

Stimulating Rhythms: Rolph Scarlett— Paintings and Jewelry



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Rolph Scarlett (1889–1984) was a multi-talented artist, who was known for paintings, jewelry, and industrial and set designs. Canadian born, he garnered his jewelry training with his family's business in Ontario, eventually emigrating to New York in 1918, where he worked as a commercial designer. During a trip to Europe in 1923, he was introduced to the works of Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee, both of whom came to influence his work.

In 1936, he met Hilla Rebay, Director of the Museum of Non-Objective Painting, today the

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, who befriended the young artist and championed his talent. Her support resulted in a Guggenheim Foundation scholarship in 1938, followed by the inclusion of multiple works by him in the Museum's collection, along with those of Kandinsky, Klee, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, and Rudolf Bauer, who also became a mentor. Rebay and Scarlett were simpatico, and the latter promoted her theories about art as the Museum's chief lecturer from 1939–1947. They believed that art was the expression of the spirit, using formal elements

to represent specific precepts, rather than springing from reality.

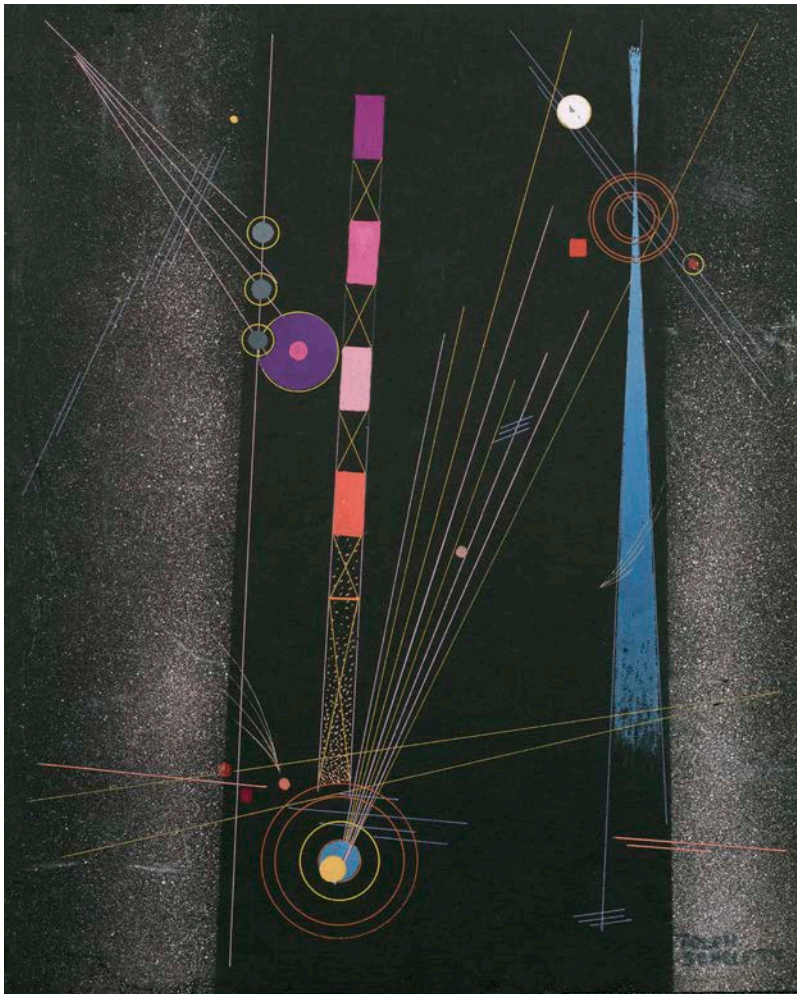
Although painting in various styles throughout his career, Scarlett's most successful output was in his geometric abstractions from the 1930s onward, as seen in the examples in the present exhibition. Bright, dynamic colors are arranged in a harmonious, kaleidoscopic format, and shapes often overlay each other in semi-transparent folds, creating an illusion of depth. The artist typically used basic, two-dimensional geometric forms traced from stencils, including wooden blocks,



Anthropomorphic Abstraction, circa 1930s, gouache on paper, 25 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 39 $\frac{3}{4}$ in.

OPPOSITE: *Pendant I*, circa 1960s–1970s, silver and semi-precious stones, 9 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 6 in.

