

LUMIA: THOMAS WILFRED AND THE ART OF LIGHT

*Exhibition restores pioneering light artist to his rightful place in history of modern art
February 17–July 23, 2017*

February 17, 2017, New Haven, Conn.—The Yale University Art Gallery is delighted to present *Lumia: Thomas Wilfred and the Art of Light*, the first exhibition devoted to this pioneering artist in more than 40 years. Beginning in the 1920s, the Danish-born American artist Thomas Wilfred (1889–1968) forged an international reputation as a radical innovator by creating kinetic abstractions with light. Wilfred designed and built an array of sophisticated mechanical sculptures to produce vibrant, multi-colored displays, realizing a new art form—which he collectively called *lumia*—that was among the first successful fusions of modern art and technology.



Thomas Wilfred Sitting at the Clavilux "Model E," ca. 1924. Sepia-toned photograph. Thomas Wilfred Papers, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library, New Haven, Conn.

Recognized as a pioneering mode of artistic expression throughout Wilfred's decades-long career, *lumia* has been a critical touchstone for later generations of light and media artists, and yet, has remained unexplored and largely unknown since Wilfred's last retrospective, held in 1971 at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, in Washington, D.C., and the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), in New York.

An assemblage of electric, mechanical, and reflective elements, the projection machines invented by Wilfred employ a technique akin to painting with the rays of a lightbulb. The beam that originates from this source first passes through a rotating, transparent disc with hand-painted color, known as a "color record," and is then transmitted onto the mirrored surfaces of moving structures. After wending through this virtual obstacle course, the refracted and reflected light ultimately reaches the back of a flat screen, which varies in format and size between artworks; some of these screens are housed in small cabinets that resemble early television sets, while others are of cinematic scale, with only the face of the screen visible from the viewer's vantage point. The resulting brilliantly colored compositions, changing in palette and pattern as forms emerge and are then transformed into new shapes, call to mind the aurora borealis as it shimmers across the night sky. *New York Times* reviewer Edward Alden Jewell wrote in 1939 that the spatial-temporal experience of *lumia* was "as if one were witnessing a kind of sidereal choreography—a dance of comets and galaxies with the boreal aurora as backdrop and, beyond that, the velvet blackness of infinite, universal space."

Enchanting in their effects, *lumia* works are all the more remarkable for their dates of creation. When Wilfred began in 1919 to produce large-scale light projections with the aid of his



Thomas Wilfred, *Unit #50, Elliptical Prelude and Chalice*, from the *First Table Model Clavilux (Luminar)* series, 1928. Metal, fabric, glass, and electrical and lighting elements on a maple table. Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn., Gift of Thomas C. Wilfred, 1983.66.1

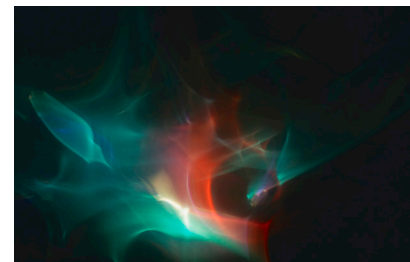
“Clavilux,” an organlike instrument controlled by several banks of sliding keys, lumia were ephemeral performances that could only be viewed by live audiences in concert halls. Today, apart from some disassembled equipment, the Clavilux models no longer exist, but their compositions survive through black-and-white photographs taken of the screen during performances and through the keyboard notations that Wilfred read like musical scores to conduct the light’s rhythm, movement, and color sequences. On view in the exhibition, these rare materials represent this largely lost period of the artist’s early practice.

The Gallery’s presentation focuses primarily on the subsequent phases of lumia’s development, featuring about half of the extant light works by Wilfred, including three from the Gallery’s permanent collection. Organized chronologically, the exhibition tracks the evolution of lumia in format, size, setting, and aesthetic experience, from at-home instruments made for individual viewers in the 1920s and 1930s to a late, culminating installation, *Lumia Suite, Op. 158*. Commissioned by MoMA in 1963,

Lumia Suite was a popular favorite during the 16 years it remained on almost continuous view at the museum, before being dismantled and stored in boxes after 1980. In anticipation of the present exhibition, conservators from the Gallery and MoMA partnered to restore *Lumia Suite* to its original spellbinding effect; it is presented in a viewing room to the specifications that Wilfred stipulated in his original plans. The exhibition also highlights a selection of drawings and diagrams from the Thomas Wilfred Papers, housed in the collection of Manuscripts and Archives at Yale’s Sterling Memorial Library. These documents reveal additional aspects of Wilfred’s career, such as the public courses and demonstrations on lumia that he led between 1934 and 1943 at the headquarters of his organization, the Art Institute of Light, in New York.

After it closes at the Gallery on July 23, *Lumia: Thomas Wilfred and the Art of Light* travels to the Smithsonian American Art Museum, in Washington, D.C., later this year. The accompanying illustrated catalogue includes a foreword by the contemporary light artist James Turrell and a number of insightful essays that explore lumia’s dialogue with science, technology, abstraction, and the moving image. Together, the exhibition and its publication help to secure the rightful place of Wilfred’s work within the history of modern art.

“This exhibition gives visitors multiple avenues through which to approach Wilfred’s work,” explains Keely Orgeman, the Alice and Allan Kaplan Assistant Curator of American Paintings and Sculpture and the curator of the exhibition. “It revives his analog form of light art, allowing viewers to study lumia’s impact during both Wilfred’s own time and today. Simultaneously, it offers a pure aesthetic experience that will resonate with viewers—lumia’s slowly unfolding compositions



Thomas Wilfred, *Lumia Suite, Op. 158*, 1963–64. Projectors, reflector unit, electrical and lighting elements, and a projection screen; approx. 9 yrs., 127 days, 18 hrs. Museum of Modern Art, New York, Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund, 582.1964

and constantly morphing patterns evoke something different to everyone, whether it be deep space, the Northern Lights, or psychedelic light shows. Whatever we might see, the works transport and transfix us the longer we linger before them.”

