton photographed in 1932 in Cathedral City, CA. Mount San Jacinto in the background.
© Raymond Jonson Archive, University of New Mexico Art Museum, Albuquerque

About the Artist

“To paint a landscape well, first lay bare its geological layers. Think how the history of this world dates from the day when 2 atoms came together or 2 chemical dances combined.”

—Agnes Pelton³

Agnes Pelton (1881–1961) was born to American parents in Stuttgart, Germany. When she was eight years old, Pelton moved with her mother to Brooklyn, New York to live with her maternal grandmother. Early in her life, Pelton experienced two family hardships. Her father died of a drug overdose when she was only nine and her family faced public shaming due to a scandal that had occurred a decade before she was born.⁴

Pelton turned to the arts as an emotional and intellectual outlet. Her mother ran a music school where Pelton learned to play piano, and she took art lessons from Arthur Wesley Dow (1857–1922), who was a painter, photographer, and influential art educator. Dow did not teach students to copy historic styles as was common at the time. Rather, he taught Pelton, and later Georgia O’Keeffe (1887–1986, an influential painter of the American modernism movement), about art as a mode of self-expression that didn’t need to simply copy nature.⁵ Pelton enjoyed early success with her paintings. Two of her works were included in the landmark Armory Show of 1913.⁶ They were **Symbolist** paintings of human figures immersed in imaginary landscapes, influenced by, among other things, the artwork of modern art proponent Arthur B. Davies (1862–1928).

In 1921, Pelton left New York City for Southampton, Long Island where she lived in an historic windmill for the next decade. There she earned money by making portraits of summer residents while studying and painting the natural world around her. In 1926, she began making her first abstractions inspired by natural phenomena like the movement of air, water, and flower petals.

In 1932, Pelton left New York for the desert near Palm Springs, California where for the next 30 years she painted both landscapes and abstractions. She was drawn to certain elements of the local environment, such as the desert, the mountains, and the effects of light and atmosphere.

Theosophy offered Pelton a way of thinking about the metaphysical dimensions of her art and the role of the artist in conveying the spiritual realm through art.

During these years, she also became interested in **occult** and **esoteric** religions, specifically **Theosophy**, founded by Helena Blavatsky (1831–1891). With its emphasis on tuning into unseen forces and energies, Theosophy offered Pelton a way of thinking about the metaphysical dimensions of her art and the role of the artist in conveying the spiritual realm through art. Theosophy also provided its female adherents an alternative to the restrictive social and political attitudes of the time.⁷

Unlike O’Keeffe, to whom she is most often compared, Pelton never became well-known in her lifetime. She lived in California until she died at the age of 80 in 1961.

View and Discuss

View and Discuss

Look together at Agnes Pelton's *San Geronio in Spring* (1932). Ask students to describe the landscape, starting with the background and then moving toward the middle ground. Finally, describe the foreground moving toward the surface of the painting. What do students notice about color, light, depth, subject matter, and mood?

Tell students that Pelton painted this work only months after she moved to Southern California to a town where this was her view of the San Geronio mountains. Pelton believed every place had “the voice of locality,” or a unique aura.⁸ Ask students what they think Pelton considered “the voice” of this place sounded like. Why?

The landscape details some elements that captured Pelton's eye, including the atmospheric effects of clouds, the blooming of desert flora, and a type of “color radiance” she explored in her abstract paintings. It also captures **dualities**—or opposites—that she was interested in examining: hot and cold, wet and dry, air and matter.⁹ Ask students if they see these dualities in the painting and where. Ask them to identify other dualities the painting might express.

Tell students that Pelton likely referenced a photograph while painting this landscape, but she didn't copy the scene exactly. She believed painting should depict more than what human senses can detect at an historical, geological, or spiritual level. Ask students what they think she might have altered or exaggerated about the landscape and why.

Pelton was simultaneously painting fully abstract art while making landscapes like these. She believed both forms of art had equal value. Search for an example of Pelton's abstract paintings from around this time (such as, *Sand Storm* <https://crystalbridges.org/blog/womens-history-month-agnes-pelton/> from 1932). Ask students which form of art they prefer and why.

Activities

Activities

Color Correspondences

Like many other modern California painters influenced by Theosophy, Agnes Pelton was interested in how artists could perceive and translate the metaphysical world beyond human senses. Many of these artists thought the spiritual could be conveyed by revealing connections between sound and color, as well as emotion. In her sketchbook, Pelton indicated how color corresponded to various psychic states: “Red = creation; orange = passion; yellow = life; blue = beauty; green = nature; purple = pain; white = death.”¹⁰ Ask students what they think of Pelton’s equations. Do they believe that colors have universal meanings? Why or why not? Ask them to create their own personal correspondences with color. What associations do certain colors have for them? What images, emotions, or sounds come to mind? Then challenge them to make a sketchbook entry with colored pencil to visually represent their own personal color beliefs. What form does each drawing take and why?

