

Stanton Macdonald-Wright & Japanese Art

(Tom Croft)

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Abstract

Stanton Macdonald-Wright (1890–1973) was an artist, specifically a painter. He was born in Virginia, USA. He studied in Paris, where he encountered such famous artists as Picasso, Matisse and Cézanne. At this time, he met another US artists, Morgan Russel, and they invented ‘Synchronism’, an art movement which wants to create emotion with colour. In 1915, during WW1, he left the Parisian art world for the new New York art world, and after for southern California, to which he brought the ‘gospel’ of modern art, and established the first exposition of modern art in Los Angeles.

He was one of the first occidental (western) artists to become interested in Zen and oriental art and culture. In his later years, more and more frequently he visited Japan. He relinquished his abstract style, and had a period of figurative pictures, inspired by (and using) Japanese forms and colours. In the final years of his life, he returned to Synchronism, but his colours were more clement, tranquil and contemplative; much inspired by the Japanese art and philosophy.

Earlier Influences and Europe (1890–1912)

Stanton Macdonald-Wright was born 1890, in Charlottesville, Virginia, USA. His father was an amateur painter, and encouraged the young Stanton’s interest in art. When Stanton was 10 years old, the family moved to Santa Monica, California. Resisting his family’s pressure to aim for a career in medicine, Stanton attempted (unsuccessfully) to run away to Japan, and (successfully) to study Art in Los Angeles.

In 1907, aged seventeen and married (last year) to a well-off woman of 27 years, he went to Paris, to enjoy the bohemian life of the avant garde artist (though without the usually associated poverty). He later says ‘I felt at home in European traditions because, [...] I [had] had to speak French always at dinner and Spanish at lunch, so I was really trilingual as a kid’. He also studied at various art institutions, including the Sorbonne, where he met Henri Focillon, who introduced him to oriental art and philosophy.

“I became interested in Oriental art through probably the greatest aesthetician with whom I studied at the Sorbonne, in Paris, when

I was a very young man over there. His name was Focillon. He is the man who is recognized, I guess all over the world, as being the greatest aesthete of modern times; he is a very sweet fellow. And he said to me one day, 'I know nothing about Oriental art, but I think there is a great deal in it'."

— Stanton, speaking in 1964

It is worth noting that 1907 is the year Picasso painted 'Les Femmes d'Alger' (O. J. R. No. 1), the painting considered to signify the birth of modern art. Stanton collected art, including works by Cézanne, by whom he was (like everyone else, it must be said) heavily influenced.

"Every modern painting that existed, from the time of Cézanne, was influenced by Cézanne. Cézanne was a great spring, out of which many of those boys [= men like Otho Friesz] would take a cupful; but the spring was still there, gushing. And without Cézanne there never would have been any development of modern painting."

— Stanton, speaking in 1964

In 1911, he visited London, Rotterdam, Amsterdam, Dordrecht, Antwerp and Brussels. He met Morgan Russel, another US expatriate. Russel took him to the atelier of Percyval Tudor-Harte, an English colour-theorist and painter (and, according to Stanton 'perfectly stark-raving mad'). The two studied and worked with Tudor-Harte, and studied colour-theory profoundly.

Stanton and Russel attended the various soirées of Gertrude and Leo Stein, where Stanton met Picasso, Rodin, and Matisse. He also knew Man Ray and many other now-famous artists in Paris at that time.

In 1912, when Vorticism was coming of age in England, and Cubism was in its most productive phase, Stanton and Russel founded Synchronism, an abstract offshoot of cubism that considered colour to be the raw material of art. It closely resembles the Orphism practiced by Robert Delaunay at the same time. This seems to have been pointed out before, and Stanton rebukes:

"It has nothing to do with Orphism and anybody who has read the first catalogue of Synchronism of the Bernheim Jeune exhibition of 1913, or of the Neue Kunst Salon Exhibition in Munich of the same year would realize that we poked fun at Orphism and at Delaunay in spite of the fact the Delaunay was a good friend of mine. [...] The reason we were likened to it [Orphism] is because we were the first people to break away from the monochromatic type of work that was done by Cubism at that time.

