

Sonia Delaunay review – the woman who made colour dance gets a knockout show

Tate Modern, London Painter, designer, tireless tango-dancer and coat-maker to the stars, Sonia Delaunay tore through the worlds of art and fashion like a whirlwind

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From the early 20th century until her death in 1979, Sonia Delaunay painted, designed fabrics and clothing, ran shops as well as a textile design company, and collaborated with poets Guillaume Apollinaire, Blaise Cendrars and Tristan Tzara. She played gender games, was a polyglot, danced the tango, translated Kandinsky, and was a thoroughly modern woman artist in a man's world. She was indomitable.

Born Sara Stern to a Jewish family in Odessa, Ukraine, in 1885, the artist lived with her well-to-do aunt and uncle in St Petersburg from the age of five. Intellectually well-versed, she studied painting in Germany and, by 1907, was working through the influences of Gauguin, German expressionism and the Fauves, whom she had seen in Paris. Her early paintings look as if they want to break free.

Her marriage to the gay German art critic and dealer Wilhelm Uhde in 1908 allowed her to settle in Paris. Uhde had visited Picasso's studio in Montmartre and had seen his *Les Femmes d'Alger*. He also showed the work of Henri Rousseau and gave Delaunay her first exhibition the following year, where she showed a tense, sexualised and confrontational reclining *Yellow Nude*, with coruscating blue shadows, the sinuous body offset against a background of juddering angular patterns.

In 1910, she divorced, to marry the aristocratic, avant-garde (the term meant something then) painter Robert Delaunay. She stopped painting, turning to needlework and embroidery instead. In 1912, she gave birth to a son. This might look like the typical story of the talented wife subsumed by the sovereign demands of the male genius. It isn't.

Sonia Delaunay is now rightly seen as a stronger and more complex artist than her husband, who died in 1941. Although the Delaunays were regarded as collaborators in a single artistic project, the truth was never so simple. The major retrospective at London's Tate Modern, which comes here from Paris, is wonderful – and something of a revelation. Far from retreating into the applied arts and stereotypical “women's work”, Delaunay sought instead to extend art into the everyday and the broader material culture.

Her first purely abstract work seems to have been a sewn patchwork quilt, designed as a cradle cover, whose wonky rectangles and triangles of clear colour recall both cubism and Russian folk art. She made abstract book bindings and decorated a wooden box for her son's toys. She also started making clothes and adapting the fashionable garments of the day into

what she called “simultaneous dresses”, whose geometric shapes and slivers of coloured fabric accentuated the sway and movement of the body. These were paintings to be worn.

She made clothing for Robert and the two of them would step out to such burgeoning Paris nightclubs as Le Bal Bullier, quintessentially modern places alive not just with music but with electric light. Delaunay’s clothing subsumed their wearers in the overall atmosphere. Just like clubbers today, they could get lost in the music, the light, the rhythms and atmosphere. Tango and foxtrot were the grooves.

By 1913, she was painting again and her Electric Prism works - along with a frieze-like, four-metre-wide canvas depicting Le Bal Bollier - syncopated modern life. The dancers dance and your eye dances, too, caught up in the painting’s stop-start, relentless tango rhythms. That same year, she collaborated with Cendrars on the publication of a poem describing a trip from Moscow to Paris on the Trans-Siberian railway, in which Cendrars’s text is shifted this way and that by Delaunay’s colour. Her rhythmic, abstract images and patches of colour sway like the train, and give us flashes of the world hurtling by the windows. The whole thing is a delight. Typeset text and painted words vie with one another, and Delaunay used the optical effect of simultaneous contrast (by which the juxtaposition of different colours affects how we perceive them) with great energy, subtlety and vitality. She grasped the constant disruption and speed of modern life and gave it form.

At the outbreak of the first world war, the Delaunays were in the Basque country and stayed in Spain and Portugal throughout the conflict. She painted street markets and flamenco dances, and began to design clothes in earnest. Losing what income she had from Russia after the 1917 revolution, she opened (with Sergei Diaghilev’s help) a string of shops in Bilbao, Madrid and Barcelona, selling clothing, fabrics and homeware. Returning to Paris after the venture failed, she was able to set up her next business on a surer footing.

Several rooms and vitrines in this marvellous exhibition are dedicated to Delaunay’s garments, fabrics and fashion work, from designs for the cover of Vogue to photographs of models. There’s also a shot of architect Arno Goldfinger (so detested by Ian Fleming he turned him into a Bond supervillain) in a swanky pair of Delaunay pyjamas. Her high-end clientele included actor Gloria Swanson, for whom she designed a coat. She stitched poems on to clothes, designed costumes for Diaghilev and dadaist theatrical productions, decorated film sets and turned her family apartment into a kind of domestic installation.

Lengths of fabrics she designed turn on moving rollers behind glass, and swatches and colour-ways, neckties and beachwear, parasols and handbags and shoes fill vitrines and display cabinets. There’s even a 1925 film shoot, in colour, in which women model her garments. All this is more than fun. I look at it as abstract painting by other means. Delaunay even registered Simultané as a brand name. Some black and white designs recall optical art, while the way she infiltrated abstraction into the fashion industry looked forward to pop art. One fashion shot has two models in Delaunay designs with a Citroën painted in “simultaneous” livery. She produced an enormous quantity of printed textiles for a chain of Netherlands department stores. Some of this, inevitably, has dated, yet her abstract patterns are often as simple and pure as the best geometric abstract art. Which is exactly what it is.

In 1937, Delaunay produced, with assistants, a number of mural-sized canvases for the Paris international exposition. Only three remain. Celebrating French technology, they depict aeroplane engines, a propeller and a cockpit instrument panel. Mixing enlarged technical

drawings of engine parts, cut-away sections of pistons and engine blocks, coloured spirals, discs, targets and calibrated dashboard dials and temperature gauges, these vividly coloured tempera paintings might have been made today and are filled with optimism for a technological future. Meanwhile, elsewhere in the Paris exposition, the Germans and Russians were bickering, and Picasso was showing Guernica in the Spanish pavilion, a reminder of the German air attack on the ancient Basque capital. This room is a complete knockout.

Postwar, the show focuses on later paintings. Colour becomes flatter, the paintedness of Delaunay's forms more acute. They are as serious and playful as any abstraction made anywhere. Circles are still bisected by lines. Her aesthetic remained unchanged. Rectangles slide together and apart. She knows where to give things weight and solidity, and where to let the painting breathe. Her touch is full-blooded, assured, careful and careless, as modern as it ever was.

The EY Exhibition: Sonia Delaunay is at Tate Modern, 15 April - 9 August.