Jock Reynolds, the Henry J. Heinz II Director states, “This notable exhibition and publication are the result of several years of dedicated scholarship by Keely Orgeman and are a fruitful partnership between curators and conservators, including the Gallery’s team, led by Carol Snow, Deputy Chief Conservator and the Allan J. Dworsky Senior Conservator of Objects, and our colleagues at the Museum of Modern Art, whose conservators worked with us to restore Wilfred’s magnificent *Lumia Suite, Op. 158* for this exhibition. The Gallery is grateful for MoMA’s generous collaboration and is honored to be able to share the exhibition with a wider audience when it travels to the Smithsonian American Art Museum in the fall. The attendant publication is distinguished by fresh insights on Wilfred’s work from art-historical and technological perspectives, and especially by a foreword written by the celebrated contemporary light artist James Turrell, who describes his first, transformative encounter with lumia at MoMA in 1957. It is the Gallery’s true pleasure to help bring Wilfred’s work to life for a new generation.”

On View

Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn.

February 17–July 23, 2017

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.

October 6, 2017–January 7, 2018

Related Publication

Lumia: Thomas Wilfred and the Art of Light

Keely Orgeman, with a foreword by James Turrell and contributions by Maibritt Borgen, Jason DeBlock, Carol Snow, and Gregory Zinman

Lumia presents a long-overdue reevaluation of the groundbreaking artist Thomas Wilfred (1889–1968), whose unprecedented works prefigured light art in America. As early as 1919, many years before the advent of consumer television and video technology, Wilfred began experimenting with light as his primary artistic medium, developing the means to control and project unique compositions of colorful, undulating light forms, which he referred to collectively as *lumia*. Manifested as both live performances on a cinematic scale and self-contained structures, Wilfred’s innovative displays captivated audiences and influenced generations of artists to come. This publication, the first dedicated to Wilfred in over forty years, draws on the artist’s personal archives and includes a number of insightful essays that trace the development of his work and its relation to his cultural milieu. Featuring a foreword by the celebrated artist James Turrell, *Lumia* helps to secure Wilfred’s rightful place within the canon of modern art.

172 pages / 9¼ × 10¾ inches / 161 color and 8 black-and-white illustrations / Distributed by Yale University Press / 2017 / Price: \$45

Related Programs

Lecture Series

Friday, February 17, 1:30 pm

“Material. Human. Divine. Notes on the Vertical Screen”

Noam Elcott, Associate Professor of Modern and Contemporary Art and Media, Columbia University, with Keely Orgeman, the Alice and Allan Kaplan Assistant Curator of American Paintings and Sculpture, Yale University Art Gallery

Part of the series “What Is a Screen?”; for more information, visit dev.screens.yale.edu.

Performance

Thursday, February 23, 5:30 pm

“After Wilfred: The Contemporary Lumia Experience”

Joshua White, artist and founder of the Joshua Light Show

Lectures

Friday, February 24, 1:30 pm

“After Wilfred: The Influence of Lumia on the Joshua Light Show”

Joshua White, artist and founder of the Joshua Light Show

Gallery+

Thursday, April 27, 5:30 pm

“Gallery+Lumia”

Gallery Talks

Wednesday, February 22, 12:30 pm

“The Legacy of Lumia: Collecting and Preserving the Work of Thomas Wilfred”

Dr. Eugene E. Epstein and AJ Epstein, private collectors, and Keely Orgeman

Wednesday, March 8, 12:30 pm

“How Many Conservators Does It Take to Change a Lightbulb?”

Carol Snow, Deputy Chief Conservator and the Alan J. Dworsky Senior Conservator of Objects, Yale University Art Gallery

Wednesday, April 12, 12:30 pm

“Lumia and Modern Art”

Maibritt Borgen, Ph.D. candidate in the Department of the History of Art, Yale University

Exhibition Tours

Tuesdays, March 28, April 18, and May 16, 12:30 pm

All programs are free and open to the public unless otherwise noted. For more detailed programming information, visit artgallery.yale.edu/calendar.

Exhibition Credits

Exhibition organized by Keely Orgeman, the Alice and Allan Kaplan Assistant Curator of American Paintings and Sculpture. Made possible by the Terra Foundation for American Art. Additional support provided by Mary-Jo and John Amatruda, B.A. 1966; Jerald Dillon Fessenden, B.A. 1960; the David Bermant Foundation; the Art Gallery Exhibition and Publication Fund; and the Friends of American Arts at Yale Exhibition and Publication Funds.

Yale University Art Gallery

The Yale University Art Gallery, the oldest college art museum in the United States, was founded in 1832 when the patriot-artist John Trumbull gave more than 100 of his paintings to Yale College. Since then its collections have grown to more than 200,000 objects ranging in date from ancient times to the present.

General Information

The Yale University Art Gallery is located at 1111 Chapel Street, New Haven, Connecticut. Museum hours: Tuesday-Friday, 10 am-5 pm; Thursday until 8 pm (September-June); and Saturday-Sunday, 11 am-5 pm. The Gallery is closed Mondays and major holidays. Free and open to the public. For general information, please call 203.432.0600 or visit the website at artgallery.yale.edu.

Press Contact

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