A Redating of Kupka’s *Amorpha, Fugue in Two Colors II*

The intent of this article is to establish more precisely the date of *Amorpha, Fugue in Two Colors II* (Figure 1) by František Kupka (1871-1957). A comparative analysis of this artwork and others related to it will show that it was executed during the months of late 1909 to early 1910, rather than the years 1909 to 1912, as currently estimated. This article will discuss the painting’s subject, its status in the entire *Amorpha, Fugue* series, and the artist’s intentions, highlighting the current research on Kupka. A formal examination of the painting and a brief consideration of the artist’s career will locate the painting in Kupka’s oeuvre. Correlating the Cleveland painting with other works by the artist not only reveals a shorter period of execution for the object, but also helps the viewer to understand how this work demonstrates Kupka’s artistic development.

Passionately interested in mysticism and the occult, Kupka found in Theosophy a source of artistic inspiration as well as spiritual guidance. Theosophy is a religious doctrine that interrelates the deity, cosmos, and the self, whose adherents believe that through especially acute perception and immediate intuition, certain individuals gain access to extrasensory reality and perception; thus, the initiate can develop heightened faculties, including wisdom, and learn to dominate nature and direct his/her fate or evolution. Kupka’s spiritual concerns led to replacing the idea of painting as a static image with an attempt to depict movement itself, in the belief that this could communicate supersensible, dynamic realities beyond the world of the senses.

This idea was expanded by Kupka’s curiosity about modern scientific investigations, particularly chronophotography, a procedure that records a moving figure in progressive stages of motion in a single photograph. An examination of both Kupka’s spiritual inquiries and scientific interests allows the re-dating of *Amorpha, Fugue in Two Colors II* and locates the painting specifically within Kupka’s experiments in abstraction.

Through a brief analysis of the technique, design, and composition of the Cleveland painting, the artist’s goals become apparent. The image is a composite of several faceless figures or aspects of a
single figure, abstracted to appear as a body in motion. The arrangement of shapes connotes human anatomy, with a circular form near the head and narrow, rectangular shapes defining the limbs. The figure’s round blue head is cocked back to the left; its rectangular blue and red arms are outstretched to the right. The free-form blue and red legs are placed next to each other and are seen in profile facing to the left. The shifted torso, the multiple outlines of the legs, and the up-raised arms suggest motion, as does the cocked-back head.

The scale of this painting is small in comparison to human proportions; as a result, the figure represented appears childlike or doll-like. Though the image is partially abstracted, the space of the painting is illusionistic, intended to give a sense of realistic three-dimensional depth. Nevertheless the space remains ambiguous. The artist has used the height of the objects on the picture plane to create a perspective system in which the upper arm, for example, seems farther away because it is higher up on the painted surface. From a technical standpoint, the painting appears to be a complete resolution; there are no untreated areas of the canvas that would indicate partial or fragmentary conclusions by the artist. All sections of the canvas contain several layers of paint, intended to produce vivid and varied chromatic and tonal effects. Surprisingly, there is no distinction among any parts of the canvas; there is no evidence that the artist developed certain areas more than others.

The status of Kupka’s Amorpha, Fugue in Two Colors II as a member of a series is critical, because it is a synthesis of images and ideas Kupka had already considered, not only in the Amorpha, Fugue series, but also in at least two other groups of studies: a systematic analysis of a figure in motion, and studies of a woman dancing and of a woman gathering flowers; to which sources must be added the abstract studies of their movements Kupka invented to represent motion itself.
In the series of drawings and paintings that preceded this image is a sketch Kupka made of his naked stepdaughter playing with a ball outdoors, *Child with a Ball* (Figure 2), probably from 1908. In this pastel drawing, the figure holds a ball in one hand and shields her face from the sun with the other. From this drawing, Kupka made a painting of the same subject that remains unfinished, perhaps because the artist could not expand the temporal element he would investigate intensely in the next few works.²

