

The Morgan Russell Archives

by Gregory Galligan

In the spring of 2004, the Montclair Art Museum received a grant from the Henry Luce Foundation for the comprehensive evaluation, cataloguing, and rehousing of its extensive archives and collection (primarily of works on paper) of the American Synchronist painter, Morgan Russell (1886-1953). The Russell archives

and collection entered the Museum in 1985, a gift from then-member of the board and art committee, Henry M. Reed, an insurance executive and private collector. At the time that he placed this gift at Montclair, Reed had just made museum history in successfully recalling, at threat of a protracted court battle, this same cache of Russell ephemera and art works from the Whitney Museum of American Art, New

York. According to Reed, the Whitney had failed to mount a major Russell retrospective in keeping with terms he claimed to have negotiated on donating this gift in 1978. Whitney curator, Gail Levin had, however, organized the unprecedented exhibition, *Synchronism and American Color Abstraction, 1910-1925*, which included significant examples from Reed's gift.

Given the forbidding expense implied in



In celebration of the completion of *The Morgan Russell Archives and Collection Enhancement Project, 2004-2006* by the Montclair Art Museum, 3 S. Mountain Avenue, Montclair, New Jersey, 07042, 973-746-5555, www.montclairartmuseum.org, the Museum presents *Morgan Russell and the Old Masters* on view through August 6, 2006. The guide is available upon request or by visiting the website under “What’s New/Special Projects.”

All illustrations are by Morgan Russell and from the Montclair Art Museum, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Reed.

LEFT: *Still Life with Bananas*, c. 1912-13, o/c, 10¾ x 14.

RIGHT: *Still Life (Bouquet with Watering Can)*, c. 1911, oil on paper, 5½ x 7⅞.

BELOW RIGHT: *Untitled (Color Study of Apple after Cézanne)*, c. 1910-12, gouache (or watercolor) on paper, 5⅞ x 9¼.

subjecting this archives and collection to an immediate cataloguing and curatorial evaluation, the Montclair Art Museum found it necessary to postpone such a multifaceted project until sufficient funding could be secured. For almost two decades, some four thousand of Russell’s working drawings and sketches lay unsorted and dispersed among sixteen voluminous Solander boxes in the Museum’s already crowded storage vault. Russell’s personal ephemera—correspondence, business documents, essays and lectures, loose sketches, artist’s notebooks, printed materials, and photographs, among other papers—had received only a hasty sorting and archival housing by the Whitney Museum only months prior to losing this material to Montclair.

In 1990, the Montclair’s curator Marilyn S. Kushner (now Curator of Prints and Drawings, Brooklyn Museum of Art) organized the first Russell museum retrospective, which was accompanied by the first monographic catalogue on this artist. Eight years later, Kushner reexamined his critically important contribution to the advent of color abstraction in prewar Paris when she returned to Montclair to co-curate, with Chief Curator Gail Stavitsky, an exhibition, *Morgan Russell: The Origins of a Modern Masterpiece*, examining the formal and philosophical genesis of Russell’s seminal painting, *Synchromy in Blue-Violet* (1913).

Several attempts to inventory this archives and collection were subsequently made over the course of 1998 to 2003, al-



though none of these projects resulted in a systematic cataloguing in keeping with industry-wide archival standards. The generous Luce Foundation grant has made this important body of material much more accessible to scholars and the general public.

Morgan Russell Archives and Collection Enhancement Project, 2004-2006, has proved to be a timely reconsideration of one of America’s most important and long eclipsed pioneers in color abstract painting of the early modern period. Russell is already commonly recognized by historians for his co-creation in Paris, from about 1912 to 1914, of *Synchromism* (meaning “with color”), with fellow American expatriate, Stanton Macdonald-Wright.

Abandoning his father’s profession of

architecture for painting in late 1906, Russell toured France and Italy (on funds provided by Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, who was the first to sense Russell’s promise as a painter), and then enrolled in classes in anatomy, sculpture, and figure drawing at the Art Students League, New York from 1906 to 1908. Beginning in the fall of 1907, Russell went on to study painting with Robert Henri, who would thereafter remain a lifelong friend and guiding light.

It was, however, only after he settled in Paris in the spring of 1909 that Russell began to form his own aesthetic sensibility. By that date, he had largely confined his sculptural efforts to the production of plaster maquettes for studying various properties of form and space, and considering



LEFT: *Untitled (Synchrony Study)*, c. 1912-13, paster on paper, 7 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 9 $\frac{1}{8}$.

BELOW LEFT: *Untitled (Study for Reclining Nude Figure)*, c. 1909, ink and gouache on paper, 5 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 8.

