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‘Sonia Delaunay: Living Art’ Review: Radiantly Modern
New York’s Bard Graduate Center highlights the underappreciated artist in a show that focuses on her colorful, pioneering work in graphic and commercial design.

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Installation view of ‘Sonia Delaunay: Living Art.’ PHOTO: BRUCE M. WHITE

New York

Sonia Delaunay (1885-1979) was as innovative, influential and prolific a designer as she was a painter. In 1912, she and her husband, the abstract painter and theorist Robert (1885-1941), were the first Parisians to paint purely abstractly. She created, for their newborn son, the earliest abstract textile—the multicolor patchwork-fabric crib cover “Couverture (Blanket)” (1911). And the wooden toy box “Coffret à Jouets” (1913)—the first abstract painted object. Her collaged, mixed-media book covers (1912-13)—including that for Blaise Cendrars’s poem “Les Pâques à New York” (1913)—heralded the invention of abstract graphic design. Delaunay also created groundbreaking books, posters, typefaces and playing cards; sets and costumes for stage and film; interiors, home furnishings, stained glass and

even the jovial, multicolored-checkerboard surfaces and upholstery of automobiles. But she remains underknown and underappreciated.

Sonia Delaunay: Living Art

Bard Graduate Center, through July 7

Bard Graduate Center's "Sonia Delaunay: Living Art," a kaleidoscopic survey of some 200 works—including rarely seen clothing, furniture, jewelry, mosaics, documentary photographs and films, and a painted-plastic scale-model car—intends to redress that oversight. Some designs, such as the black-and-white silk "Serpent Scarf" (1924/1978); the large wool tapestry, "Rythmes Couleurs ou Panneau F 1898" (1973/1975); and her shimmering costume design for the role of Cleopatra (1918), are graphic, bold, carnivalesque. Other abstract textiles—diaphanous, twinkling—favor springtime, autumnal or aquatic hues. Co-curated by Laura Microulis, at Bard, and Waleria Dorogova, an independent art historian, the lavish exhibition and its doorstep catalog constitute the first serious U.S. appraisal in over 20 years.



'Coffret à Jouets' (1913) PHOTO: RMP

Born Sarah Elievna Stern to poor Jewish parents in Odessa, Ukraine, then part of the Russian Empire, Delaunay was adopted, at age 5, by her wealthy Russian aunt and uncle, Anna and Genrikh Terk, who reared her in St. Petersburg as Sonia Terk. She studied painting in Germany and, in 1906, moved to Paris. After an arranged marriage failed, she wed Robert in 1910. In 1917, her generous allowance was

cut off during the Russian Revolution. As the family's sole breadwinner, she practiced—sometimes for multiple years at a stretch—largely commercial art.

BGC is dedicated to the study of decorative arts, material culture and design history. Unsurprisingly, “Living Art,” eschewing her formative Fauvist years, highlights Delaunay the postwar designer—not the painter. Among scant paintings here is the strong geometric abstract oil “Rythme Couleur (no. 1633)” (1970), a bisected plane comprising flat, colored rectangles, circles, half-circles, triangles and lines.



‘Broderie de Feuillages’ (1909) PHOTO: RMP

Despite its dearth of painting, the exhibition—overflowing with arabesques of ebullient color—touches on nearly every aspect of Delaunay’s multifaceted universe. Here are several seminal works, including “Coffret à Jouets”; the nearly abstract wool embroidery on canvas “Broderie de Feuillages” (1909); and the roughly seven-foot-long, painted vertical lithographic scroll (folded accordion-style) “La Prose du Transsibérien et de la Petite Jehanne de France” (1913) and its hand-painted cover-wrapper. Comprising 12 multicolored typefaces, a Michelin railway map and a rainbow of whirling color, “La

Prose du Transsibérien” transforms Cendrars’s epic travel-poem into modernism’s first abstract prose-painting—fusing color and text.

The show also features milestones never before exhibited in the U.S., including “Robe Simultanée,” or “Simultaneous Dress” (1913). The earliest piece of abstract clothing—and, therefore, modern art’s initial launch into everyday life—“Robe Simultanée” is a full-length, variously colored patchwork of geometric-shaped scrap material (fur, wool, velvet, satin), with a black parachute-silk hip-bustle. Delaunay—who embraced the emotional power and primacy of pure color—envisioned everything, including fashion, through the eyes of a painter. Rather than design a pattern and drape the body, like covering furniture, she conceived of the dynamic human figure (and accessories such as scarves, hats and bags) as a kinetic, abstract relief-sculpture—a performative ensemble in which layered, rhythmic patterns and colors move, overlap and interact.



‘Rythmes Couleurs ou Panneau F 1898’ (1973/1975) PHOTO: PRACUSA

Delaunay referred to her abstractions as “Simultaneity” or “Simultaneous Contrasts.” And I can think of few artists, with the exception of Piet Mondrian, who did so much with so little. Simultaneity was an economical but infinitely fruitful approach to geometric painting and design. Delaunay treated the flat canvas, page or fabric as a malleable plane on top of and within which her flat geometric forms are brought instantaneously—simultaneously—to the foreground. Her purely abstract orchestrations bisect, interlock and interlace unmodulated color shapes (circles, half-circles, rectangles, stripes,

triangles, spirals, zigzags) as syncopated color movements. In her deceptively simple, childlike paintings and designs, there exists no depth or recession; no foreground or background; no before or after—no time. We experience everything all at once—right here, right now.

“Living Art,” according to press materials and wall texts, “illuminates Delaunay’s ingenious strategies of promotion and branding” and explores “the materiality, making, and marketing” of her work. Visually, it’s a triumph. But it’s not the full story. Delaunay made no hierarchical distinctions between her painting and design. But she also wrote in her 1978 autobiography: “The world of business has always filled me with horror and disgust.” It would be unfortunate if Bard viewers came away thinking that commercial art, not painting—color, light—was Delaunay’s chief love and ambition. “Do you begin by coming up with an overall design?” Delaunay was asked, in 1974. “No, no. Color is everything,” she replied. “I paint from morning until evening . . . a new way of painting, where color is a living element that exists in and of itself, that has its own life.”