

Ferenc Martyn and the Parisian Abstract Art

Flóra Mészáros

In the 1930s an association of abstract art called *Abstraction-Création* (1931–1936) was formed in Paris to unite the different abstract art tendencies and artists and to provide a forum for non-figurative art. Among the followers of organic abstraction in *Abstraction-Création* there is an “unknown” Hungarian artist, Ferenc Martyn (1899–1986), who arrived in Paris in 1926. He lived in the French capital for 13 years and became a member of the forum in 1934. He was the only Hungarian from the association who returned to his home country at the beginning of World War II and preserved the heritage of *Abstraction-Création*. As one of the founders of the Hungarian *Európai iskola* (European School), he disseminated the abstract tradition that he had discovered in the Paris group, and became a model for numerous contemporary artists in his native Hungary. This carried on to the later surrealist phase in his career at about 1936, which could also be considered a very exciting period in the history of the movement. In the analysis and research of Ferenc Martyn’s oeuvre, the most important addition is to study his artistic activity in Paris, especially the period in *Abstraction-Création*. Through the case study of Ferenc Martyn’s inspirations and artistic development, this study casts light on the characteristics and effects of the Parisian *Abstraction-Création* movement in France as well. In this essay, I would like to reveal new findings pertaining to the relation between Ferenc Martyn and *Abstraction-Création* which I have researched for 5 years, including half a year of fieldwork in Paris in 2009.

Ferenc Martyn’s monographer, Éva Hárs has almost presented Martyn’s complete work but in her writings Martyn’s Parisian period appears to be marginalised by focusing on his activities in Hungary.¹ Hárs has published of Martyn’s Parisian letters, written in Hungarian to his Hungarian friend Lajos Török, the director of *Pécsi Képzőművészek Társasága* (Fine Artists’ Organisation of Pécs).² However, 30 years have passed since this publication and Martyn’s work in Paris clearly needs to be re-examined due to the gap in research about the Parisian period. This examination is not only useful for the evaluation of external influences in Martyn’s career and their repercussions with Martyn’s followers, but it is also an addition to the research on *Abstraction-Création*. Gladys Fabre published the first summary (catalogue) about the group in 1978, which has become the most fundamental research on *Abstraction-Création*, still relevant to this day.³ She emphasized the significance of foreign artists and their groups, especially that of Central Europeans. Since then, research on the individual artists within the group

has been the most prolific means of enriching the existing research on Abstraction-Creation.

In the second half of the 1920s, there were a lot of abstract artists who spent some time in Paris, or settled down in the French capital; moreover, many famous abstract painters had already been based there, such as Piet Mondrian, who arrived in the city in 1919. Paris provided several opportunities to this group to showcase their talent. It were primarily galleries, such as Léonce Rosenberg's *Galerie de L'Effort Moderne* (Gallery of Modern Efforts), which popularised the tendencies in abstract art. The gallery was founded by the art dealer at the end of World War I, so it was a powerful and representative early agent in promoting modern trends. Rosenberg did not only offer individual exhibitions for non-figurative artists, like Georges Valmier (1921, 1927), but he also organized collective shows for groups, as in the case of *De Stijl* (1923). He started a periodical publication as well, which bore the same name as the gallery. A further pioneer of modernist efforts in art was the Polish painter Victor-Yanaga Poznanski. In 1925 he organized the first large international avant-garde exhibition titled *L'Art d' Aujourd'hui* (Today's Art), bringing non-figurative artists into the limelight. Some Hungarian participants were featured at this exhibition, such as László Moholy-Nagy, József Csáky, Vilmos Huszár, Alfréd Réth and Lajos Tihanyi. The event provided an important opportunity for Central European artists to introduce their art. The 'Hungarian abstract artists' also had numerous individual shows (Étienne Beöthy in Galerie Rosenberg in 1930; József Csáky in Galerie Bonaparte in 1930). Besides exhibitions, the non-figurative art scene in Paris at the time was also enriched by the appearance of formal groups, which were defining themselves through different approaches to abstraction. In 1930, Michel Seuphor and Joaquin Torres-Garcia led the *Cercle et Carré* (Circle and Square) group, while Theo Van Doesburg created *Art Concret* (Concrete Art). One of the common principles of both was to step up against the stronger, well-organized current of Surrealism and to assume a power position in avant-garde art. The group of *Cercle et Carré* declared themselves to be followers of Neoplasticism. However, participants of the forum interpreted their work in a much wider sense, considering that for example Post cubism or Futurism coexisted with Constructivism in the group. *Art Concret* highlighted this eclectic profile when they criticised *Cercle et Carré* for their lack of accurate self-definition. Theo van Doesburg and his group introduced the idea of purely geometric abstraction and rejected the symbolic content.⁴ However, Van Doesburg's unexpected death and the financial problems of Mondrian's forum broke up their plans. Ironically, the end of both organizations brought about the fulfilment of their vision, and thus the birth of a new movement, the Abstraction-Création, which operated successfully for five years despite the fact that it was never promoted officially.

The group, titled "Abstraction-Création: Art non figurative," was founded on the 15th February 1931 in Paris by Auguste Herbin, Georges Vantongerloo, Hans Arp, Albert Gleizes, Jean Hélion, George Valmier, František Kupka, Robert Delaunay and Léon Tundjian. The forum had more than 40 official and 200 corresponding members over the years, including Wassily Kandinsky, Naum Gabo and Alexander Calder. Among the Hungarians, Ferenc Martyn, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Étienne Beöthy, Alfred Reth and Lajos Tihanyi joined the group. The society operated for five years, until 1936 (it eventually dissolved due to financial problems and theoretical debates about the principles

of abstract art).⁵ To provide a special forum for non-figurative art, they organised individual and collective exhibitions, published a review discussing theories of abstract art, and circulated photos of their artists' works. The forum offered opportunities for its members to discuss the problems of non-figurative art by expos and visiting others' studios, to name a few.⁶ The shared platform ensuring group cohesion was their non-figurative approach, which was the only condition of participating in the group. There were, however, two distinctive approaches to realising non-figurative works of art. On the one hand, the organization saw itself as a groundbreaking representative of abstraction, "because certain artists arrive at the idea of non-figuration through progressive abstraction of the forms of nature."⁷ On the other hand, some artists actually continued the ideas and principles of Art Concret, of Neoplasticism and of Van Doesburg's Elementarism. They worked in the spirit of creation: "others arrive at non-figuration indirectly, through the concept of a purely geometrical system or by the exclusive use of elements commonly called abstracts: circles, planes, diagonals, lines, etc."⁸ The above two principles did not collide with each other because both claimed that the artistic creation could exist by itself, so it did not have to imitate a concrete subject. The first group of artists believed that non-figurative forms had to symbolise and contain the meaning of the cosmic and organic nature of the world. In the movement of Abstraction-Création this idea, which could be labelled as organic abstraction, took priority over the latter. As Gladys Fabre noticed: "For the French avant-garde the winding lines, the curves and the spirals meant the other possibility to free the Cubist world and to create something original against the geometric abstraction."⁹

