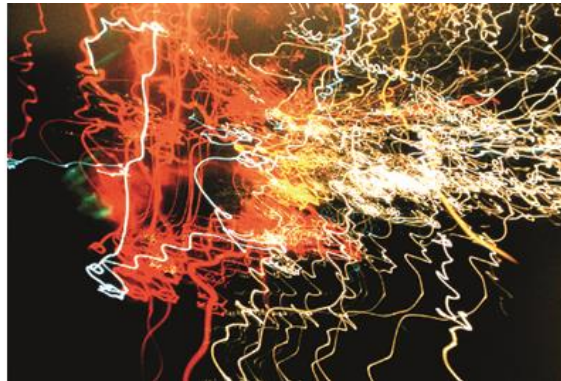




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THE PAINTINGS OF MOHOLY-NAGY ***The Shape of Things to Come***

First Exhibition to Emphasize Artist's Use of Painting as a Means
of Overcoming the Limits of Early 20th-Century Technology

On View July 5 – September 27, 2015

March 20, 2015– Organized by the Santa Barbara Museum of Art (SBMA), *The Paintings of Moholy-Nagy: The Shape of Things to Come* (<http://www.sbma.net/exhibitions/upcoming/index>) is the first exhibition to explore how the practice of painting served as the means for Moholy to imagine generative relationships between art and technology. László Moholy-Nagy (1895–1946) is now recognized as one of the most influential members of the Bauhaus. Active in America from 1937 until his untimely death from leukemia in 1946 at the age of 51, Moholy's legacy for later 20th-century art is typically linked to the photogram (a type of cameraless photography) or to the so-called 'telephone pictures,' that he famously ordered from a factory and displayed in a notorious exhibition held in Berlin in 1922. **However, the driving force behind this exhibition is the relatively under recognized role of the more traditional medium of painting throughout Moholy's career.** Painting, and not just the newer reproductive technologies of photography or film, remained a visionary medium for the artist, as is explored in this selection of 33 works of art ranging in date from the 1920s to 1940s, including paintings, works on paper, photograms, video projections, and a facsimile replica of Moholy's prescient *Light Prop*, one of the first kinetic sculptures of its kind. The installation also includes a Kodachrome slide set (the latest in color photography innovation at the

Images (L-R): László Moholy-Nagy, *Z vi*, 1925, oil on canvas, Harvard Art Museums/Busch-Reisinger Museum, The Fredric Wertham Collection, Gift of his wife Hesketh, 1987.78, Imaging Department © President and Fellows of Harvard College; *Kodachrome Slide, Color Study*, 1939-46, Estate of László Moholy-Nagy; *CH Space 6*, oil on canvas, Estate of László Moholy-Nagy

time), which comprises 12 luminous images. This is the first comprehensive presentation of the artist's work on the West Coast since the 1968–69 retrospective, for which the Santa Barbara Museum of Art was a venue. The captivating installation highlights the seamlessness with which Moholy moved between painting, photography, three-dimensional sculpture, and so-called light sculptures. Like the other members of the legendary Bauhaus, Moholy believed that the language of abstraction could affect a transcendence of the dystopic reality embodied by the two World Wars, in favor of a futuristic vision of the world made anew as “the shape of things to come.”

Guest curated by art historian **Joyce Tsai** (University of Florida, Gainesville), the exhibition is organized chronologically and thematically to show the evolution of Moholy's thought and practice over his career. The presentation begins with the emergence of Moholy's abstract painting in the early '20s and highlights his embrace of a new machine aesthetic, more sympathetic to Constructivism. It links his style, technique, and materials to his tenure at the Bauhaus when the project of unifying art with technology stood at the center of the school's artistic and pedagogical endeavors.

Most dramatically, the installation also features a modern facsimile of ***Light Prop for an Electrical Stage*** in a gallery space all to itself. *Light Prop* was a project Moholy worked on obsessively during a period in which he gave up painting to focus on developing industrial lighting prototypes. Arguably the artist's most ambitious endeavor, the assemblage was made from metal, glass, and plastic components that were enclosed within a box with multicolored lightbulbs lining the perimeter. The machine literally whirls and twirls, reflecting and refracting light that seems to dance: a lighting display for a modern, electrified stage. *Light Prop* is now recognized as a pioneering example of kinetic sculpture, much emulated in later 20th-century art.

