Cultural Daily

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# Art and Science Collide at Getty Center

Stephen West · Friday, October 4th, 2024

The latest edition of Pacific Standard Time, or PST Art, a sprawling series of exhibitions supported by Getty at more than 70 Southern California institutions, continues to roll out. This third series, called Art and Science Collide, includes eight separate shows just at the Getty Center in Los Angeles.

The biggest of the bunch isn't about how modern high-tech materials have been used to make artworks, as you might expect. Instead, the flagship show, "Lumen: The Art and Science of Light," focuses on the period of 800 to 1600 A.D. and "how science informed the artistry of the Middle Ages and Renaissance," as a wall label explains. It was a time when instruments such as the astrolabe—used to measure light from the stars for navigational purposes—were developed. That led eventually to telescopes and microscopes and all the rest.

*Tapestry of the Astrolabes*, about 1400-1450, Flemish, wool and silk; Cabildo Catedral de Toledo, Primada de España, Toledo, Spain; photograph by David Blazquez.

One of the most spectacular works in the show, *Tapestry of the Astrolabes*, of about 1400-1450, is a huge Flemish wall hanging from the cathedral of Seville, Spain. On the upper left, God directs all the activity in the scene, with an angel below turning a crank to keep the world in motion. On the right are the poet Virgil and astronomer Hipparchus. In the center are two golden rings arranged like an astrolabe, inside of which are all sorts of mythical and real-life creatures, from a winged horse to strange snakes to a brown bear, as well as personifications of philosophy, geometry,

arithmetic, and astronomy. It’s an astounding scene.

Muhammad b. Abi Bakr (Iranian, active 1200s), *Astrolabe With a Geared Calendar (front and rear views)*, 1221 or 1222, copper alloy, silvered copper alloy, silver, and wax; History of Science Museum, University of Oxford, images © History of Science Museum, University of Oxford.

The exhibition includes several astrolabes, which measure the angle of the North Star to the horizon and can calculate the time of day or night and determine the latitude of a ship at sea. They consist of a pair of circular plates made of copper or brass alloys and inscribed with intricate scales for measurement. On the back are gears to coordinate their motion. The astrolabes in the Getty show are particularly beautiful, probably made more for show than for long ocean voyages.

*Compound Microscope and Case, With All Accessories,* France, early 1750s, gilt bronze, iron, enamel, sharkskin and glass; wood, gilded leather, gilt bronze fittings, green silk velvet, gold braid; slides of various natural specimens and brass implements; Getty Museum.

