



painting music: rhythm and movement in art

2006-2007 20th Annual Sheldon Statewide Exhibition
Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery University of Nebraska-Lincoln

painting music: rhythm and movement in art

In the past 100 years music has played a tremendously important role in the stylistic development of visual art. It has created impetus and inspiration for those artists wishing to produce a pure and transcendental art form. Music has also been used as an analogy or metaphor in artistic expression. By listening to music and emulating it in their work, artists have discovered unconventional techniques in their art-making approach. *Painting Music: Rhythm and Movement in Art* explores the influence of music on the visual arts beginning in the early 20th century with the Russian artist Wassily Kandinsky and continuing with the work of contemporary artists. While some works in the exhibition express characteristics of music and dance others reference a particular composer or style of music. Most of the exhibition is composed of nonrepresentational art reflecting its relationship with music and the belief that, like music, art is created from the depths of one's inner self and the purest way to express this is without recognizable imagery.

The music and art connection can best be described in the late 19th century concept of *synaesthesia* or the blending of senses. The idea means that sensory perception of one kind can manifest itself as a sensory experience of another. Color was considered a core element in sensory perception and in seeing color it has been asserted that one hears certain sounds. As with music, color can act directly upon the emotions.

In 1911 Kandinsky attended a concert by the Viennese composer Arnold Schoenberg, an



Wassily Kandinsky, *No. III, Die Kleine Welten*, 1922, four-color lithograph, 10 ¹⁵/₁₆ x 9 ¹/₁₆"
UNL-E. M. Hall Collection

event that became a turning point for the artist. Kandinsky was so impressed with the music that he began correspondence with Schoenberg and later invited the composer to exhibit art with a group of artists called *Der Blaue Reiter* (The Blue Rider).¹

Kandinsky attempted to put order to tonal colors. In his famed 1912 essay *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* he explained how he associated certain colors with particular instruments. For example: yellow was linked with the sound of the trumpet, red with the tuba or kettle drum and blue with the cello, contrabass or organ.² Kandinsky also asserted that a new art could evolve from the formal abstract structure of music such as can be seen in *No. III, Die Kleine Welten* (The Little Worlds, 1922). By layering and blending paint and creating juxtapositions,

artists created compositions likened to musical scores. And indeed synaesthesia proved to be essential in the development of abstract art.

The Swiss artist Paul Klee explored the laws of color harmony in relation to musical harmony. An accomplished violinist, Klee used *polyphony* or harmonized multiple voices, as a model for painting. Using a small format Klee rendered nature by using gradations of color and repetitions of shapes to give a sense of unfolding parallel to music. A contemporary artist who considers Klee to be his greatest influence is Robert Natkin. In Natkin's #630 (1979) large, colorful, textured abstractions with a layering can be likened to Klee's *Park* (1914-15) despite the difference in scale.

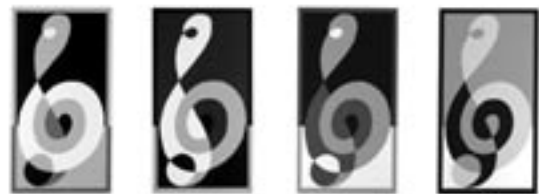
Kandinsky, Klee and German-born artist Josef Albers all taught at the Bauhaus School in the mid-1920s. There they developed theories about music and art, and they remained in close contact after the Bauhaus was closed in 1933. Albers created a systematic, serial group of works such as the *Treble Clef* sequence of 1934. This isolation of elements set up systematically was similar to music in the way sounds are isolated and then equally treated in a composition. Albers went on to experiment and write about the psychological effects of color:

“Only by alterations of color can a completely different climate be engendered... What I envision is playing ‘staccato’ or ‘legato’ – and all the other musical terms.”⁴