While inspirational in concept, such futuristic light sculptures



Image: László Moholy-Nagy, *Light Prop for an Electric Stage*, 1929-30, exhibition replica, constructed in 2006 through the courtesy of Hattula Moholy-Nagy. Metal, plastics, glass, paint, and wood, with electric motor. Harvard Art Museums/Busch-Reisinger Museum, Hildegard von Gontard Bequest Fund 2007.105. Imaging Department © President and Fellows of Harvard College

were ill-timed at the beginning of the Great Depression. Despite efforts to garner funds for additional research and development, Moholy admitted defeat in a letter to the editor that was published in *telehor*, “It is an irrefutable fact that the material dependence of the artist on capital, industry, and working equipment presents an insurmountable obstacle today to the successful creation of a true architecture of light...While possession of a few brushes and tubes of color enables the painter in his studio to be a sovereign creator, the designer of light displays is only too often the slave of technical and other material factors, a mere pawn in the hands of chance patrons...” Shortly thereafter, Moholy returned to painting.

The exhibition also explores Moholy’s use of newly developed **thermoplastics** that shaped his aesthetic over the course of the ‘30s and ‘40s, during a period when he served as director of the New Bauhaus and Institute of Design. These objects are essentially **painting-sculpture hybrids**,



made to activate the viewer and reveal new capacities of color photographic reproduction. Moholy describes the natural passageway between painting and color photography in an essay “Paths to the Unleashed Color Camera,” first published in 1933. He painted “...the front and back of a transparent material. Adjacent to the colored surfaces there is a perforation. This admits unfiltered light, so that in addition to the pigmentary effect of the painted spaces we have a direct material effect derived from the light striking though upon the background. Thus a kind of spatial kinetics also begins to play its part. When the picture is secured at a certain distance from its background, we have effects of light and shade which appear to move as the spectator walks past the picture.” Such “spatial kinetics” are well exemplified in the exhibition by *Untitled Space Modulator* (1946), in which oil was applied to the relatively new material of that time, Plexiglas.

The installation also includes a set of Kodachrome color slides shown in a loop on four imbedded flatscreens to reveal the links between Moholy’s painting and photographic practice and concludes with a hypnotic video

projection created by **Jan Tichy** (<http://www.richardgraygallery.com/artists/jan-tichy/>), a Chicago-based, contemporary artist. Tichy recreated footage made by Moholy-Nagy in 1936 for H.G. Well’s futuristic film, *Things to Come*, that was not included in the movie, thereby offering a

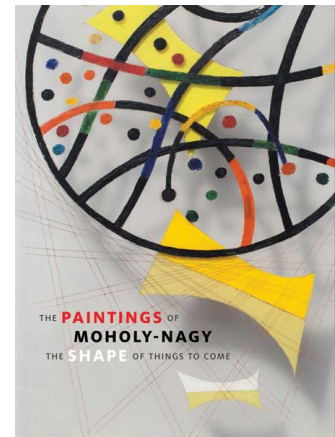
glimpse of Moholy's prescient anticipation of a dystopic, technologically redefined world unmoored from nature.

CATALOGUE

This exhibition is accompanied by an exquisitely designed, scholarly catalogue, distributed by [Yale University Press](#) and authored by Tsai with contributions by SBMA Assistant Director and Chief Curator, Eik Kahng, art historian James Merle Thomas, and Conservator Friederike Waentig.

EDUCATIONAL INTERACTIVES

The Education gallery includes a groundbreaking interactive app, which allows visitors to create their own digital photograms, which they can then share on social media.



UNIQUE INSTALLATION DESIGN ELEMENTS

This unprecedented presentation also features 'interventions,' inspired by Moholy's art, by the high-end designer, **Alex Rasmussen**, whose company **Neal Feay** (<http://www.nealfeay.com/>), reinterprets artistic forms in anodized aluminum. In many ways, Rasmussen's innovative fusion of technology and the arts is the 21st-century continuation of Moholy's legacy.

RELATED PROGRAMS

Guest Curator, Joyce Tsai, gives a public lecture on the exhibition on Sunday, July 5 at 3 pm.

CREDITS

The Paintings of Moholy-Nagy: The Shape of Things to Come is organized by the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, guest curated by Joyce Tsai, and facilitated by Eik Kahng, SBMA Assistant Director and Chief Curator.

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The Santa Barbara Museum of Art is a privately funded, not-for-profit institution that presents internationally recognized collections and exhibitions and a broad array of cultural and educational activities as well as travel opportunities around the world.

Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 1130 State Street, Santa Barbara, CA.
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