RIGHT: *Untitled (Multiple Male Figure Study of Classical Poses)*, ink and pencil on paper, 10 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 8 $\frac{1}{4}$.

FAR RIGHT: *Untitled (Early Study for Synchrony in Blue-Violet)*, watercolor on paper, 11 x 8.

BELOW RIGHT: *Portrait Head (Self-Portrait)*, c. 1924-28, pencil on paper, 8 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 6 $\frac{5}{8}$.



how they might transfer to the two-dimensional parameters of painting. Russell was guided by the example and firsthand instruction of Henri Matisse, in whose informal académie he sketched and painted, as did his fellow Americans, Max Weber, Sarah Stein, and others similarly enamored by the most progressive, Paris-based currents in contemporary art.

Like many of his colleagues of that era, Russell promptly found his way to the weekly salon of Gertrude and Leo Stein, the latter with whom he subsequently developed an ongoing, aesthetic exchange of wits that is documented extensively in correspondence. He also met at the Steins' sa-

lon poet-critic Guillaume Apollinaire, as well as Pablo Picasso.

Forever struggling at the time with his own aesthetic experiments and theories, the dyspeptic Leo Stein both admired and dismissed Russell (behind his back) for his aesthetic ideals and projects, all aimed primarily at developing an unprecedented mode of painting that would approach the expressive capacity of music—a goal shared by Wassily Kandinsky, Matisse, and Frantisek Kupka, among many others, during the first decade of the twentieth century.

As revealed in the artist's notebooks of the period (there are over seventy preserved in the archives at Montclair), Russell sus-

pected early on in his experiments that only a perfect synthesis of color and form would enable him to realize such an expressive ideal. He enrolled himself in classes then offered in Paris by the Canadian color-theorist, Ernest Percyval Tudor-Hart, whose theories regarding the expressive, abstract, and rhythmic deployment of color in painting informed Russell and Wright's experiments, as he subscribed the use of color compilations that would mimic, in visual terms, the sonorities and dissonances of various chords and triads employed in musical composition (Russell and Wright listened to Beethoven symphonies assiduously throughout this period).

Promptly after settling in Paris, Russell studied Michelangelo at the Louvre (as well as in several tours of Italy) and became virtually obsessed with the Renaissance master's *Dying Slave*, of 1513, as though it were an indispensable talisman for his own successful maturation as a modern painter. In the colossal vertical "S" curve of this sculpture Russell found a prime motif on which to hang his own experiments with sculptural depth and two-dimensional flatness. Russell combined his observations of this High Renaissance masterpiece with others he derived from close study of Leonardo da Vinci, Sandro Botticelli, Peter Paul Rubens, and others, finally seeing in these artists' signature styles an antique standard of beauty that begged to be equaled, or even surpassed, by his own efforts, if only on more abstract terms. Thus Russell hoped to recycle his predecessors' achievements and push them forward in an ever more evolutionary, organic direction.

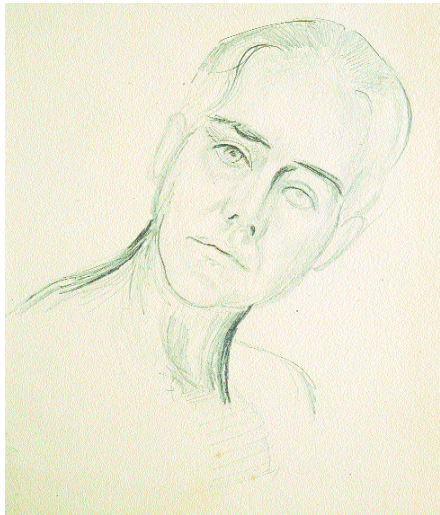
Russell found contemporary inspiration in the examples of Paul Cézanne and Picasso, both of whose work he copied in the collections of the Steins, as well as Matisse and Auguste Renoir—at first glance a mot-



ley pantheon, but one made fully intelligible on close examination of Russell's notebooks and sketches of the period from about 1909 to 1915. Each of these modern masters had something to contribute to Russell's explorations of sculptural and tactile form in painting, and his work would come to represent an abstract amalgam of their discoveries and maxims with his own briskly evolving ideas.

Russell and Wright made their bid for public attention in two successive exhibitions in Europe. Like two Broadway producers launching a new production in a context safely distanced from the theatrical epicenter, Russell and Wright unveiled Synchronism first in Munich, well shielded from the art critical maelstrom that was Paris at that moment.

