

# Significant Others

EDITED BY

WHITNEY & ISABELLE de  
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# Significant Others

*Creativity & Intimate  
Partnership*

with 17 illustrations

 Thames & Hudson

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*We dedicate this book to significant others:  
Bob Bechtle  
Michele Respaut and Michèle Sarde*

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LIVING SIMULTANEOUSLY  
*Sonia & Robert Delaunay*

WHITNEY CHADWICK



Sonia and Robert Delaunay in front  
of his painting *Propeller*, 1923

Whether in the studios of Cubist painters, or in the public dance halls of Montparnasse, cultural life in pre-First World War Paris often appeared as a canvas of abrupt rhythms and fragmented shifting surfaces. Modernity was embodied in a restless desire for change and innovation, for newness in all its forms. Sonia and Robert Delaunay (both born in 1885) were among the artists and writers who would give new verbal and visual form to the dynamism and dislocations of the twentieth-century urban landscape. In 1913, they were also among the crowd which flocked to dance halls like the Bal Bullier, where he danced to the intricate patterns and staccato rhythms of the tango and the foxtrot and she, disguised in the colors and shapes of an abstract painting, sat quietly absorbing the flow of movement and light.

The Delaunays' desire to shed the conventions of the past and embrace the modern in every aspect of their lives and work extended to their costumes. Dressed in fashions designed by Sonia, which employed the same palette of colors and shapes evident in their paintings of these years, the young couple seemed to have absorbed the multi-faceted rhythms of everyday life into their very persons. Their frequent companion, the poet and art critic Guillaume Apollinaire, spoke admiringly of Robert Delaunay's red coat with its blue collar, his red socks, yellow and black shoes, black pants, green jacket, sky-blue vest, and tiny red tie. Sonia was no less resplendent in a purple dress with a wide purple and green belt. Under the dress's jacket, she wore a large corsage divided into brightly colored zones of fabric in which antique rose, yellow-orange, Nattier blue and scarlet appeared on different materials, juxtaposing wool, taffeta, tulle,

watered silk, and *peau de soie*. So much variety, Apollinaire concluded, could not escape notice and must surely transform fantasy into elegance.

By 1913, the Delaunays' project of capturing the tempo of modern urban life by integrating sensations of movement and immobility on a two-dimensional surface was well advanced. Using strident juxtapositions of color, they evoked volume and depth. Employing a vocabulary of color and curved forms without recognizable subject matter, they produced lyrical compositions whose content was bound up in impressions and associations. They called the result simultaneity – the term derived from the color theories of Henri Chevreul which underlay the Impressionists' and Neo-Impressionists' elaboration of the structural and spatial properties of color – and its principles would dominate the work of both for the remainder of their lives.

Sonia Terk's arrival in Paris in 1905 coincided with a widespread international migration of artists to the French capital during the first decade of the twentieth century. The daughter of a Ukrainian factory worker, she had been adopted by a wealthy uncle and raised in luxury in St. Petersburg. The tradition of educating upper-class women in Russia – which dated to the nineteenth century – insured her training in literature, philosophy, and mathematics. A female drawing teacher, recognizing the young girl's talent, advised the family to send her abroad for further study. It was ambition and commitment, however, that kept her in Paris in the face of growing familial disapproval over her decision to pursue art as a profession rather than as the amateur accomplishment considered suitable to a young woman of her class and background. Robert Delaunay, on the other hand, the son of the Countess Berthe-Félicie de Rose, a supporter of modern art, was raised in the world of the French avant-garde and spoke its language from an early age.

The meeting between Sonia and Robert Delaunay in 1908 marks the beginning of one of the most productive and, in some though not all ways, mutually enriching artistic exchanges of the twentieth century. Yet modern art histories, with their almost exclusive focus on individual production, provide little in the way of a model with which to evaluate creative exchange within partnerships like that of the Delaunays. For the most part, they are content to project the Delaunays' working relationship (when acknowledging Sonia's presence at all, that is) as an

artistic variant of the perfect marriages of popular fiction, stressing a complementarity secured by difference and by untroubled relations of dominance and subordination. He, Parisian-born and upper middle class, mercurial and ambitious, a self-declared "genius," painted and wrote theoretical treatises on modern art, sometimes extending his ideas to other media and other projects. "I was carried away by the poet in him, the visionary, the fighter," Sonia herself later confessed.<sup>1</sup> She, a Russian Jewish expatriate, all warmth and generosity, quietly adjusted herself to his needs, setting aside her own career as a painter and instead devoting herself to applying his esthetic theories to the decorative arts, and to the creation of a welcoming environment for the couple's many friends. Cheerfully shouldering the responsibility for the family's financial well-being, she also assumed the care (with paid help) of the son born in 1911, thus freeing Robert to follow the dictates of genius.