Determined to resolve the problem of representing movement, Kupka, rejecting traditional methods of painting, embarked on
a project to develop and change the image in order to emphasize its locomotion. He reduced the image to a linear analysis in a crayon drawing (Figure 4), then considered it as a series of interconnecting geometric shapes in several crayon and pencil drawings (Figures 5-9). Still dissatisfied, he wrote on a drawing from 1908-1909 (Figure 10), "Here, only the surfaces are dissected; the concept of atmospheric copenetration is still to be found. As long as there is a difference between the ground colors and the flesh, I will fall once again into photographic postcard imagery." Kupka mentions color as an important element in achieving the abstraction he pursued.
Figure 4. Study after Child with a Ball. Colored crayon on paper. 21.2 x 14 cm. 1907. František Kupka. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. František Kupka.
Figure 5. Study after *Child with a Ball*. Colored pencil and graphite pencil on paper, 16.8 x 15.2 cm, 1908. František Kupka. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. František Kupka.
Figure 6. Study after Child with a Ball. Colored pencil and graphite pencil on paper, 21 x 19 cm, 1908. František Kupka. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. František Kupka.
Figure 7. Study after *Child with a Ball*. Colored pencil and graphite pencil on paper, 21 x 19 cm, 1908. František Kupka. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. František Kupka.
Figure 8. Study after *Child with a Ball*. Pencil on paper, 21.6 x 13.3 cm, 1908-09. František Kupka. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. František Kupka.
Figure 9. Study after Child with a Ball. Crayon on paper, 20.9 x 10.2 cm, 1908. František Kupka. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. František Kupka.
Figure 10. Study after *Child with a Ball*, Pencil on paper, 27.3 x 18.7 cm, 1908-09, František Kupka. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. František Kupka.
Figure 11. Study after Girl with a Ball for Disks of Newton and The Fugue. Colored crayons on paper, 21.4 x 13.4 cm, 1908-09. František Kupka. Private Collection, New York.
He wanted to develop "color planes" that moved in both space and time, apparent in several of the drawings (Figures 4-7). These treatments, though not reproducible in color here, form a spatial and coloristic consideration of the subject. The four drawings share the same vertical emphasis, each showing a slightly different aspect of the figure. One other drawing in colored crayons on paper (Figure 11) continued the examination of the figure as it moves.

Now, as seen in Figures 4 through 11, Kupka has added circular lines—beyond those that describe the figure—to show where it has moved in space. These circular lines provided a means of showing, over a period of time, animated movement in a single image. Kupka appropriated the circular form the figure holds as she moves from the earlier watercolor of a woman dancing with a hoop, helping to focus the viewer’s attention on the motion. The figure upholds it and its location implies that she will probably slip her hands around it as she dances. In Amorpha, Fugue in Two Colors II the circle is integrated into the composition, suggesting pure lines of force rather than a hoop. In the concluding 1912 painting of the Amorpha, Fugue series (Figure 12), the figure and the hoop are completely integrated; the viewer understands progressive movement.

The Cleveland painting incorporates imagery from two other sources: the Woman Gathering Flowers series and studies of movement for an illustration to Lysistrata. Two drawings from The Woman Gathering Flowers series show a single figure in successive phases of movement, and Kupka assimilated the legs into Amorpha, Fugue in Two Colors II. Curiously, the figure in the Woman Gathering Flowers series moves from right to left, while the torso and arms of the figure in Amorpha, Fugue in Two Colors II shift from left to right.

The studies for an illustration to Lysistrata present a similar visual parallel. Kupka considered the figure as it dances, repeating the specific features of the anatomy, such as the raised arms, to show movement in space. Regardless of the opposite movement of the two figures, Kupka has spliced together the bodies of his stepdaughter and the dancer with the legs of the "moving" figure in the Woman Gathering Flowers and Lysistrata series.
Figure 12. Amorpha, Fugue in Two Colors. (Amorpha, Dvořák Fugue). Oil on canvas, 211 x 220 cm, 1912. František Kupka. National Gallery of Prague, Czech Republic.
How did Kupka become interested in abstracting the movement of a figure, and what problems did it pose? Kupka was a mystic and devout Theosophist throughout his life, and his early training underscored several of his spiritualist views; he developed his painting style in conjunction with his beliefs based on Theosophy. Also, Kupka's mature artistic style carried with it ornamental and decorative elements garnered from his earliest training. His first formal training came in his native Czechoslovakia, where he studied under a teacher influenced by Czech folk art, Alois Studnicka (1842-1927). Studnicka emphasized folk color ornamentation to his students, in particular repetitive patterns based on geometric forms. Kupka then studied in Prague, with František Ševčík (1836-1896), a Nazarene-style painter. The art of the Nazarenes emphasized allegory, poetry, and philosophy, and direct contact with their ideas led him to the notion that art could have religious or spiritual importance.¹⁰