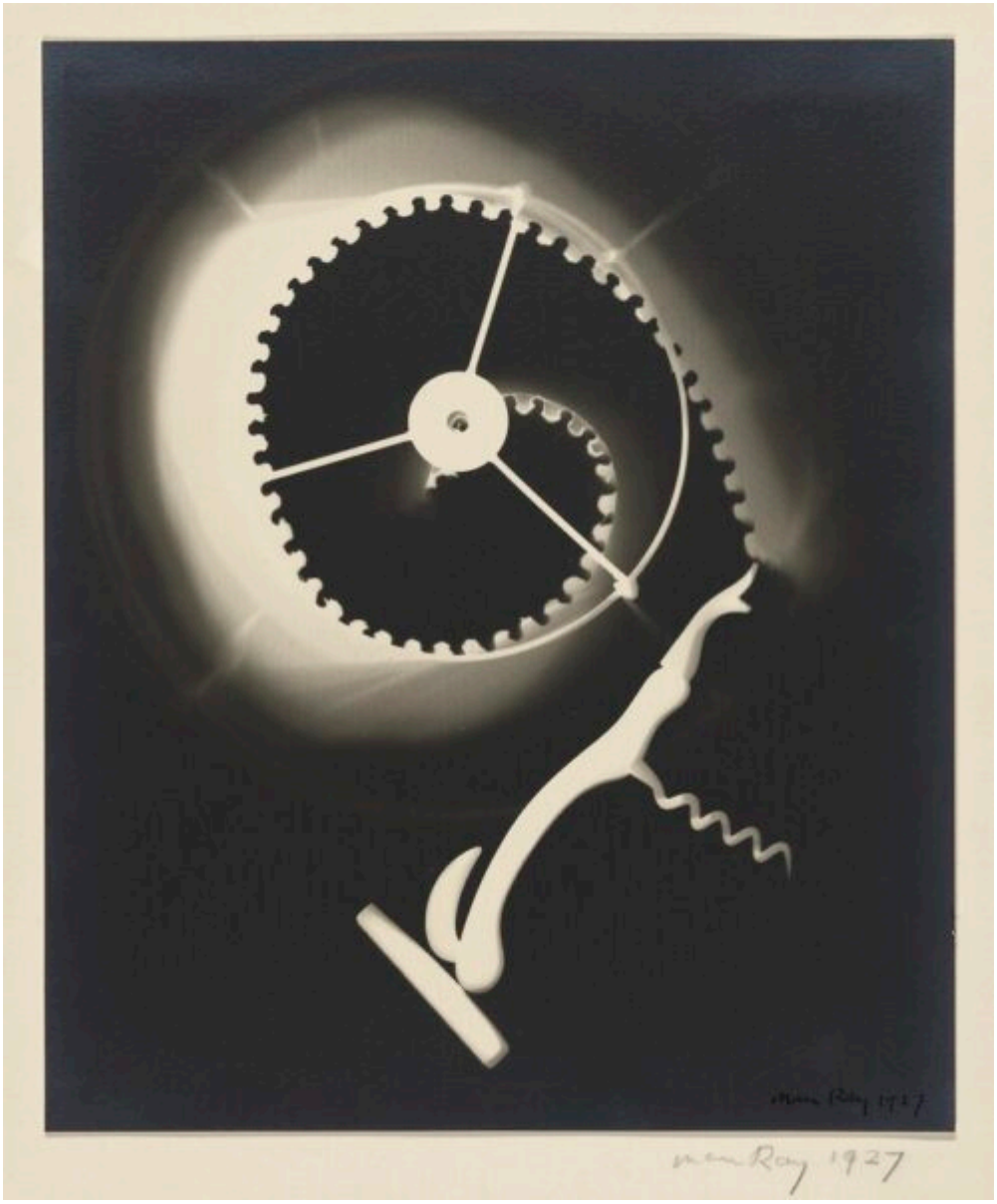
Another exhibition at Getty Center, “Magnified Wonders,” features essentially one object, an 18th-century microscope that’s a work of art in its own right. As the show notes, the elaborately decorated instrument (and its equally decorated case) was “doubtless made for an aristocratic amateur scientist” and is similar to one owned by King Louis XV.

Though the gilded base of the microscope looks like a Rococo sculpture, the instrument itself is not that different from modern versions: a plate on which objects are placed to be studied, a large brass knob to focus the image, a concave glass mirror to light the specimen, additional knobs to adjust the eyepiece. Everything packs neatly into a velvet-lined wooden case, including slides and other accessories.

## Experimental Photography

Not all of the Getty’s PST shows feature objects from centuries ago. Two lively exhibitions, “Abstracted Light: Experimental Photography” and “Sculpting With Light: Contemporary Artists

and Holography” offer works from the 1920s forward to the present.