As Wright stated years later in an interview for *American Art Review* (January-February, 1974), he and Russell proved such a success that a German company offered to buy up the entire show on the spot. Intending to conquer France, however, and now emboldened by their preliminary triumph, Russell and Wright took their Synchronist

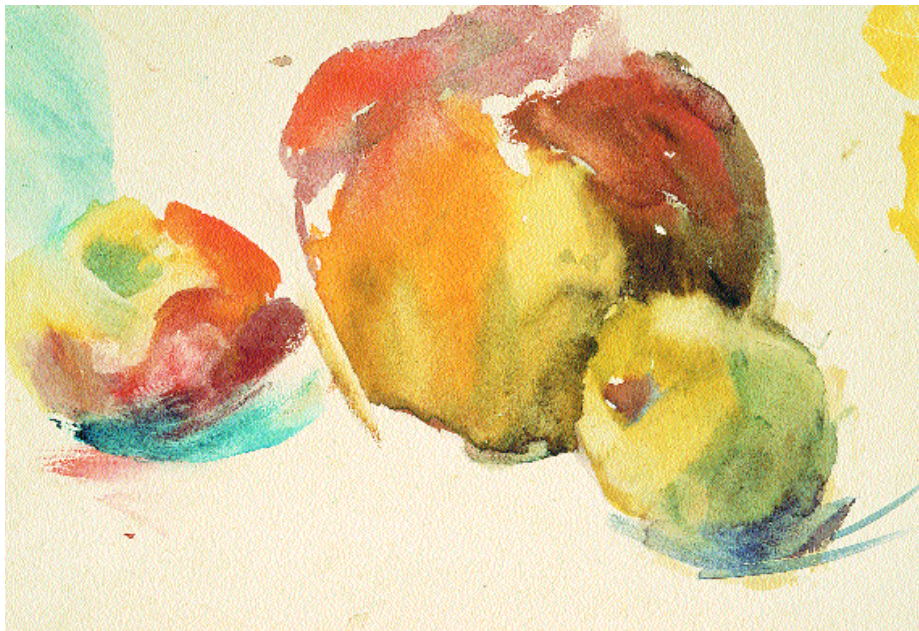


road show back to the progressive firestorm of Paris, where it made its official debut at the prestigious Galerie Bernheim-Jeune, in late October of 1913.

As was practically de rigueur for any ambitious debut in the art world of prewar Paris, Russell and Wright published a brief, compelling manifesto to accompany their precocious—some would say presumptuous—exhibition. Like two upstarts hungry

to be taken seriously by an already overstrung public, Russell and Wright, two American expatriates of uncertain accomplishment, burst brusquely onto the contemporary French scene as though certain of their ability to save the future of western art from an otherwise imminent, ominous tailspin. Writing of the uniqueness of his goals and achievement in the illustrated exhibition program, Russell claimed for himself the distinction of having forged a mode of color abstraction that had absolutely nothing to do with French Impressionism (still, by that date, a force against which to counter-construct one's own identity).

Russell was attempting to make clear that his abstract plays of light, color, and rhythm had virtually nothing to do with the depiction of the local colors of objects observed under fluctuating conditions of illumination; rather, the canvas holistically represented an expressive color "orchestration" unfolding over time. Privately, Russell more modestly framed his self-evaluation, writing in a notebook of August 1913, only weeks prior to his Paris debut, "Will beauty be able to save the world?"

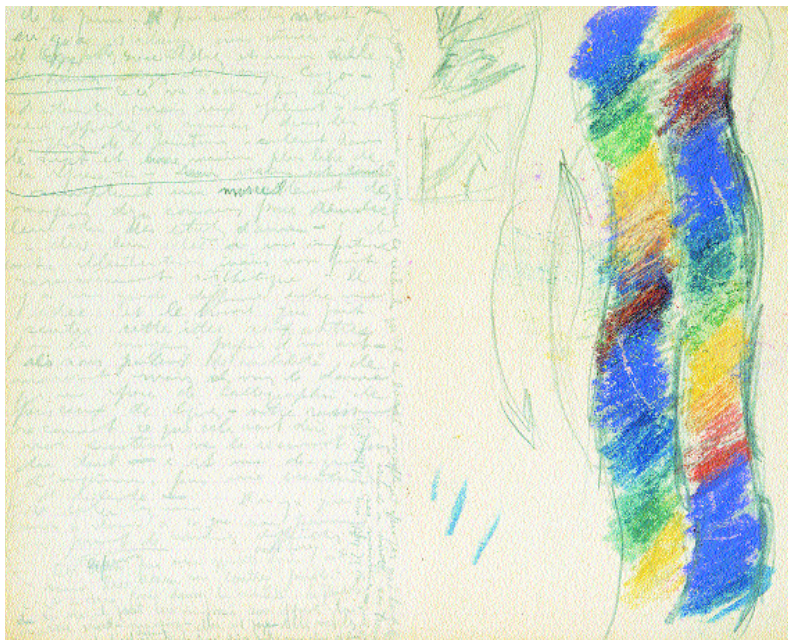


LEFT: *Untitled (Three Apples, Color Study)*, c. 1915, watercolor on paper, 5 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 8 $\frac{1}{2}$.