Kupka left his native Bohemia in 1892 to enter the Vienna Academy. In Vienna, he became aware of the concept of applying musical laws to painting. There he learned from a Viennese professor of music, Eduard Hanslick (1825-1904) that music is essentially, "logic of sound in motion. . . . The important law is the primordial law of harmonic progression by means of which themes are developed and transformed."¹¹ Kupka seriously considered this concept in painterly terms when he experimented with the union of the third dimension of space and the fourth dimension of time to suggest mobility, apparent in the Cleveland painting in the figure's simultaneous yet autonomous movements.

While a student in Vienna, Kupka met Theosophists and lived for a time in the house of a major Austrian Theosophist in a kind of commune setting.¹² Theosophy influenced and involved several central and eastern European artists, including Wassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian, because of its relation to mystic, esoteric theories of religion, and its regard for reflection as a basis for creativity. Thus, Theosophy had interest for Kupka, as he had always been a spiritualist, even from an early age, and had always been engrossed in numerous metaphysical philosophies.¹³

The juxtaposition of the teachings of Theosophy with his theories on painting provided Kupka with the understanding that other realities exist dynamically beyond the sense realm, connecting the spirit world with the imaginary and perceptual aspects of the physical world.¹⁴ Kupka saw his mission in painting as unfolding a constantly changing multidimensional reality; in emphasizing actualities beyond those evidenced by sense perception, he could communicate
his mystical idea of the dynamism of the cosmic order. Kupka and the Theosophists believed that, by studying the fourth dimension—time itself—they expanded their notion of reality to include the spiritual or incorporeal domain. And here Kupka was aided by current scientific investigations of the physical world.

In his photographic experiments Etienne-Jules Marey (1834-1904) achieved a photograph of a moving figure or object that records progressive stages of motion. Known as chronophotography, these experiments measure space and time and suggest the progression of time. According to Margit Rowell, Kupka began looking at motion photography by Marey in 1908. Marey’s work affected Kupka because he, like many other twentieth-century artists, no longer conceived of painting as a static image of a single, fixed moment. Also, he appreciated Marey’s view of an object in motion: the artist/photographer made a single photographic plate showing several motions of a figure at several intervals. The finished product reveals overall motion. Prompted by chronophotography’s capacity to suggest simultaneity, Kupka attempted to paint multiple mobile events in a single painting.

Kupka turned to Marey’s experiments (Figure 13) for the prototype of his attempts at abstraction. He also was influenced by the moving pictures created by Emile Reynaud’s Praxinoscope, in which a band of drawings were reflected in a mirror and animated a figure when rotated. Kupka drew a version of a man on a horse, The Horsemen, based on his understanding of the Praxinoscope’s drawings. The

drawing diagrams the figure’s locomotion schematically in the manner of Marey’s chronophotographs, also apparent on the legs of the figure in one of the sketches for Child with a Ball (Figure 5). The vertical striations along the figure’s body and pattern of movement indicate successive phases of progression in space. Kupka applied these same vertical phases to the figure’s legs in Amorpha, Fugue in Two Colors II.

Chronophotography provided Kupka with a format that unifies the figure with the surrounding space. In Amorpha, Fugue in Two Colors II the figure and the space are not easily differentiated. The figure moves across the landscape, but the viewer cannot distinguish when the figure runs from when it stands still. By abstracting the child playing with the ball, and melding the figure with multiple moments of animation, Kupka suggests a figure in motion, emphasizing its activity rather than its physical presence. The subject of Amorpha, Fugue in Two Colors II is the dissolution of the figure in space as it moves, created by fusing several kinetic moments into a single image.

In addition to chronophotography, discoveries regarding energy and x-rays particularly influenced Kupka’s investigations. Virginia Spate and Linda Dalrymple Henderson have considered Kupka’s interest in the fourth dimension as an extension of his Theosophical beliefs, and his curiosity about modern technical and scientific investigations. In particular, Spate describes how the discovery that matter is pervaded by the energies that animate all beings confirmed mystical beliefs that Kupka then pursued in his art. Spate also suggests that Kupka’s isolation and hermitlike lifestyle may have promoted his interest in laws of energy, which predict invisible phenomena, as opposed to sense perception based on empirical visual information.

