

CULTURAL COLLISION

Sonia Delaunay was an unstoppable force in art and fashion



Movement is at the core of Sonia Delaunay's life. She never paused – embracing artistic cross-pollination, innovating in the fields of fashion, interior design, textiles, costume and advertising. She was a collaborator, someone who enjoyed networking – a fiercely modern woman connecting back and forth amongst Europe's avant-garde creative community.

Sonia was born to a Jewish family in Odessa, Ukraine in 1885, moving aged five to live with her uncle and aunt in an intellectually rich St Petersburg. She was educated across Europe; in Germany she studied with Schoenberg, and in Paris she met Picasso and Braque.

At 25, she married artist Robert Delaunay with whom she spent a lifetime practising *simultané*, an aesthetic adventure rejoicing in the moving principle of art: the light and 'the motion of colour'. They were a 'power couple'; colour was their language of love, inspiring and informing their work, always in parallel – never in competition. Robert died in 1941. "He was like a whirlwind... his attitude was more scientific than mine... he would search for justification of theories," recalled Sonia.

Sonia's designs contain a calculation that seems more spontaneous. Italian painter Gino Severini was so enamored with her geometrization of shapes in the modernist style, he was said to cable every detail to the Futurists. When Sonia lectured at The Sorbonne in 1927, she offered a context for her way of seeing colour

Sonia Delaunay and two friends in Robert Delaunay's studio, rue des Grands-Augustins, Paris 1924

