Sonia Delaunay. Art, design and fashion

4 July to 15 October 2017

Curator: Marta Ruiz del Árbol

This summer the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza is presenting Sonia Delaunay. Art, design and fashion, the first exhibition in Spain to be entirely devoted to this artist. As such its intention is to emphasise not only her important role as an avant-garde painter but also the way in which she successfully applied her aesthetic ideas to everyday life. Delaunay’s work as a painter will be exhibited in the Museum’s galleries alongside her designs for books, theatrical sets, advertising, interiors, fashion and textiles as well as items of clothing. In total there will be more than 200 exhibits loaned from public institutions such as the Centre Pompidou, the Bibliothèque nationale de France, the Musée de la Mode de Paris and the Museo Reina Sofía in Madrid, as well as from private collections. The exhibition, which is benefitting from the collaboration of the Comunidad de Madrid, will thus reflect recent art-historical research which has reassessed Delaunay’s career with the aim of highlighting the multi-disciplinary nature of her work which allowed her to explore supports and techniques other than painting.

Sonia Delaunay (1885-1979) was born into a modest Jewish family in the Ukraine. As a child she went to live with her maternal aunt and uncle in Saint Petersburg, receiving a cosmopolitan education from them. She started studying art in Karlsruhe (Germany) in 1904 and two years later moved to Paris to continue her training. In order to be able to remain in France she married the German art dealer Wilhelm Uhde, at whose gallery she first exhibited her work in 1908. It was through Uhde that she met avant-garde artists such as Picasso, Braque and Robert Delaunay, whom she married in 1910 following her divorce from the gallerist.

Images, from left to right:

More information and images: With the collaboration of Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza – Press Office. Paseo del Prado, 8. 28014 Madrid. Tel. +34 914203944 / +34 913600236. prensa@museothyssen.org
http://www2.museothyssen.org/microsites/prensa/2017/Delaunay/index.html
From that date onwards the artistic exchange between the two would be an ongoing and constant one although from the outset of their relationship Sonia differed from her husband in combining her activities as a painter with other disciplines such as embroidery and interior and fashion design. She thus became a multi-disciplinary artist, concerned to express the language of the avant-garde on the widest range of supports and making use of bright, lively colours and a range of techniques that reflect her Russian origins.

Around 1912 the Delaunays moved towards abstraction and championed the basis of a new art which rejected traditional media and was founded on the power of colour. This led Robert Delaunay to develop the theory of Simultanism, a neologism taken from Eugène Chevreul’s treatise on the simultaneous contrast of colours, a text that argues that the tensions and optical vibrations generated by the relationship between complementary colours suggest movement in a way comparable to the rhythmical model of dance and music. The Delaunays associated Simultanism with modern life and urban progress and aimed to extend it to all possible areas of creative activity.

For the two artists Paris was the Simultanist city par excellence. It became their source of inspiration and the place where they started to analyse the effect of light on colours. However, it was in Madrid in 1917 that their experiments in translating the ideas of Simultanism to everyday life moved into the public realm. It was there that Sonia began to work with performance arts and also opened a boutique in which she sold her clothes and interior design objects. This phase in Madrid, which took place exactly 100 years ago, was one of great freedom and experimentation for Sonia Delaunay and would influence all her subsequent artistic development from the 1920s onwards and following her return to Paris. Sonia Delaunay. Art, design and fashion aims to present those Madrid years as a key moment in her career and they are thus the subject of the central section of the exhibition, which is structured into four chronological parts that also include the phases immediately prior to and following Delaunay’s time in Spain.

Early Paris years

At the start of the second decade of the century Simultanism dictated Sonia Delaunay’s activities as she painted and made objects and clothes that reflected this new and colourful aesthetic. A bedspread for her son’s cot is the first object traditionally described as Simultanist. This was followed by a painted toy box, book covers, everyday objects and clothes sewn together from different pieces of cloth. Delaunay combined her avant-garde experiments with the influence of Russian folk art.
Her first creations reveal her quest for a total art, illustrating her desire to introduce the Simultanist aesthetic into popular culture. The Delaunays’ apartment, a Sunday gathering place for artists and intellectuals, was the first venue where these Simultanist creations were exhibited in the manner of an art gallery. Sonia was committed to focusing without distinction on the widest range of supports, considering all forms of artistic expression to be of equal merit and worthy of exhibition. Thus, for example, at the famous Autumn Salon in Berlin in 1913 she exhibited paintings, poster designs, book bindings and domestic objects in the company of works by Robert Delaunay, Marc Chagall, Max Ernst, Lyonel Feininger, Franz Marc and Paul Klee, among others.