Ferenc Martyn was among the followers of organic abstraction. Before his 1926 arrival in Paris, his work evoked the imagery of his master, József Rippl-Rónai, who had also studied in Paris. Thus Martyn received Rippl-Rónai's method of art, such as the fundamentals of image composition and his synthesizing thinking based on structural principles.¹⁰ Martyn eventually headed to Paris because of the French spirit of his childhood near Rippl-Rónai¹¹ as well as his deteriorating relationship with his master.¹² (This relationship suffered due to the personal and artistic conflicts between Martyn and Rippl-Rónai). Martyn's Parisian art initially resisted the influence of modern French painting in favour of the traditional genres and techniques. Around 1928, Martyn discovered Giorgio de Chirico's metaphysical painting and surrealist works that had a decisive influence on him, apparent in subsequent still-lives. The artist discovered Surrealism through René Magritte's work, a major influence both generally and in the following features specifically: his compositional solutions, „double up attempt" and dramatic spaces. The method of surrealist treatment of space in Martyn's art, such as the representation of floating objects can be derived from this influence. Between 1929 and 1930, Martyn was influenced by Bauhaus, Oskar Schlemmer's art and Renaissance architecture, and he started to model non-figurative forms. In 1933, he began to create non-figurative drawings combined with surrealist treatment of space.

In 1934 he joined the Abstraction-Création movement as an unknown abstract artist, presumably on the recommendation of his Hungarian friend, Étienne Beöthy. The already famous abstract artist was a regular participant in the group, whereas Martyn needed endorsement since he did not have an expansive non-figurative oeuvre. Étienne Beöthy was the secretary of the society and his dominant role in the organisa-

tion could help Martyn. Presumably, Beöthy introduced Martyn to Herbin at a café bar of Montparnasse as both frequented the same place.¹³

Before getting involved with the activities of the Abstraction-Création movement in 1933, Martyn's works showed very little abstraction, only in some graphics. The pieces that supported his initiation into the group could be the 30 abstract red chalk drawings from 1933.¹⁴ These are autonomous compositions, even though they seem similar to sketches as he used his traditional sketching techniques. Martyn reduced motivic objects of his prominent paintings to a linear structure. Some of these artworks clearly reveal the inspiration, like *Homage*; in other cases, only the thickest lines of the subjects, such as outlines of the figure refer to the original theme, like *Above the water*. Martyn drew building constructions and ports, like in *Colliure* (Fig. 1). In these cases, he designed several identifiable elements, including the harbour and the lighthouse balustrade. The city and port images are closer to abstraction, because he evoked the formal characteristics of buildings, the strictly constructed structure. There are some drawings in which the artist seceded from concrete elements and revealed nature related phenomena, such as fluctuation and waves in the sea. He used calligraphic drawing,¹⁵ as in *Rhythm of line* or in *Swimming lines* (Fig. 2). In these examples he reached total non-figuration. He depicted expressive, dynamic rhythms of lines, which fill the whole composition. He adopted the special surrealist method of use of space, so lines seem to levitate in empty space. Examples of this method resonate with

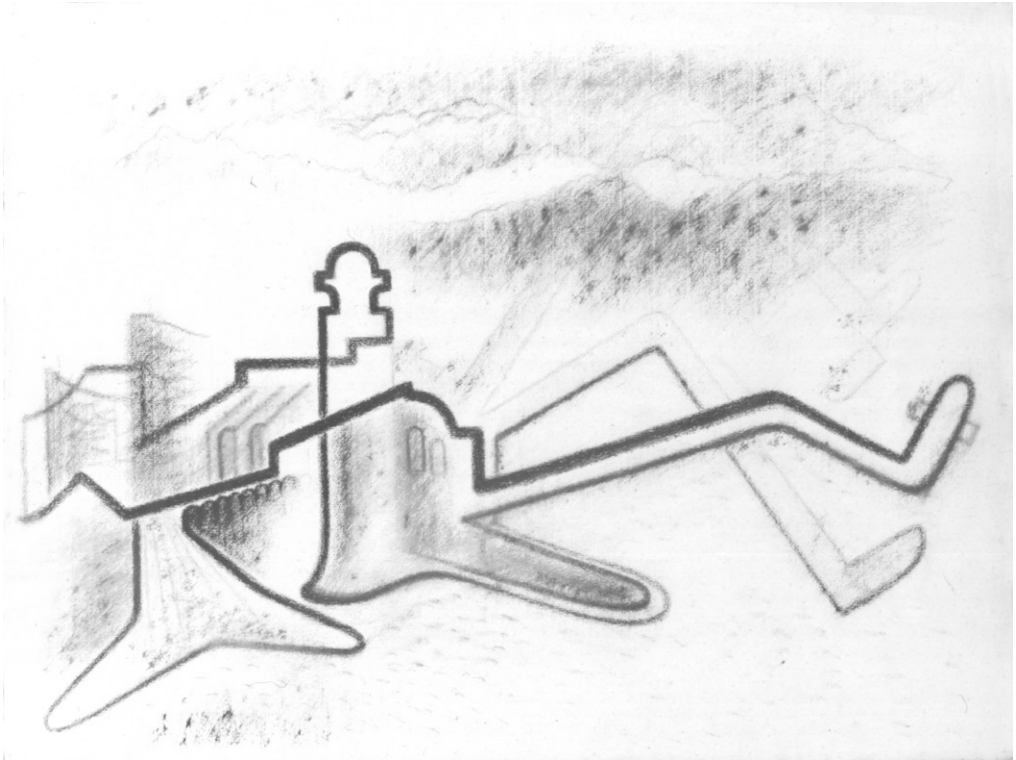


Fig. 1. Ferenc Martyn: *Colliure*. Budapest, Private Property. Red chalk, bistre, paper. 620x810 mm. 1933. Körmendi Gallery's photo

