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John Cabot University

Department of Art History

Bachelor of Arts in Art History

Sonia Delaunay: from Muse, Designer, Wife to Artist Sara Stern

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Abstract

The reception of Sonia Delaunay's work has been distorted and undervalued due to her social position as the wife of a famous artist, her ethnicity, her gender, and her choice of media. The primary literature documenting her life and practice presents a male perspective on her art: first, that of her husband, then of the male representatives of the Parisian bohème, and then of male art critics and scholars. As a result, Sonia Delaunay was not the author of her own history. Instead, her history was written for her by her male colleagues in the art world, resulting in numerous misinterpretations and depreciative stereotypes. Thus, the historiography that established our current perception of Sonia Delaunay's work is overloaded with biases both in the academic literature and in the curatorial practices of exhibiting her work. This thesis aims to analyze the origins of these recurring patterns and to provide solutions to overcome the dead-ends in historiography and museum practices. Using a post-modernist and post-feminist methodology, this research attempts to revise the existing literature from the 1910s to the 2020s to provide a new reading of Sonia Delaunay's work, free of biases, stereotypes, and distortions. The main goal was to secure Sonia Delaunay's proper place in art history. The research resulted in rethinking her complex artistic cooperation with her husband, the use of her ethnicity as a way of integrating French society and concealing her Jewish origins, and her prescient reservations about being relegated to the essentialist category of 'female artist.'

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my lovely family who has always supported me and motivated me.

Without you, dad, I would not have been able to read such great texts in foreign languages and translate them. Without you, mom, I would not had so much curiosity in everything I do.

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1. Introduction

Sonia Delaunay, a modern artist working in France, was originally born in Ukraine. She has never been the subject of profound scholarly interest, despite her importance in and contribution to the Orphic movement's invention. In 1910 she married Robert Delaunay, with whom she cooperated and co-founded Orphism. Despite her crucial role and the importance of her many works, she never received the attention granted to her male contemporaries, like Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, Hans Arp, or Wassily Kandinsky. Even after her death. What is particularly striking is that she never received even half of the scholarly or artistic recognition that her husband's work did. The influential publications, major articles, introductory books on modernism, or pompous exhibitions that define “modern art” have almost always ignored Sonia Delaunay's work. Even when they mention her work, they always look at her work as secondary and complementary to her husband's œuvre, taking a male perspective on avant-garde modernism. Thus, in the majority of cases, it was her husband, Robert Delaunay, who made the headings. Sonia remained in his shadow, as was socially prescribed for the wife of a genius, and a woman, especially in the early twentieth century. As a woman navigating a male-oriented and male-dominated avant-garde world, the possibilities for her public recognition were limited and strictly restricted to her work in the decorative arts, considered an appropriately “feminine” medium.

In the 1970s, right before Sonia Delaunay's death, the first wave of feminism shed light on her existence and her importance as a female painter, despite the limitations it introduced with the term 'female artist.' Later, in the 1980s, the second wave of feminist thought

tried to contextualize Sonia Delaunay's work not only with regards to her gender but also through economic, social, and ethnic perspectives. However, the academic work done on Sonia during these two decades and in these two waves of feminist art history did not clarify or stabilize her place in art history. Instead, they obfuscated her full recognition through their determination to analyze her practice within strictly defined categories.

As a result, Sonia Delaunay is studied either as “Sonia Delaunay” by the academics who try to highlight how her practice was indebted to her husband’s, or as “Sonia Delaunay-Terk” by those academics who emphasize the importance of her artistic practice even before her marriage with Robert Delaunay, through the use of her maiden name. In sum, one half of the literature looks at Sonia as an assistant of Robert’s, fully dependent on him and his artistic ideas. Another half views her practice as fully independent from that of her husband.

