The Museum of Modern Art
11 West 53 Street, New York, N.Y. 10019 Tel. 956-6100 Cable: Modernart

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THOMAS WILFRED: LUMIA

> Light is the silent universal expression of the greatest force our senses can grasp...(page 66)
> From an unpublished manuscript Lumia: The Art of Light by Thomas Wilfred (1945-47)

A retrospective exhibition of the work of Thomas Wilfred (1889-1968), the first artist in this century to use light as the sole means of expression, will be on view at The Museum of Modern Art from August 9 through September 20, 1971. The exhibition includes 11 internally programmed lumia compositions which are completely self-operating and 28 drawings, dating from 1928, which represent technical ideas, individual works, visionary projects and designs for theatrical projected light settings. The exhibition is directed by Donna Stein, Assistant Curator, Department of Prints and Illustrated Books, who was also guest director of the larger version of the exhibition at The Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. last spring. Special arrangements with the Corcoran make this New York showing possible. Accompanying the exhibition is an extensively illustrated catalogue with a definitive essay by Miss Stein published by The Corcoran Gallery of Art.

Born in Denmark in 1889, Wilfred emigrated to the United States in 1916. As early as 1905, he had begun tentative exploration in light and color and their use as a medium for art. In the United States, he continued his experimentation and in 1921 completed his first portable clavilux, with keyboard controls, which projected compositions in light on a screen. For the next 4 years, he toured the United States, Canada and Europe giving lumia recitals. During this time he also designed settings for stage productions using projected light to create illusory effects. In 1930 he founded the Art Institute of Light, a center for research,

(more)

teaching and demonstration in lumia, Wilfred's name for the art of light. The Art Institute of Light closed to the public during World War II, but Wilfred continued research and composition from his studio in West Nyack, New York. For the next two decades, Thomas Wilfred wrote, performed and designed light settings until his death in 1968.

As Miss Stein states in her catalogue, "Thomas Wilfred worked in virtual isolation for more than sixty years and struggled to uncover the secrets of an art of light. He executed each detail of his art with meticulous care, demanding the highest standards of craftsmanship, which his instruments exhibit. His relatively small but impressive oeuvre is the legacy of an unusual mind, one which successfully combined the artistic and the technological."

The Museum of Modern Art has played an important role in supporting the career of Thomas Wilfred. In 1941 it purchased "Vertical Sequence II, Opus 137," Wilfred's first lumia composition to enter a museum collection. In 1952, the Museum recognized his achievements by giving him his first major exposure in the exhibition 15 Americans. Wilfred's work again was featured in 1958 in Photographs from the Museum Collection and in 1962 in Paintings, Sculpture and Graphic Art from the Museum Collection. Through the Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund, "Lumia Suite, Opus 158" was commissioned in 1963 and has remained on view in a small darkened theatre in the Auditorium Gallery. Now, in 1971 with the exhibition Thomas Wilfred: Lumia, full recognition is given to the extraordinary and varied career of the pioneer in the art of light.

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Additional information available from Sally Ruth Rau, Assistant, and Elizabeth Shaw, Director, Department of Public Information, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 W. 53 St., New York, NY 10019. Phone: (212) 956-7294, -7501.

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Thomas Wilfred: Lumia

Thomas Wilfred (1889-1968) was the first artist in this century to use light as a means for expression rather than for the illumination of real objects from nature. He began his experiments in 1905, and although Wilfred was certainly not the first to emphasize the integration of form, color, and movement as a separate art, he clarified its possibilities and invented a means to communicate his concept.

Lumia is Thomas Wilfred's name for a visual art that utilizes light as its medium of expression and replaces earlier names designating an art of light. Wilfred defined the basic ingredients of lumia as form, color, and motion in a dark space. Of the three, he considered form and motion the most important elements. Wilfred's main goal was to add the missing third dimension to a flat screen, and to do it so convincingly that the screen became a large window opening on infinity. His most significant original contribution in lumia, however, is the addition of a fourth dimension--time.

Since 1924, lumia has been used as a visual accompanient to music, dance, and drama. It has been projected as mobile architectural decoration and employed as an aid in psychiatric diagnosis and psychotherapy. Lumia has also served as an education tool.

A typical composition contains one principal motif with one or more subordinate themes. Once chosen, they vary infinitely in shape, color, texture, and intensity. The principles evident in plastic and graphic compositions--unity, harmony, and balance--function kinetically in lumia. When movement is temporarily suspended in a lumia composition, the result is a balanced picture. However, the static picture's ultimate meaning can only be seen in relation to what follows it.

In 1919, after fourteen years of experimentation, Thomas Wilfred made his first successful instrument, the clavilux, a name derived from the Latin, meaning "light played by key." Wilfred's ideas for the clavilux and lumia were dependent upon modern advancements in electrical and mechanical research. Technology has freed the artist by expanding the possibilities for his creativity. The clavilux is one of the earliest examples of this freedom--a creation unifying art and science. Beginning with Model A, Thomas Wilfred built eight variations on his first clavilux, of which the seventh variation (G) is on view in the Auditorium Gallery.