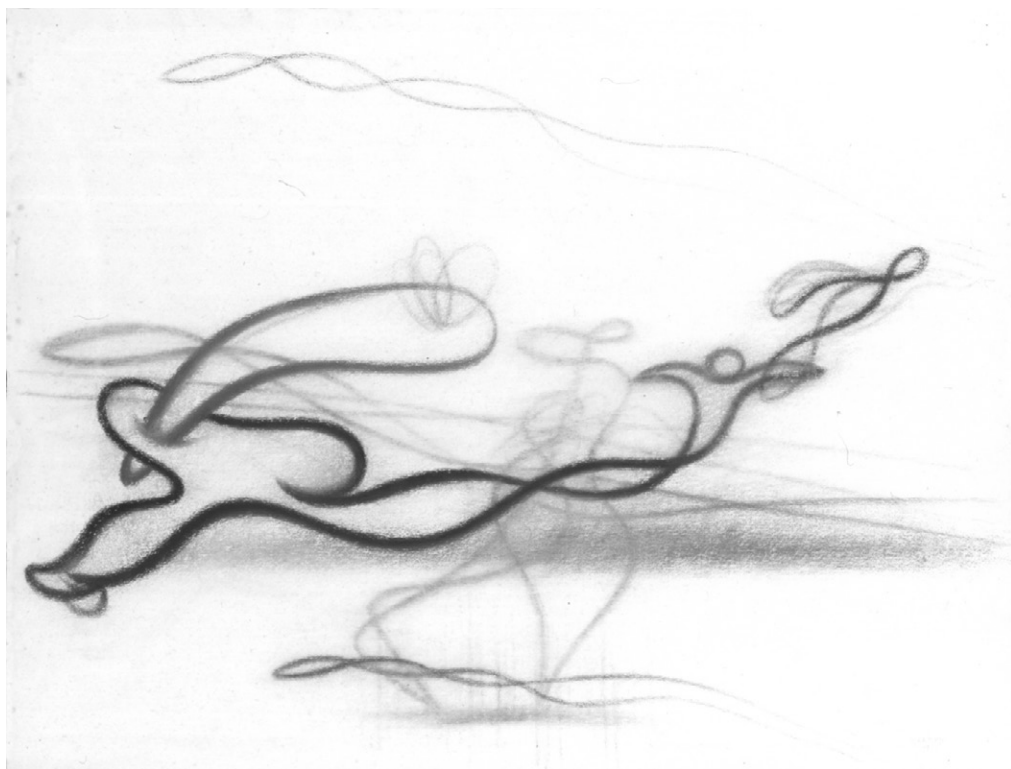


Fig. 2. Ferenc Martyn: Swimming lines. Budapest, Private Property. Red chalk, bister, paper. 620x810 mm. 1933. Körmendi Gallery's photo

organic abstraction, particularly pieces created by Pablo Picasso, and artists of the Abstraction-Création movement, like Alexander Calder, or Auguste Herbin. But most of them were affected by Picasso's simultaneous calligraphic character paintings from 1928-1932, like *Pitcher and Fruit* (1930), or *Mirror* (1932). Martyn mentioned in his letters that Picasso was of great influence on his art because of his large retrospective exhibition in Paris in 1932.¹⁶

So the mostly abstract red chalk drawings like *Rhythm of Line* or *Swimming Lines* (Fig. 2) could be the material he showed Herbin and the board of directors, which satisfied the requirements of organic abstraction. In 1934 Martyn joined the *Abstraction-Création* movement as he mentioned to Lajos Török.¹⁷ However, neither in this message nor in any other letter did he clarify why and how he became a member of the group, therefore it is safe to assume it happened as described above. Martyn's intentions to join the group may have been twofold. Firstly, of course, his artistic attitude changed and the continuation, as well as the completion of his new artistic ways could be achieved through *Abstraction-Création*. Secondly, his living conditions and ideas changed as well, as he explained fully in his letters at the end of 1933.¹⁸ Martyn wanted to spend a longer time in France, so he re-evaluated his previous work and his goals for the future. He was making greater plans – he found out the same year that one of his ancestors was an Irish king, therefore he intended to live up to his family's reputation.¹⁹

Consequently, he dreamed of organising his own large-scale retrospective exhibitions, as well as minor expos. He considered various other forms of communication (more lectures and publications) too.²⁰ He believed that becoming part of the group would offer valuable opportunities to realise his vast artistic vision. In the 20s and 30s it was difficult indeed to be a foreign start-up artist in the xenophobic world of Paris, as Martyn also alluded to in most of his writings. In contrast, Abstraction-Création provided a new perspective, taking in emigrants and other young foreign artists. Although in the second issue of the organisation's journal, the group declared that they distanced themselves from commercial intentions and political manifestations,²¹ it was obvious and rare that the forum made a conscious effort to gather famous immigrant non-figurative painters, and it was open to young entrants, too. This way, Martyn managed to overcome the problem of connecting with the artistic world of Paris and that of earning a living in the city. Martyn initially saw a potential for opportunities to showcase his art in the Abstraction-Creation movement; he hoped that he could achieve his exhibition through the organisation. One of his first letters, where he mentioned Abstraction-Création, explains his previously analysed and discussed plans and purposes: "If there were no obstacles, I could exhibit my works for weeks in the new gallery, called 'Abstraction-Création', which is considered here to be the future of the entire European art scene. This is a group of international profile with about 80 members, of which only 12 are French. Among the Hungarians, the sculptor Étienne Beöthy plays a significant role there, and there are a few more Hungarians, for example Tihanyi. I am a new member. Here, in this gallery, I would like to realise my collective exhibition, which of course would be at a later date."²² It sounds like a very ambitious, even excessive statement. Nevertheless, in Martyn's career the group had a very important role to establish and promote the principles of organic abstraction. Before we discuss that issue, we should analyse his whole activity in the group through the chronological review of his works.

