

“The art of painting new totalities”

Orphism, the early 20th century art movement, in focus at New York’s Guggenheim Museum

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Harmony and Dissonance: Orphism in Paris, 1910–1930, Guggenheim Museum in New York City, November 8, 2024–March 9, 2025

The exhibition *Harmony and Dissonance: Orphism in Paris 1910–1930* at the Guggenheim Museum in New York highlights an artistic movement that arose at a time of rapid technological advances and sharpening international tensions. The trend was at its most prominent in the years immediately preceding World War I, from 1911 to 1914. Its leading figures included Czech artist František Kupka (1871-1957) and French artists Robert Delaunay (1885-1941) and Sonia Delaunay (1885-1979).

Through their use of color, the Orphists, whose movement was named after the poet and musician Orpheus of Greek legend, sought to convey the “simultaneity” that innovations in areas such as electrification, aviation and communication were imparting to modern life. Emphasizing sensation and the similarities between painting and music, the Orphists moved away from representative art toward pure abstraction.

The exhibition brings welcome attention to a modern art movement that is less widely known than others, at least in the United States. Many of the paintings pulse with energy and a sense of possibility. But in explaining the historical and ideological context for the emergence and decline of Orphism, the curators have contented themselves with broad strokes. Nor do they draw attention to the parallels between the Orphists’ period and our own.

There are a number of contradictions and problems bound up with art trends of this era, as visually fresh and even breathtaking as they often were, which need to be considered.

In the period before World War I, the influence of German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche was pervasive among European and American artists. Nietzsche espoused subjectivity, spontaneity and the “liberation of the instincts.” Despite his essentially aristocratic perspective, Nietzsche struck many artists as a radical, anti-establishment figure. His paeans to irrational chaos and “intoxication” seemed more appealing to many artistic figures than the project of analyzing, for example, the contradictions between the recent technological advances and the outmoded political and social order or turning to the apparently prosaic struggles of the working class.

Georg Lukacs argued in *The Destruction of Reason* (1952):

Nietzsche’s philosophy performed the ‘social task’ of ‘rescuing’ and ‘redeeming’ this type of bourgeois mind. It offered a road which avoided the need for any break, or indeed any serious conflict, with the bourgeoisie. It was a road whereby the pleasant moral feeling of being a rebel could be sustained and even

intensified, whilst a ‘more thorough’, ‘cosmic biological’ revolution was enticingly projected in contrast to the ‘superficial’, ‘external’ social revolution.

Orphism developed out of Cubism, pioneered by Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso. Cubism, which sought to break down its subjects into their geometric components, bore the impress of Nietzschean subjectivism. “There is nothing real outside of us,” wrote the artists Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger in *On Cubism*. “We seek the essential, but we seek it in our personality, not in an eternity laboriously fashioned by mathematicians and philosophers.” This extreme individualism and the assertion that the external world was unknowable were carried into Orphism, a movement that Gleizes and Metzinger helped to develop.

Unlike the Cubists, who took an analytical approach to their subjects, the Orphists tended toward lyricism. In contrast with Cubism’s muted palette of browns, grays, black and white, Orphism adopted bright, even dazzling, colors. And although Cubism remained rooted in representational art (in however radical a form), Orphism evolved toward pure abstraction. Given its radical subjectivism, Orphism had at best a limited ability or inclination to reveal truths about social life.

The Orphists based their theory and deployment of color on the ideas of chemist Michel-Eugène Chevreul, who wrote the most broadly adopted color manual of the 19th century. One of the chemist’s books is on display at the Guggenheim. Chevreul developed the law of simultaneous contrast, which holds that when colors are juxtaposed, they mutually influence each other: each color imposes its own complementary color on the other. The Orphists harnessed these ideas, which were rooted in scientific study, to the expression of sensation and the evocation of emotion.

French poet Guillaume Apollinaire provided Orphism with its name and emphasized its subjective perspective. Orphism was “the art of painting new totalities with elements that the artist does not take from visual reality, but creates entirely by himself,” he wrote in 1913.

The artists were responding to increasingly explosive and ominous events and processes that they largely did not understand, catching at certain sides of these developments, ignoring or misreading others. There was a general intuition that the old socio-economic order and accompanying culture were exhausted, but what would replace them? The influence of Nietzscheanism and other forms of irrationalism encouraged many artists to take what was for them the path of least resistance, toward the conception that ideas and emotions determined life.

Before the first world war, wrote Trotsky, capitalist society passed

through two decades

of unparalleled economic prosperity which destroyed the old concepts of wealth and power, and elaborated new standards, new criteria of the possible and of the impossible, and urged people towards new exploits.

At the same time, the social movement lived on officially in the automatism of yesterday. The armed peace, with its patches of diplomacy, the hollow parliamentary systems, the external and internal politics based on the system of safety valves and brakes, all this weighed heavily on poetry at a time when the air, charged with accumulated electricity, gave sign of impending great explosions.

Futurism and other art trends, including Expressionism, Fauvism, Cubism and Orphism, in differing ways, were “the ‘foreboding’ of all this in art.”

The Guggenheim exhibition introduces the leading Orphists—the Delaunays and Kupka—in its first gallery. The movement’s international character is already apparent in this trio of artists. Robert Delaunay was born in Paris. His wife Sonia was born in Ukraine and studied in Russia and Germany before moving to France. Kupka was born in Opatowitz, Austria-Hungary, a town that is now part of the Czech Republic.

Robert Delaunay’s Cubist phase is evident in his early *Eiffel Tower* series. In *Eiffel Tower* (1911), the subject is rendered in broken lines and incomplete planes. The irregular grid and diagonals of *Windows Open Simultaneously 1st Part, 3rd Motif* (1912) also derive from Cubism, but Delaunay is beginning to abandon representation and to dedicate himself to vivid colors.

