



At home in Paris, Sonia Delaunay, at 92, continues to work on small paintings of vibrant color.

AHEAD OF HER TIME, IN TUNE WITH OURS

By Françoise Giroud

When in 1970, Georges Pompidou, President of the Republic of France, came to visit Richard Nixon, President of the United States, he gave him, in the name of France, a present: a painting by Sonia Delaunay. It was a connoisseur's graceful homage to one of the artists who has strongly marked the physiognomy of our time.

For nearly 75 years, Sonia Delaunay has been a dazzling creative force. Yet, for most of

Françoise Giroud, a journalist, was formerly French Secretary of State for Women's Affairs. This article was translated by Stanley Hochman.

that time, her name has been inseparable from her husband's, has seemed almost a declension of it. The paintings of Robert Delaunay were applauded, criticized, dissected. When Robert exhibited his work, Sonia exhibited with him, so people talked about the Delaunays together. Thus for a long time Sonia was viewed as though her work were a minor byproduct of a major production — Robert's.

But then, from the close union broken by Robert's death in 1941, after 31 years of life together, Sonia emerged — not "better" but "different," strongly original, and recognized as a pioneer, who before and after World War I had boldly applied the principles of abstract painting to functional objects, to the life around her.

In short, Sonia Delaunay has been rediscovered.



With "brushes dipped in light," Sonia Delaunay in 1914 merged words and geometric shapes into "Zenith."

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A Delaunay textile, reprinted for the Artcurial Gallery show, displays her characteristic controlled but "savage" vigor.



Delaunay's graphic art turned gallery rooms into an "exaltation of color."



Done up in Delaunay stripes, a performer paraded about at a 1923 Paris gala honoring Marshal Ferdinand Foch.



Ablaze with circles, swirls, zigzags and stripes, Delaunay's fabrics were a hit at the Artcurial Gallery exhibition in Paris.

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ered — found to be in vibrant harmony with our times, our streets, our walls; given one-woman shows, celebrated for her own work, praised for herself. Her fabric designs have been featured in Paris, and five American museums are planning a major show of her work.

Laughing, winking a still mischievous eye, she watches as the scent of incense perfumes the evening of her life. She is an old woman now, 92 years of age and practically immobilized. Yet, until a short time ago when she broke her thighbone, she displayed an almost inexhaustible vitality. Only such an accident could have torn her away from her brushes dipped in light.

Is she touched by the acclaim? Just barely. "Everything I've done, I've had fun doing," she says. Does she feel "liberated"? In no way. The only liberation she ever took an interest in was the liberation of color. No woman has ever felt less that she has lived in the shadow of a man or that she was effaced or enslaved by him or anyone else. Besides, shadow is the last possible image evoked by this creature of the sun, whose painting, a message of joy, bursts upon us like a peal of laughter.

Enslaved? Sonia Delaunay? Let no one ask her such stupid questions. In any case, she firmly refuses to be interviewed by feminist magazines and wants to hear no talk of "women painters." She knows only painters — and they may be either men or women.

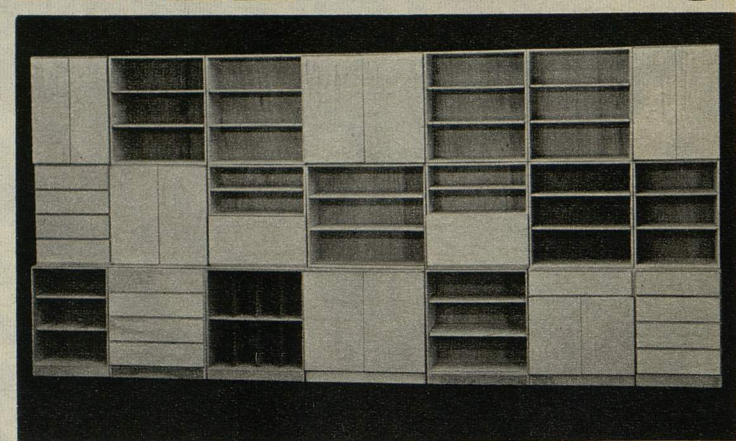
That her work complemented her husband's is obvious. They plowed the same furrow: The quest of a language, of a grammar of color, he wanting to articulate the doctrine, she speaking that language spontaneously. Couldn't one as easily say that, Robert Delaunay's work complements his wife's?

In his writings, he was the first to acknowledge that she had literally revealed color to him at a time when Cubists "painted with cobwebs" — which was the way he described painting that he judged lusterless and gray, painting against which he rebelled after having demonstrated that he had mastered its technique.

The truth is that the Delaunays lived their union as two equals. It is because of the way society long looked — still looks? — on women that Sonia was minimized in relation to Robert.

Sonia Delaunay was born Sonia Stern, the daughter of a Jewish family who lived in the Ukrainian village of Gra-

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dizhsk. In 1890, at the age of 5, under circumstances that have never been explained, she was adopted by her maternal uncle, Henri Terk, a St. Petersburg lawyer of considerable wealth; she never again saw her mother.