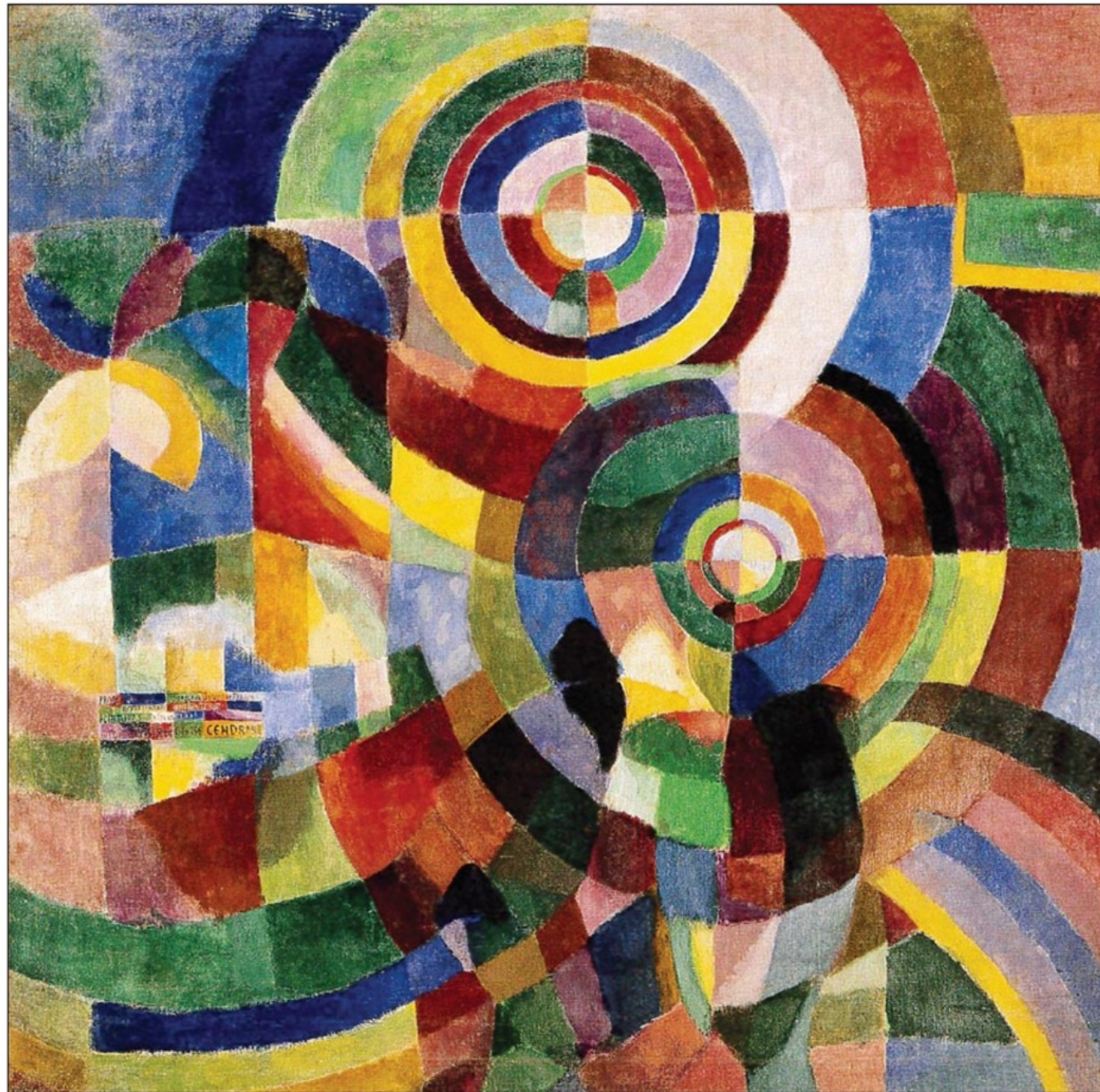
Electric Prisms, Sonia Delaunay, 1913

contrasts: "There was no gap between my painting and my so-called decorative art, enjoying the application of the same research."

In *Electric Prisms*, 1914, this sensibility uses concentric colour circles to represent reflections, the newly-installed electric lighting on the Parisian urban scene. "The halos made the colours and shadows swirl and vibrate around us as if unidentified flying objects were falling from the sky."

The early portraits reveal more exotic backdrops; a bold line offering a psychological confrontation with a sitter. When Robert and Sonia met Apollinaire in 1911, it was his poem *Zone* (the first literary exemplification of simultaneity) that inspired Sonia to experiment with posters, integrating words with specific colour that played with ideas from advertising of the time. Her *Autoportrait*, 1916, *Dress poem for Tzara*, 1923, or *This Eternal Woman*, 1922, show exciting compositions of typeface, work that radiates into textiles too. On sketches a letter might curl round a shoulder or extend up an arm as decoration (often a Z or an F, decorating a cuff, or arranged with E and S as reciprocating curves).

Music remained a pervasive influence throughout her long career. Colours click like a castanet, inspired by the flamenco she adored in Madrid. When Paris was hit by a tango craze, she sketched dancers in the undulating rhythm. She once said "The BAL Bullier ▶



Simultaneous Dresses (The three women), Sonia Delaunay, 1925

ballroom was for me what the Moulin de la Galette had been for Degas, Renoir and Lautrec." Sonia liberated fabrics with her impactful use of reds, yellows, greens, purples, pinks, beiges, white and blacks.

The Tate Modern's current retrospective contains many examples. There's a cradle cover made for her son Charles from scraps of yardage and fur. The rough and ready coarse stitching reminds us of Russian roots, fragmented shapes seamlessly celebrating the family tradition of quilting and also a personal abstract modernism.

It could be seen as an early prototype for *Simultaneous* collage, presented later as a spectacularly animated fabric window (in the 1924 Salon d'Automne) when handmade pieces were made up by Russian women hired by Sonia to embroider. There's a stitching heritage within much of her work, mixing the painterly narrative and empowering it.

Sonia promoted her own brand seductively, and received orders from manufacturers such as Metz & Co for bespoke fabrics. She delighted the wives of Bauhaus architects and so many creative people, working and enjoying her company. Her distinctive photos and films show stylized moments. "Casa Sonia" was an immersive space – a kind of domestic theatre.

Sonia had a Paris studio dedicated to creating textiles and clothing. She called her garments