COVER DETAIL: *Floating Forms*, circa 1960, oil on canvas, 41 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 49 $\frac{7}{8}$ in.



Black Abstraction, circa 1940s, mixed media on paper, 12¼ x 10 in.

tin cans, and other everyday objects against a neutral ground, seemingly suspended in an undefined space. A sense of motion presides in many of his works with an increased effect of depth and vastness in paintings made after 1940. In terms of the overall impact of Non-Objective painting on the beholder, the artist wrote:

Let him trace for himself the rhythm pattern of the lines and other elements. Study the juxtaposition of

mass against mass, feel the receding and advancing of the colors in spiritual space. Let him observe the relation and play of point against counter point and thus feel the esthetic values of each painting's own inner order.

It is only by means of such thoughtful, careful observation in this fascinating world of non-objectivity, where color and form make music for the eye; only by such recreation upon his own soul can he realize for himself the living

*impulse and mysterious quality of a non-objective painting.**

In 1961, he began creating jewelry in the American Modernist tradition, which had begun to emerge in the United States after World War II and was notably embraced by Alexander Calder, Ibram Lassaw, and Harry Bertoia, among others. Scarlett preferred working in silver and occasionally in gold with semi-precious stones, particularly agates. He made his pieces freely without sketches, and each one was a unique sculptural entity. Some were organic; others biomorphic or constructivist in nature. His esthetic was based upon showing the method of fabrication, wherein rough edges were often left around joints holding bits of tarnish, thereby creating greater depth and variations in color and texture. As in his two-dimensional works, his jewelry is a combination of intersecting triangles, circles, and squares, blending geometric and natural forms into wearable sculpture.

Scarlett spent his later years in Woodstock, New York, where he continued to paint and design jewelry and to exhibit in New York City until the year before his death. Most of the 30 works in this exhibition were acquired directly from the artist by a private collector in Massachusetts; this is the first time they are being shown publicly.

* Rolph Scarlett, quoted in Judith Nasby, *Rolph Scarlett: Painter, Designer, Jeweller* (Quebec: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004), pp. 77-78.



Bracelet I, circa 1960s–1970s, silver and semi-precious stone
2¾ x 3 x 2½ in.



Yellow Abstraction, circa 1930–1940, gouache on paper, 17½ x 21¾ in.



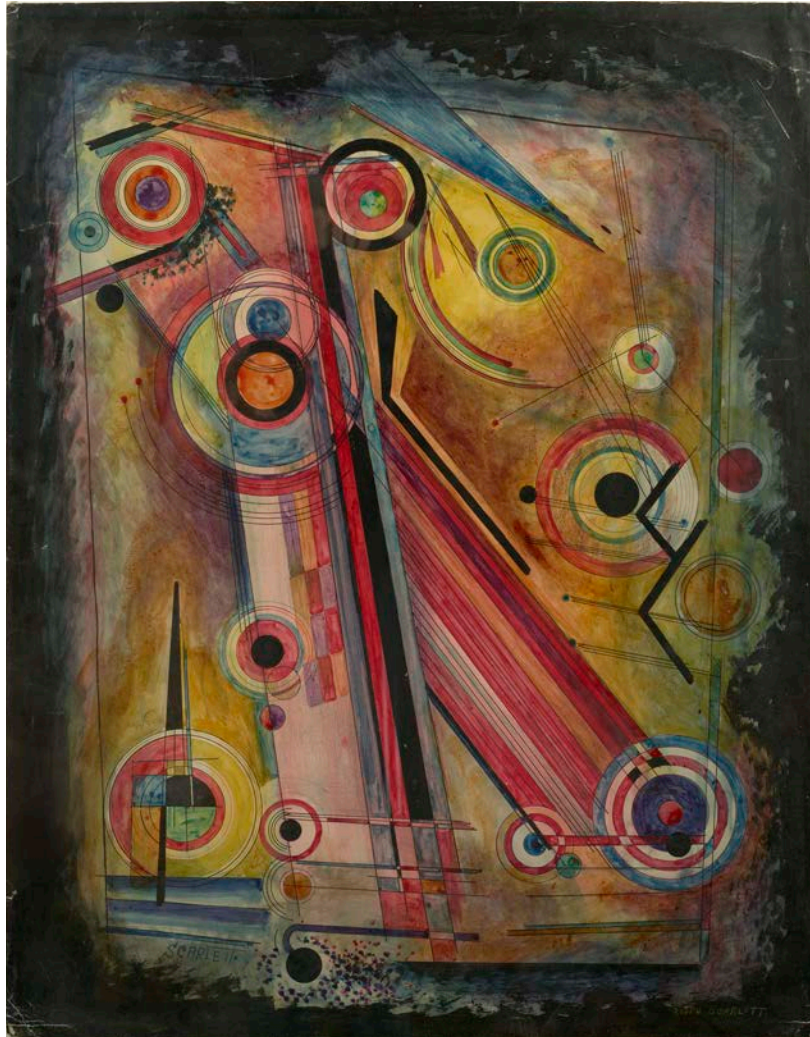
Grey and Blue Abstraction, circa 1940s, gouache on board
20½ x 15 in.



