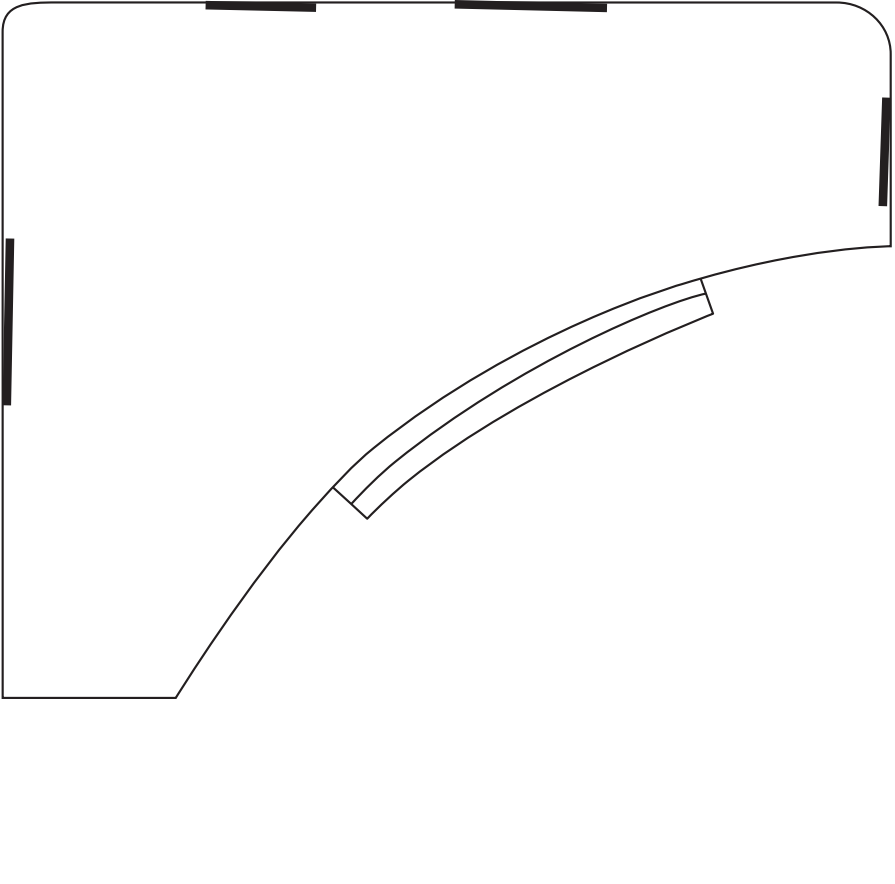




While Orphism was born in Paris, the interconnected artists who developed this abstract approach to painting hailed not only from France but also from countries across Europe and from the United States, reflecting the cohort’s transnational nature. Of the artists on view in this introductory gallery, only Robert Delaunay was strictly French. The Jewish polymath Sonia Delaunay arrived via a circuitous route from current-day Ukraine. (She met and married Robert in Paris.) František Kupka came from Bohemia, a region now part of the Czech Republic. Francis Picabia was of French and Spanish heritage.

The four pivotal canvases exhibited here exemplify how each painter engaged differently with key features of Orphism’s visual language. Testing theories of color and optics, these artists were united by the desire to represent simultaneity, the wish to stimulate sensory responses in their viewers, and the ambition to epitomize the novelties of modern life. But they had their own independent takes on the idiom as they variously depicted a panoply of themes: popular dance, celestial phenomena, electric light, and harmonic rhythms.

In a final twist, as often happens when critics define styles, these and other artists did not immediately accept the Orphist label concocted by poet Guillaume Apollinaire to describe their work. The Delaunays initially called their mode of art making *simultanisme*, or “simultanism”; Picabia had a relationship to Cubism at the time; and Kupka considered himself unaffiliated with any movement. Orphism, then, comprised assorted individuals who collectively lent this new “ism” its distinctive yet variegated ethos.