The starting point of Martyn's nonfigurative art was studying natural landscape and he abstracted these recorded experiences into a new visual reality. The painter was interested in experiencing the landscape during his phase at Abstraction-Création, and therefore he returned to the source of his painting, the importance of nature-based work that he learnt from his master, the Hungarian painter József Rippl-Rónai. This provided the base of his abstract pieces later, about which he noted: "Abstraction is based on nature-based work, only those can paint an abstract picture who have studied nature thoroughly, who can model a 'natural' landscape or figure at any time."²³

Before his entering the group, his non-figurative drawings show the object of their abstraction; these are the early works inspired by landscape. Almost all of the images are in connection with the sea; scenes that take place at sea, or ships, waterfronts, ports, etc.²⁴ He focused on an object, concentrated on one element and created central-iconic pieces, like in the *Ship* (Fig. 3). He returned to making red chalk drawings as in 1933. The composition of the *Ship* is built on abstract forms, solely on the distortions of the triangle shape. Martyn rubbed and smeared red chalk, and created surfaces of varying intensity on the paper. However, the sharp chalk lines have a different role than in the past, they do not serve to reduce the concrete elements to abstract ones, their function is rather to contour lines of the abstract, rubbed components. He sometimes used black coloured bister chalk, which is in contrast with the white paper

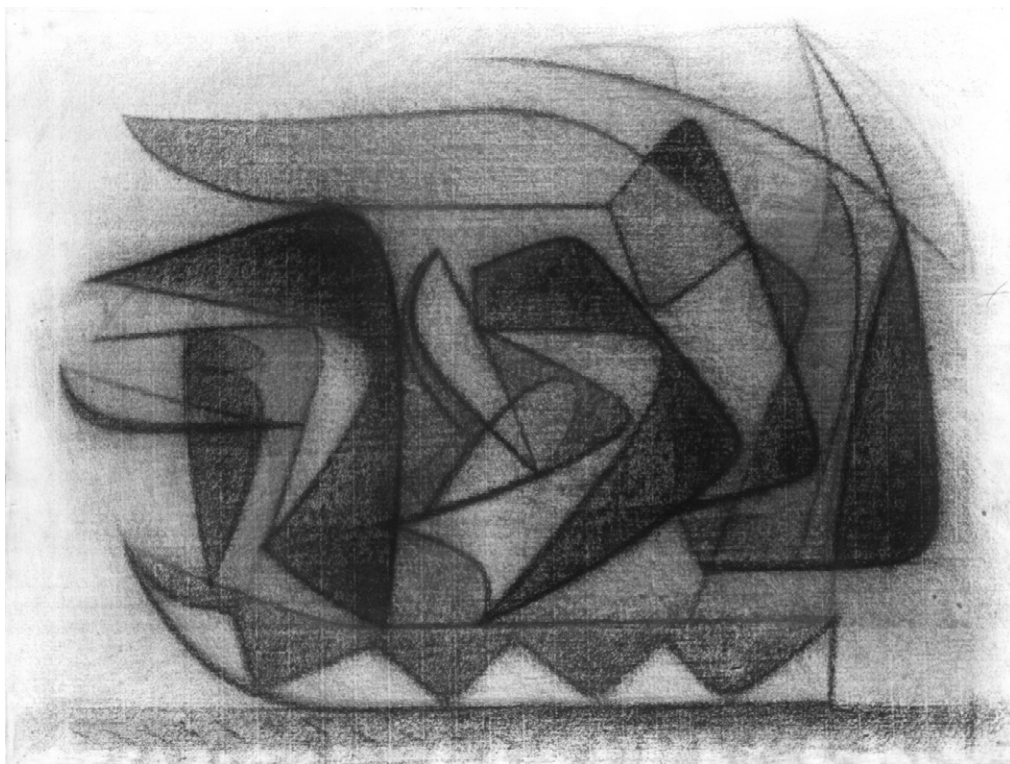


Fig. 3. Ferenc Martyn: *Ship*. Budapest, Private Property. Red chalk, bister, paper. 620x810 mm. 1933. Körmendi Gallery's photo

background and the lighter tones of the other elements. So the composition becomes three-dimensional by means of varied, rubbed surfaces and by bister. In the center of the image field there are three uniform triangles, which are rotated along an imaginary spiral, so these become the curved body of a sail. He definitely preferred using meandering lines, which lends dynamics to his pictures, as in the *Ship*. The busy centre of the image is surrounded by a bastion-like frame made up of huge, pure, plain geometric shapes. Direct, straight lining dominates against the curved lines of the central part in this framed structure, and the result is a tranquil and static composition. This way the rigorous, angular frame and its static nature dissolve and cancel the centre's dynamic tensions and effects completely.

The *Ship* has a version in oil as well that was probably created after the drawing. Martyn had completed an artistic program by the end of 1934, which led him to change the technique, and he concentrated on oil paintings and graphics.²⁵ During his years in Paris, especially during his non-figurative period he could be characterised as someone consciously designing his images, using sketches and making variations. Occasionally, he prepared several variations of the same theme, so with the same schematic composition and with alternative techniques he realised a variety of his artistic visions. Consequently, he achieved different solutions of form and content. In the oil version of the *Ship*, by changing the technique, he could create diverse, powerful coloured

surfaces, which yield a much more three-dimensional effect and sense of depth than in the previously discussed drawing. The image-conscious design suggests that he left behind “the technique of painting all at a time” permanently, which he had learned from his master, Rippl-Rónai in Hungary. In an early period of his abstract artistic activity, he sought to fill the image space completely and to create rhythm between the components by means of curved shapes, lines and spiral-rotated elements. All of these principles complied with those represented by artists advocating organic abstraction in the organisation.