Poetry

Agnes Pelton loved poetry and sometimes wrote poems to accompany and help explain her abstract paintings. She said, “My abstract pictures are just as real to me as nature, but they are not material, but mental images. They are a culmination of impressions which come to me at a quiet time just exactly as a line of verse comes to a poet’s mind; the only difference being that I see it in form and color, and the poet sees it in sound and words.”¹¹

For her painting *Alchemy* <https://imca.uci.edu/alchemy/>, Pelton wrote:

The golden glow of earth transcending
the cloudy barrier in white response
to the diamond light, in revelation.¹²

Ask students to compare the poem to the painting. Then challenge students to write a poem to accompany *San Geronio in Spring*. How can words help viewers understand what Pelton sought to convey?

“Voice of Locality”

Pelton believed that every place had its own aura, which she referred to as “the voice of locality.” Ask students, What do you think is the “the voice of locality” where you live? Encourage them to make paintings that capture that voice, whether in the form of realistic landscapes or total abstractions. Share what they create. What do the class’s paintings have in common, if anything? Do they capture a certain “voice” for your locality or do students perceive this “voice” in varied ways? As an extension to this activity, invite students to create a soundscape to accompany their landscape. They could either record these or perform them live.

About the Artwork



Gordon Onslow Ford, *Constellations and Grasses*, 1957, Casein on mulberry paper, 38 x 56 in. The Buck Collection at UCI Institute and Museum of California Art, © Courtesy of the Lucid Art Foundation

About the Artwork

In Gordon Onslow Ford's *Constellations and Grasses* (1957), radiating concentric circles pulsate like stars amidst staccato dashes of pigment. Built up in layers, marks of white, black, cornflower blue, egg yolk orange, and olive green reveal Onslow Ford's interest in the natural world, the cosmos, and the spontaneous gesture. The combination of these elements results in a dynamic composition that vibrates with energy and expands outward beyond the confines of its frame.

Onslow Ford began his painting career in Paris with the Surrealists where he experimented with automatism, a technique used to make art without conscious control. Like other artists of the time, Onslow Ford wanted to access subconscious parts of his mind and liberate his imagination through these acts of improvisation.

While living in San Francisco in the late 1940s, he became part of a group of artists called The Dynaton, who used automatic techniques to explore nature, subjectivity, and metaphysics. Curator Erin Stout

writes about this group's art: "Brimming with imagery like stars, galactic spirals, and kaleidoscopic human figures, the work speaks to the dynamic nature of the universe and the potentialities of existence within it."¹³

In 1952, Onslow Ford met Zen master Hodo Tobase Roshi (1895–1982) and studied **calligraphy** with him for five years, which influenced his

Onslow Ford wanted to access subconscious parts of his mind and liberate his imagination through acts of improvisation.

Constellations and Grasses

Constellations and Grasses

About the Artwork

artmaking. To create new works, Onslow Ford used quick-drying paint to perform a kind of action painting inspired by a calligraphic rhythm. He even incorporated his own interpretations of Chinese and Japanese characters.¹⁴ These elements can be seen in the way Onslow Ford used his brush in this painting, from the swoop of the concentric circles in the constellations to the emphatic gesture of the parallel marks depicting the grass.





Gordon Onslow Ford in his studio on the Ferryboat Vallejo in 1956. © Courtesy of the Lucid Art Foundation.

About the Artist

“My painting is a form of meditation. For a day to have depth, I need to paint.”¹⁵

—Gordon Onslow Ford

Gordon Onslow Ford (1912–2003) was born in England to an artistic family. His grandfather, Edward Onslow Ford (1852–1901), was a successful sculptor. Gordon Onslow Ford also took painting lessons from his uncle. While still in his early teens, Onslow Ford’s family enrolled him at a naval college. He subsequently pursued a career as a naval officer until 1937, when he left the military permanently to become an artist.¹⁶

In the late 1930s, Onslow Ford became involved with the Parisian **Surrealists** and formed a close friendship with artist Roberto Antonio Sebastián Matta Echaurren (Matta) (1911–2002). Together, Onslow Ford and Matta explored **automatic processes** for creating artwork, techniques that allowed them to make art without conscious control. In one method, Onslow Ford poured paint onto the canvas, anticipating artists like Jackson Pollock (1912–1956) and Helen Frankenthaler (1928–2011). He called this method *coulage* (from *couler* in French, meaning “to flow”).¹⁷

In 1941, Onslow Ford traveled to New York and then to Mexico where he met artist Wolfgang Paalen (1905–1959), whose *DYN* magazine explored Paalen’s and other artists’ interest in Indigenous cultures of the North American continent.