Some scholars look at Sonia as a wife, others as a muse. One author calls her a French artist, another a Russian one. One might wonder: is she a French or a Russian artist, and how is this relevant? A wife or a muse, and how does this effect our understanding of her work? Should we call her Sonia Delaunay or Sonia Delaunay-Terk? As in any discipline, hard-line dichotomies and extreme categorization do not lead to a constructive, or sensitive argument and instead represent a lop-sided instrumentalization of an artistic practice to further a larger agenda. Postmodernist and post-feminist art history have loosened the straight jacket of each of the categories in which Sonia Delaunay's work was fitted. Therefore, to attempt an objective contemporary rethinking of Sonia Delaunay's life and practice, this thesis abandons the conjunctions 'or' and 'either' and its limitations, preferring instead the conjunction 'and.'

To abandon and overcome the biases that have shaped Sonia Delaunay's reception, this thesis tries first to define what recurrent distortions characterize her reception in

France. This research takes a historical, critical approach to understanding how biases and distortions are still present in today's museum practices and academic literature. It investigates how these biases were formed, when and by whom. A good metaphor for this thesis would probably be the process of unwinding a ball of tangled threads. To unravel the untangled thread, one must first follow the thread to its tangle's origin, and only then one can untangle it.

Therefore, my first chapter is fully devoted to establishing these deeply rooted biases during Sonia Delaunay's life, from the 1910s to the 1970s. It investigates Sonia Delaunay before she was even recognized, when she was only viewed as "Delaunay's wife" and her husband's assistant. The first chapter also reconstructs the context in which her works were made, perceived, and evaluated as Other. There is an examination of the avant-garde sphere's structure, and the key players from whom Sonia Delaunay drastically differed. She was not French, not male, not free; she was restricted by the social expectations on her role as a wife, a mother, and a daughter. Therefore, this chapter examines how differently the mechanisms of the art world worked for her. The first chapter also explores how Sonia Delaunay's gender, civil and social status, ethnicity, choice of media, and religion modified the process of her navigation of the Parisian art world. Furthermore, it looks into how her husband's perception of her influenced her reception and how she herself modified or generated the construction of certain patterns. This chapter finishes with a revelation of the limitations of the categories within which Sonia Delaunay was examined from the 1910s to the 1970s, and how those categories subjugated her artistic merit and identity.

The second chapter provides an overview of the impact of first and second-wave feminism on Sonia Delaunay's perception when finally, she attracted scholars' attention as Sonia Delaunay and not only as a plural: the final "s" in "the Delaunays." However, the second chapter

also shows that these innovative approaches, while they attracted attention to her as a female artist, were not supported by museums who continued to use old-fashioned and outdated policies to exhibit and acquire her work. Moreover, it reveals the limitations of these new approaches and their blind spots.

The third and final chapter provides postmodernist and post-feminist solutions to the limitations of the first and second wave feminist approaches and the recurrent patterns inherited from the early half of the twentieth century. The third chapter also introduces the idea of a sophisticated relationship and cooperation between Sonia and Robert Delaunay, challenging the old constraints of her role as a muse and his role as a genius. In the last chapter, the distortion of Sonia Delaunay's practice by museum exhibition and acquisition policies is also raised. The cultural institutions intended to shape our world-view have failed to represent the world of Sonia Delaunay. This final chapter ends, therefore, with possible solutions about ways in which to represent Sonia Delaunay's world, giving her back her voice, and allowing her to speak about her own experience in both her private and artistic spheres.

In this way, all three chapters attempt to find the origin of the tangled threads, follow them, and provide solutions for untangling them. Even though this thesis provides rich biographical references and an extensive literature review, it aims to exceed the borders of biography and literature review, proposing contemporary solutions to the old repeating patterns that limit her proper reception — in order to root and stabilize the place in art history she so cryingly deserves.

2. Chapter I: Métèque

Like all artists and poets from the East, she has a hereditary bent for colour.