Henderson’s research focuses on Kupka’s interest in the fourth dimension, especially related to his desire to transcend optics and perception for access to a “superconsciousness.” Henderson notes that Kupka analogized the artist-visionary and a photographic plate or film. An artist who believed that extrasensory perception is linked to the spiritual would focus on translating mystical or metaphysical rhythms into artistic formats. Henderson also highlights Kupka’s regard for x-rays, which imply a dynamic sense of transparency, capable of indicating a vigorous but invisible reality. She notes that the culmination of the Amorpha, Fugue series in 1912 moved further into abstraction as a result of Kupka’s investigations into transparency through photographic film and x-rays, investigations that he soon abandoned. In essence, the ideas outlined by Spate and Henderson partially account for the visibility of all phases of the figure’s movement in Amorpha, Fugue in Two Colors II.
Despite sharing the Cubists' interest in simultaneity of vision, Kupka shunned Cubism. He even lived near a group of Cubists centered around the sculptor Jacques Villon, a brother of Marcel Duchamp, in the Paris suburb of Puteaux, where Kupka had moved from Paris in 1895. The rural, sunny atmosphere enabled Kupka to feel closer to nature and more connected to the cosmos. Kupka lived near Jacques Villon and knew several of the Puteaux Cubists, including Jean Metzinger and Albert Gleizes. The Puteaux Cubists pursued a form of abstraction in which the shifting planes of space on their canvases or in their sculptures demonstrated movement. Henderson notes, however, that Kupka's greater age and different ideas prevented him from becoming involved in the close-knit Puteaux Cubists' group.25 Instead, Kupka pursued a premonitory and admonitory abstract art with a spiritual relation to reality. This visionary approach to reality and perception essentially contradicted the realist view of Villon's circle. Moreover, Kupka was interested in time, whereas the Puteaux Cubists were not.26

Cubism was too static for Kupka.27 The Puteaux artists selected an object and then moved around it, as Eadweard Muybridge (1834-1904) had done in his photographs. Kupka preferred to let the subject move while he remained stationary, like Marey, and focus on the motion rather than on each phase of movement.28 Amorpha, Fugue in Two Colors II is closer in spirit to Marey's single photograph with multiple phases of locomotion (Figure 13) than Muybridge's individuated frames of successive movement (Figure 14).29

Figure 14. *Dog from Animals in Locomotion*, Plate 705, Collotype, 1899. Eadweard Muybridge. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of Phyllis Seltzer in memory of John Cook. 78.97.
Having examined how Kupka's scientific, artistic, and philosophical concerns related to his art, it is easier to comprehend his approach to the subject in the Cleveland painting. At issue in this discussion of Amorpha, Fugue in Two Colors II is the period of execution. An earlier date is consistent with the naturalism of the subject's treatment compared to the relative abstraction of the works that follow in the series.

The date of Amorpha, Fugue in Two Colors II as currently stated by The Cleveland Museum of Art is 1909-1912. However, both the 1975 and 1989 retrospective catalogues date this painting as 1910-1911. These proposed dates ignore the evidence of Kupka's development, apparent in the comparison to works in other series. The Cleveland painting must have been executed after the Child with a Ball series, dated 1907-09, from which its imagery stems. It must precede two other works in the series, Oval Mirror (Figure 15), dated by the artist immediately below his signature "1910," and the painting Red and Blue Discs (Figure 16), also dated by the artist immediately below his signature as "1911-12."
There are some important similarities and differences between the forms of the Cleveland painting and those of Oval Mirror and Red and Blue Discs. All three have the same centralized location of the moving figure with a definite vertical emphasis. All have circular lines of movement surrounding the central figure and several divided and bounded planes of color defining space. The Cleveland painting and Oval Mirror share the same multicolored surface. But the subject of the Cleveland painting is depicted more realistically than the more abstracted image of Oval Mirror, suggesting that the Cleveland Amorpha, Fugue in Two Colors II is an earlier step in Kupka’s progress toward the abstraction of the final painting of the series. And the colors of the final painting are reduced to the essential red and blue, as in Red and Blue Discs of 1911-1912, its immediate predecessor.

