

# PEYTON WRIGHT

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## Hilaire Hiler

(American Painter, 1898-1966)

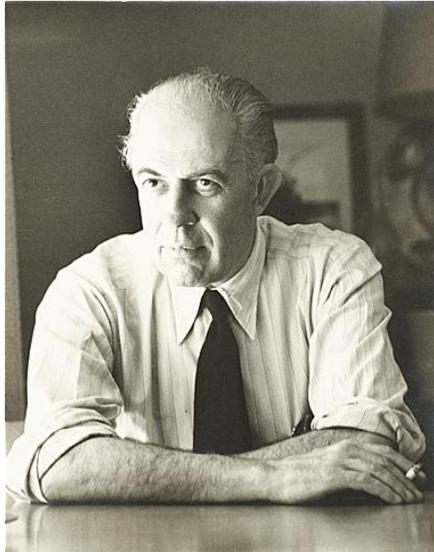


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American Art

Hilaire Hiler was born in St. Paul, Minnesota in 1898. Early in Hiler's childhood, his father sold his jewelry business in order to produce vaudeville shows. Consequently, Hiler grew up surrounded by vaudeville, instilling in him an early but lasting fascination with theater set and costume design.

Hiler's early studies were quite diverse, including classes at the Rhode Island School of Design, the Wharton School of Finance and Commerce at the University of Pennsylvania, the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, and the Pennsylvania School of Industrial Art.

In 1918, Hiler moved to New York City. A year later, he traveled to Paris on an assignment for *Shadowland* magazine and stayed for the next fifteen years. While there, Hiler managed a popular club in Montparnasse called the Jockey Club, where he played jazz piano and

saxophone, painted murals, and participated in the lively avant-garde social scene of Bohemian 1920s Paris. During this time, he made the acquaintance of numerous writers, musicians, and artists, such as Ezra Pound, Ernest Hemingway, Sinclair Lewis, Constantine Brancusi, Amedeo Modigliani, Jean Cocteau, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, Stuart Davis, Marc Chagall, and e.e. cummings.

In 1934, Hiler returned to the United States, where he worked for the Federal Arts Project of the Works Project Administration (WPA). In 1937, Hiler was commissioned under the WPA to paint murals for San Francisco's Aquatic Park (now the San Francisco Maritime Museum). Throughout the 1940s, Hiler struggled to make a place for himself in the art world. Always a man of diverse and wide-reaching interests, Hiler often abandoned art for other work as a musician or set and costume designer. In 1946, Hiler spent some time working as a psychoanalyst in Los Angeles. But, according to a friend and colleague, color was always Hiler's "primary obsession". During this time, he founded Fremont College – an institution focused on design and color theory. In

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1944, he moved his college to Santa Fe, though he only remained in Santa Fe for two years before returning to Los Angeles. He lived in Los Angeles until the 1960s when he relocated to Paris, where he remained until his death.

Throughout his career, Hiler was fascinated by color, design, and abstraction. His early work – from his time in Paris in the 1920s – was primitivistic and semi-abstract in style. In the 1930s, he experimented with Native American themes, though his work became increasingly abstract over time. By the 1940s, he was moving into the style of work for which he is best-known, a style which Hiler termed “Structuralism”. Hiler’s theory of Structuralism embodied a kind of “scientific analysis of color-form”, as it was described by the art critic and theorist Waldemar George. Hiler described the theory this way: “The harmonious relations of structure and order presented in a new way, in the nature of a continuum. Relations of degree, and those of geometric progression of color-form, replace relations of simple analogy—or in turn of contrast, by opposition. As the sequential relations of Structuralism design resemble those of natural growth, it may be termed organic. In this sense, it is like certain kinds of music.” (Hiler, *Structuralism*, London, Heal & Son, 1955). Consequently, Hiler’s best-known work combines formal geometrical design elements and subtle variations of color.

Always a writer, philosopher and theorist as well as an artist, Hiler published a number of works including *From Nudity to Raiment, An Introduction to the Study of Costume* (1929), *Notes on the Technique of Painting* (1932), *Color, Harmony and Pigments* (1940), and the *Manifesto of Psychromatic Design* (1945), among others. During his lifetime, he was also a member of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the Institute of General Semantics, and the London Royal Society of Arts.

Hiler’s work has been exhibited extensively, including two significant retrospective exhibitions, at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1968, and at the University of New Mexico Art Museum in 1976. His works are included in the collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, and the Museum of New Mexico, among other private and public collections.

#### *Sources & Further Reading:*

Fred R. Kline, Fred R. Kline Gallery, Santa Fe, NM; November 2004