The problem with this version of reality is not that the facts don't fit, but that it originates almost entirely in the minds of men. We know how Apollinaire, Tristan Tzara, André Breton, and other male modernists viewed the Delaunays. We do not know how Marie Laurencin, Fernande Olivier, or Simone Breton experienced life *chez* Delaunay, if indeed they did. Gertrude Stein's rather curt dismissal of the couple in her *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* is of little help in sifting reality out of vanguard myth; and few historians have been willing to accept Sonia's characterization: "We were two moving forces. One made one thing and one made the other."<sup>2</sup>

Feminism has contributed mightily to disentangling Sonia and her work from Robert and his, and contesting that all too familiar assumption that he made art and she made craft. Like Sophie Taeuber-Arp, Marie Laurencin, Lee Krasner, and other productive female modernists, she now stands alone when necessary – with her own exhibitions, catalogs, monographs, even a biography. The problem is that underlying many of them is the assumption that she can be neatly fitted into the mold that he forged, that *his* modernism and *her* modernism are for all intents and purposes the same; they were after all a couple. Once again one is left wondering where to put a life and a production as intricate as those of Sonia Delaunay, that both shaped and defied familiar categories and forms of expression. Clearly it is modernism itself – particularly those

aspects of it relating to the intersection of abstract painting and design – which demands refashioning around a figure like Sonia Delaunay. I want to suggest here that not only should we be wary of attempts to insert Sonia Delaunay too neatly into the lineage which has secured Robert's place in modern art histories, but that we must continue to chip away at the notion that the parameters of modern art are fixed and monolithic. To acknowledge the territory of early twentieth-century modernism as unstable rather than fixed, as shifting in focus and definition, is to concede that a single couple in the Paris of the 1910's and 20's might indeed experience, and shape, different versions of what we now call modern art. If Sonia Delaunay is at the margins of modern art – as her exclusion from many books on the subject suggests – then it is the margins that must be seen as defining the center.

The terms of the Delaunays' artistic relationship were less fixed, more subject to negotiation, to unconscious if not conscious reworking, than art history leads us to believe. Artistic hierarchies, which establish the predominance of painting and sculpture by asserting their difference from the decorative arts, are of little help in evaluating a creative outpouring in all media like that of Sonia Delaunay. And social constructions of sexual difference within bourgeois marriage as complementary but separated into distinct spheres of influence color both the Delaunays' and our own understanding of their creative relationship. Sonia Delaunay did not publicly contest society's, and Robert's, positioning of her: "From the day we started living together, I played second fiddle and I never put myself first until the 1950's. Robert had brilliance, the flair of genius. As for myself, I lived in greater depth."<sup>3</sup> To live a secret life in "greater depth," or to assume what feminists have theorized as a public masquerade of masculinity – "I'm against women's work being seen apart. I think I work like a man"<sup>4</sup> – are but two of the many strategies often adopted by women, perhaps unconsciously, when confronted with the difficulty of reconciling art and femininity.

The woman who "lived in greater depth" was sensitive to the complexities of a union between two artists, one of whom had a well-known antipathy to competition, and was secure in her knowledge of herself. Her words also reveal something of the unfolding pattern of the creative lives of this couple; it is a pattern rich in loops and circles – like the prisms and discs of the Delaunays' painting – loops which sometimes

parallel each other, sometimes intersect, only to swirl away again, always returning to a central point.