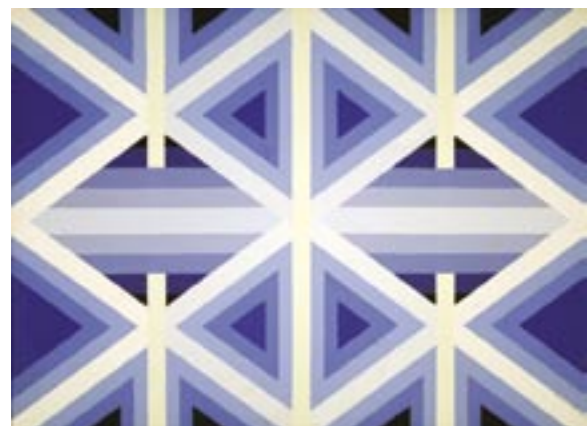
Ed Garman first encountered Kandinsky's work at the Art Institute of Chicago when he saw his series of *Improvisations* in 1935.⁵ In



Paul Klee, *Park*, 1914–15, color lithograph, 4 7/8 x 4”
UNL–E. M. Hall Collection



Josef Albers, *Formulation: Articulation I*, 1972, screen print, 12 3/16 x 26”
UNL–E. M. Hall Collection



Ed Garman, *Variation of a Structure No. 43*, 1965, polymer paint on Masonite, 45 x 33”
UNL–Gift of Arthur H. Johnson in memory of May Van Dyke

1941, he moved to New Mexico and joined the Transcendental Painters Group who sought to create art with a spiritual purpose using color and form. After his service in WWII, Garman's art began to take on a more abstract appearance. *Variation of a Structure No. 43* (1965) pulsates with bright colors and straight-edge geometric shapes that defy gravity and perspective.

Like Garman, James Brooks' style changed after WWII. He had painted in a realist manner for the WPA (Works Progress Administration) before entering the war after which his work became more lyrical and abstract. Brooks tended to paint in dark tones. His work evolved into a fluid style with chance not unlike the work of the famous abstract expressionist artist Jackson Pollock with whom he had become a friend and neighbor. His painting, *U-1951* is monochromatic or with few variations on one color. In musical terms it might be described as having a slow, deliberate tempo proven effective by its ponderous shapes and minimal color. ⁶

Morgan Russell and Stanton Macdonald-Wright were also influential forces in furthering the connection between music and art. Interested in the psychological effects of color and sound they developed the method of color composition based on what they termed color chords derived from the color wheel. Russell has been credited for inventing *synchromism*, meaning "with color". It was chosen as an analogy to the musical term *symphony* to denote his emphasis on color rhythms. The Synchromists' first exhibited in Munich in June 1913, with artwork that was controversial because of its abstract and ephemeral nature. ⁷



James Brooks, *U-1951*, 1951, oil on canvas, 37 3/4 x 25 3/4"
NAA—Thomas C. Woods Acquisition Fund



Jan Matulka, *Cubist Nudes*, 1918, oil on canvas (double-sided), 29 x 25"
UNL—Gift of Mary Riepma Ross



Stanton Macdonald-Wright, *Dragon Forms*, 1926, oil on panel, 26 1/4 x 15 1/4"
NAA—Bequest of Herbert Schmidt, Centennial Committee, the Art of Politics,
and Joseph Chowning



Morgan Russell, *Synchrony*, about 1925, oil on canvas, 11 x 20 1/8"
UNL—F. M. Hall Collection

According to Russell, color was light and the color rhythms that they produced unfolded before the viewer giving their paintings the fourth dimension of time. Russell emphasized rhythm, “the palpitation or undulation ...” over the subject of the painting.⁸ In his painting, *Synchrony* (about 1925) we see a three-dimensional quality, which equates with the theory that color should express form. This structural solidity might have stemmed also from Russell’s training in architecture.

The vivid colors in *Dragon Forms* (1926) by Macdonald-Wright tend to vibrate on the canvas as music does in our ears. About his work he wrote “...as nature recedes from the eye it becomes blue-violet or violet, while as it advances, it becomes warmer or in other words, more yellow or more orange.” And in between were “...all the intermediate steps of the spectrum.”⁹ Macdonald-Wright and Russell both felt that if effective, art, like music, could deliver humankind to a higher realm or spiritual awakening.

In Jan Matulka’s *Cubist Nudes* (1918) we see figures possessing detached, colorful shapes that contain structural elements similar to the work of the Sychromists. Matulka’s close friendship with Stuart Davis may have also strengthened his relationship to music. Matulka’s work was cubist in style but more direct and hard-edge than that of Picasso or Braque.