Initially, Wilfred thought of lumia as an art of public performance, and the majority of his compositions were composed for the clavilux. Comparatively few of these were ever transcribed from a clavilux composition to an internally programmed instrument. In 1928, partly due to the demands being placed on him by individual art collectors and his own desire to be in museum exhibitions and collections, the artist reconsidered lumia's potential. His reevaluation resulted in the development of recorded or internally programmed instruments that were completely self-operating.

Wilfred used his diagrammatic and architectural drawings to conceptualize his projects; most, like his Silent Visual Carillon, were never realized, but became prototypes for later projects. Many of the drawings of Multiplate and Direct Beam projector units were done as illustrations for Wilfred's manual PROJECTED SETTINGS. They show an artist more concerned with exploring the concepts of a sophisticated technology than with executing works.

Thomas Wilfred worked in virtual isolation for more than sixty years and struggled to uncover the secrets of an art of light. He executed

each detail of his art with meticulous care, demanding the highest standards of craftsmanship, which his instruments exhibit. His sophisticated aesthetic stands as the embodiment of concepts which embrace the modernist traditions of painting and sculpture as well as music and theater. Wilfred's relatively small but impressive oeuvre is the legacy of an unusual mind, one which successfully combined the artistic and the technological.

Donna M. Stein

This exhibition was organized for The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. by Donna M. Stein of The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

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THOMAS WILFRED: LUMIA

August 9 - September 20, 1971

Checklist of the Exhibition

Works are listed in chronological order. Dates in parentheses do not appear on the works. Dimensions for screen and composition size are given in inches, height preceding width. Length of composition follows measurements.

INSTRUMENTS

1. First Home Clavilux # 93 (Clavilux Junior). 1930. Internally programmed instrument, 21 1/2 x 17 1/4 inches. Collection Earl Reiback, New York

2. Multidimensional, op. 79. 1932. Internally programmed instrument, 9 3/4 x 11 inches. 20 minutes. Collection Earl Reiback, New York

3. The Firebird, op. 91. 1934. Static instrument, 29 x 38 1/2 inches. Collection Thomas C. Wilfred, Palisades, New York

4. Tranquil Study, op. 92. 1935. Internally programmed instrument, 28 3/4 x 38 1/2 inches. 5 minutes, 15 seconds. Collection Thomas C. Wilfred, Palisades, New York

5. Clavilux, Model G. 1937. Projector with four optical systems and keyboard. Collection Earl Reiback, New York

6. Vertical Sequence II, op. 137. 1941. Internally programmed instrument, 15 1/4 x 15 3/8 inches. 2 days, 12 hours, 59 minutes. Collection The Museum of Modern Art, Purchase, 1942

7. Aspiration, op. 145. 1955. Internally programmed instrument, 19 1/4 x 15 inches. 42 hours, 14 minutes, 11 seconds. Collection The Museum of Modern Art, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Julius Stulman, 1961

8. Nocturne, op. 148. 1958. Internally programmed instrument, 16 x 20 inches. 5 years, 359 days, 19 hours, 20 minutes, 48 seconds. Private Collection, New York

9. Spacetime Study, op. 153. 1960. Internally programmed instrument, 19 1/2 x 15 3/8 inches. 14 days, 14 hours, 33 minutes. Collection Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska

10. Spacedrift, op. 154. 1960. Internally programmed instrument, 15 1/2 x 19 1/2 inches. 1 year, 164 days, 21 hours, 54 minutes. Collection Edwin A. Bergman, Chicago

11. Lumia Suite, op. 158. 1964. Internally programmed instrument, 6 x 8 feet. Collection The Museum of Modern Art, Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund, 1964

12. Luccatta, op. 162. 1968. Internally programmed instrument, 3 x 4 feet. Collection The Lannan Foundation, Palm Beach

DRAWINGS

13. Relative Positions of Moving Elements as Function of Time: Fast, Medium, Slow. (1928). Pen and ink on linen-backed paper, 21 x 30 1/8 inches. Collection Earl Reiback, New York

14. The Clavilux Silent Visual Carillon. 1928. Gouache on paper, 11 1/2 x 8 1/2 inches. Collection Thomas C. Wilfred, Palisades, New York

15. Tower of a Tall Building Surmounted by a Clavilux Silent Visual Carillon. 1928. Pencil and ink on linen-backed paper, 32 7/8 x 40 7/8 inches. Collection Earl Reiback, New York

16. Electrical and Mechanical Layout of Control Room, Showing Construction and Position of the Clavilux Control Keyboard and Corrected Wiring Diagram for Sherman Annex, Chicago, Drawing #280. July 24, 1929. Pen and ink on linen-backed paper, 23 x 30 3/16 inches. Collection Earl Reiback, New York

17. Static and Mobile Projectors, Sherman Hotel, Chicago, Drawing #281. 1929. Pen and ink on linen-backed paper, 21 5/16 x 30 inches. Collection Earl Reiback, New York