The initial moment of confluence and diversion came during the summer of 1909. While Picasso and Braque struggled toward the new relationship of form and space that would define Cubism – one working in a small Spanish hill town, the other in Cézanne country – the Delaunays spent hours walking in the countryside near Paris, exploring nature with an eye to breaking down its forms and using them as the basis for a new pictorial language. Despite Robert Delaunay's relative lack of formal training in art, he already displayed a characteristic desire to understand its complexities through study and analysis. A series of Neo-Impressionist canvases, their broken brushstrokes and juxtapositions of primary colors signalling his familiarity with Cézanne's landscapes and Chevreul's color theories, was followed by a speedy but methodical sweep through Fauve and Cubist painting. Robert Delaunay's paintings of 1909, which include the first study for the groundbreaking series *Eiffel Towers*, reveal his growing commitment to the interplay of color patches and curved forms, and to a structural use of color and brushstroke strongly influenced by Cézanne.

It was at this point that Sonia temporarily abandoned painting and turned to embroidery. The paintings included in her first one-person exhibition at the art dealer Wilhelm Uhde's gallery the previous year had included powerful figurative canvases in which forms were simplified and organized into flat areas of intense color, often bounded by strong black outlines. Influenced by the work of Matisse and Gauguin, these early paintings established her professional reputation and revealed her allegiance to the principles of an expressionist avant-garde that included a group of fellow Russians, among them Alexandra Exter and Natalia Goncharova.

The reasons for Sonia Delaunay's sudden change in medium in 1909, when she produced an embroidery of foliage patterns similar to Robert's flower studies of the same year, remain obscure. There are no extant paintings by her from that year and she has offered no explanations. Robert, on the other hand, clearly encouraged her to find her direction through the applied arts, and in so doing reaffirmed a gendered creative tradition in which men produce the masterpieces, women embellish the

home. “The break,” he later noted, “was to come in 1909. Delaunay-Terk made some satin wall-hangings which, by means of their expressiveness, were to bring into view the prospect of liberation.”<sup>5</sup>

Was it Robert’s criticism of her reliance on drawing as a scaffolding for her imagery that led her toward a new kind of surface elaboration? Or a growing awareness of her young lover’s insecurity in the face of competition? Or simply a renewed fascination with satin stitch embroidery? It was an unusual step for an ambitious young woman who had battled with her family for the right to remain in Paris and become an artist and whose first exhibition had recently opened to positive reviews. We may never know the true reason – and Sonia would not exhibit her paintings alone again until after Robert’s death – but the decision meant that the Delaunays moved toward pure abstraction along related, but distinct, paths and into art history in different, but unequal, categories.

In 1910, Sonia and Uhde (with whom she had enterprisingly arranged a marriage of convenience in 1908 in order to remain in Paris and paint) agreed to an amicable separation so that she and Robert could marry. After a sojourn in the country while they waited for Sonia’s divorce to become final, the young couple settled into an apartment with a studio on the rue des Grands Augustins. It was during this period that Sonia produced her first collaged and painted designs for book covers, and Robert began his first Cubist-derived paintings on the theme of the modern city.

Moving toward an art of abstraction in which color and form were liberated from representation, Sonia and Robert Delaunay first analyzed forms in nature. Robert referred to the process as “deconstruction;” Sonia thought in terms of the constructed surfaces of textile design. Although the routes they followed toward their goal of pure abstraction were not identical, both would come to conceptualize painting as a structural activity. And both used the word *craft* to describe their interest in the materiality of paint. Sonia’s utilization of the vocabulary of textiles, however, no doubt contributed to later critical dismissals of her work as craft rather than “fine” art. “There is really a flagrant injustice toward us two,” she later noted. “I was classified in the decorative arts and they didn’t want to admit me as a fully fledged painter.”<sup>6</sup> Robert’s adherence to Cubism, on the other hand, placed him squarely within the theoretical framework that rooted modernist painting in that movement’s conceptual and stylistic innovations.

It is not surprising that Sonia Delaunay’s first purely abstract work was not a painting at all, but a pieced and appliquéd quilt of brightly colored geometric blocks and arcs made shortly after the birth of the couple’s son in 1911. The quilt’s geometries and extravagant mix of colors – reds, yellows, greens, purples, pinks, black and white – originated in her memories of quilts she had seen in Russian peasant homes. But while Robert identified the quilt with Russian folk art, the couple’s artist friends were quick to note its debt to Sonia’s knowledge of early Cubist painting. The bed covering – produced at a moment when Robert’s paintings were also moving toward greater abstraction, rectangular fragmentation, and a stronger surface patterning – shares its vertical orientation with the upwardly sweeping geometries of his *Eiffel Tower* paintings of 1909–11, but the color sense is pure Sonia.