Coat made for Gloria Swanson, Sonia Delaunay, 1923-24



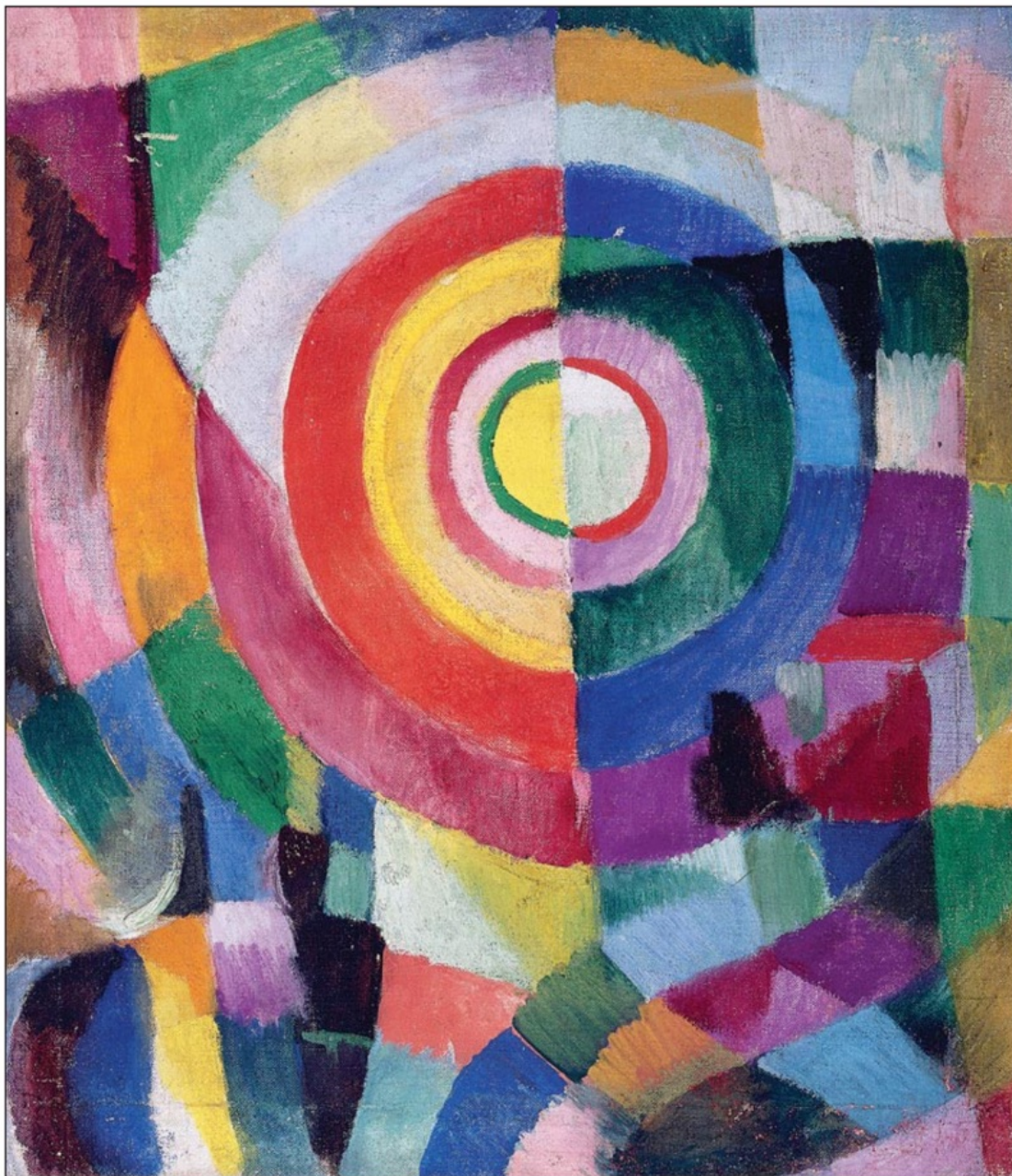
“painted silk paradoxes” that would mould to the body of the wearer. These gave the fabric shape through meticulous embroidery or application. One of the most exciting elements of the Tate Modern exhibition is seeing these threads in detail, reading about them in her scribbled notes in archived fabric sketchbooks.

Rectangular woven coats, tunics embroidered with lozenges, silks with beaded teardrops – these were high impact, original designs that empowered the wearer. They were daring, exotic and different. Diana Vreeland wrote, “Sonia’s chromatic colours were more than intelligent abstractions – they were unabashedly sexy. Her clothes wrapped around the body like a second skin or a mad tattoo.”

American socialites, Surrealist poets and French film stars, who bought in to the artistic and luxurious sensibility of these pieces valued the authenticity of the ‘Sonia’ brand; she was daring and different. A circular swirl within a scarf, or a black, white and red stripe running down with a rhythm of its own; these creations gave pleasure, allowing their wearers a vital originality. According to the Surrealist writer Rene Crevel, they offered “masterpieces that embellish our daily gestures”.

Blaise Cendrars was inspired to write poetry by Sonia’s simultane dress, which remains conceptually energetic, a surface where poetry, art and fashion collide: ▶

Electric Prisms, Sonia Delaunay, 1914



On Her Dress She has a Body...

Belly

Discs

Sun

And the perpendicular cries of colour
fall on the thighs"

What Sonia successfully pioneered was the performative element of wearing clothes, an individualism and synergy between form, function and fashion. Her products started from handwork and attained supremacy through design; fabric becomes the principle element. Her clothes were outré with their dazzling contrasts and joyful energy.

They continue to excite today. Rosita and Angela Missoni look to Sonia Delaunay as a source for brand inspiration: "The way she worked with real passion... such freedom, a kind of creativity coming out of her brush." It's Sonia Delaunay who tied fashion and fabric together offering a new palette for fine art and lifestyle. "It was my life and I worked the whole time, but I wasn't working – I was living – and that is the difference". ●●●

Maggie Norden

The EY Exhibition: Sonia Delaunay, until 9 August Tate Modern, Millbank, London SW1P 4RG, T: +44 (0)20 7887 8888, www.tate.org.uk Maggie Norden's film *The Black and White of Colour* is included in 'Missoni, L'Arte, il Colore' at Gallarate Art Museum, MAGA, Italy Until 8 November, www.museumaga.it