Robert Delaunay¹

From 1910 to 1980, six factors influenced the reception of Sonia Delaunay's work: gender, ethnicity, civil status, choice of media, commercial and aesthetic value. Her gender curtailed the value of her art through her otherness. Her choice of media was conflated with the vocabulary of the decorative arts' "domesticity," and the feminine task of decorating the home. The commodification of her work in the decorative arts established another glass ceiling keeping her from recognition in the high or fine arts, while the anonymity of her aesthetic theory undermined the originality and innovation of her work. Her Russian and Ukrainian ethnicity might have contributed to her marginalization from French society but, paradoxically, her otherness became a source of attraction for those seduced by Russian exoticism — as witnessed by the fascination for the Paris-based *Ballets Russes*, and its identification of mysticism to Russianness. Finally, Sonia Delaunay's status as the wife of a celebrated painter restricted her potential as an independent artist, as it invited comparisons between her spouse's work and her own.

This chapter discusses the responses to Sonia Delaunay's artistic endeavors from the time of her marriage to Robert Delaunay, in 1910, to her death in 1979. This date is a turning point for two reasons: it was the start of Sonia Delaunay's marriage to Robert Delaunay, which has profoundly affected her reception since. It is also a turning point in her own artistic research: the year when Sonia abandoned Fauvism in favor of the Orphic movement. This period, and this

¹ Jacques Damase, *Sonia Delaunay: Rhythms and Colours* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1972), 51.

chapter, end in 1979, the year of her death and the development of critical texts and exhibitions of her work. This chronological timeframe has, within its premise, the patterns, axiomatic framework, biographical impulse and critical factors that, to this day, condition the limited recognition of her art.

This chapter will argue that the social, economic and political structure of the avant-garde amalgamated the work of Sonia Delaunay and established recurring sequences that devalue Sonia Delaunay's work, making it challenging for her artistic endeavors to act as autonomous entities. Therefore, to discover the patterns that continue to influence responses to Sonia Delaunay's work, and to determine these patterns' historical development, this chapter asks the following questions: How were these patterns constructed? How did Robert shape their development? Did Sonia herself alter their construction? What events changed these patterns? Did her status as the wife of a famous painter prefigure these patterns? Did the death of her husband change these patterns? What were the authoritative mechanisms and key players in the art world that influenced Sonia's reception? What role did Sonia's gender play in her reception? What role did Sonia's choice of media play? What role did her ethnicity play in her choice of media, style and strategies of recognition?

The first mention of Sonia Delaunay in the press dates to 1913.² It merely referred to her as the wife of Robert Delaunay. Perhaps because of family connections to key art players in the Parisian art world, her tango costumes for the popular nightclub in Paris, Le Bal Bullier, caught the attention of Parisian artistic circles. These acquaintances were largely representative of the Parisian *bohème*: the gallery owner Herwarth Walden, the artist Arturo Ciacelli, the poet Guillaume Apollinaire, the critic Tristan Tzara, the poet Blaise Cendrars, the historian Bertrand Guégan, the art critic André Salmon, and French designer Edmond Courtot.

²Guillaume Apollinaire, "A Travers le Salon des Indépendants," *Montjoie !: organe de l'impérialisme artistique français*, (March 18, 1913): 1-4.

They became the first admirers of her talent in costume design. For instance, they were the first to admire Sonia's experimental fashion/costume designs for herself. In 1913, Sonia Delaunay created *La robe simultanée* (figure 1)³ which she used as a costume for dancing tango at a famous dance hall, Le Bar Bullier. She used a variety of fabrics as well as colors to deconstruct the female body, and created a much looser silhouette that did not highlight her waist, breasts or hips. She also avoided any representational elements, like floral motifs. Instead, her dress consisted of abstract blocks of colors. These patches of color established such a new silhouette and constructed such a new form of body, that Blaise Cendrars, in his poem for Madame Delaunay states that "sur la robe elle a un corps."⁴ Despite its adherence to "the streamlined garçonne style of the time,"⁵ it was stripped of the representational decoration still present in the garçonne dresses. Instead, her dress introduced a new way of looking at the female body: as abstract painting, not as an assemblage of traditional flowers and lace. Her dress was so non-figurative, that her three-



Figure 1: Sonia Delaunay, *La robe simultanée* (private collection of Eric and Jean-Louis Delaunay)

³ Sonia Delaunay, "La robe simultanée," 1913. Fabric patchwork, wood, silk, fur, velvet. Source: Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, <https://exposicionesquehayenmadrid.wordpress.com/2017/07/06/sonia-delaunay-arte-diseno-y-moda-museo-thyssen-bornemisza/robe-simultanee/>.