The quilt’s rich surface of liberated forms and colors is imprinted in Robert Delaunay’s groundbreaking series of paintings titled *Windows*, begun in 1912. His return to a more highly keyed palette in subsequent paintings is inseparable from Sonia’s increasingly free use of color at this time. To unravel the directional flow of influences in 1912 might satisfy an art historian’s need to know who did what first, but it is of little help in understanding the Delaunays’ synergistic creativity. However indebted Robert may have been to Sonia’s more spontaneous and uninhibited expressions of color – or she to his years of studying and analyzing form – the two understood their sources quite differently. She attributed her new compositions to Robert’s understanding of Chevreul’s color theories: “And his construction in turn helped me. It was the backbone of my painting. It enabled me to arrange colors without drawing.”<sup>7</sup> He was quick to connect the surface orientation of Sonia’s painting to the traditions of the decorative arts: “the colors are dazzling. They have the look of enamels or ceramics, of carpets ...”<sup>8</sup> If her surfaces were decorative in his eyes, her color sensibility was “atavistic,” rooted in her Russian Jewish heritage, a sensitivity to color that, in Robert’s words, “went far beyond academic and official instruction because of an innate need that was incompatible with established formulas, because of an anarchic spirit that would eventually be turned into a regulated force.”<sup>9</sup>

The identification of a woman artist’s creativity with the innate and powerful generative forces of nature places women’s productions

outside the mediated sphere of male cultural activity. Men study and think; women feel and generate instinctively. In the Western polarizing of mind and body, men are rewarded for being intellectual and theoretical, women for being intuitive and procreational. Constructions such as these reinforce powerful and widely held cultural beliefs that women and their actions are inexplicable and unknowable, and they are widely internalized. “My life was more physical,” Sonia would later explain. “He would think a lot while I would always be painting. We agreed in many ways, but there was a fundamental difference. His attitude was more scientific than mine when it came to pure painting, because he would search for a justification of theories.”<sup>10</sup>

Sonia, although she did not share Robert’s interest in intellectual and theoretical analysis, understood her ability to translate sensation into coherent expression as a result, not of intuition or mystical origin, but of the disciplined training she had received as an art student in Karlsruhe between 1903 and 1905. Describing those years in a biographical sketch written later and in the third person, she remarked that: “He [the professor] not only taught drawing, with severe discipline, but the structure of plastic expression as well. . . . This discipline has marked her work thereafter, forcing it to have a constructive basis which imparts force to plastic expression and *eliminates chance, indecision, and mere facility* [my italics].”<sup>11</sup>

The year 1912 – the year that both Delaunays fully realized the implications of simultaneity in their work – was a major turning point for them. While he formulated his theory – based on light as a unifying force among contrasting colors – she produced lampshades and curtains, colored surfaces penetrated by actual light. Robert’s first abstract compositions, *Windows*, *Discs*, and *Circular Forms* (all of which would become series), appeared and many of them were included in his first one-person exhibition that year at the Galerie Barbazanes. Sonia executed her first studies of light (*Study of Light*, *Boulevard Saint Michel*) and painted her first completely abstract oil, *Simultaneous Contrasts*.

At the moment that Robert assumed a public position in the modernist vanguard – traditionally measured by one-person exhibitions of paintings or sculpture and critical recognition – Sonia’s career began to diverge from this familiar model. Her return to painting in 1912 was

not accompanied by a return to public exhibitions. And although her reputation spread rapidly throughout Western Europe after 1912, it did so primarily among art world initiates or, after the War, as a commercial designer rather than an “artist.” As Robert Delaunay’s work became more firmly situated within esthetic debates, Sonia Delaunay began to apply the principles of simultaneity to a wide range of materials and objects, producing collages, pastels, fabrics, household items, and book bindings.