Known as spontaneous, intuitive and experimental, John Ferren explored honesty and sincerity in his art. He was interested in the spiritual, transcendental and natural world and studied Zen Buddhism and Taoism. An usher for the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra,

Ferren was passionate about music and became deeply aware of its emotive and symbolic power. He believed that abstract art could communicate creative emotion better than representational art. Ferren lived in Paris in 1929 and again from 1931 to 1938. He studied Kandinsky's *The Art of Spiritual Harmony* and knew him personally. Borrowing ideas from the book, Ferren continued to paint and interpret abstract art into the 1950s. His adept use of color as creative emotion can be seen in *Red and Blue* (1954).

Abraham Walkowitz also was deeply influenced by Kandinsky's work and writings. He studied both seriously and adapted a style of his own that incorporated a similar philosophy. An admirer of dancer and choreographer Isadora Duncan, Walkowitz made her his primary subject for several years. His work, which began as portraits, grew into simple curved lyrical lines with musical references. Similar characteristics can be seen in *Untitled (New York)* completed in 1912. Walkowitz also believed in non-referential language that communicated the inner expression of the artist. He was quoted as saying "Abstract art...is a universal language, and dwells in the realm of music with equivalent emotion. Its melody is attuned to the receptive eye as music is to the ear."¹⁰

Listening to the music of jazz piano players Earl Hines and Fats Waller inspired artist Stuart Davis to find a similar style of painting. He likened his color intervals to the way Hines used space in his music. Furthermore he discovered that painting has an element that will dominate and make chaos seem orderly just as jazz rhythm will hold together the most unrelated excursions that occur in individual pieces.¹¹



John Ferren, *Red and Blue*, 1954, oil on canvas, 48 x 38"
UNL-F. M. Hall Collection



John Cage, *Stones 2*, 1989, spit bite, sugar-lift, soft-ground etching, 18 x 22 3/4"
UNL-F. M. Hall Collection



Abraham Walkowitz, *Untitled (New York)*, about 1912, graphite on paper, 12 ⁷/₈ x 9 ¹/₂"
UNL–Nelle Cochrane Woods Memorial

Finding success in his new style, Davis encouraged his friend Romare Bearden to consider the visual analogies in jazz. Bearden, who grew up listening to jazz music, learned from Davis how to incorporate music elements such as intervals and rhythm in his art.

Bearden lived in Harlem when it was a hub of intellectual and cultural life. His family apartment was located across the street from the Lafayette Club where his friend, Duke Ellington, along with Ella Fitzgerald and Fats Waller, performed. Bearden also had a studio above the Apollo Theatre for 16 years. He painted two entire series entitled *Of the Blues* and *Of Jazz*. In the early 1950s Bearden stopped painting and spent the next few years writing songs. With composer Dave Ellis he founded Bluebird Music Company and recorded 20 songs. *Jazz* (1979) was created at a time when Bearden was producing album covers for jazz musicians. It depicts musicians playing together within a colorful and well-lit setting. Bearden also outlines the image with bright colors that seem to convey the lively, energetic music being produced.



Romare Howard Bearden, *Jazz*, 1979, photogravure with hand coloring, 22 ¹/₄ x 30 ¹/₈"
UNL–F. M. Hall Collection

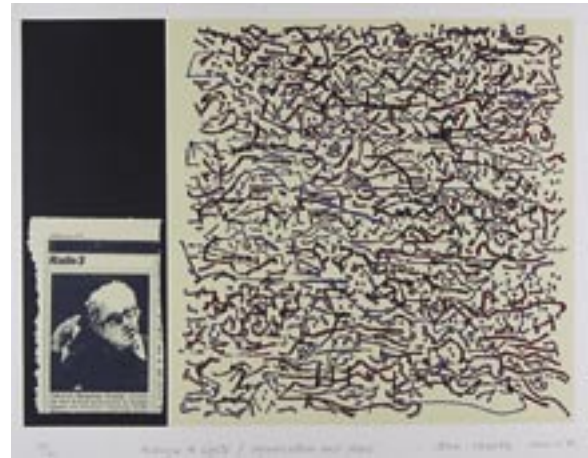
Musicians also have created visual art as was the case with John Cage. In the late 1940s this composer, writer and artist made a life-altering discovery. In a silent chamber at Harvard he heard two sounds: one was high, which he deduced was his nervous system, and one was low, thought to be his blood circulation. This revelation and his study of Eastern philosophies, led him to his “exploration of nonintention.”¹² Like the chance methods in his music, Cage used color and shape randomly in his visual art. Cage’s awareness of silence in music can be seen through its abundance of white space in

