

# PEYTON WRIGHT

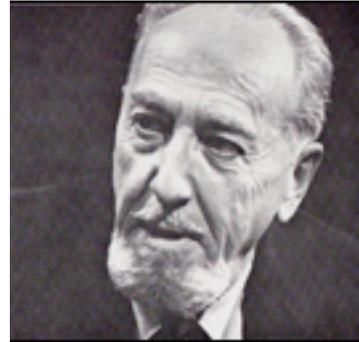
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## Stanton Macdonald-Wright

(American Painter, 1890-1973)

Stanton Macdonald-Wright (1890-1973) was one of America's leading modernist painters and an early pioneer of abstract art. Born in Virginia and raised in southern California, he enrolled at the Art Students League in Los Angeles as a precocious thirteen-year-old. In 1907, while still a teenager, he married and then settled in Paris, studying at the Sorbonne and several art academies, including the Académie Colorossi and the École des Beaux Arts, and then privately with Percyval Hart-Tudor, who taught color theory in relation to music. Inspired chiefly by the works of Cézanne, Matisse, and the Cubists, Macdonald-Wright exhibited at the Salon d'Automne in 1910 and at the Salon des Indépendents in 1912.



Together with fellow American expatriate Morgan Russell, Macdonald-Wright co-founded the avant-garde painting movement Synchronism, whose first exhibition was held in Munich in the summer of 1913 and the second in Paris during the fall of the same year. These were soon followed by shows in London, Milan, and Warsaw. And in early 1914 Synchronist paintings were exhibited for the first time in New York. Similar to its rival Parisian movement Orphism, Synchronism combined color with Cubism, producing luminous and rhythmic compositions of swirling and serpentine forms infused with a rich chromatic palette. As Macdonald-Wright later described it, “Synchronism simply means ‘with color’ as symphony means ‘with sound’, and our idea was to produce an art whose genesis lay, not in objectivity, but in form produced in color”.

At the outbreak of World War I, Macdonald-Wright moved to London with his older sibling, Willard Huntington Wright, who was an editor and author. Sharing quarters there for the next two years, the brothers collaborated on three art books, including *Modern Painting, Its Tendency and Meaning* (1915), that were subsequently published in New York. After repatriating himself to the United States in 1915, Macdonald-Wright took up residence in New York, where he participated in the *Forum Exhibition of Modern American Painters* in 1916 and was given his first one-man show at Alfred Stieglitz's “291” gallery the following year. His Synchronist paintings had a direct and marked influence on the work of Thomas Hart Benton, Andrew Dasburg, Jan Matulka, Stuart Davis, Arnold Friedman, and Alfred Maurer.

Although successful in New York, Macdonald-Wright became increasingly dissatisfied with what he saw as the “sterile artistic formulism” of modern art and the

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“academicism” of his own Synchronism. Consequently, he permanently resettled in Santa Monica in 1919 and withdrew from the commercial art scene for the following three decades. Instead, he became an active and energetic force in the southern Californian art world primarily as a teacher and administrator, all the while still continuing his artistic pursuits, which turned heavily toward Eastern representational models, especially Chinese painting. From 1922 to 1930 he served as Director of the Art Students League in Los Angeles, writing a student textbook entitled *Treatise on Color* (1924). During the late twenties and early thirties, he co-exhibited at several museums in California with Morgan Russell and had a one-man show at Stieglitz’s “An American Place” in New York in 1932. He then worked for the WPA Art Project as Director of Southern California and as Technical Advisor for seven western states from 1935 to 1942, during which time he personally completed several major civil art projects, including the murals at the Santa Monica City Hall. During World War II and up through 1952, Macdonald-Wright taught at UCLA, USC, Scripps College, and the University of Hawaii on the subjects of art history, Oriental aesthetics, and iconography. In 1952-53, he visited Japan as a Fulbright exchange professor and briefly lectured at Kyoiku Daigaku (Tokyo University of Education). Finally, in 1954, he retired from academia.

After a hiatus of more than thirty years, Macdonald-Wright returned to nonobjective painting in the mid 1950s with renewed vigor and enthusiasm, producing some of his finest canvases. This new body of Neo-Synchronist work surpassed the artist’s earlier paintings by way of a heightened luminosity and augmented spatiality, creating as a result, in the opinion of the modern art champion, Alfred Barr, a deeper spirituality. As the artist himself described it,

“At first I saw my new painting with a certain astonishment, for I had made the “great circle”, coming back after 35 years to an art that was, superficially, not unlike the canvases of my youth. However, at bottom there was a great difference: I had achieved an interior realism, what is called *yugen* by the Japanese. This is a sense of reality which cannot be seen but which is evident by feeling, and I am certain that this quality of hidden reality was what I felt to be lacking in my younger days.”

From 1958 on, Macdonald-Wright spent five months each year at Kenninji, a Zen monastery in the center of Kyoto, Japan. One of the most fruitful outcomes of his exposure to Japanese poetry and art was the creation of the Haiga portfolio (1965-66), a suite of twenty Haiku illustrations in brilliant color that is a masterful synthesis of modernist art in the Synchronist style and the traditional technique of Japanese woodblock printing.

In 1967 the Smithsonian Institution’s National Collection of Fine Arts held a

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major retrospective exhibition on Macdonald-Wright, honoring his more than six decades of artistic achievement. During the remaining years of his life and up until his passing in 1973 at the age of 83, Macdonald-Wright continued to be productive and inventive, leaving as his legacy a large and diverse body of modernist painting, which has since taken its rightful place as being of premier importance in American twentieth-century art.

~ Andrew Diversey

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