In the first year of his activity in the group, he created *Riding* (red chalk drawing) and the *Maritime Memory* (oil painting), which were later published in the fifth issue of the journal of Abstraction-Création in 1936 (unfortunately, these pictures have disappeared). But they had been painted earlier, in 1934, as Martyn declared in one of his letters dated December 1934.²⁶ He mentioned that the board of directors at the organisation had selected those two pictures to be published in the next issue of their journal.²⁷ In his works we can see blank space divided by a horizon. But the central form, a curved shape becomes the emphatic, focal element of these images. This curved form is floating towards the left side of the picture; it is undulating in “vacuum”, which is the artist’s way of bringing it into movement. There are numerous small, curvilinear shapes in the centre, with their contour lines running into each other. This floating movement is dominant, as is the harmonious, homogeneous background and colouring. Here Martyn experimented with creating a sense of motion by applying calligraphic lines and spiral forms in various techniques (chalk drawing, oil painting). During his surrealist-metaphysical period (before joining the group) at around 1930, he also focused on the same artistic problem, directing his attention to complex compositions and exciting form combinations which illustrate motion in diverse, intriguing ways. These works could compare to some of the images of Abstraction-Création, like Auguste Herbin’s abstract compositions (see *Composition*, 1932), Enrico Prampolini’s compositions, or Robert Delaunay’s and Alfred Réth’s colour experiments, since these artists made similar efforts as Martyn.

Martyn’s piece entitled *Composition* (Fig. 4) (around 1935) reveals his goal to create rhythm in his pictures, also reminiscent of the role of the curved, meandering line in his abstract approach in Paris. *Composition* is a large, horizontally positioned oil painting inspired by coastal experiences, so it appears Martyn still continued the naval theme. The shapes are arranged along an oval composition and they fill almost the entire image field. The contour lines of each form also run into each other as in the previous pictures. Therefore the different shapes are shown in multiple overlapping layers, where each form can be distinguished by its colours only. For example a white, wedge-shaped formation starting from the right corner of the composition can be seen as itself, but the outline of the shape can also be drawn out further. In doing so, the shape continues to the left in the yellow and then red coloured surface, which is a different shape, a part of the serrated curved, tree-shaped geometrical structure. Thus the whole picture has several possible interpretations, lending Martyn’s analytical and constructive method the potential to create an exciting play with form throughout. As for origins, he may have discovered this artistic experiment primarily through Robert Delaunay’s work. Delaunay was fascinated by how the interaction of colours produced sensations of depth, rhythm and movement. The work of the 19th century



Fig. 4. Ferenc Martyn: *Composition*. Budapest, Private Property. Oil on canvas. 97×196 cm. 1935. Körmendi Gallery's photo

scientist, Michel-Eugène Chevreul (1786–1889) was hugely influential on Delaunay's art, even more so as he had taken over Chevreul's concept of simultaneous contrast.²⁸ Between 1912 and 1914 Delaunay started making colour transitions by painting curving lines and circular shapes. Around 1930 when he joined Abstraction-Creation, he tried experimenting specifically with how the curved lining produced colour and form transitions (*Circular Shapes*, 1930).²⁹ His later attempts focused more on forms than on the relations between colours. Alfred Réth, a Hungarian acquaintance of Martyn's also pursued this method in his *Rhythms* series and in other contemporary pieces (*Composition*, 1935), and his inspiration may have been Delaunay's work and his light and colour theory.³⁰ During Delaunay's, Réth's and Martyn's experiments, all three have been interested in creating formal transitions and various colour-zones by curved, meandering, sinuous lines. In other words, they used different clean, bright colours and tones, colour contrasts and complementary colour pairs assigned to each other and placed them along a spiral shape, which resulted in a rhythm and motion effect. Delaunay and Réth's primary goal was to play an exciting and scientific game with colours and tones. However, Martyn used this imaging tool for different purposes. He was intrigued by experiments with form, and considered colour as a tool of secondary importance. For example, in *Composition*, he only pays sporadic attention to colour. Compared to other artists of Abstraction-Création, he did not always see the interactions between colours directly. One of the few exceptions is when he validated the contrast of complementary colour pairs: blue and orange, yellow and purple contrasts on the left side of the picture, and with this he created the most vivid and vibrant part of the painting. In other instances he ensured the contrast of the tones such as red-black, blue-white, yellow-white, as did Réth. Martyn, however, mainly focused on formal experiments, increasing complexity by the use of colour transitions.

In this picture Martyn maximised the role of a curved line. In the present composition the spiral lining links each element of the image with each other, not only by transi-

tions and analytical constructions as seen in the paragraph above, but also by repeating the same curved-line shapes such as the recognisable sail-shape on the left side and in the centre. Consequently, it could be emphasized that each item related to the sea or nature (visible vessels, waterside tree shapes) is formally connected through spiral lines, suggesting that in nature all objects are based on the same common elements of form, such as spiral lines. This idea was a dominant preoccupation in Abstraction-Création. In the late 1920s in Paris Alexander Calder had already highlighted the same problem, when he created calligraphic, figurative wire sculptures by means of meandering lines. The American artist treated wire as a three-dimensional drawing tool, and he placed the wire sculptures in front of a white wall in strong light. As a result, they existed as a sculpture in real space, while functioning “as Graphics”, their moving shadows created dynamics against the wall. Calder maximized the laws of physics with his hand-held *mobiles*, which were created during the Abstraction-Création period. Due to this innovation circular objects (made of wire and metals) started appearing as well. Calder’s words explain what the spiral form and circular shape meant to him: “I think I am a realist. I think the universe is real but we cannot see it. You have to imagine it. Then you can be realistic in reproducing it. (...) The fundamental importance of form in my work is the system of the Universe, or a part thereof (...) the simplest and most obvious shapes in the world are the circle and the sphere (...) Those are the ones I am interested in; colour is only of secondary importance in my work.”³¹ In the first issue of Abstraction-Création’s journal Robert Delaunay said: „the stirring, circular mode of expression is the most specific formulation of the human dynamism.”³² „The radius of the circle and the sphere can be followed from the lines of iron all the way through lead (...) A single line is microscopic, the individual’s microscopic measure, which is mostly embodied in architecture. Painting, however, must express the universal feeling, the movement... The single line embodies the connection, the expression of measure, which is collective and universal.”³³