At 18, supplied with a comfortable income, Sonia Terk went off on her own to spend two winters at Karlsruhe, where she studied academic drawing under a stern teacher. At 20, she went to Paris to see contemporary French painting. "I had bought three books on Impressionism in Germany," she explained. "I wanted to live near it, near Sisley and Monet, near the airiness and lightness."

Settling among the artists of Montparnasse, Sonia worked and studied and soon, in the art of Gauguin, she discovered the organization of flat colored surfaces. One of her first major paintings — *Philomène*, a figurative work — clearly shows the nature of the language she was to make her own by eliminating form and line, expressing herself purely through the relations of colors. *Philomène* was exhibited in 1908, in her first one-woman show, held in a Left Bank Gallery that belonged to a German named Wilhelm Uhde. Uhde was not only an art dealer but a critic, collector and friend of most of the avant garde artists of the day. He was gracious enough to marry Sonia when she asked this favor of him in order to escape her family's efforts to get her to return to Russia. Their marriage of convenience was celebrated in London and lasted only until she met Robert Delaunay, to whom Wilhelm Uhde very politely ceded his rights.

Sonia married Robert in November 1910. They were the same age: 25. Two forces of nature that might have destroyed one another were united on the basis of mutual respect, indifference to conventions, a shared passion — "When the Delaunays wake in the morning, they start talking about painting," said their friend, the poet Guillaume Apollinaire — and noncompetitiveness in their ambitions. The result was one of the most astonishing marriages that ever united two creative people.

There were curious parallels in the lives of the two Delaunays. Just as Sonia's mother relinquished her to her uncle, Robert's mother, a beautiful eccentric who was the model for the Douanier Rousseau's "Snake Charmer," turned her young son over to an aunt so that she could be free to gad

about. When Robert and Sonia married, they both were rich, free and eager for life. But he was turbulent, extroverted and bubbling with new ideas that he expounded fluently. He was mad about the still new Eiffel Tower, which he saw as a symbol of the universe and which was to become his "coat of arms." He developed a painting style called Orphism, in which he combined fragmented forms with light and glowing colors. Sonia was a somewhat stolid and calm brunette, attentive to others, kindly, hospitable, generous — and strong. She observed Robert, took an interest, criticized, admired and participated in what was going on, but she did not imitate him. Working spontaneously, directly on the canvas without a preliminary sketch or drawing, she strove to achieve, as she put it, "an extreme exaltation of color with complete flatness."

Together, the Delaunays caused a sensation with their art. The word "simultanism" was invented to describe their way of organizing contrasts of hot and cold colors. Robert was bent on working out a theory for the style, while Sonia concretely applied it to everything around her: a book, a lampshade, a cushion, her dresses, those of her friends, her husband's clothes. He went about in a blue-colored red jacket, over which he wore a green cloak. She combined purple and green, pink, orange and light blue. But Sonia was quite the opposite of a couturier, for her clothes were untailored; they were simply splashes of color, inscribed in strict geometric forms.

In that scintillating Paris teeming with ideas just before World War I, every Thursday at their home on the rue des Grands Augustins, the Delaunays sumptuously received the city's artists and thinkers. Afterwards, everybody would go to the Bal Bullier, a popular dance hall of the period. Robert loved dancing. Sonia watched. And later, using only the play of colors, she would capture on canvas the movement of the dancers.

When she became pregnant, Sonia came to a sort of pause. It was another kind of creation, and she enjoyed it. But in 1911, for her newborn child, Charles, she created something that launched her on a new course: a coverlet. A mosaic composed of 60 pieces of different kinds of fabrics, it looked like a royal game — but it was also an adventure into abstract collage. Soon, she applied the technique to other forms, especially book covers,



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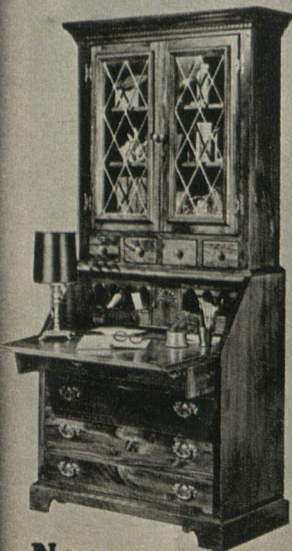
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In 1923 the Delaunays posed in front of one of Robert's paintings.

which, under her hands, became vibrant compositions of contrasting shapes, colors and fabrics.

The war overtook the Delaunays in Spain, where they had gone in the summer of 1914 in search of sun for their ailing child. Robert had been rejected for military service. They were able to remain, untroubled, far from the horrors of the war, in the luminous light of Madrid and then of Portugal. And in their villa, appropriately called La Simultanée, they both painted.