During this time, Onslow Ford’s artworks began to combine dreamlike and cosmic imagery with features of the landscapes he was seeing in Mexico.

Six years later, Onslow Ford moved to San Francisco, California. There he formed a group called The Dynaton with Paalen and fellow painter Lee Mullican (1919–1998). Dynaton is Greek for “the possible” and the word captures the group’s goals of exploring the nature of reality, creativity, and the imagination through experimental painting methods. In their work and writings, the Dynaton artists brought together and appropriated

Dynaton is Greek for “the possible” and the word captures Onslow Ford’s and his fellow painters’ goals of exploring the nature of reality, creativity, and the imagination through experimental painting methods.

About the Artist

Gordon Onslow Ford

disparate cultural and religious traditions, including Eastern philosophies, Native American cosmologies, **shamanism**, Theosophy, and Surrealist theory. In an exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Art (SFMA) in 1951, the group exhibited their artwork alongside objects from their personal collections, including from **Olmec** and **Mayan** cultures. Onslow Ford's work during this time moved away from landscape though still featured the natural world. It embraced the spiritual and emotional in art. Dynaton members went their separate ways after the SFMA exhibition, but their ideas influenced Onslow Ford for the rest of his life.¹⁸

In 1952, Onslow Ford met Zen master Hodo Tobase Roshi and studied calligraphy with him for five years. He applied what he learned in calligraphy to create a kind of action painting.

Onslow Ford painted until 2002, focusing on outer space imagery with abstract forms. He died on November 9, 2003 in Inverness, California.¹⁹

View and Discuss

View and Discuss

Ask students to describe this painting thoroughly—its colors, brushstrokes, lines, and types of marks. Ask them what their associations are with its colors, forms, and lines.

Share the title of this artwork, *Constellations and Grasses* (1957). Tell students that the painting captures the two areas of subject matter that greatly interested Onslow Ford, the cosmos and the natural world. Ask students to describe how he portrays these two areas interacting in this painting.

Challenge students to hold an imaginary paintbrush in their hands and visualize making the marks they see in this painting. How do their bodies move—their wrists, shoulders, and waists? How does it feel to move like this?

Tell students that this painting was made in 1957 and that the artist, Gordon Onslow Ford, had been studying calligraphy since 1952 with a Japanese monk. Compare this painting to Japanese calligraphy (see <https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2013/brush-writing>). Where do they see the influence of Onslow Ford's studies on this painting?

Onslow Ford discovered that “calligraphy—not writing about something but expressing yourself in line—was the way of talking about the spirit.” Western calligraphy is “done with the fingers and the wrist while Chinese and Japanese calligraphy is done with the whole body/mind.” He said that the paintings he made influenced by this tradition were “a form of meditation.”²⁰ Ask students to compare his description to their experience with the imaginary paintbrush. How would it feel to make marks with the “whole body/mind” and as “a form of meditation”? Are there any activities students do in their lives that achieve this?

Activities

Activities

The Line, The Circle, and The Dot

Gordon Onslow Ford said he thought of “the line, the circle and the dot” as the “three elements at the root of art.” Before he studied calligraphy, Onslow Ford said, “I was making line, circle, dot elements in a rather mechanical way that did not have the blood and bones of calligraphy.”²¹ As a class, experiment with these elements. With ink and brushes, challenge each student to fill a large piece of paper with only dots. Start small, using just the wrist, and then ask them to move their bodies in new ways, using their shoulders, their waists, and even their legs as they make their dots. How do the dots change? How do their emotions or states of mind change? Try this same experiment with circles and then lines. (For inspiration for younger students, read *The Dot* by Peter Reynolds.)