From left to right:

Francis Picabia
b. 1879, Paris
d. 1953, Paris

Edtaonisl (Ecclesiastic)
(*Edtaonisl [Ecclésiastique]*)
1913
Oil on canvas
The Art Institute of Chicago,
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Armand Bartos, 1953

Edtaonisl (Ecclesiastic) encapsulates a multiplicity of Francis Picabia’s interests on a grand scale, including his preoccupation with dance and, more broadly, kinesthesia—or the physical sense of a body in motion. Picabia painted this cacophonous composition after his transformative 1913 trip to New York. Many impressions made their way into his art, from watching the dancer and film star Stacia Napierkowska practice with her troupe on the ship’s journey over, to seeing movies in the city, to hearing jazz in Harlem. Picabia also enjoyed wordplay. “Edtaonisl,” which he inscribed on the painting, is non-sensical in French but acts as a quasi-anagram of *étoile*[e] and *dans*[e] (star and dance), a reference to Napierkowska. The subtitle, “Ecclesiastic,” points to a priest the artist espied on board the liner intently observing the dancers. Picabia rendered these experiences in a synesthetic abstraction of riotous forms merging dance, music, the ship’s movement, and more.

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Robert Delaunay
b. 1885, Paris
d. 1941, Montpellier, France

Simultaneous Contrasts: Sun and Moon
(*Soleil, lune, simultané 2*)
1913
Oil on canvas
The Museum of Modern Art, New York,
Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund, 1954

In spring 1913, Robert Delaunay embarked upon a new series, “Circular forms,” that centers on the sun, the moon, or, as in this painting, both celestial

bodies. For these works, Delaunay continued to rely on scientific studies delving into chromatics, optics, and perception. He also capitalized on the numerous spiraling possibilities afforded by the circle, among them chemist M. E. Chevreul’s color wheels, on view just outside this gallery; Paris’s gyratory Great (Ferris) Wheel, a recurrent motif of Delaunay’s earlier compositions; the tondo, or round, format he chose for this painting; and the rotating orbs depicted within. Now Delaunay’s gaze shifted skyward, leaving behind his abstracted views of urban Paris for heavenly scenes untouched by human intervention, coincident with a period distinguished by several major astronomical events. Light is the ultimate subject of *Simultaneous Contrasts: Sun and Moon*, which makes tangible the glow emanating from these multiplied cosmic entities.

Sonia Delaunay
b. 1885, Gradizhsk, Russian Empire
(now Hradyz’k, Ukraine)
d. 1979, Paris

Electric Prisms
(*Prismes électriques*)
1914
Oil on canvas
Centre Pompidou, Paris, MNAM/CCI,
State Purchase, 1958

In this animated night scene illuminated by street-lamps, Sonia Delaunay captured a city boulevard teeming with brilliant hues and vibrating forms. *Electric Prisms* reveals Delaunay’s abstract style of *simultanéité* (simultaneity), yoking together instances of time and glimpses of place in a simultaneous experience that describes the multilayered feeling of modern life. By selecting contrasting hues from opposite sides of the color wheel, Delaunay produced a push-pull effect, activating the composition and equating color with light. While experiments in color theory and optical effects dominate this image, aspects of commerce and self-promotion slip into it as well. A painted flyer posted on a barely discernible advertising column in the lower-left quadrant of the composition highlights a collaboration between Delaunay and the poet Blaise Cendrars on their “first simultaneous

book,” *The Prose of the Trans-Siberian and of Little Jehanne of France* (featured elsewhere in this exhibition).

František Kupka
b. 1871, Opočno, Austro-Hungarian Empire
(now Czech Republic)
d. 1957, Puteaux, France

Localization of Graphic Motifs II
(*Localisation de mobiles graphiques II*)
1912–13
Oil on canvas
National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.,
Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund and Gift of
Jan and Meda Mladek, 1984

The mystical and the scientific were not incompatible for František Kupka, nor for many of his peers. Although Kupka’s interest in occult philosophies began during his youth, his engagement with scientific currents and discoveries thrived following his move to Paris in 1896. There he attended lectures in physics, biology, and other sciences; saw early film; and studied color theory. His prescient nonrepresentational compositions, initially exhibited in Paris in 1912, endured with two new canvases at the 1913 Salon d’Automne titled *Localization of Graphic Motifs I* and *II* (*II* is on view here). Kupka called his vibrating lines “stereoscopic bridges”—markings that guide sight and the perception of depth. Through streaming waves of color that appear to emerge out of and converge in the pictorial space, he investigated the science of vision, optics, and energy. Upending painting’s static nature, Kupka privileged the experiential aspect of the image.

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