It was this context, in which fashion, painting and avant-garde were closely interconnected, that gave rise to the “Simultanist dress” as a form of introducing the public to the new visual language. The Delaunays wore Sonia’s creations and transformed Parisian dance halls such as the Bal Bullier into laboratories where they experimented with Simultanism in an initial attempt to renew the aesthetic of the city through colour. With their provocative mixtures of colours and materials, they caused a sensation and the couple became “reformers of how to dress” in Apollinaire’s words.

During this period Sonia produced paintings that are among her most important works. Above all, however, she exhibited Simultanist objects alongside Robert’s paintings. The present exhibition includes oils such as The Bal Bullier from the Merzbacher collection (1913), Simultaneous Contrasts (1913), and Electric Prisms no. 41 (1913-14), advertising posters for Zenith and Dubonnet (1914) and fashion designs, including the Simultanist dress and waistcoat made in patchwork in 1914. Also on display will be a copy of La prose du Transsibérien et de la petite Jehanne de France [Prose of the Trans-Siberian Railway and of Little Jeanne of France] (1913), one of the masterpieces of avant-garde literature and visual art and a collaborative creation between the poet Blaise Cendrars and Sonia Delaunay which represents the first complete fusion of poetry and painting. The book takes the form of a vertical fold-out measuring 2 metres long which the user both looks at and reads simultaneously. Cendrars’ free verses are reflected in Delaunay’s drawings in an interlinking of forms and colours that suggest the forward movement of a train passenger.

First period in Madrid and Portugal

World War I broke out while the Delaunays were on holiday in Spain. As a result, in late 1914 they decided to settle in Madrid. They were fascinated by the city’s light, which contributed to the culmination of their investigations into colour at this time. Separated from the avant-garde, they looked for inspiration among the masters of the past and in 1915 Sonia registered as a copyist in the Museo del Prado. Her canvases and Simultanist dresses for the Bal Bullier gave way to an interest in folk art and in Flamenco singers and dancers involving a degree of return to figuration. In the summer of 1915 the couple were invited...
to Portugal by a group of Futurist artists who had settled in Vila do Conde, a small village in the north of the country and they decided to move there for a while. Nonetheless Sonia continued to be inspired Spain, evident in works such as *Large Flamenco* (1915-16) and *Small Flamenco* (1916), which are exhibited here alongside drawings, watercolours and drawings of this period.

### Second Madrid period and total art

Madrid provides the core of this exhibition and the time Sonia Delaunay spent there resulted in a major change of direction in her career as it allowed her to put into practice the idea that Simultanism could extend to all areas of life. Following the victory of the October Revolution in Russia in 1917 she no longer received her allowance from her family which had previously given her financial stability. She thus decided to launch her creations on a commercial basis.

In Madrid the Delaunays coincided with Sergei Diaghilev who had also taken refuge in Spain. Sonia started to collaborate on the design of sets and costumes for the Ballets Russes, marking the start of a close relationship with the performance arts that would continue throughout the rest of her career. This section of the exhibition includes some of her costume and set designs for the Ballet Russes’ *Cleopatra* (1918) which was created in Sitges and first performed in London. It also shows photographs of the complete redesign that Sonia Delaunay undertook of the old Teatro Benavente in Madrid, transforming it into an innovative theatre-concert that opened with the name of the Petit Casino in 1919.

“I opened a Maison Sonia for interior decoration” the artist recalled in her memoirs, “In wealthy houses and historic palaces I did away with sugary pastels, gloomy colours and deadly frills and furbelows.” The opening of this business, which also focused on the design of fashion and accessories, marked a turning point in Sonia Delaunay’s career and can be considered an important precedent for her intense focus on interior, textile and fashion design that began in the 1920s.