18. Plan of Projection Room, Sherman Hotel, Chicago, Drawing #282. 1929. Pen and ink on linen-backed paper, 22 3/4 x 30 5/16 inches. Collection Earl Reiback, New York

19. Transverse Section of Ballroom in Hotel Sherman, Chicago. 1929. Blueprint, 9 3/4 x 16 3/4 inches. Collection Thomas C. Wilfred, Palisades, New York

20. Suspended Clavilux Instrument for the Projection of a Continuous Mobile Mural of Light in a Rotunda, Drawing #806. March, 1931. Pencil, pen and ink on tracing paper, 23 3/4 x 17 3/16 inches. Collection Earl Reiback, New York

21. Plan for Decoration of Aquarium Room, Hotel Sherman, Chicago, Drawing #3127. September 11, 1931. Pencil, pen and ink, and crayon on paper, 21 1/4 x 18 5/8 inches. Collection Thomas C. Wilfred, Palisades, New York

22. Notation for Chalice, op. 65. 1932. Pencil, pen and ink, and colored pencil on paper, 14 1/4 x 8 1/2 and 11 x 1 inches. Collection Thomas C. Wilfred, Palisades, New York

23. History of The Firebird, op. 91. 1934. Pencil and red pencil on paper, 7 1/2 x 7 1/2 inches. Collection Thomas C. Wilfred, Palisades, New York

24. History of Tranquil Study, op. 92. 1935. Pencil and colored pencil on paper, 9 7/8 x 8 1/4 inches. Collection Thomas C. Wilfred, Palisades, New York

25. Form Development for Tranquil Study, op. 92. 1935. Pencil on paper, 9 3/4 x 6 1/2 inches. Collection Thomas C. Wilfred, Palisades, New York

26. Lumia Suite, op. 120. 1941. Pencil on paper, 10 3/4 x 7 3/4 inches. Collection Thomas C. Wilfred, Palisades, New York

27. History of Vertical Sequence, op. 137. 1941. Pencil, colored pencil, and pen and ink on paper, 11 x 8 1/4 inches. Collection Thomas C. Wilfred, Palisades, New York

28. Sequential Development of Three Form Groups. (1948). Colored pencil and pen and ink on paper, 18 5/8 x 26 3/8 inches. Collection Earl Reiback, New York

29. 5000 Watt, Lateral Type, Wilfred Multiplate Scenic Projector with f:2 Magnalux Objective. (1950-57). Pencil and pen and ink on paper, 12 x 15 3/4 inches. Collection Earl Reiback, New York

30. 5000 Watt Wilfred Multiplate Scenic Projector. Optical System and Plate Rotor. (1950-57). Pencil and pen and ink on tracing paper, 14 x 16 5/8 inches. Collection Earl Reiback, New York

31. 5000 Watt Wilfred Multiplate Release of Rotor Solenoid and Lever System. (1950-57). Pencil on tracing paper, 15 1/8 x 11 1/4 inches. Collection Earl Reiback, New York

32. Lamphouse Details for 5000 Watt Multiplate Projector. (1950-57). Pencil on tracing paper, 11 5/16 x 15 1/2 inches. Collection Earl Reiback, New York

33. Diagrammatic Front View of 5KW Lateral Model Multiplate Scenic Projector. (1950-57). Pen and ink on tracing paper, 9 3/4 x 10 1/4 inches. Collection Earl Reiback, New York

34. Front View of 2100 Watt Direct Beam Projector Color Frame Drive. (1950-57). Pencil and pen and ink on paper, 15 3/8 x 9 7/8 inches. Collection Earl Reiback, New York

35. Arrangement of Colored Glass Strips in the Two Modifier Frames for 2100 Watt Direct Beam Projector. (1950-57). Pencil on paper, 15 3/4 x 12 3/4 inches. Collection Earl Reiback, New York

36. Design of Internal Mechanism for Nocturne, op. 148. 1958. Pencil on paper, 14 1/8 x 24 1/2 inches. Collection Earl Reiback, New York

37. Design of Internal Mechanism for Nocturne, op. 148. 1958. Pencil on paper, 19 1/2 x 22 1/2 inches. Collection Earl Reiback, New York

38. Shape and Disposition of Reflecting Units for Spacedrift, op. 154. 1960. Pencil and colored pencil on paper, 8 1/2 x 11 1/2 inches. Collection Thomas C. Wilfred, Palisades, New York

39. Projector and Spectator Disposition for Lumia Suite, op. 158. 1963-64. Pencil and typewriter ink on tracing paper, 11 x 8 1/2 inches. Collection Thomas C. Wilfred, Palisades, New York

40. Wiring Diagram for Lumia Suite, op. 158. 1963-64. Pencil, colored pencil, and red ink with collage on paper, 15 3/16 x 12 1/2 inches. Collection Thomas C. Wilfred, Palisades, New York

41. Projection Room, Screen Frame, Instrument Supports and Ventilating Arrangement for Installation of Lumia Suite, op. 158, Drawing #158-20GC. 1964. Pencil on blueprint, 31 3/8 x 30 7/16 inches. Collection Earl Reiback; New York