Not angles, but curves dominate the tondo (a Renaissance term for a circular work of art) *Simultaneous Contrasts: Sun and Moon* (1913). Gentle gradations of color sit side by side with contrasts. A white, eyelike moon gazes calmly at the flaming sun, which also suggests a cluster of blazing flowers. The painting’s evocation of nature in its immensity balances between joy and reverence.

By *First Disk* (1913), another tondo, Delaunay has crossed into pure abstraction. The painting is a series of concentric circles divided into quadrants; dark and earthy tones predominate on the bottom, and watery and fiery tones on top. The palette and contrasts simulate radiance but promote contemplation rather than bedazzlement. The effect is harmonious and mystical, embodying Delaunay’s signature style.

Sonia Delaunay’s paintings more clearly reflect Orphism’s engagement with the other arts and with the advances that were changing modern life. *Le Bal Bullier* (1913) is a panoramic painting named after a dance hall that the Delaunays frequented. With lively colors and contrasts, and with horizontal lines and curves, it captures the sway of dancers under electric lights.

One of the exhibition’s most outstanding works is Delaunay’s design for *Prose of the Trans-Siberian and of Little Joan of France* (1913), a fanciful poem by Blaise Cendrars about a train voyage around the world. The book is unconventionally printed in a seven-foot-long sheet that unfolds like an accordion. Delaunay’s brightly colored curves and arches cascade down the left as the poem flows along the right. Both painting and poem convey the wonder and beauty of the world and of the modern transportation that was making it more accessible.

In *Electric Prisms* (1914), two dazzling electric lights (which recall Robert Delaunay’s *First Disk*) throw arcs of many colors upon a highly abstract street scene. Technology is associated with an almost mystical experience that Delaunay seeks to evoke through complementary colors that paradoxically unify the canvas.

As it was for the Delaunays, the disk was a central motif for Kupka, who was equally interested in occult philosophy and hard sciences such as physics and biology. Based on overlapping disks and arcs and painted largely in primary colors, *Red and Blue Disks* (1911) seems to radiate beyond the edges of the canvas. Though he painted it in oil, Kupka achieved the delicate, translucent effect of watercolor.

The disks and arcs of *Disks of Newton, Study for Fugue in Two Colors* (1912) are more solid and fixed. Fields of black and beams of white and blue anchor the brighter concentric circles, which seem to gleam pure white light.

In *Localization of Graphic Motifs II* (1913) Kupka changes his technique and compositional elements. Shapes that recall leaves or reptilian scales swirl toward a white vortex at the center of the canvas. These fuchsia, green and gray forms are rendered in many small brushstrokes. Here, Kupka has built a “stereoscopic bridge” to guide the eye and convey depth.

Paintings by other Orphists, such as Gleizes and Metzinger, are included in this expansive exhibition, as well. The French artist Francis Picabia, who changed styles many times during his career, is also represented at the Guggenheim. The effects of Orphism in America are visible in canvases by Stanton Macdonald-Wright and Morgan Russell, who developed the small and closely related Synchronist movement.

The exhibition also includes several paintings by Italian Futurists, who were contemporaries of the Orphists. The bright colors and geometric abstraction of Gino Severini’s *Dancer = Propeller = Sea* (1915) have much in common with Orphism. In addition to emphasizing technology and speed (even more than the Orphists did), the Futurists fetishized youth, physical fitness and violence. Moreover, they were staunch nationalists, and many of them embraced fascism. But the exhibition hardly mentions the Italian Futurists’ politics or their historical and philosophical (i.e., Nietzschean) roots.

Much of the work on display predates World War I, which profoundly affected the artists. Apollinaire was struck in the temple by shrapnel and never fully recovered. Cendrars lost his right arm. The Delaunays moved to Portugal, which was neutral, and painted outdoor markets and the Iberian coast, shunning the war. Other artists left Europe entirely.

The exhibition is silent about the geopolitical and economic roots of this epochal event. Nor does it mention how the war altered artists’ consciousness (e.g., by challenging patriotism, religious faith and even faith in reason and progress). Even more tellingly, the exhibition contains no reference whatsoever to another world-shaking event of the period: the Russian Revolution.

The postwar paintings on display show Kupka’s continuous experimentation with technique. His work, unlike that of the Delaunays, grew in sophistication and complexity. But the exhibition does not acknowledge that Orphism ended as an active movement with World War I.

Subsequent movements such as Suprematism and De Stijl retreated further from the depiction of the external world and oriented themselves toward spirituality and “pure artistic feeling.” In contrast, the Dada movement openly rejected patriotism, war and the establishment. It gleefully and pitilessly satirized capitalist society through absurdity and provocation.

Harmony and Dissonance brings a trove of wonderful paintings to public attention. Anyone interested in the way that artists responded to the developments of the early 20th century should visit this exhibition. But besides falling short in placing Orphism in its historical and philosophical context, the exhibition fails to evaluate the movement critically. To recognize the Orphists’ visual brilliance still leaves a number of questions unanswered: Where did this trend lead to? How enduring were its conceptions and approaches? How richly, persuasively and meaningfully did it encounter the world and society of its epoch?

Ultimately, to have the deepest and most enduring impact, art needs to reveal important, all-sided truths about the reality its viewers inhabit. The latter are not empty machines who merely appreciate formal excellence. The Orphists, despite their interest in science and their enthusiasm for technology, subscribed to a radical subjectivity that precluded an examination of the social relations and psychology of the modern life and trends they celebrated. Though their work represented formal advances and expressed the thrill of new possibilities, it did not transcend the artists' surface impressions of urban life during their epoch.



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