⁴ "On the dress she has a body" in Blaise Cendrars, "Sur la robe elle a un corps," translated by Carrie Noland (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999) https://artmuseum.princeton.edu/files/sur_la_robe.pdf [Originally published in February 1914].

⁵ Kathrine Townsend, "On the dress she wears a (printed) body," (paper presented at The Body-Connections with Fashion - 10th Annual Conference of the International Foundation of Fashion Technology Institutes, RMIT, Melbourne, Australia, 8-9 March 2008), <http://iffiti.org/downloads/papers-presented/x-RMIT,%202008/papers/p209.pdf>.

dimensional dresses appeared to produce a “two-dimensional image.”⁶ Unfortunately, this revolution in costume design was only appreciated by those of her friends who went to the Bal Bullier in the 1910s: “Her clothes were regarded as wildly daring by those Parisians who, like the Delaunays, went to dance tango at the fashionable Bal Bullier in Montparnasse.”⁷ It would take the 1925 Exhibition in Paris and the first wave of feminist studies to attract the attention of a wider public to her designs.

Sonia Delaunay’s friends from the Parisian *bohème* soon wrote about her talent in costume design. While Apollinaire, Guégan, Salmon, and Coutot expressed their admiration in brief, but encouraging avant-garde reviews and major artistic periodicals in France, Walden and Ciacelli offered to include Sonia’s work alongside her husband’s work in exhibitions at their galleries in Berlin and Stockholm.⁸ Despite her being mentioned in the press and her participation in several exhibitions, the impact of her work remained limited to a close circle of friends, while Robert’s work was amply praised.

Although reviews of Sonia Delaunay’s work in artistic periodicals did not bring her public fame, they did establish a recurring pattern of mentioning Robert’s work in reviews of her own. By contrast, articles on Robert’s work make no mention of Sonia. One of the most striking examples of this inequity comes from Guillaume Apollinaire’s articles about Orphism, written in

⁶Elizabeth Morano, *Sonia Delaunay: Art into Fashion* (New York: Braziller, 1994), 11-21.

⁷Michael Peppiat, “Sonia Delaunay,” in *Interviews with the Artists 1966-2012* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 198.

⁸Guillaume Apollinaire, “La Vie Anecdotique,” *Mercure de France* CVII, no. 397, (1 January, 1914), 216-220; Guillaume Apollinaire, “A Travers le Salon des Indépendants,” *Montjoie !: organe de l’impérialisme artistique français*, (18 March, 1913):1-4; Bertrand Guégan, “Reliures d’Aujourd’hui,” *Montjoie !: organe de l’impérialisme artistique français*, (April-May-June, 1914): 26-27; André Salmon, “Le XXXe Salon des Artistes Indépendants,” *Montjoie !: organe de l’impérialisme artistique français*, (March, 1914): 22-28; Edmond Courtot, “De la Mode Esthétique Vivante,” *Montjoie !: organe de l’impérialisme artistique français*, (April-May-June, 1914): 23-24; A. Öhrner, “Delaunay and Stockholm,” In: *O Círculo Delaunay / The Delaunay Circle* (Lissabon: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian; 2015): 226–40, <http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:sh:diva-28793>; Herwarth Walden, “Erster Deutscher Herbstsalon” *Der Sturm*, 1913.