[he moves on to the similarities]

They [Synchronism and Orphism] were both color. Delaunay had a very delicate sense of color, a very charming sense of color. Delaunay was probably right in the French tradition of its most magnificent decorative quality, just as Braque was afterward."

— Stanton, speaking in 1964

Like Kandinsky, Vorticism, and other then-contemporary abstract artists and movements, Synchronism explained itself in terms of music. Synchronist paintings were called ‘Synchronies’, a word which closely resembles ‘Symphonies’.

“These two artists believed that color had sound equivalents, and the word synchrony means ‘with color’ the way symphony means ‘with sound’. They believed that by painting in color scales in the same way that one composes with musical scales, you could create paintings that would evoke in the viewer musical sensations. Europeans at that time knew about these theories and were riled up [= excited] about them.”

— Will South, Curator, ‘Color, Myth, and Music: Stanton Macdonald-Wright and Synchronism’

The War Period (1913–1918)

“In freeing ourselves from certain previous restraints and stepping boldly into the unknown, we have been able to wrest from nature its secret in order to bring painting to its highest point of intensity.”

— Stanton Macdonald-Wright & Morgan Russel

In 1913, Stanton and Russel held two two-man expositions, one in Munich, the other in Paris. The pair then moved to New York, and Stanton separated from his wife. The next year, 1914, they shared another exposition in New York. In their introduction in the exhibition catalogue, they wrote:

“Besides solving the problem of the inherent nature of colors in their relation to form, we have applied ourselves to a close study of the harmonious relation of these colors to one another. And, as a result of the incorporation of these colors into gamut-form, they convey the notion of time in painting. They give the illusion that the canvas develops like music, in time, while both the old and modern paintings exist strictly in space. With one glance they can be felt in their entirety.”

They then moved back to Paris, and on to London due to the war. They stay with Stanton’s older brother, Willard Huntington-Wright. In 1915 Stanton and Willard co-author and publish a book, ‘Modern Art: Its Tendency and Meaning’. They then move to New York, USA, and the brothers both help to organise an ambitious but disappointing group exposition: ‘The Forum Exhibition of Modern American Painters’. Stanton did some teaching work, and had a solo exhibition in 1917, although little sold.

In 1918, he left New York, and moved back home to Los Angeles, California.

Taking the Gospel of Modern Art to California (1920–1925)

1: California lacketh modernism; 2: Stanton bringeth the Testament of St. Pablo; 3–6: Groups are formed and Synchronism codified.

California, and the rest of the USA's occidental coast, was virtually untouched by modern art in 1918. Impressionism was still considered to be pretty radical.

In 1920, Stanton began to experiment with film. He created a full-length feature film, but it was destroyed in a fire. In the same year, he organised the first modern art exposition at 'The Los Angeles Museum of History, Science and Art, Exposition Park', entitled 'Exhibition of Paintings by American Modernists'. He also gave several lectures there, on modern art.

In 1923 he began teaching at the 'Los Angeles Art Students League', where he had previously studied before moving to Paris. He soon took over as director, and held the post for ten years. He also organised the 'First Exhibition of the Group of Independant Artists of Los Angeles'; the Group of Independant Artists of Los Angeles became an important artistic group in the area.

In 1924 he wrote 'A Treatise on Color', summarising the Synchronist method. This is probably his most important literary work.

"I have just gotten out a book on color, 60 copies with handmade charts of spectrums, which I hope to sell at \$10 each. This is in the hands of God"

— Stanton in a letter to Morgan Russel

The next year, 1925, he organised the 'Modern Art Workers'. This became another important artist collective in California. He also organised various exhibitions of modern art in the following years.

Development of Japanese Influences (1927–1973)

In 1927, the Los Angeles Museum hosted 'Synchronism', an exposition of Synchronist work. Also, Stanton wrote and directed Synchronist theatre in Santa Monica, using for the purpose a device he invented to project colour. Both he and Russel have been interested in making a kinetic light machine since their Paris days; this is an important first step (the project was finally realised fully in 1959).

