

A LIFE OF CONTRASTS

Delaunay was born in 1885 in Gradizhsk, a small village in Ukraine. When she was five she left her parents and two siblings and went to live with her wealthy uncle in St Petersburg. Delaunay, who was from a poor Jewish labourer's family, was treated to a very different kind of life – her uncle's house was filled with books, paintings and music, and she was taken to the museums and galleries of Europe. She was given her first set of paints by the German Impressionist Max Liebermann, who was a family friend.

After studying art in Germany she moved to Paris, where she met Robert Delaunay, whom she married in 1910. Following their son's birth Sonia began to paint less so as not to encroach on her husband's artistic territory. Instead, she painted the walls of their apartment white to provide a blank canvas for her own designs, which decorated the couple's cushions, lampshades and book covers. She said that many of the colours she used in her work referred back to the 'pure' colour she remembered from her childhood in Ukraine, and to the bright costumes worn at peasant weddings.

In 1913 Delaunay designed her first dress, the *robe simultanée*, a gown made of pink, scarlet, blue and orange sections, which she wore to dance the tango with her husband at the fashionable Bal Bullier. Robert wore a red coat with a blue collar, a green jacket, a sky-blue waistcoat, a red tie, red socks and black and yellow shoes. One of her most famous paintings, *Bal Bullier* (1912-13), is a riot of colour and movement inspired by these nights, its interlocking swatches of red, blue and green swirling like the dress in which she danced.

At the outbreak of the First World War the Delaunays moved to Spain. Three years later the Russian Revolution meant the couple lost their regular income from Sonia's uncle in St Petersburg, whose property empire had been funding their living costs. They moved to Madrid where Sonia met Sergei Diaghilev, whose avant-garde Ballets Russes was revolutionising the world of ballet. Diaghilev asked Sonia to design the costumes for his ballet *Cléopâtre*, while Robert Delaunay designed the sets. Cleopatra's dress, a slim column of gold with Delaunay's signature circular forms in red, green, purple and blue around the breasts and bodice, caused a sensation. The Delaunays decided to capitalise on their new

One of her most famous paintings is a riot of colour, the red, blue and green swirling like the dress in which she danced the tango



Clockwise from above:
an embroidered bathing
suit from the 1920s;
Le Bal Bullier, 1913;
Delaunay's costumes
for the ballet *Cléopâtre*;
a fabric design for the
Dutch store Metz & Co
from the early 1930s





Delaunay's bold, geometric designs encapsulated the verve and daring of the new modern woman



popularity and in 1919 Sonia opened a fashion and interiors boutique, Casa Sonia, in Madrid. For the next 20 years it was Sonia's income alone that would keep the family afloat.

The boutique was a success but the Delaunays returned to Paris a year later. Their apartment in the 17th arrondissement became one of the fashionable artists' salons. The couple hosted Dadaist evenings, where Sonia would showcase her *robes poèmes*, colourful dresses that incorporated text from Dadaist poems. In 1925 she opened Maison Delaunay, the same year that the Exposition des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes in Paris finally brought her designs to a wider audience. Maison Delaunay was visited by the likes of Gloria Swanson, the actress, and the heiress Nancy Cunard. Delaunay's bold, geometric designs encapsulated the verve and daring of the new modern woman, and orders flooded in from chic women who wanted to wear the latest fashion designed by a bona fide artist.

The Wall Street stock-market crash of 1929 put an end to Delaunay's fashion business and from then until her husband's death in 1941 she concentrated mainly on textiles. Under her label Tissus Delaunay she sold designs all over the

world. Her designs from the late 1920s and early 1930s are incredibly modern and, in a way, even more impressive than her paintings – the colour combinations are so vibrant they appear to pop right off the page. She never seemed to run out of ideas or inspiration, writing how she could dash off 10 to 20 designs in a day.

Delaunay returned to painting again in the mid-1930s but it was not until the 1960s, after being overshadowed by her husband for most of her life, that she finally began to garner worldwide acclaim. Delaunay always denied that she had been forced to stall her career as a painter for her husband, but her biographers disagree – she took sole charge of bringing up their son, and it was her success as a designer that enabled the family to survive. In 1964 she became the first living female artist to be given a retrospective at the Louvre in Paris. She is still in demand: last year one of her portraits sold at Christie's for more than £600,000. Delaunay died in 1979 aged 94, and was painting the day she died. 'I always changed everything around me,' she said. 'I made my first white walls so our paintings would look better. I designed my furniture; I have done everything. I have lived my art.' ●

Clockwise from above: a set of fabric designs for Metz & Co from 1927; a watercolour of the *robe poème*, 1923; embroidered driving caps from the 1920s; printed cotton georgette, 1934

Colour Moves: Art and Fashion by Sonia Delaunay (Thames & Hudson, £22.50), by Matteo de Leeuw-de Monti and Petra Timmer, is available from Telegraph Books (books.telegraph.co.uk; 0844 871 1516) at £18.99 plus £1.25 p&p