Bracelet II, circa 1960s–1970s, silver and semi-precious stones
5¼ x 3¼ x 2 in.



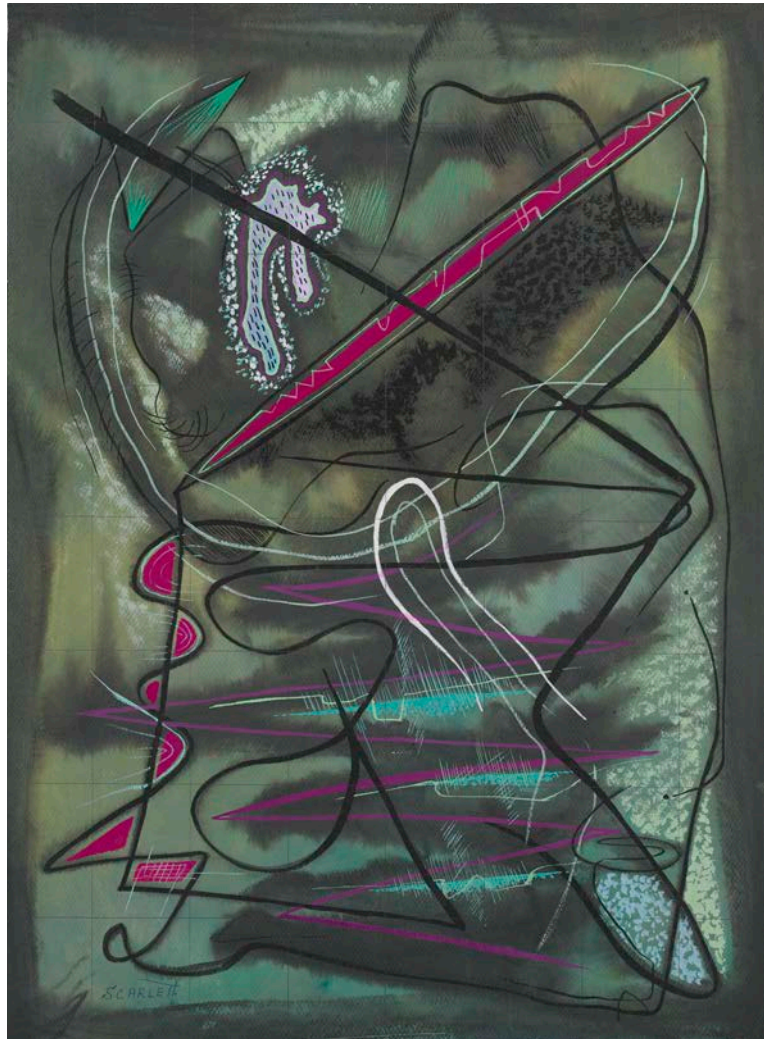
Floating Forms, circa 1960, oil on canvas, 41¼ x 49¾ in.



Vertical Abstraction, circa 1940-1945, mixed media on paper, 28¾ x 22½ in.



Pendant II, circa 1960s–1970s, silver and semi-precious stones, 5¼ x 4 in.



Magenta Lines, circa 1950s, mixed media on paper, 30 x 22 in.



Pendant III, circa 1960s-1970s, silver and semi-precious stones, 6 x 5¼ in.



Geometric Abstraction, circa 1955-1965, oil on canvas, 32 x 32 in.

BACK COVER: *Necklace*, 1976, silver and beads, 11 in. (diameter)

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Monday-Friday, 10AM-6PM and Saturdays by appointment

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