Sonia and Robert Delaunay shared a remarkably similar esthetic vision. Yet that vision would be inscribed very differently across the geographies of modernism. While Robert and his work, along with his growing reputation, remained closely tied to the “art for art’s sake” esthetics of Cubism and geometric abstraction, Sonia soon identified with those artists – including the Futurists and Dadaists – who sought to demolish the hegemony of easel painting, to take art out of the studio and into the streets. It was during this period that Sonia and Robert Delaunay met the two writers whose work came closest to theirs in feeling and attitude, and whose influence would prove decisive in shaping the relationship of both to an emerging modernist art history. Guillaume Apollinaire and Blaise Cendrars would find poetic inspiration in simultaneity, that embrace of multiple and coincident events and sensations that signified contemporaneity to the Delaunays. Both would make of it an experimental poetic language; both would, like the Delaunays, be assigned very different positions in the modernist pantheon. It was Apollinaire, the intellectual and theorist, whose writings would define the new modern art in Paris and situate Robert Delaunay within it, but it was Cendrars who remained for Sonia “the truest and greatest poet of our time.”<sup>12</sup>

It was while staying with the Delaunays in November and December of 1912 that Apollinaire composed “Zone,” a simultaneous poem that has been called the first truly modernist piece of writing. Today Apollinaire is as well known for his passionate and persuasive defense of modern artists like Picasso, Braque and Robert Delaunay as for his modernist verse. His writings on Robert Delaunay, and his critical support at a key moment in the young artist’s career proved crucial. Sonia and Robert Delaunay’s first collaborative book project was an album of orange and indigo blue sheets designed for a poem of Apollinaire’s inspired by Robert’s painting *Windows*. The project provided a powerful impetus toward their

subsequent experiments with verbal and visual combinations. Cendrars, colorful French-Swiss vagabond and self-invented personality, arrived in Paris in 1912, bringing with him an explosive poetic hymn to what Apollinaire would call *l'esprit nouveau*. “Easter in New York” erupted in a stream of confrontations and condensations: “The steam whistles raucously jeer and choke. The city trembles. Fire, cries, and smoke.” The poem so moved Sonia Delaunay that she immediately designed a cover for it: “On suede I placed motifs of paper collage. Inside I did the same with big, colored paper squares. It was a tangible response to the beauty of the poem.”<sup>13</sup>

The following year Cendrars and Sonia Delaunay collaborated in designing a format for his epic *Prose of the Transsiberian and of Little Jeanne of France*. Determined not to “illustrate” the poem, Sonia instead experimented with new arrangements of color, images and words. The results found their way into the paintings of both Delaunays, as well as the writing of Apollinaire and Cendrars. To accommodate the text, a long poem evoking a train journey from Moscow to Nikolskoye on the Sea of Japan, the two chose a single sheet of paper which, folded lengthwise and then refolded, opens like an accordion to a length of about seven feet. The parallel columns of painted and typographic imagery flow from panel to panel through a series of interlacing arcs, arabesques, spirals, squares, and triangles of color. The work’s verbal and visual equivalences marked a major innovation in twentieth-century graphic design; it also signalled the fully developed articulation of a new, pure language of color in Sonia Delaunay’s work.

Blaise Cendrars, who often called himself “the poet of the Simultaneous,” enjoys no position in the chronicles of modern art comparable to that held by the cerebral Apollinaire. Indeed, if Sonia has often been projected as “other” to Robert, something similar might be said of the position assigned to Cendrars by critics and historians of modernism. His literary reputation, his biographer Jay Bochner tells us, is often cast as that of a “gifted outsider;” he is frequently dismissed as more intuitive than intellectual, more connected to lived experience than to art. Just as Robert Delaunay produced Sonia’s “otherness” through the gendered attributes of “exoticism” and “atavism,” so also did critics project Cendrars as the irrational “feminine” to Apollinaire’s measured intellectualism.<sup>14</sup>