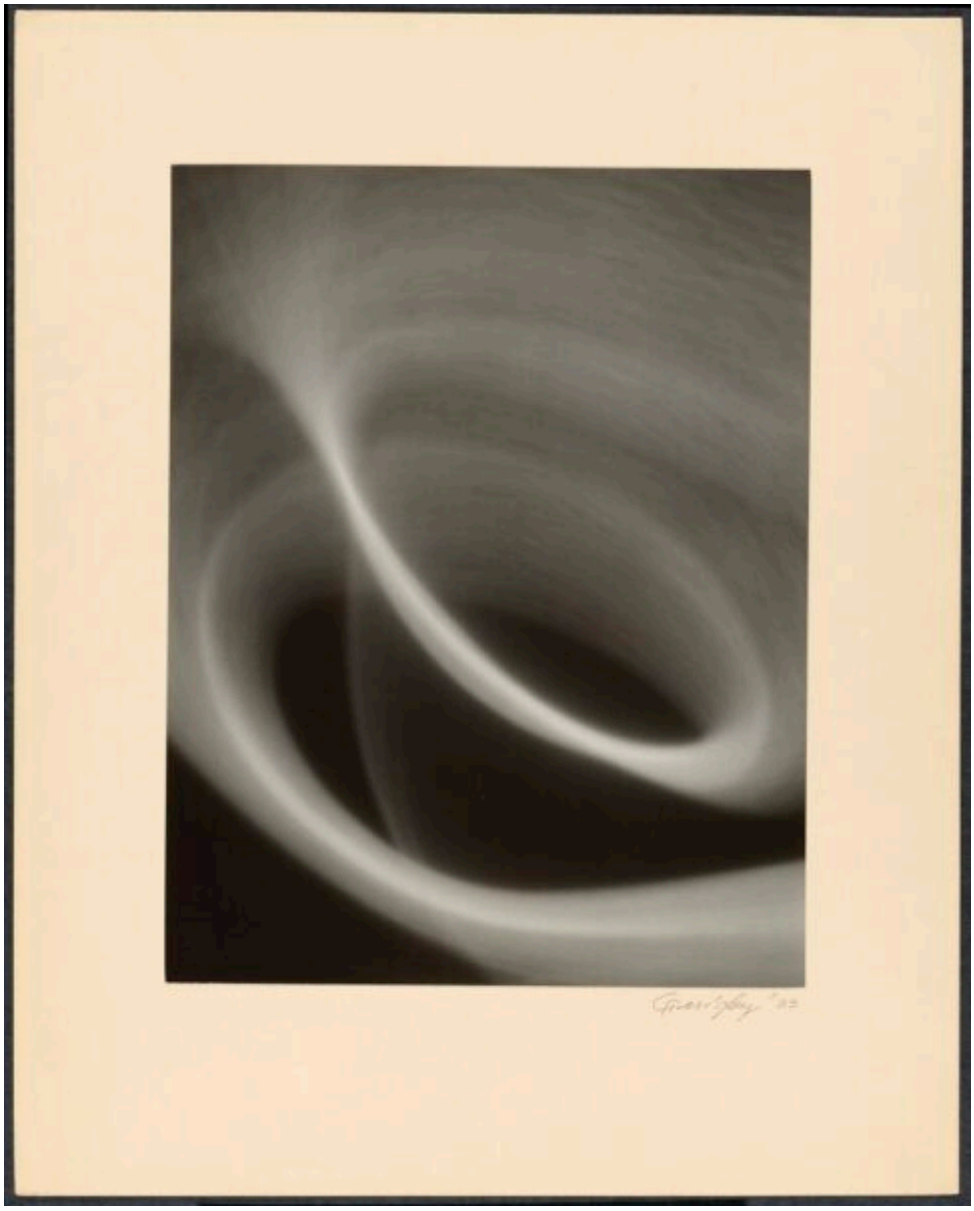



Man Ray (American, 1890-1976), *Untitled (Corkscrew and Lampshade)*, 1927, gelatin silver print, Getty Museum, © Man Ray Trust ARS-ADAGP.

“Abstracted Light” focuses on photograms, produced mostly in the 1920s and 1930s. Artists including Laszlo Maholy-Nagy and Man Ray began to use photography in a new way, without cameras, by imprinting images on photographic paper. Ray, for example, created *Untitled (Corkscrew and Lampshade)* of 1927 by placing a corkscrew and lampshade on unexposed paper and turning on a light for a moment. He modestly called it a Rayogram.

The picture itself looks like something out of 1920s Italian or Russian Futurism. The lampshade is transformed into a geared machine, with the corkscrew seeming to function as a handle or lever.

Other artists employed different techniques to make images on paper without cameras. Asahachi Kono, for example, used the same negative more than once, in contrasting orientations, to create his photograms. Theodore Roszak shifted his light sources to produce multiple images from a single object placed on a sheet of photographic paper. Barbara Morgan in effect drew on paper with a handheld light.