1913-1914 and published in three different artistic periodicals: the avant-garde *Montjoie!*, the widely-read *Mercure de France*, and the influential German review, *Der Sturm*.⁹ While Apollinaire mentioned both Sonia and Robert as “les Delaunays” in the article on Sonia Delaunay’s innovations in fashion for *Le Mercure de France*, he did not mention Sonia in the articles on Robert’s achievements in *Der Sturm* or *Montjoie!*. In *Le Mercure de France*, Guillaume Apollinaire stated that both “M. et Mme Robert Delaunay” were reforming costume at Le Bar Bullier.¹⁰ Throughout the article, the author praised their allegedly joint contributions to materials and forms: “l’orphisme simultané a produit des nouveautés vestimentaires qui ne sont pas à dédaigner.”¹¹ Although Apollinaire apportioned equal praise to Sonia and Robert Delaunay, only Sonia designed and sewed her costumes, with her own materials, while “Robert’s loud tuxedos were ordered from a tailor.”¹² Apollinaire ignored Sonia Delaunay’s contribution to Orphism in *Montjoie!* by claiming that Robert was the only founder of Orphism.¹³ In his article for *Der Sturm*, Apollinaire did not dwell much on Sonia, but referenced her role in Orphism by adding, once, an ‘s’ to Delaunay: “Ebenso gibt es in der modernen Malerei neue Tendenzen; die bedeutendsten scheinen mir einerseits der Kubismus Picassos, andererseits der Orphismus Delaunays zu sein.”¹⁴ The author then quickly switched to Robert’s practice. Yet Apollinaire entertained a close relationship with the Delaunays. As a close friend of the family’s, he spent many Thursdays at their house, went to Berlin for the Herbstsalon together with Robert in 1913, and coined the term

⁹ Apollinaire, “A Travers,” 3; Apollinaire, “La Vie”, 216-220; Apollinaire, “Die Moderne Malerei,” *Der Sturm*, (February 1913), no. 148-149: 272.

¹⁰ Apollinaire, “La Vie”, 216-220.

¹¹ “The simultaneous morphism produced clothing novelties which are not to be despised” in Apollinaire, “La Vie,” 218 [my translation].

¹² Axel Madsen, “Syntheses” in *Sonia Delaunay: Artist of the Lost Generation* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1989), 180.

¹³ Apollinaire, “A Travers le Salon,” 1-4.

¹⁴ “Likewise, there are new trends in modern painting; the most important seem to me to be Picasso’s Cubism on the one hand, and Delaunay’s Orphism on the other” in Apollinaire, “Die Moderne Malerei,” 272 [my translation].

Orphism. Despite his insider's knowledge of Sonia's practice and her cooperation with Robert, he neglected her role in his press articles. This tendency to admit Sonia Delaunay's accomplishments only through the filter of her husband's work resulted in Sonia's work being subjugated to Robert's. Furthermore, she was reduced to being the passive recipient of her husband's artistic influence. Her own contribution to the creation of Orphism was negated. As a result, her work was considered a byproduct of her husband's endeavor. That is, until the first wave of feminist studies in the 1970s challenged this precept.

Sonia Delaunay's work was also viewed, during her life and even after her death, as a product of her ethnicity. Paradoxically, Sonia contributed to this. The myth surrounding her use of color being a function of her Eastern origins was sealed by the Ballets Russes. The Paris-based troupe, active and hugely popular from 1909 to 1929, largely constructed the identification of Russian with mystical and colorful. Sergei Diaghilev used bold colors in his ballet costumes (figure 2),¹⁵ packaging Russian identity and creating an Orientalized, vivid version of it to construct a fantastical stage show. This use of color associated



Figure 2: Léon Bakst, *Costume for the Blue God* (National Gallery of Australia, Canberra)

¹⁵ Léon Bakst, "Costume for the Blue God," 1912. Silk, silk moiré faille, satin, velvet ribbon, braid and embroidery thread, rayon, metallic embroidery thread and ribbon, metal studs and fasteners, gelatin imitation mother-of-pearl discs, metallic gauze, braid and paillettes, silk embroidery thread, gelatin sequins, metal studs, metallic and other paint. Source: National Gallery of Australia, <https://artsearch.nga.gov.au/detail.cfm?IRN=76761>.