BELOW LEFT: *Untitled (Sketch for Synchrony in Blue-Violet)*, 1912, crayon on paper, 5 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 8.

RIGHT: *Study in Transparency*, c. 1913-1923, oil on tissue paper mounted on wood, 4 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 15 $\frac{3}{4}$.

BELOW RIGHT: *Color Study*, 1912-13, watercolor on paper, 5 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 3 $\frac{1}{2}$.



gations (largely by way of the Paris cafes and their shared, or closely located studios), but who were, in all probability, intent on realizing the logical outcome of their own, idiosyncratic discoveries. Indeed, a recent review of Russell's notebooks suggests that Russell was only one of many artists of the moment experimenting with color, light, and form in ways that were meant to effect the visual faculties of an observer in some manner of empathic "vibration," namely by analogical comparison of painting to music and the latter's physiological and psychological effect on the listener's auditory and cognitive faculties.

Russell's own thoughts on the subject, doubtless influenced by Matisse, Tudor-Hart, Kandinsky, and others, were ultimately unique enough—especially for their sculptural history—to suggest that the Orphist-Synchronist debate about origins, succession, and "influence" should ultimately be considered nonsensical. Indeed, in a notebook dating from his mature Synchronist period, Russell dismisses Delaunay's orbs of color as one more stylistic variant of Post-Impressionism—and this follows Russell's reflection on his own pursuits as constituting an unprecedented departure from the entire history of representational painting.

Russell surprisingly lost faith in his Synchronist project in the aftermath of World War I, even indulging, as early as 1915, in bouts of severe self-criticism over having been too calculated or theoretically driven in his former aesthetic investigations. Like many artists working in France at war's end, Russell's underlying faith in a long, colorist, Mediterranean-based tradition—running from Greece through Italy to Paris—reasserted itself and led Russell, as it did many others, to return to figuration and pursue a much more mythological, at times even quasi-baroque format.

This period of "new classicism," dating from the early 1920s and extending well

The Paris debut of Synchronism received mixed reviews by the critics, as would prove true when Russell and Wright sent the show on to the Carroll Galleries, New York, the following March. Some observers bristled at the gall of two greenhorns dismissing every major French movement in painting of recent memory, from Impressionism to Cubism. Guillaume Apollinaire considered Synchronism one of only several recent, precocious offspring of Cubism, proper, and he confused Russell and Wright's achievement with Delaunay's own "simultaneist" experiments in color abstraction—thereby setting in motion an unfortunate eclipse of Russell from

full public recognition, which persists to the present day.

It is simple to prove the point: where historians bother to mention Russell in discussing the advent of color abstract painting in prewar Europe, his work is invariably raised as an afterthought in a larger discussion of "Orphism," (a term invented by Apollinaire), that is, the achievement of Robert and Sonja Delaunay. In other instances, art historians bent on ascertaining who did what first in the development of abstraction in the prewar period have been preoccupied by delineating down to the day of the week painting chronologies of artists who doubtless knew of each others' investi-



into the 1930s, is Russell's pastoral era, during which his more ambitious canvases would be populated with increasing frequency by Roman bathers and apocalyptic nymphs and prophets—many deriving from various religious and mythological traditions of Europe and Asia alike—which were explored through what might best be described as a cartoon-like clarity, as though Russell were trying, with admittedly varying degrees of success, to invent a modern genre of icon painting.

The Morgan Russell Project was successfully brought to a close in May of 2006, with the posting of a highly annotated, 200-page *Comprehensive Guide* to the archives and collection to the Museum's web site, www.montclairartmuseum.org.)

Among other accomplishments of this historic Project, the Museum is celebrating the rehousing of the entire archives and collection (jointly comprising some four thousand drawings and sketches) in state-of-the-art storage systems; the collating of preexisting translations and transcriptions from the French of Russell's notebooks with their respective, primary sources; the production of an informative brochure for future publicity and scholarly reference; the conservation of selected drawings (generously conducted by the Conservation Center of the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University); and the planning of future Russell exhibitions and events that will draw on the many discoveries made in the course of this undertaking.

The *Morgan Russell Archives and Collection Enhancement Project, 2004–2006* suggests how important regional museums of American art, given proper funding and an enterprising spirit, may contribute decisively to the better understanding and enjoyment of America's crucial, if still largely underappreciated, participation in the advent of modernism on both sides of the Atlantic ocean.