The year 1913 was one of extraordinary production in avant-garde circles. In Paris, Apollinaire published *Les Peintres cubistes: méditations esthétiques* (*The Cubist Painters: Aesthetic Meditations*), the book which would be accepted for many years as the first serious analysis of Cubist painting as understood by its original practitioners, and Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* made its explosive debut. In New York, Marcel Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase* outraged audiences at the Armory Show, while in Moscow, Natalia Goncharova exhibited 761 works and signed the Rayonist and Futurist manifesto. Sonia Delaunay’s paintings of that year included major works like *The Bal Bullier*, a three-by-ten-foot painting in which brilliantly colored shapes and rich juxtapositions of warm and cool, acid and mellow hues evoke the five couples dipping and turning to rhythms of the tango, and the first of *Electric Prisms*, paintings based on the effects of electric lighting on the streets of Paris. An explosion of works in a wide variety of media accompanied the paintings as Sonia and Cendrars turned their attention to commercial images, producing advertisements and posters for lectures and exhibitions marked by luminous arcs of pure color. There is no evidence that Sonia sought to realize any of these projects commercially at this time, or to profit by them. Rather they served as a fertile ground for her ongoing attempt to define the modern through a poetics of color and word.<sup>15</sup> Having fully liberated her esthetic from a reliance on the easel picture, it was no longer possible to arrange her productions in any recognizable hierarchy based on media.

In 1913, Sonia and Robert Delaunay were invited to exhibit in the Herbstsalon at Der Sturm Gallery in Berlin. Robert’s works on display, including canvases like *The Cardiff Team* (1915) and the series *Circular Forms* (begun in 1912), reveal the richness and complexity of artistic exchange between the Delaunays at this time. His large canvas *The City of Paris*, when exhibited in Paris, had moved Apollinaire to proclaim it the most important work in that year’s Salon. “‘The City of Paris’ is more than an artistic manifesto,” he assured his audience. “This picture marks the advent of a concept of art which has not been seen since the great Italian painters.”<sup>16</sup> The painting combines themes familiar to Robert – views of urban Paris, the Eiffel Tower – and adds to them the Classical image of the three Graces, as seen through the distorting lens of Picasso’s

proto-Cubist masterpiece *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907). Robert's *City of Paris* represents a kind of summing up of his own history as a modern artist, but its self-conscious grandeur also reveals the beginnings of his later struggle to locate subjects worthy of his ambitious desire to shape modern art.

Sonia's contributions to the Berlin exhibition ranged from book-covers and posters to lampshades, curtains, and cushions, and included her collaboration with Cendrars on *Prose of the Transsiberian* which they planned to publish in an edition of 150 copies. Sonia Delaunay's Berlin works reveal no indecision about her future direction, no agonizing over medium or subject. Many of the items she sent to the Herbstsalon had already found homes with artists and other friends of the couple, but her work was now circulating without the intermediary of gallery, art dealer, or critical press.

While Robert's painting moved between the poles of pure abstraction and a simplified Cubist-derived figuration, always stressing the interplay of color and form, Sonia began to apply the principles of simultaneity to new enterprises. Both Delaunays maintained a firm belief in movement and the dynamic interplay of shapes and colors as signifiers of modern life, but it was Sonia who first acknowledged the limitations of painting as an essentially static medium, one in which motion could be depicted or implied, but never actualized. During the summer of 1913, she began to make "simultaneous" dresses and fabrics, organizing their patterns of abstract forms to enhance the natural movement of the body and produce a moving surface of shimmering color. Cendrars was quick to remark on the new identification of the female body in motion with modern life, noting in a poem inspired by Sonia's new fashions, "colors undress you through contrast; On her dress she wears her body."<sup>17</sup> In the early twentieth century, women's fashions would become an important medium through which the principles of abstraction were translated to a broad public as the Victorian legacy of clothing as a means of defining class and occupation gave way to the modern preoccupation with clothing as a means of creating identity. Sonia Delaunay's experiments with color and design contributed mightily – along with those of the Bloomsbury group in London – to an early forging of what would become a long and uneasy marriage between modern art and fashion in the twentieth century.

News of Sonia's simultaneous dresses spread swiftly. In Italy the Futurists, equally committed to producing their own esthetic rupture with the past, also began to exploit the idea of clothing as a signifier for a revolutionary modernism. Although Futurism's virulent anti-feminism would lead to costumes designed almost exclusively for men, it is worth noting that Giacomo Balla's 1914 manifesto, "The Anti-Neutral Dress," owed much to Sonia's pioneering experiments. The avant-garde designs by artists for fabrics and fashions which flowed from Paris, Milan and, after the October Revolution, Moscow, marked the beginning of a new era in fashion and a challenge to critical constructions of modernism as primarily rooted in the stylistic innovations of vanguard painting.