his piece called *Stones 2* (1989). Using rocks and chance placement, the personality of the artist is removed. The result is “a series of prints that are as quiet and empty as his music.”¹³

The late 20th-century composer Gyorgy Ligeti is the subject of John Christie’s serigraph from the portfolio titled: *Homage to Ligeti/Organisation and Chaos* (1981). Christie’s imagery was inspired by a statement he read in the programme notes for the *San Francisco Polyphony*. In describing his music Ligeti referred to the interplay between chaos and organization and likened it to throwing a lot of things into a drawer. Even though the things in the drawer are in disarray, the drawer itself is a well-defined form. Christie’s image includes a newspaper clipping of the composer next to what might be described as a chaotic musical score.

Painting Music: Rhythm and Movement in Art is about the many ways artists have emulated music using techniques such as color, form, repetition, layering and lyricism. It also exemplifies how music has influenced and inspired art and art making. As many ways as there are to explore the music and art connection, what is actually being seen and what is heard is up to the individual. What do you hear: a symphony, a ballad, the blues or jazz? Perhaps you hear only noise or silence between the notes. However you experience it, we hope you will enjoy the performance.

Sharon L. Kennedy
Curator



John Christie, *Homage to Ligeti/Organisation and Chaos* (from *Ten Recent Prints and a Collage/Drawing portfolio*), 1981, screen print, 12 x 16 1/4"
UNL—Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Eugene Judd

Endnotes

- ¹ Kerry Brougher, et al., *Visual Music Synaesthesia in Art and Music Since 1900* (New York, Thames & Hudson, 2005), p. 32.
- ² Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (New York, George Wittenborn), p. 58.
- ³ Brougher, p. 16.
- ⁴ Karin Maur, *The Sound of Painting, Music in Modern Art* (Munich, Prestel, 1999), p. 103.
- ⁵ Gail Levin and Marianne Lorenz, *Theme and Improvisation: Kandinsky and the American Avant-Garde 1912-1950* (Boston, Little, Brown, 1992), p. 128.
- ⁶ Sam Hunter, *James Brooks Whitney Museum of Art* (Montpelier, Capital City Press, 1963), p. 14.
- ⁷ Gail Levin, *Synchromism and American Color Abstraction* (New York, George Braziller, 1978), p. 18.
- ⁸ Levin, *Synchromism*, p. 9.
- ⁹ Levin, *Synchromism*, p. 47.
- ¹⁰ Levin, *Theme and Improvisation*, p. 25.
- ¹¹ Mona Hadler, “Jazz and the Visual Arts”, *Arts Magazine*, 57 (June 1983), p. 98.
- ¹² <http://www.newalbion.com/artist/cagej/autobiog.html>
- ¹³ http://www.cyberchiks.com/cage_interview.htm

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EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

Josef Albers
Formulation: Articulation I
1972
screen print
12 ³/₁₆ x 26"
UNL–F. M. Hall Collection



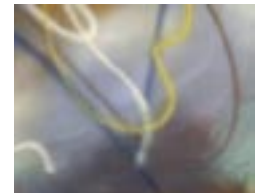
John Cage
Stones 2
1989
spit bite, sugar-lift,
soft-ground etching
18 x 22 ³/₄"
UNL–F. M. Hall Collection



Jennifer Bartlett
From Rhapsody
1987
spit bite, sugar-lift, photogravure
37 ¹/₄ x 12"
UNL–F. M. Hall Collection



Dan Christensen
Untitled (Pink Abstraction)
1968
acrylic on canvas
33 ¹/₂ x 41 ¹/₂"
UNL–Gift of Murray and Ruth Gribin