We emphasised that in Martyn’s work discussed above, inspiration by nature took precedence, which is further underpinned by the fact that all elements connect with each other through a curved line as in nature. The significance of this principle in Martyn’s work is the underlining of the collective, universal role of curved lines and spiral forms as in Herbin’s work. Martyn otherwise also concentrated on colours and built on meandering lines similarly to Calder, and he wished to create rhythm and dynamism through this form, as did Delaunay. Therefore it can be concluded that his principles, ideas and method were in agreement with the theories and manner of organic abstraction within the group. From Ferenc Martyn’s letters we know that he presented his first works to some members of the organisation and he tried to network and keep in touch with the artists of Abstraction-Création, like the previously discussed Herbin or Delaunay: “Here I am in the middle of great work, but Delaunay, Vantongerloo, Clouston, Herbin visited me recently; there is a great interest.” Martyn’s similar interests and diverse knowledge of the French language³⁴ made it easy for him to fully take part in the group. Based on his letters and the frequent mentioning of certain people, he may have visited Beöthy’s and Tihanyi’s groups, which also contained some other organic abstract artists. But he equally could have had relations with Herbin, the director of the organisation and the spiritual father of the idea of *abstraction*, because Martyn frequently referred to this connection: “Yesterday Herbin, the painter enthusiastically

praised me; he, who always dismisses some people in a terrible manner in a matter of minutes. He was done with Klee only in two minutes, and I confess his logic is hardly arguable.”³⁵ However, it is unlikely that Herbin had a strong connection with Martyn. He rather paid attention to all visitors only and followed the works of the group members,³⁶ and this is the reason why Martyn mentioned him so many times. Nevertheless, his stylistic influence on Martyn is evident. We can conclude that Martyn was close to organic abstraction, one of the currents of Abstraction-Création, with his creative solutions, compositional methods and artistic intentions, and he also promoted the important role of the universal content of pictures.

The works discussed above, such as the watercolour series *Sail* (1934), the *Ship* (1933/1934), the *Riding* (1934), the *Maritime Memory* (1934), the *Composition* (1935), as representative pieces of his first period in Abstraction-Création, illustrate that he carried through his point on constructive thinking more than ever. He also noted a few years later: “Structure is the basic nature and vehicle of all artistic will and creative power. Along the lines of composition, we may follow the true history of all mankind.”³⁷ It is worth noting that his master, Rippl-Rónai had underlined the significance and important role of structural thinking of nature before, as Martyn mentioned: “In the summer of 1914, before he left Paris, he talked about how difficult it was to draw a tree. Because the tree is a so-called symbol: often it has such deep roots and it clings to the ground and reaches for the sky. And it is a structure. However, not only this must be followed (...), but also how it works, how its metabolism works, and what happens within its trunk, from spring blossoms to autumn leaves.”³⁸ It appears his master clearly directed his attention to observing every single process of nature. This method became, as we noted, Martyn’s source of nature-based abstraction, but it also compelled him to have an eye on everything when designing and creating a picture. He emphasized that every detail has the same important function and relevance to the image just like in nature. Martyn examined nature, especially coastal landscapes very consciously and he constructed his images with much awareness. This is the reason why he chose to fill the whole image space. He made connections by lining, creating rhythm, repeating the same form, colour-transitions and tension. Every detail and structural unit got the same emphasis. He had thought the entire composition over in advance. He used static and dynamic elements proportionately such as vacuum and busy spaces in his abstract pictures, until these components dissolved each other to make way to a coherent, unified work. He often attempted a surrealist treatment of space, the creation of a floating, moving sensation, which synthesizes the whole picture. The sources of the uniqueness and cohesion of his images are these structural solutions.

We can say that during his time with Abstraction-Creation Martyn reinforced constructive thinking, which he had acquired previously while working with Rippl-Rónai and then practised during his Parisian years. He may have chosen to join the Abstraction-Création movement because he believed it would confirm his artistic vision. Among the members of Abstraction-Création there were a lot of artists, including Auguste Herbin or Enrico Prampolini, who also relied on the constructive design of the artistic process.

During his second period of involvement with Abstraction-Création, he often started to combine recognisable concrete elements and nonfigurative motives, like in

another *Composition* (1935, Hungarian National Gallery). This was not unusual within the group; for example some acquaintances of Martyn's such as Henri-Jean Closon or Auguste Herbin also attempted it. Furthermore, the artistic pattern of Auguste Herbin also had an influence on Martyn's work. The "birdhuman" motif of Martyn's previously noted *Composition* (in the Hungarian National Gallery) originated from Herbin's oil painting at around 1930, when he himself made several compositions called *Birdhuman*. Both show a mix of figurative and non-figurative components in portraying a human form pre-flight, which is actually an abstract shape made by calligraphic lining.

Martyn continued to work on the synthesis of non-figurative and figurative art, as the *Composition with fish and birds* (Fig. 5) represents. The large horizontally formatted oil painting was made in 1936 when Martyn conceived a lot of huge oil paintings with a coastal and bird theme. The picture shows irregular geometric forms such as nature-related motives of birds, ships, fish, which appear in front of a neutral, homogeneous background. The layout of the composition is diversified; it fills the whole space of the image. Martyn also used his typical formal solutions, the rotation of the same forms, the transitions, overlaps, or the flat, one-dimensional horizon in the background. Furthermore, his analytical method, as we noted in relation to his form-colour transitions in *Composition* (1935) which one in a private collection, adds a new feature. The new solution is represented for example in the image of the recognisable couple of birds (triangle shapes) on the right side of the picture. The artist apportions these forms with structural lines. However, these are not visible contour lines but only added by the layered construction of forms, which results in large surfaces of various colours. In this case, the interaction between these coloured surfaces plays the leading role in the composition. He apparently applied the colour-centred technique of Delaunay by



Fig. 5. Ferenc Martyn: *Composition with fish and birds*. Budapest, Private Property. Oil on canvas. 114x195,5 cm. 1936. Körmendi Gallery's photo

placing pure complementary colours next to each other resulting in a vibrant, cheerful effect.

