



Smithsonian

Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden

Modern and Contemporary art

Visual Music: 1905 – 2005

VENUES: Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (MOCA)
February 13 – May 22, 2005

Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden (HMSG)
June 23 – September 11, 2005

EXHIBITION SUMMARY:

Music has provided a model and a source of inspiration for some of the most adventurous visual art of the twentieth century. Early in the last century, progressive artists and critics elevated music to a status of supremacy above other forms of creative expression. Believing that the visual arts should aspire to the condition of music, they intended to create “a genuinely new art” by “simply using the color as music.” Underlying that vision was a belief in synaesthesia, that is, the union of the senses or the interchangeability of sensory perceptions. Musical analogy based on synaesthesia inspired pioneers of abstract painting, abstract film, and light art, as well as more recent experiments in new media and digital technology.

The Smithsonian’s Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles are co-organizing a major loan exhibition for 2005 devoted to this idea. *Visual Music: 1905-2005* will chart the influence of synaesthesia and musical analogies on the development of abstract and multi-media visual art forms from the early twentieth-century to the present. The first American exhibition devoted to this important current in modern and contemporary art, *Visual Music* will feature works that stimulate viewers’ aural and visual perception. The impulse to emulate musical forms in the visual arts transcended the limits of traditional visual arts media and led to multi-dimensional, multi-media, and performance art. Technological innovations from electric illumination and cinema to video and digital recording fueled experimentation with musical analogy and synaesthesia in the visual arts.

Building on a long tradition of color and music theories of synaesthesia from Newton to Rimsky-Korsakov, artists such as Wassily Kandinsky, Franktišek Kupka, and Paul Klee, along with composer-artists such as Mikolajus Konstantinas Čiurlionis, Arnold Schönberg, and Alexander Scriabin, experimented with ways of merging the two art forms into a new, abstract, and total art. Many based their non-representational works on a presumed analogy between the color spectrum and the musical scale. Using bold color and dynamic

forms in rhythmic compositions, these artists sought to attain the metaphysical quality of music in visual media.

Featuring the work of sixty artists and an array of media, including painting, photography, film, light projection, computer graphics, and immersive environments, *Visual Music* will be arranged in roughly chronological order. In recreating this little-known history, the exhibition will introduce the work of artists unfamiliar to American audiences, including Čiurlionis from Lithuania, Henry Valensi from France, and Russians Mikhail Matiushin (from a Greek collection) and Vladimir Baranoff-Rossiné (from French and American collections), as well as the work of Thomas Wilfred, a pioneer of light art, whose art remains largely unknown. *Visual Music* also places the work of renowned artists, such as Kandinsky, Kupka, Klee, Georgia O’Keeffe, and Francis Picabia, in a new context together with that of film pioneers, such as Viking Eggeling, Hans Richter, and Oskar Fischinger.

Highlighting the catalytic role of technological change in the evolution of “Visual Music,” the exhibition will showcase moving analogue and digital computer graphics by James and John Whitney and video artists, such as **Stephen Beck**; documentation about the seminal Vortex Concerts at the Morrison Planetarium in San Francisco in the late 1950s; documentary footage of 1960s psychedelic light shows; and installations of recent immersive environments combining a number of these media by artists and composers, including Jennifer Steinkamp, Brian Eno, Leo Villareal, and Jim Hodges. The exhibition also will include a listening station where visitors can experience musical compositions by composers involved with Visual Music.

CATALOGUE:

Approximately three hundred pages in length, the accompanying exhibition catalogue will analyze the intellectual and cultural roots of this powerful idea of visual music, which inspired some of the most beautiful and daring works of abstract art over the last century. It will feature an introduction by the four curators; essays by Kerry Brougher, Judith Zilczer, and Ari Wiseman that discuss in depth the historical periods; and an essay by musicologist Olivia Mattis. The catalog will also include an extensive bibliography, biographies of artists, chronology, and exhibition checklist.

PUBLIC ENRICHMENT PROGRAMS:

Visual Music presents a rich platform for the Hirshhorn to reach new audiences through an array of free public programs and events, including a symposium on synaesthesia, re-staged light shows, musical performances, lectures, and artist-led workshops. Pending availability of funding, the Museum plans to create an interactive computer station where visitors can create their own visual music using recently developed software programs. The Hirshhorn also has enlisted the

participation of the Alexandria Symphony Orchestra (Virginia) and the Twentieth Century Consort (Washington, D.C.), an ensemble group that performs contemporary classical music; both organizations will perform programs on the theme of Visual Music in conjunction with the exhibition.

CURATORS:

The exhibition is co-curated by Kerry Brougher (Director of Art and Programs and Chief Curator, HMSG), Jeremy Strick (Director, MOCA), Ari Wiseman (MOCA), and Judith Zilcher (Curator Emerita, HMSG).