In comparison to Oval Mirror, which also has a vibrantly multicolored surface, the Cleveland painting has many more remnants of realistic imagery. Red and Blue Discs shows an even more evolved level of abstraction and reduction of colors. The visual evidence indicates that the Cleveland painting antedates these other works,
locating it in early 1910. It also follows the definitively dated Child with a Ball series of 1907-1909, placing it in late 1909. The dates of these other works are apparent on their surfaces under Kupka's signature or are not disputed. Based on these comparisons, the Cleveland painting should be dated after the Child series, but before the two paintings leading to the final version of Amorpha, Fugue. Therefore, the months of late 1909-early 1910 form a more suitable and defined range for the Cleveland painting.

With the information now available, as examined in this article, it is clear that the date of the painting has been overgeneralized and should be reduced to the months of late 1909 to early 1910. This painting embodies some of the aspects of Kupka's mystical, quasi-scientific intentions. As Rowell and Meda Mladek explain, Kupka felt that art should embody metaphysical aspects of reality and communicate the artist's contemplative experiences to the viewer, an attitude garnered from his early training, religious beliefs, and interest in technologies such as chronophotography. Spate and Henderson, in their respective studies, emphasize Kupka's desire to achieve this end without referring to a particular subject or representing an image from the objective world, drawing imagery instead from the interrelationship of his mystical ideas and scientific curiosity. Their considerations of Kupka's interests and publication of his many related studies permit a fuller understanding of the Cleveland painting, as well as a broader conception of the artist during the period of the painting's execution.

In Amorpha, Fugue in Two Colors II Kupka succeeded in painting a dynamic image in flux, revealed to the viewer purely through the relationships of formal elements without extensive reference to the physical realm. The process of refining its date affords insight into the artist's intentions, and illuminates the painting itself.

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I want to thank Professor Ellen G. Landau for her advice and encouragement as I prepared this article.

References


1. Edward Henning described the date as 1909-1912 in his 1970 article on this work. (See Henning, CMA Bulletin 57, no. 4, p. 110.) The work was then redated to 1910-1911 in the 1975 and 1989 retrospective catalogues, without any explanation. (See František Kupka: A Retrospective, pp. 71 and 155 and František Kupka 1871-1957, Paris, 1989, p. 198.)

2. Girl with a Ball, 1908, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris. See illustration in František Kupka: A Retrospective, p. 115. Also, there is another related painting of Kupka's stepdaughter Andréa in a private collection (Figure 3) that further evidences the artist's attempts to abstract the image.


4. Ibid.

5. On Figure 5, Kupka has written, "origin of the technique employed in the structure of the Fugue."

6. The inscription on Study after Child with a Ball (Figure 11) shows the artist's estimation of the importance of this drawing, and Figures 4-10 to which it is related, to the Fugue series, as well as another series of works on the "Disks of Newton." The owner of this drawing notes: "In order to leave no doubt as to the drawing's role in his development, before he gave me the drawing Kupka wrote in the lower left corner, 'Genèse des disques et de la Fugue.'" (Letter to the author from a private collector, New York, October 4, 1993.)


8. Mladek notes that Woman With a Hoop, an early pencil and watercolor work, (see footnote 7, above), "is one of a series of compositions in which Kupka used a circle and flowing robes to emphasize fluidity of movement." (See Mladek, František Kupka: A Retrospective, p. 38.)

9. The two related images from the Woman Gathering Flowers series are both pastel on paper and owned by the Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, variously dated as 1909-1910 and 1910-1911. See illustrations 106 and 107 in František Kupka 1871-1957 ou l'invention d'une abstraction, pp. 178-180. The illustration for Lysistrata is illustrated in Vachtova, Frank Kupka, p. 76.

10. Mladek remarks that "The Nazarenes wanted to produce with their paintings an effect parallel to that of church music or religious songs... which led them to adopt a particular style, and a fine, simplified, melodic and decorative line now became their hallmark." (Mladek, p. 20.) Kupka's interest in endowing his imagery with religiosity probably stems from this early connection. See also Rowell, František Kupka: A Retrospective, p. 49. This biographical information and its meaning for Kupka's art are discussed in detail by both Mladek and Rowell in their respective articles in František Kupka: A Retrospective.

11. As quoted by Mladek, see Mladek, p. 24.

12. Ibid., p. 25

13. Ibid.


15. Ibid., p. 49.

16. Ibid.