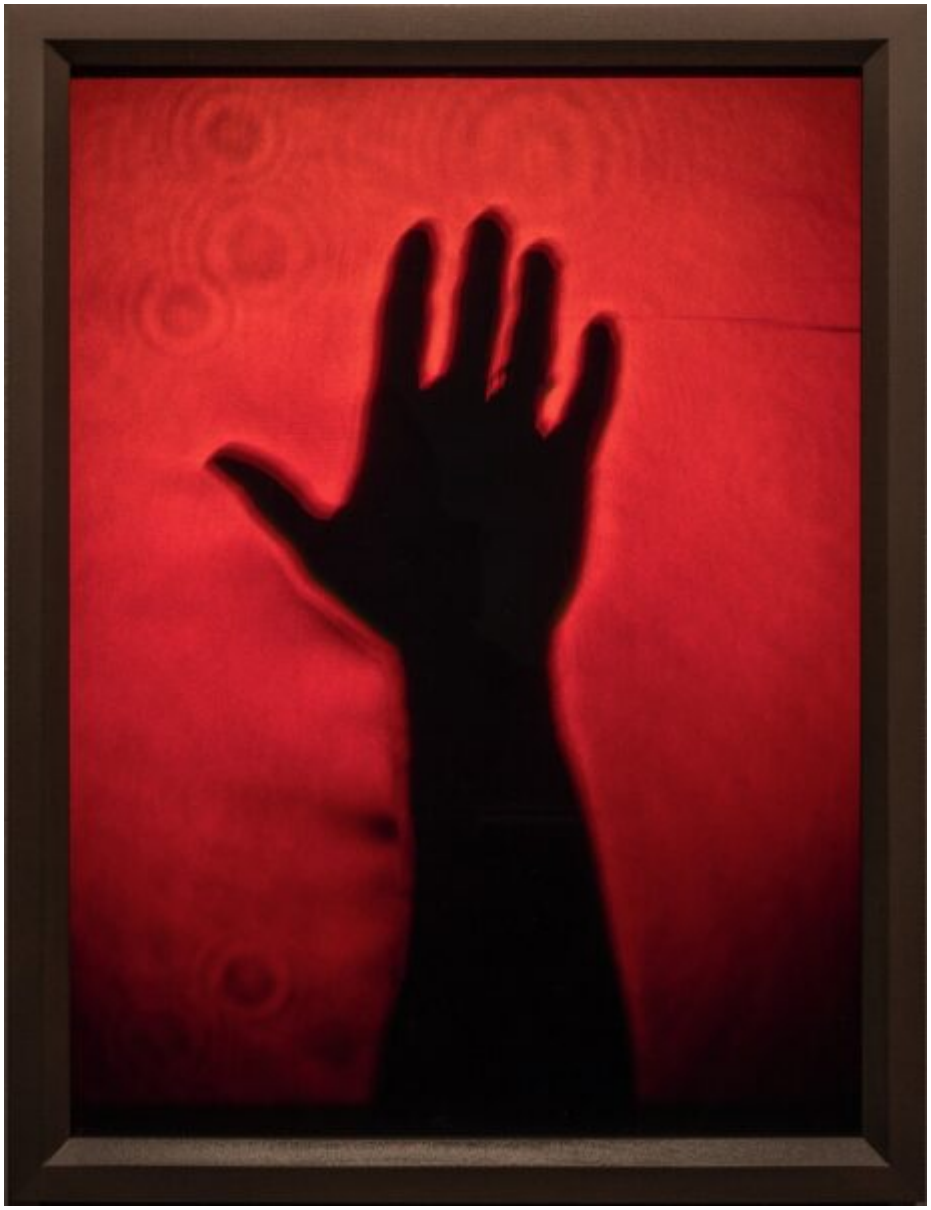


Edward W. Quigley (American, 1898-1977), *Vortex*, 1933, gelatin silver print, Getty Museum. © Estate of Edward W. Quigley.

Edward W. Quigley, described in a wall label as “secretive about how he achieved his special photographic effects,” may have used “long exposures and projected forms in motion.” However he produced it, *Vortex* of 1933 is a powerful and mysterious image. It could represent something as simple as a whirlpool in a stream or as massive as a black hole in space. In any case, it’s a knockout.

## Three Dimensions

Another exhibition in the photography galleries focuses on the three-dimensional but mainly monochromatic images known as holograms. “Sculpting With Light: Contemporary Artists and Holography” certainly features some big-name artists, including Ed Ruscha, Chuck Close, and John Baldessari. Yet to me, at least, they come across as gimmicks as much as powerful artworks. (Showing Chuck Close’s head and shoulders from five angles rather than one doesn’t really make it more interesting.)



Matthew Schreiber (American, born 1967), *Bowie 5,* 2016–2023, reflection hologram, courtesy of the artist, © Matthew Schreiber.

The younger artists in the show seem to make more of the holography medium. Matthew Schreiber, for example, is represented by two groups of images, one a series of eerie landscapes set in a small village in upstate New York.

The other, a group of eight images of Schreiber's own hand in various poses, was made as a homage to rock musician David Bowie after his death in 2016. The holograms are arranged in a simple horizontal row on the wall. Their variations in background colors – oranges, blues, greens — and his hand's positions within the frame creates a lively ensemble.

The Getty's experimental photography and holography shows run through November 24. The Lumen medieval art and science exhibition is on view through December 8, and the 18th-century microscope through February 8, 2024, all at the Getty Center, 1200 Getty Center Drive, Los Angeles. The museum is closed Mondays.

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Top image: *Tapestry of the Astrolabes* (installation view), about 1400-1450, Flemish, wool and

silk; Cabildo Catedral de Toledo, Primada de España, Toledo, Spain; photograph by Stephen West.

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