Sonia and Robert Delaunay were in Spain when war broke out in 1914. Word of the Revolution in Russia reached them in Barcelona in 1917, bringing with it news of the certain loss of Sonia's income, on which they had depended since their marriage. It was during this period that she began to seek commercial applications for her designs. Costumes which she created for Serge Diaghilev's production of *Cléopâtre* in 1918 (with sets designed by Robert) established the couple's reputation as innovative designers. A subsequent commission for costumes for the Barcelona Opera Company's production of *Aida* led to the first requests from wealthy Spanish women for modern dresses designed by Sonia Delaunay. In 1919, the "Casa Sonia," a boutique specializing in simultaneous dresses, scarves and fabric, opened in Madrid. With Sonia now launched on a commercial design career, Robert began to draft a chronology of her work in the various media she now employed.

The Delaunays returned to Paris in 1921 and quickly reestablished themselves at the center of a group of writers and artists which included members of the Paris Dada group, among them the poets Breton, Philippe Soupault, and Tzara. Now, however, it was Sonia's extension of the principles of abstraction in painting to the objects of daily life which attracted others determined to abolish hierarchies of media, artists whose radical stance included a critique of the conventions of painting and sculpture and a desire to break down the barriers between art and life.

She turned the interior of the couple's Paris apartment into a dazzling display of simultaneous fabrics, screens, embroideries and geometrically patterned rugs. The poet René Crevel described walls covered with

multi-colored poems to which fellow poets and painters added their own notes and greetings. Determined to disrupt at every point the conventions of artistic expression, the Dada poets were quick to enter into the spirit of creative freedom that prevailed in the Delaunay household. “The master of the house,” Crevel noted, “invited every new guest to go to work and made them admire the curtain of gray *crêpe de Chine* on which his wife, Sonia Delaunay, had through a miracle of inexpressible harmonies deftly embroidered in linen arabesques the impulsive creation of Philippe Soupault with all his humor and poetry.”<sup>18</sup>

The Delaunays’ first encounters with Dada had probably taken place in Madrid at the time Robert contributed to the second issue of the periodical *Dada*. By 1922, Tzara, Soupault, Joseph Delteil, and others were writing poems on Sonia’s creations and wearing clothes that she had designed and made. Although her name appears infrequently in Dada histories, her achievement in freeing abstraction from the conventions of easel painting helped shape a new esthetic, or anti-esthetic, depending on who was employing the pen or the brush. A series of “dress-poems” brought colors and words into ever-changing relationships through the movements of the body. “When receiving her friends,” wrote one admirer, “she wears a tea-gown... But in the evening she wears the coat that is worthy of the moon and that was born of a poem; for the geometric forms of the alphabet were used by Sonia Delaunay as an unexpected ornament, so that now instead of saying that a dress is a poem we can say: This poem is a dress.”<sup>19</sup>

Dada took art out of the studio and into the cabaret as artists contributed compositions, musical scores, and performances – as well as paintings, objects, and poems – to Dada events. When in 1923 Tzara revived his theatrical work *The Gas Heart* in a production at the Théâtre Michel, it was with costumes designed by Sonia Delaunay. The play, a complicated parody on nothing, featured the characters Neck, Eye, Nose, Mouth, and Ear. Sonia’s cardboard costumes retained the planes and geometries of her earlier costumes for the ballet, but their scale and absurdity were pure Dada.

Sonia’s willingness to continue funding the family through the commercial application of her talents may have relieved the impractical Robert, but it doesn’t appear to have liberated his work. If the Dada

revolt against traditional esthetic values found sympathetic spirits in the Delaunays, it also may have contributed to Robert’s crisis over what to paint during the 1920’s, for it struck at the heart of his commitment to painting as central to the modernist project. The years during which Sonia extended the principles of abstraction to a flourishing design business correspond to a period in which Robert’s painting vacillated stylistically and his career languished. His 1922 exhibition at the Paul Guillaume Gallery received positive notice from artists but was a commercial failure, and he sold practically nothing for the next ten years. His paintings of these years include reworkings of earlier subjects – including the Eiffel Tower – as well as a number of portraits of prominent poets and writers in which volumes are simplified and the palette monochrome. In several of these works, abstraction is present only in the bold geometric shapes and colors of the simultaneous scarves and vests designed by Sonia and worn by the sitters.