Martyn tried a new solution in the design of space as well. He, as usual, compartmentalises the image into two separate areas, marked by the horizon on the lower half of the painting. However, he does not attach the objects to the horizon so they appear as floating, moving forms at different points in the surrealist space. This element of his solution is not particularly new because he used this method in his surrealist painting around 1928–1930, which was influenced by René Magritte, who also “floated”, and “brought into motion” the objects of his images. However, here Martyn underlined the horizon with a strip of yellow coming into view over it. It is a light-toned but vibrant colour, which darkens progressively so the basic tone of the background moves from dark green to black. Consequently, the horizon appears as a beam of light in the darkened space. This same technique of creating space dominates in Giorgio de Chirico’s oil paintings between 1917–1918, in which the artist designed mannequins, maps and allegorical scenes. Chirico depicted the visible, far sky, similarly to how Martyn might like to show it. But Martyn’s imagination is complex, attempting to design double natural visions of the sky and the sea. We can come to the same conclusion from the title of the piece as well. The discussed solution intensifies the scenic and dreamy features, the unreal, locked atmosphere in Chirico’s pictures. Although Martyn only adopted the formal solution of Chirico’s shaping of space, the result is similar. The background seems endless and the depth of field is not perceived through the unifying effect of dark colours and horizon. The dynamic, strong coloured forms, which appear in different planes and seem to be levitating, intensify the sense of infinity. Martyn in this latter method was returning to his roots of 1933, when he produced his first non-figurative drawing with the same space arrangements that he had known from Yves Tanguy’s paintings.³⁹ All this shows that Martyn was not able to free himself of the influence of Surrealism, which he was especially connected to in the late 20s, when he designed dream-or-memory images symbolising his first visions, dreams or experiences of nature. Therefore his themes related to the sea, as *Composition with birds and fish* (1936) could be interpreted as his memories of water-related experiences, or any archetype that his mind automatically associates with nature and sea.

Ferenc Martyn definitely rediscovered the surrealist imaging and way of thinking in 1936, and combined it with abstraction although we have to note that during his first membership in Abstraction-Creation he was already attracted to this trend. But it became predominant at around 1936, during the time when abstract-surrealist trends developed and strengthened within the Abstraction-Création movement. Abstraction-Creation proved to be more tolerant with Surrealism than the Art Concret or the Cercle et Carre, which both rebelled against its figurative artistic view and its popularity. Moreover, some new research connects Surrealism and Abstraction-Création entirely. Anna Moszynska sees the works of André Breton’s and Auguste Herbin’s groups in parallel because they both had a specific, well-defined program, special selection criteria for prospective members (automatic writing/non-figuration), and both were a loose organisation.⁴⁰ This new approach could answer the question why Abstraction-Création appeared to be more accepting with Surrealism than previous, non-figurative unions.

Returning to our remarks, there were two surrealist-abstract lines in the organisation at around 1936. First, there was a line of the creators who became members of the company as identifiable surrealist artists, or were associated with the surrealist group.⁴¹ These artists, like Léon Tutundjian, Arshile Gorky and others were invited by Abstraction-Création. The outstanding examples could be Hans Arp and Joan Miró, but Hans Arp was the only official member of a surrealist forum who represented himself in Abstraction-Création.⁴² On the other hand, the second line of abstract-surrealists discovered Surrealism themselves (Calder, Prampolini, Herbin, etc), particularly Enrico Prampolini (*Angels Land*, 1936).⁴³ In their state of abstraction there is the recognition of their subconscious projection, and they also experimented with a surrealist type of use of space. Martyn could be the only example who could be connected to both directions. Around 1936, he created great, unique and original oil paintings, which shows us that during this period he was an integral part of the artistic era.

Martyn could very well have been just one of the myriad other members of the group, but his last year in the organisation was very successful. He had the opportunity to publish two of his pictures in the forum's journal. The critic, Anatole Jakowski mentioned him in his presentation along with such names as Picasso or Mondrian.⁴⁴ This was the year when he brought new, exciting non-figurative results into the history of the group. Following the termination of the group, between 1937–1939 he started to create in the spirit of geometric abstraction, paintings characterised by clear geometric forms.

To summarise the findings of research and the contribution of this study, the artistic development of Martyn is as follows. At the beginning of his membership in Abstraction-Creation, he combined the previously learned methods with new construction manners; he continued to fulfil his constructive, structural way of thinking, and he used the curved lining to express universal content and an intriguing formal solution with similar efforts to those of Herbin's, Calder's, Prampolini's, Réth's and Robert Delaunay's. He found his own way of formal expression by combining the abstract elements with surrealist methods. He was not an iconic member of Abstraction-Création but he became a successful artist at the end of the operation of the association. Nevertheless, we have to mention that his entire oeuvre was feeding from his Parisian artistic experience, especially from the period of Abstraction-Création, which had a great influence on modern artists in Hungary.

Notes

- 1 Éva Hárs, *Martyn Ferenc* (Ferenc Martyn) (Budapest: Képzőművészeti Alap Kiadóvállalata, 1975); Éva Hárs, *Martyn Ferenc Életmű katalógusa* (*Ceuvre Catalogue of Ferenc Martyn*) (Kaposvár: Somogy Megyei Múzeumok Igazgatósága, 1985).
- 2 Ferenc Martyn, *Levelek Török Lajosnak, 1926–1944* (*Letters to Lajos Török, 1926–1944*), ed. Éva Hárs (Pécs: Művészetek Háza – Jelenkor Alapítvány, 1999).
- 3 *Abstraction-Création, 1931–1936*, ed. Gladys Fabre (Paris: Musée d'Art Modern de la Ville, 1978).
- 4 Georges Roque, *Qu'est-ce que l'art abstrait? Une histoire de l'abstraction en peinture, 1860–1960* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), 112.
- 5 Roque, 2003, 201–203.
- 6 My interview with Gladys Fabre. Paris, 12.05.2009.