During the 1930s, he created an important mural cycle for the Santa Monica Public Library, showing art, science, and lots of great thinkers from around the world and throughout time. He was also involved in a number of exhibitions in New York and California, and he became first district supervisor, then later state director for a US governmental art-related organisation ('Federal Arts Project/Works Project Administration'). He repeatedly refers to this project as 'setting art back 150 years' in the area. He also says:

“My job on that thing was mostly talking to these politicians and the people who were heads of industries to get them to give ten percent of putting up some statues or pictures that they didn’t need and didn’t want, and I had to go around and browbeat them and then I had — at one time I had five secretaries there that were writing letters here and there all of which was of no possible importance one way or the other.”

— Stanton, speaking in 1964

Also, in 1933, he wrote ‘A Basis of Culture’, a survey of worldwide art (unpublished). He spent 1939 in a Zen Monastery.

In the 1940s, he had many major exhibitions, and began teaching oriental and contemporary art at UCLA (the University of California at Los Angeles).

In 1951, his wife died. In 1952, he remarried, and also travelled to Tokyo to study Chinese and Japanese painting and sculpture, and also to do some teaching in Tokyo, as a Fulbright professor. He resigned from UCLA in 1954 due to ill health. In 1956 there was a major retrospective of Stanton’s work. He says at the time:

“At first I saw my new painting with a certain astonishment, for I had made a great circle, coming back after 35 years to an art that was, superficially, not unlike the canvasses of my youth. However, at bottom there was a great difference. I had achieved an interior realism... This is a sense of reality which cannot be seen but which is evident by feeling.”

After decades of attempts and failures, in 1959 Stanton built the first version of the Synchrome Kineidoscope, the light machine about which he and Russel had been theorising since 1913. Stanton’s brother Willard wrote a book about the machine entitled ‘The Future of Painting’ (Stanton’s copy is dated 1923, he says it must be a reprint and he thinks it was written in 1915).

In about 1960, Stanton was given a house in the Kyoto monastery where he spent 1939. This suggests that he was well-revered in Japan at this time. He began to spend most of his time living there, in the monastery. From that point all of his painting was done in Japan.

“We live in a monastery (my wife is the only woman they ever allowed on the grounds); the house that we live in is the same size, to the foot, as this house that you’re in now. [...] it’s oriented in exactly the same direction; and it’s divided in exactly the same way as to rooms. Strange coincidence, and that coincidence is the thing that gave me that house. When the head bishop found out about that thing, and several other extraordinary coincidences, he became convinced that I had lived there in times gone by. [interviewer interrupts] So he handed me that house for the duration of my life.

[...]

It's [the monastery] the original foundation of Zen in Japan; the original. That was founded by Eisai. And this year [...] marks the 750th anniversary of the death of Eisai Zeshi. And Eisai's tomb is within tossing distance of my studio: I mean I can reach across to it with a fishing pole. That's where I live."

— Stanton, talking in 1964

In 1962 he suffered a heart attack, but recovered. In 1964–1965 he worked with Clif Karhu in Tokyo on a series of 20 colour woodblock prints entitled 'Haiga'.

In 1964, he was interviewed by a woman named Betty Hoag. He talks about his life and the art world, about Japanese and European influences and various people. He talks a lot about the various murals and things he did, or was involved in, in the California area. Interestingly, he claims that his painting is not influenced by oriental ideas:

Betty: "Do you feel there is any Oriental influence in your painting?"

Stanton: "Not a particle; absolutely not! Not a hair's breadth!"

He goes on to explain:

"...it's altogether something... I don't believe it is possible for a Western mind to... Well, let's put it this way: I'll quote Jung and say I think it's very dangerous for a Western mind to monkey with Oriental ideas. I don't think it should be monkeyed-with at all."

This is presumably paraphrasing, rather than a direct quote. And further, probably with implicit reference to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (i.e. that language controls what we think about and how we think about it):

"Our minds don't work the way theirs do. Anybody who has studied Japanese would realize the utter difference between our method of thinking and what the Japanese do."

Despite this, his figurative period used Japanese forms and colours, and his later-life Synchronies, with such titles as 'Flight of the Butterfly' and 'Subjective Time', have a subtle, flowing, meditative feel to them which is undoubtedly related to his contact with Zen philosophy and art.

He probably means to say (above) that there is a fundamental difference between true oriental works and his own.

In 1973, he died of a heart attack, aged 83.