Figure 3: Sonia Delaunay and Blaise Cendrars, *La Prose du Transsibérien et de la Petite Jehanne de France* (196.9 x 35.6 cm, Department of Drawings and Prints, Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA)

Russian nationality with an inherent use of bright colors.¹⁶ This association was largely attested by the press, such as the exemplary 1913 statement that: “L’amour des couleurs et des lignes fortes qui régnait déjà à l’étranger dans l’art décoratif, semble s’implanter chez nous surtout par le costume féminin qu’influencèrent indéniablement les Ballets Russes.”¹⁷

Critics viewed Sonia Delaunay’s work in this cultural and ideological context and thus cited her Ukrainian-Russian birth to explain both her interest in costume design, and her work on color. Her 1913 illustration for the pochoir of Blaise Cendrars’ “*La Prose du Transsibérien et de la petite Jehanne de France*” (figure 3)¹⁸ united color and text. On the right side of the two-meter fold-out, Cendrars’ text recounted a train-trip through Mongolia and Russia; on the left, Sonia’s graphic work did not merely illustrate the book, but accompanied, resonated with, or intruded upon the text. Her watercolor swirls of contrasting color and dynamic shapes evoked the train’s fast pace. As the reader unfolded another part of the book, she observed a change in the abstract forms and colors that recall the morphing view from a train window. Guillaume Apollinaire recognized Sonia’s work as “une

¹⁶ Madsen, *Sonia Delaunay*, 89; Dominique Desanti, *Sonia Delaunay, magique magicienne* (Paris: éditions Ramsay, 1988), 143; Sergei L. Grigoriev, *The Diaghilev Ballet, 1909-1929* (London: Constable 1953).

¹⁷ “The love of colours and strong lines, which already reigned abroad in decorative art, seems to be established here above throughout the feminine costume that the Ballets Russes undeniably influenced” in Courtot, “De la Mode,” 24 [my translation].

¹⁸ Sonia Delaunay and Blaise Cendrars, “*La Prose du Transsibérien et de la Petite Jehanne de France*,” 1913. Illustrated book with pochoir and hand-painted parchment wrapper. Source: Museum of Modern Art, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/273447>.

première tentative de simultanéité écrite où des contrastes de couleurs habituaient l'œil à lire d'un seul regard l'ensemble d'un poème.”¹⁹ However, he also highlighted that Sonia Delaunay was particularly good at simultaneously uniting colors and text while illustrating a Russian journey, because she had memories of seeing colors and being under the Russian sun. Unfortunately, this Orientalization was even more emphasized by Sonia's husband.

Robert Delaunay himself embraced this ethnic construction of Sonia's talent for color, by referring in 1924 for example, to Sonia's sense of color as “couleur slave.”²⁰ He was thereby diminishing her unique sense of color and reducing her subjectivity to an atavistic national character of Ukraine and Russia: “Like all artists and poets from the East, she has a hereditary bent for colour.”²¹ Robert shared color range and color theory with Sonia; curiously, none of the scholars or art critics reduce his choice of color to his ethnicity. Most vividly this unfair treatment is particularly evident in the different reception of Robert's and Sonia's work that have much in common, such as Sonia Delaunay's *Couverture de Berceau* of 1911 (figure 4)²² and her husband's *Fenêtres ouvertes simultanément (1ère partie 3ème motif)* (figure 5)²³ of 1912.²⁴

¹⁹ “First attempt at written simultaneity where contrasts of colors accustomed the eye to read in one glance the whole poem” in Guillaume Apollinaire, “Simultanisme-Librettisme,” *Les Soirees de Paris* (15 June, 1914): 323 [my translation].

²⁰ “Slavic color” in *The New Art of Color: The Writings of Robert and Sonia Delaunay*, eds. by Arthur A. Cohen (New York: Viking Press, 1978), 138 [Originally written in 1924] [my translation].

²¹ Damase, *Sonia Delaunay*, 51.

²² Sonia Delaunay, “Couverture de Berceau,” 1911. Fabric sewn onto canvas. Source: Centre Pompidou, <https://www.centrepompidou.fr/fr/ressources/oeuvre/coX4Gb7>.

²³ Robert Delaunay, “Fenêtres ouvertes simultanément (1ère partie 3ème motif),” 1912. Oil on canvas. Source: Tate Gallery, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/delaunay-windows-open-simultaneously-first-part-third-motif-t00920>.