- 7 *Abstraction-Création*, Paris, (I.), 1931. 1.
- 8 *Abstraction-Création*, Paris, (I.), 1931. 1.
- 9 Gladys Fabre, “Herbin, le militant de l’art non-figuratif,” in *Herbin, Musée Matisse*, (Musée Départementel, Musée d’art Moderne-Céret: Anthèse, 1994), 111.
- 10 Martyn Ferenc emlékezése Rippl-Rónai Józsefre, Nádor Tamás rádióriportja, 1967, (Memory of Ferenc Martyn to József Rippl-Rónai. Radio report by Tamás Nádor. 1967). Archives of the Institute of Art History, Research Centre for the Humanities, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Adattár MDK-C-II, 577.
- 11 *Martyn* ed. Éva Hárs (Budapest: Helikon Kiadó, 1999), 6.
- 12 János Horváth, “A Rippl-Rónai tanítványok. Rippl-Rónai művészetének hatása az 1910-es években Kaposváron” (The Students of Rippl-Rónai. The Artistic Influence of Rippl-Rónai in 1910’s in Kaposvár), *Somogyi Múzeumok Közleményei* 18 (2008): 337–354. and *Letter of Rippl-Rónai*. Kaposvár, 17.05.1925. Genthon István művészettörténeti hagyatéka. (Art Historical Heritage of István Genthon) Archives of the Institute of Art History, Research Centre for the Humanities, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Adattár MKCS-C-1-36, 766.
- 13 My interview with the daughter of Henri-Jean Closon (who was a member of the circle of Herbin, Delaunay, Beöthy in *Abstraction-Création*). Paris, 14.01.2010.
- 14 *Letter of Ferenc Martyn. Paris. 03.09.1933.* in Hárs, 1999, 93. and *Letter of Ferenc Martyn. Paris. 23.06.1933.* in Hárs, 1999, 92.
- 15 *Hommage à Martyn* ed. Katalin Keserü (Pécs: Pécsi Galéria, 1999).
- 16 *Letter of Ferenc Martyn. Paris. 26.06.1932.* in Hárs, 1999, 78.
- 17 *Letter of Ferenc Martyn. Paris, 07.01.1934.* in Hárs, 1999, 101.
- 18 *Letter of Ferenc Martyn. Paris. 25.02.1934.* in Hárs, 1999, 104–105.
- 19 *Letter of Ferenc Martyn. Paris. 28.11.1933.* in Hárs, 1999, 98.
- 20 *Letter of Ferenc Martyn. Paris, 23.11.1933.* in Hárs, 1999, 99.
- 21 *Abstraction-Création*, Paris, (II.), 1932, 1.
- 22 *Letter of Ferenc Martyn. Paris, 07.01.1934.* in Hárs, 1999, 101.
- 23 “Martyn Ferenc: Magyarok és franciák, Cézanne óta. Párizs, 1938” (Ferenc Martyn: Hungarians and French after Cézanne. Paris, 1938), in *Martyn Ferenc, Töredékek*, ed. Tibor Tüskés (Pécs: Baranya Megyei Tanács, 1979), 31.
- 24 We should redate the creation of Martyn’s work from 1934. Éva Hárs did not correctly emphasise which works were born in 1934. My suggestions are based on facts from Ferenc Martyn’s correspondence with Lajos Török. In his letters he mentioned that in 1934 he made abstract works in two periods, from January to June and in late November. In first period he writes: “Recently, I did mostly graphics, and working on some paintings – this regimen will remain.” (*Letter of Ferenc Martyn. Paris 24.02.1934.* in Hárs, 1999, 104.) Indeed, it remained in late November, too. We can conclude that he created watercolours and red chalk drawings of *Sailboats*. Martyn wrote only later in 1936 that he had begun to work in oil. Consequently, the early works may be registered as watercolours. The artistic level of these non-figurative pictures supports these assumptions. Martyn himself wrote that watercolours were not fully abstract works, thus labelling the pieces aquarelles. So in 1934 he made semi-figurative watercolours, the *Sailing Series*, and at the same time the ship-themed graphic pieces. The reason is that Martyn tended to focus

- on one motif within a single artistic period, and he made variations of the drawing compositions of the paintings.
- 25 Letter of Ferenc Martyn. Paris, 13.12.1934. In Hárs, 1999, 115.
 - 26 „Anyway, the „Abstraction” group’s 5th issue is coming– and I will be in it with two reproductions.” (translation) – Letter of Ferenc Martyn. Paris, 13.12.1934. in Hárs, 1999, 113.
 - 27 Letter of Ferenc Martyn. Paris, 13.12.1934. in Hárs, 1999, 113.
 - 28 Georges Roque, *Art et science de la couleur: Chevreul et les peintres, de Delacroix et de l’abstraction* (Nîmes: Jacqueline Chambon, 1997).
 - 29 Georges Roque, “Les vibrations colorées de Delaunay: Une des voies de l’ abstraction,” in *Robert Delaunay, 1906–1914*, ed. Pascal Rosseau (Paris: Centre George Pompidou, 1999), 53–64.
 - 30 Kálmán Maklár et al., *Alfred Reth 1884–1966* (Budapest: Maklár Artworks, 2003), 68.
 - 31 Katharine Kuh, *The Artist’s Voice: Talks with Seventeen Artist* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 38–51.
 - 32 *Abstraction-Création*, Paris, (I.), 1931. 3.
 - 33 Fabre, 1974, 112.
 - 34 „–Which languages do you speak and write? – (Martyn): French, English, Spanish, German, good knowledge of: Italian, Catalan, Portuguese” (translation from Hungarian to English) A Vallás–és Közoktatásügyi Minisztérium művészkatasztere (Catastrial Records of the Ministry of Religion and Public Education), 1940. Archives of the Institute of Art History, Research Centre for the Humanities, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Adattár MKCS–C–I–57
 - 35 Letter of Ferenc Martyn. Paris, 12.05.1934. in Hárs, 1999, 105–106.
 - 36 My interview with the daughter of Henri-Jean Closon. Paris. 14.01.2010.
 - 37 Tüskés, 1979, 31.
 - 38 Tibor Tüskés, *Szó és vonal. Martyn Ferenc irodalmi kísérőrajzi (Word and Line. Ferenc Martyn’s Illustrations)* (Kaposvár, Somogyi Múzeum, 1970), 7.
 - 39 Flóra Mészáros, “Ég és Föld kötőjele. Martyn Ferenc a párizsi Abstraction-Création kapujában,” (The Hyphen between Sky and Earth. Ferenc Martyn at the Doorstep of Abstraction-Création), *Új Művészet* 21. (2010), Nr. 10: 16–18.
 - 40 Anna Moszynska, *Abstract Art (World of Art)*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990).
 - 41 Fabre, 1978, 24–25
 - 42 Michel Seuphor, *Arp* (Paris: Hazan, 1964).
 - 43 Fabre, 1978, 25–26.
 - 44 Letter of Ferenc Martyn. Paris. 25.04. 1936. in Hárs, 1999, 138–140.