Romare Howard Bearden
Jazz
1979
photogravure with hand coloring
22 ¹/₄ x 30 ¹/₈"
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James Brooks
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1951
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37 ³/₄ x 25 ³/₄"
NAA–Thomas C. Woods Acquisition Fund



Stuart Davis
Detail Study for "Cliché"
not dated
color lithograph
12 ¹/₂ x 14 ⁷/₈"
UNL–F. M. Hall Collection



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Red and Blue
1954
oil on canvas
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Dragon Forms
1926
oil on panel
26 1/4 x 15 1/4"
NAA–Bequest of Herbert Schmidt,
Centennial Committee, the Art of Politics,
and Joseph Chowning



Victor Huggins
Composition
1969
acrylic on stitched and padded canvas
7 x 22 1/8"
UNL–Bequest of Bertha Schaefer



Jan Matulka
Cubist Nudes
1918
oil on canvas (double-sided)
29 x 25"
UNL–Gift of Mary Riepma Ross



Wassily Kandinsky
No. III, Die Kleine Welten
1922
four-color lithograph
10 15/16 x 9 1/16"
UNL–F. M. Hall Collection



Walter McConnell
Cascade
1989
metal, rope, gesso, crayon
55 x 28 x 15"
UNL–F. M. Hall Collection



Dwight Kirsch
Dance Rhythm - Mechanization
1937
watercolor
12 x 10"
UNL–Gift of Ann R. Edholm



Robert Natkin
#630
1979
oil on canvas
71 1/2 x 48"
UNL–Gift of Michael Todd



Douglas Peden
Landscape #14
1968
acrylic on canvas
56 x 46"



UNL—Gift of Jackie and Lester Lipsky

Tom V. Schmitt
Tondo
1961
oil on canvas
43"



UNL—F. M. Hall Collection

Man Ray
Merchant of Venice
1967
color lithograph
16 1/2 x 24 1/2"



UNL—Dale D. Brodkey Memorial

Abraham Walkowitz
Untitled (New York)
about 1912
graphite on paper
12 7/8 x 9 1/2"



UNL—Nelle Cochrane Woods Memorial

Morgan Russell
Synchromy
about 1925
oil on canvas
11 x 20 1/8"



UNL—F. M. Hall Collection

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EXHIBITION SCHEDULE

June 13 – August 13, 2006

Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, Lincoln,
Nebraska

August 17 – September 24, 2006

Concordia University, Seward, Nebraska

October 9 – November 12, 2006

McKinley Center, North Platte, Nebraska

Teacher Training Workshop: Oct. 13

Local sponsors: NebraskaLand National Bank,
Art Study League of North Platte

November 14 – December 14, 2006

High Plains Museum, McCook, Nebraska

Local sponsors: McCook Arts Council

January 3 – 28, 2007

West NE Arts Center, Scottsbluff, Nebraska

Local sponsors: Barbour Music

February 2 – March 6, 2007

Columbus Art Gallery, Columbus, Nebraska

Teacher Training Workshop: Feb. 2

Local sponsors: Robert C. and Linda Labenz,
Columbus Bank and Trust Company

March 8 – April 6, 2007

Morton James Public Library, Nebraska City,
Nebraska

April 10 – May 13, 2007

Stuhr Museum, Grand Island, Nebraska

Teacher Training Workshop: April 9

Local sponsors: Home Federal Bank,
Grand Island Public Schools, Moonshell Arts
and Humanities Council

May 15 – June 24, 2007

Edgerton Explorit Center, Aurora, Nebraska

Local sponsors: Hamilton County Foundation, Inc.



Painting Music: Rhythm and Movement in Art is organized by Sheldon Statewide, an outreach program of the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. The exhibition is made possible by the generous support of the membership of the Nebraska Art Association, the Nebraska Arts Council, Farmers Mutual Insurance Company of Nebraska, James and Rhonda Seacrest and Lonnie Pierson Dunbier.

Front cover image:
Stuart Davis
Detail Study for "Cliché"
not dated
color lithograph
12 1/2 x 14 7/8"
UNL-F. M. Hall Collection