One minor trouble eventually overtook them: The Delaunays lost their money. Robert was disinherited by his uncle, who disapproved of his way of life. The Russian Revolution deprived Sonia of all her income. She had no feeling for politics, but she had a generous heart. "We were left penniless," she says, "but we wept for joy."

What were they to do without money? Robert was completely devoid of practical sense, incapable of getting any money from collectors for his canvases, obsessed by his need to continue his theoretical research — in other words, helpless. Sonia, on the contrary, was level-headed. And she had also by this time completely mastered the vocabulary of her art. She would make use of it.

She began by doing interior decoration for her acquaintances. Next she provided costumes for a Diaghilev ballet, and later designed sets. But it was when she got the idea for textiles such as had never before been seen — the first designs were commissioned from her by a textile manufacturer in Lyons — that she began to achieve an international success. Miles of fabric were shipped across the frontiers. Garbo and Gloria Swanson appeared in "simultaneous" dresses.

With couturier Jacques Heim, she opened the "Boutique Simultanée," which was

one of the star attractions of the 1925 Exposition des Arts Décoratifs. The Delaunays drove around in an amazing convertible, the body of which was painted like Sonia's textiles. Citroën commissioned "simultaneous" designs from her. The Société d'Electricité commissioned an advertising display, and in it Sonia made use of a neon sculpture, the first artist to do so. Sonia was a success.

The usual interpretation of this period of her life has always been distorted by two commonly accepted ideas.

One: A woman has no choice but to "sacrifice" herself. Accordingly, she is thought to have sacrificed her own painting so that Robert could continue with his. False. The truth is that this period marked her self-affirmation, her definitive emancipation from her husband's art. And in the 1930's she returned to her own painting.

Two: An artist is always corrupted by any alliance with commerce or industry because it necessitates an abdication of freedom. False. Many of the great artists of earlier times worked on "commercial" enterprises without abdicating artistic freedom. In Sonia's case, this work helped her rediscover and preserve her creative freedom. And by applying abstraction to the decor of everyday life, she helped open to modern art a field in which it has continued to expand ever since. However, it was because of these commonly accepted ideas that her work was for so long undervalued.

At Boulevard Maiesherbes, where between the two wars they lived amid furniture and rugs designed by Sonia, the Delaunays were once more the center of a whirlpool of creative and joyous activity. On gray crepe de chine curtains, Sonia embroidered the poems of her friends, the Surrealists. Each new visitor was asked to make a contribution to the walls already covered with

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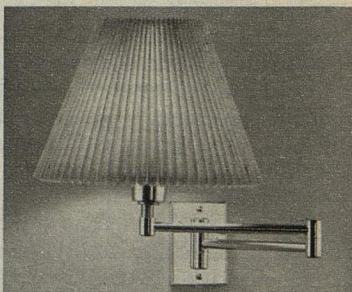


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Sonia Delaunay's beachwear of 1928 included purse and parasol.

multicolored inscriptions. The Russian poet Mayakovsky caligraphed his verses on the door of the salon. It was the 1920's, *les années folles*, the madcap years.

The black years, cruel, came later. Then everything around Sonia fell apart. In 1941, her beloved lifetime companion, Robert, died of cancer at 56. The Germans occupied France. And she was a Jew.

Sonia took refuge in the South of France. When she finally emerged from a long period of deep mourning and profound solitude, a new color had come into her painting: black.

Good-bye to youth, good-bye to dance halls, to madcap times, to provocative behavior, to unconcern, to the marvel of always being two and happy to be so. But under the ashes her indomitable passion was still intact, and she was never to be lacking for friends.

And finally, in 1967, came the great retrospective exhibition given her by the Musée National d'Art Moderne; it renewed and stimulated her vigor. Since then she has been busily producing, turning out exuberant gouaches, tapestries, illustrations, posters — including a celebrated one for the International Women's Year — all with the same "savage" ardor of her youth, yet now controlled in the service of a totally finished art. Like grand old masters of the

past, her inspiration seems never to be affected by age.

If her alert secretary didn't set up a protective barrier, Mme. Delaunay would be overwhelmed, for collectors and curators have rediscovered the way to the small, white-walled duplex on the rue Saint-Simon where she lives alone, her only companion a Persian cat. Museums everywhere want to have a Delaunay. And now when one says Delaunay, it's Sonia who is meant.

Only her son, editor of a jazz magazine, and her two grandchildren — one is a sound engineer and the other has decided to be an "artist" — and a handful of faithful friends — poets and painters as always — still have the right to pass beyond the door behind which, leg broken, body bruised, the weight of nearly a century on her shoulders, the irreducible Sonia Delaunay draws on sheets of typing paper.

In the street, young women in loose-fitting, multicolored, iridescent clothing drive by at the wheels of yellow or vermilion automobiles and think that they have rejected "la mode de Maman" — the little black nothing and the Chanel suit — unaware that they are dressed in a fashion launched by the woman for whom, in 1913, color was already the fabric of the world, the woman who from that fabric fashioned her own piece of glory.

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