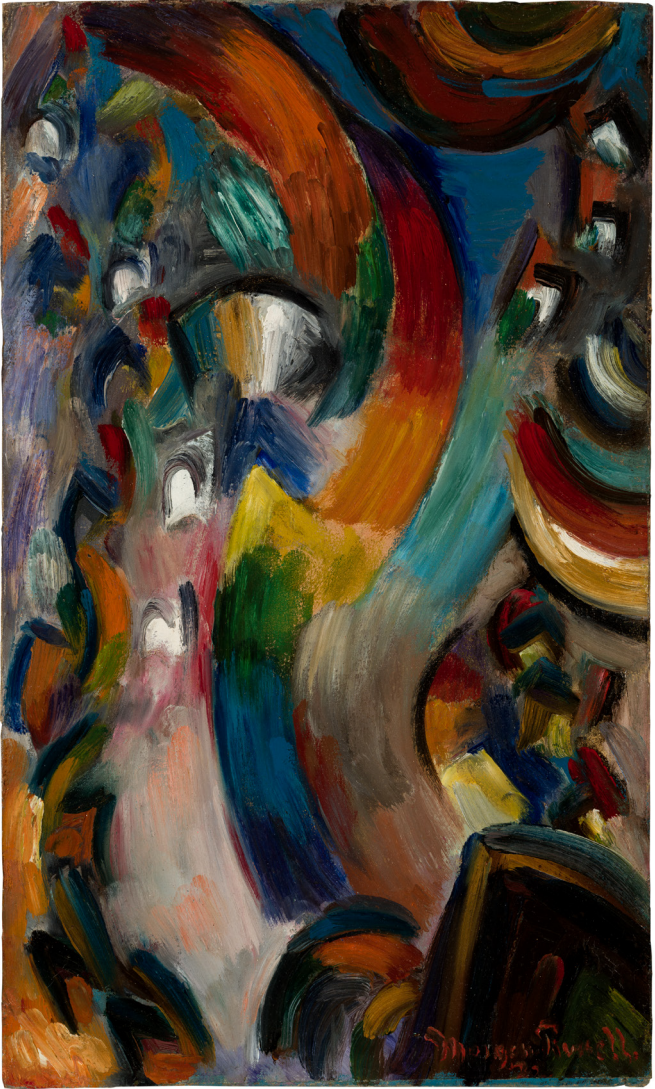
Automatic Drawing

Calligraphy was not Onslow Ford’s first attempt to tap into different parts of his mind and body. Earlier in his life, Onslow Ford experimented with techniques invented by Surrealists in Europe in order to access his subconscious mind and relinquish conscious control from artmaking. For this activity, encourage students to test some of these methods through automatic drawing. Methods might include drawing with eyes closed, drawing with a non-dominant hand, crumpling a paper first and then drawing guided by the paper’s folds. What are some other methods students can invent to take conscious control away from the process? Ask students how it feels to not have complete control over what they produce.

Action Painting Methods

Onslow Ford anticipated many important approaches in artmaking that came after him. From his poured paint methods to his calligraphic marks, his work has similarities with later artists, such as Jackson Pollock, Helen Frankenthaler, Franz Kline (1910–1962), and Cy Twombly (1928–2011). Like Onslow Ford, these artists sought spontaneous, intuitive ways of laying down paint. For this activity, ask students to pick one action painter or Abstract Expressionist to study. They should learn about their corresponding painting methods and then try the methods. How does it feel to make art with these methods? If students could invent a new method for making spontaneous, intuitive paint marks, what would it be?

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."²²

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."²³

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 Russell²⁴

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.²⁵

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.”²⁶ The two painters exhibited their Synchronist paintings together, first in Europe and later in New York, in 1914 and 1916.²⁷ 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.²⁸



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.”²⁹ (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.”³⁰ 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.
- 20 Wenger and Tanahashi, p. 39.
- 21 Wenger and Tanahashi, p. 38.
- 22 Kushner, Marilyn. *Morgan Russell*. Hudson Hills Press in association with The Montclair Art Museum, 1990, p. 132.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Kushner, p. 131–2.
- 25 "Morgan Russell Collection in the Museum of Modern Art Archives." 1999. *Museum of Modern Art*. <https://www.moma.org/research-and-learning/archives/finding-aids/Russellb.html>. Accessed April 2021.
- 26 Didactic text for *The Resonant Surface: Movement, Image, and Sound in California Painting*, University of California, Irvine, Institute and Museum of California Art.
- 27 "Morgan Russell Collection in the Museum of Modern Art Archives." 1999. *Museum of Modern Art*. <https://www.moma.org/research-and-learning/archives/finding-aids/Russellb.html>. Accessed Apr 2021.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 "Morgan Russell. *Synchromy in Orange to Form, 1914*." *MoMA's Inventing Abstraction 1910-1925*. 10 Apr 2013. <https://inventingabstraction.tumblr.com/post/47625842703/morgan-russell-synchromy-in-orange-to-form-1914>. Accessed Apr 2021.
- 30 "Synchromy in Orange: To Form." Audio Stop. *Albright-Knox Art Gallery*. <https://www.albrightknox.org/artworks/k195816-synchromy-orange-form>. Accessed Apr 2021.