Newspaper cuttings and photographs of the period make it possible to reconstruct this period in the exhibition and to present it as a key moment in Delaunay’s career. This documentation is accompanied by a selection of her fashion sketches and a painted and embroidered linen jacket (1928) which evokes the spirit of what the Madrid press came to call “the Sonia style”.

During these years in Madrid the Delaunays also established contacts with avant-garde poets such as Ramón Gómez de la Serna and Guillermo de la Torre. Following her return to Paris in 1921 and inspired by the spirit of Dada, Sonia decided to decorate the walls of her house with poems by her many poet friends, including Gómez de la Serna’s “Fan-poem” (1922). In her
constant desire to expand the boundaries of the arts. Sonia also designed “Dresses-Poem”, for which two designs are on display in the exhibition.

Return to Paris

In 1921 the Delaunays returned to Paris. The Spanish experience encouraged Sonia to produce clothes for Parisian women based on the designs of her paintings in the manner of tableaux vivants [living paintings]. During those years she worked with Dada and Surrealist groups on theatrical and film projects, including Le P’tit Parigot (1926) by Le Somptier. In 1925 Delaunay enjoyed success with her participation in a decorative arts exhibition and she began to work for one of the large Dutch department stores, Metz & Co., a commercial relationship that lasted until the 1950s.

This section of the exhibition emphasises the artist’s multifaceted and versatile manner of approaching artistic creation, from painting on canvas to textiles, tapestries, lithographs, set design and even commissions for murals. Objects displayed in this section include a jacket (1924), two dresses never previously included in an exhibition (1926), a swimming costume and a matching beach parasol and bag (1928), together with a number of earlier designs and the oil painting Simultaneous Dresses (1925) in which the garment worn by the central figure is similar to the overcoat that Delaunay designed for the actress Gloria Swanson that year and which is also on display in this gallery. Complementing these exhibits are the fashion photographs taken by Delaunay herself and a colour video which she made in 1925 to promote her designs. Finally, there is an extensive section on her textile designs which reveals the creative process behind her clothing, from the initial drawing on paper or light card to the final product and including the correspondence that the artist maintained with the Metz & Co., department store, to which she sent samples of cloth and guidelines for the production of her creations.

In 1937 Sonia participated with Robert on the decoration of two large pavilions for the Universal Exhibition in Paris, for which three preparatory designs are included in this section. In the Railway Pavilion Sonia evoked her journey to the Iberian Peninsula, once again demonstrating the significance of that period in her life.

After Robert Delaunay’s death in 1941 Sonia continued with her work and with the promotion of abstract art. In 1964 and following her donation of a hundred of her and Robert’s works, she became the first living woman to be honoured with an exhibition at the Musée du Louvre.

The exhibition closes with three large abstract compositions from the artist’s final phase: Coloured Rhythm no. 694; Rhythm Colour; and Horizontal Mosaic.
EXHIBITION INFORMATION

Title: Sonia Delaunay. Art, design and fashion

Organiser: Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza

With the collaboration of the Comunidad de Madrid

Venue and dates: Madrid, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, 4 July to 15 October 2017

Curator: Marta Ruiz del Árbol, curator of Modern Painting at the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza

Number of works: 207

Publications: Catalogue with texts by Cécile Godefroy, Marta Ruiz del Árbol and Matteo de Leeuw-de Monti, and digital publication on the Quiosco Thyssen app

VISITOR INFORMATION

Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza

Address: Paseo del Prado, 8. 28014, Madrid. Moneo exhibition galleries, 1st basement level

Opening times:

From 4 July to 3 September 2017: Tuesdays to Saturdays, 10am to 10pm; Sundays, 10am to 7pm

From 4 September 2017: Tuesdays to Fridays and Sundays, 10am to 7pm; Saturdays, 10am to 9pm

Single ticket type: Permanent Collection + temporary exhibitions:

- Standard ticket: 12 euros

- Reduced ticket: 8 Euros for visitors aged over 65, pensioners, students with proof of status and Large Families

- Free entry: children aged under 12 and officially unemployed Spanish citizens

Advance ticket sales at the Museum’s ticket desks, on its website and on tel: 91 791 13 70

More information: www.museothyssen.org

Audio guide, available in various languages

PRESS INFORMATION

http://www2.museothyssen.org/microsites/prensa/2017/Delaunay/index.html