Sonia Delaunay’s notorious booth of modern fashions at the Bal Bullier in 1923 – with its scarves, ballet costumes, embroidered vests, appliqued coats, and wealthy clients – and her Future of Fashion show at Claridge’s Hotel in London, featuring models draped in simultaneous fabric, led to an invitation to design fabrics for a textile manufacturing firm in Lyon. Sonia Delaunay would become the best-known of a number of twentieth-century artists – from Raoul Dufy to Varvara Stepanova – whose designs found their way into the world of commercial fashion.

Meanwhile, Robert Delaunay designed the display for the fabrics which Sonia presented at the Autumn Salon in 1924, and patented her invention of a “fabric pattern” which, when sold with a length of material, allowed middle-class women to produce Sonia Delaunay designs at home. By 1925, Sonia’s design work represented the most significant extension of the Delaunays’ concept of modernity into the everyday world and her name had become synonymous with “modern style.” As her experiments in design spread to furniture, carpets, the movies, and even the decoration of a Citroen automobile, Robert began to orchestrate her contacts with potential clients.

“When success literally assailed me,” she commented later, “he pretended to be envious of my luck and to believe that the money was easily earned. ‘You don’t realize, you are not doing anything, you don’t

make the slightest effort and people climb up five flights of stairs to come and buy.”<sup>20</sup>

By the end of the 1920’s, it was apparent that the Delaunays’ esthetics were inseparable from a Western European modernism in which they both played formative roles. The couple’s final decade together saw a series of collaborative efforts and, much to Sonia’s relief, the collapse of her business in the worldwide recession of the 1930’s: “I was capable of being a woman manager, but I had other purposes in life. I have always felt horror and disgust for the business world... the heap of orders, the mundane intrigues... in the end I was employing thirty workers... all of it devoured me.”<sup>21</sup> It was also a period during which Robert’s reputation was further institutionalized through major museum exhibitions like the New York Museum of Modern Art’s “Cubism and Abstract Art,” organized by Alfred Barr in 1936. For Sonia, there was no such institutionalization, though the elaboration of her designs in architectural contexts seems to have contributed to Robert’s return to abstraction in painting around 1930 in a series of works called *Rhythm Without End*, whose circular forms and half circles originate in Sonia’s earlier paintings of dancers. The exchange of motifs and colors between the Delaunays was once more open and reciprocal, connected in Sonia’s mind to the filtering of a shared esthetic through different temperaments: “He would ask me at the end of the day: ‘Are the colors exact?’ We worked a lot together on these rhythms since they were closer to me. Robert’s work is more scientifically simplified than my painting. I used to tell him at the time that it was too dry. Over the years, I realize that it was done on purpose... it was really our two temperaments expressing themselves differently.”<sup>22</sup>

Robert Delaunay died in Montpellier in 1941 and Sonia did not return to Paris until 1945. Once there, she was instrumental in arranging a retrospective of Robert’s paintings in 1946, and in organizing and documenting his work for a complete catalog, *Robert Delaunay: du cubisme à l’art abstrait (Robert Delaunay: From Cubism to Abstract Art)*, with a text by Pierre Francastel, appeared in 1957. Robert’s death released her from her long-held belief that only one public career as an artist was possible for this couple. A major retrospective of Sonia’s work – 250 pieces in all – was held at the Kunsthalle in Bielefeld, Germany, in 1958; it was followed by a remarkable string of more than fifty one-person exhibitions

by the early 1980’s. At the end of her life, she again recalled the shared vision that bound her esthetic to that of Robert. In the closing lines of the autobiography published in 1978 she noted: “In my most recent research, I have had the feeling of being very close to touching what Robert had felt and what was the ‘solar source’ of his work... I am sure that there is, behind it all, something fundamental, which will be the basis of painting in the future. The sun rises at midnight.”<sup>23</sup> Yet not until 1987 were the productions of Sonia and Robert Delaunay joined together in a major exhibition at the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris.