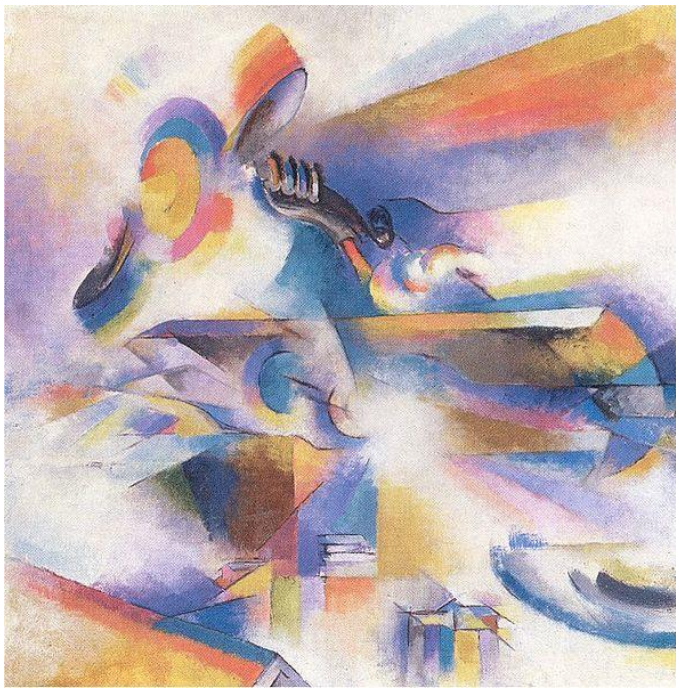


Stanton Macdonald-Wright, *Aeroplane Synchromy in Yellow-Orange*
oil on canvas, 1920 ■ Metropolitan Museum of Art

Elsie Driggs, *Aeroplane,* oil on canvas, 1928
Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

THE "AEROPLANE" *IN* VISUAL ART OF THE 1920S

The individual manmade object—from egg-beater to bridge truss—was a regular feature of modern American painting in the 1920s. In these two paintings, the manmade object is the "aeroplane"—as interpreted by an abstract *synchromist* painter and a realistic *precisionist* painter. Despite their obvious differences, the paintings reflect the modern artist's search for new ways to direct, manipulate, and enhance the viewer's perception. What do you *see* in each painting? What do you *hear* in your head? What movement do you *feel*? How would you rename each painting to reflect your answers to these questions?

☐ Describe your initial response to Macdonald-Wright's *Aeroplane Synchromy in Yellow-Orange*. How did he use color and abstraction to convey the fleeting yet compelling presence of the airplane?

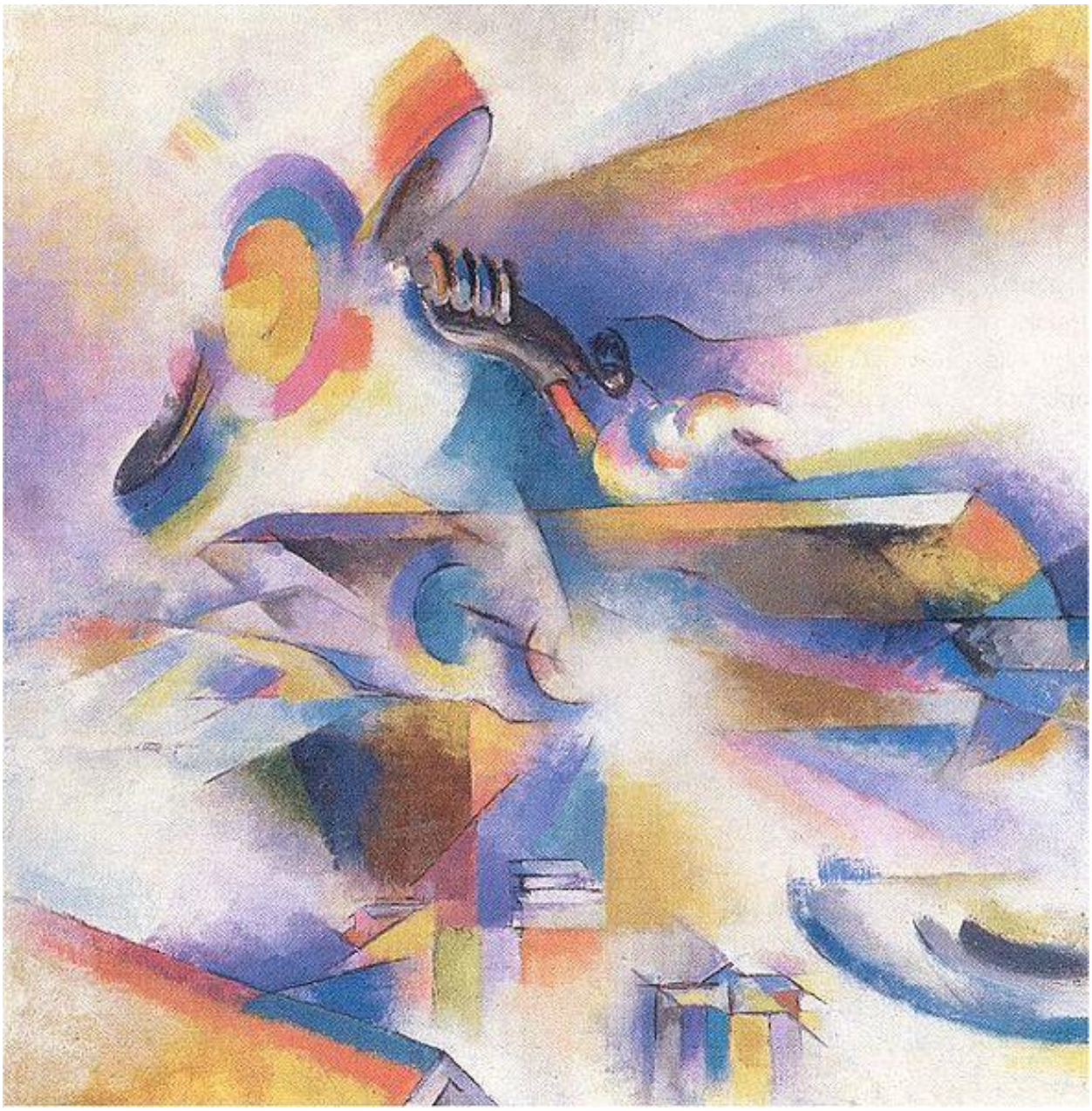
☐ Describe your initial response to Elsie Driggs's *Aeroplane*. How did she achieve a nuanced mysterious effect with seeming simplicity?

☐ How does *Aeroplane Synchromy* reflect synchromism? How does *Aeroplane* reflect precisionism? (See explanations, pp. 2-3.) How do the *–isms* reflect American modernists' aspirations to drive and define the *new*?

☐ Analyze and compare the two paintings. What singular impression of the "aeroplane" does each convey? What is implied about airplane flight and innovation in the 1920s?

☐ If you placed the paintings side-by-side in a museum exhibition, what would you title the pairing?

☐ What machine or object might be similarly depicted today? Why?



Stanton Macdonald-Wright (American, 1890-1973)

Aeroplane Synchromy in Yellow-Orange, oil on canvas, 1920

24¼ x 24 in. (61.6 x 61 cm.) Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY.

Alfred Stieglitz Collection, 1949. 49.70.52. Reproduced by permission of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Raised in Virginia and California, Macdonald-Wright pursued his art studies in Paris, and in 1912, developed with fellow artist Morgan Russell the color-saturated abstract style they titled *synchromism*. Blending color and music theory with Cubist influences, they created vivid rhythmic "chords of color" in their paintings, which they called *synchromies* ("with color"). As Macdonald-Wright explained, synchromy "is to color what symphony is to sound,"[1] i.e., a synchromist selects colors from the color wheel as a composer selects a chord structure, the "key" of a piece. As a tonic chord consists of the first, third, and fifth intervals of the tonic musical scale, for example, the "scale of red" would be composed of those intervals on the color wheel—red, yellow, and blue-green. With this technique, Macdonald-Wright created dazzlingly alive canvases that burst beyond their edges to envelop the viewer. "Stanton was a dreamer," writes art historian Will South. "He unashamedly, unabashedly looked for transcendence in painting. He wanted to create images that would take you physically, emotionally, spiritually outside of yourself—create some other state of mind, bigger than what you would normally experience in your day-to-day life."* In *Aeroplane Synchromy*, an airplane whizzes past us as it skims over city rooftops, its pilot catching our glance. The action is fast: the rotating propeller, the blur of close-range flight, the white flashes of sunlight. How does *Aeroplane Synchromy* evoke movement and immediacy, as though the plane will vanish the next moment, while Driggs's *Aeroplane* appears suspended in space, as though frozen in a memorial?

* "Stanton Macdonald-Wright: Discover the Man and His Art," interview with curator Will South, *Carolina Arts*, March 2001.

Elsie Driggs (American, 1898-1992), ***Aeroplane,*** oil on canvas, 1928

44 x 38 in. (111.8 x 96.5 cm.) Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Museum purchase with funds provided by the Brown Foundation Accessions Endowment Fund. Reproduced by permission of Merriman Gatch, daughter of Elsie Driggs.

Raised in the Pittsburgh area, Elsie Driggs was a member of the Precisionist movement which depicted modern industrial landscapes in precise distinct lines, emphasizing geometric shape and clarity, usually with no apparent human presence. She experienced her first airplane flight in a Ford trimotor airplane—the "Tin Goose," which she interpreted in her 1928 painting, *Aeroplane*. The painting, while technically "realistic," goes beyond mere illustration to evoke the allure and mystery of flight. With no pilot or passengers visible, with the sky and ground defined only by darkening greys at top and bottom, with the plane closely bounded on the sides and surrounded with a natural halo of light, the airplane is an artifact of modern man's transcendence of his earthbound limits—but not an icon to be worshipped. "Oblique and puzzling," wrote art curator Constance Kimmerle, "*Aeroplane* exudes a sense of haunting loneliness while suggesting the eeriness of a dreamlike experience."* How did Driggs achieve this multilayered effect with such seeming simplicity?

* Constance Kimmerle, et al., *Elsie Driggs: The Quick and the Classical* (James A. Michener Art Museum and the University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 34-35.