²⁴ “The quilt's rich surface of liberated forms and colors is imprinted in Robert Delaunay's groundbreaking series of paintings titled Windows, begun in 1912.” in Whitney Chadwick, “Living simultaneously, Sonia and Robert Delaunay,” in *Significant others: creativity and intimate partnership* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993), 37.



Figure 4: Sonia Delaunay, *Couverture de Berceau* (111 x 82 cm, Musée National d'Art Moderne)

In 1911 Sonia created a quilt for their son Charles (figure 4).²⁵ This prolonged rectangular quilt consisted of multiple bold patches of color with vague tattered borders, attached to other pieces of fabric that represent one or two hues of the same color. Together these different hues of one color formed batches of colors, that either demonstrated their gradation or juxtaposed different stages of it. In her color blocks Sonia Delaunay used mostly hues of green, orange, red, purple, and brown. Sometimes these color alliances did not succeed one another, but instead clashed with individual patches of black or white.

The richness of secondary and tertiary colors with their numerous shades was juxtaposed to an absence of hues of black and white. Just one year after Sonia's *Couverture de Berceau* Robert Delaunay created a series of paintings titled *Fenêtres ouvertes simultanément* (figure 5),²⁶ relying on a similar color scheme and a like-minded deconstruction of color. In his painting Robert used brighter pastel colors and made the borders between different hues more geometrical. Nevertheless, the presence of the curve from the lower left corner to the upper right corner suggested that he was heavily inspired by Sonia Delaunay's quilt: notice the same curvilinear

²⁵ Delaunay, "Couverture de Berceau," 1911.

²⁶ Delaunay, "Fenêtres ouvertes simultanément," 1912.

movement, in the same direction. The fact that the source of Robert's inspiration was his wife's work is difficult to deny. In her autobiography, Sonia Delaunay admits that *Couverture de Berceau* was created as a tribute to the peasant Russian tradition.²⁷ However, her quilt is viewed by scholars only as a product of her ethnicity, not as a break-through in her own artistic research and as a contribution to Cubist redefinition of space. By contrast, Robert's series of painting were not "explained away" with references to his ethnicity or his wife's research, but recognized as an original creation of male genius and modernity, a work which



Figure 5: Sonia Delaunay, *Couverture de Berceau* (111 x 82 cm, Musée National d'Art Moderne)

breaks ground by overcoming the borders of perspective.²⁸ Obviously, none of the articles celebrating Robert's deconstruction of space mentioned Sonia's work, or her influence.

This reduction of Sonia's use of color to her ethnic identity, and Robert's perceived superiority as a male artistic genius, did not happen only because of gender discrimination. It resulted from an internalized prejudice that Sonia herself supported. Sonia herself consciously used Orientalization to adapt to the rules of her peer-group, the Parisian Bohemia, and to construct a new, easily understandable identity to conceal her Jewish origins. The imaginary Russian identity presented by the Ballets Russes became a facade, behind which she could hide her actual name

²⁷ Sonia Delaunay, Damase Jacques, and Patrick Raynaud. *Nous irons jusqu'au soleil* (Paris: R. Laffont. 1978).

²⁸ Paul Bommersheim, "Die Ueberwindung der Perspektive und Robert Delaunay," *Der Sturm*, no. 149-150, (February 1913): 273.

(Sara Stern), her family origins, and her religion. Thus, she embraced the exaggerated stereotypes and Orientalization promoted by the myth of the “âme slave” to construct her public identity for Parisian society, and also in her relationships with her husband and their friends. According to her French biographer, Dominique Desanti, for Robert “she was a dose of exoticism to him.”²⁹ Sonia played up her artistic indebtedness to the land of her birth. Despite her strong bond with Russian nationality in public, in private Sonia Delaunay doubted her art was indebted to her origins.³⁰ After 1908, she never visited Russia, Ukraine or the USSR, and corresponded only minimally with her aunt or so-called mother, Anna Terk, who died in 1911.³¹ According to her son Charles, “Over the years, Sonia would exhibit an unconcern towards events in Russia.”³²

Another pattern that was established by critics in the 1910s was the independent reception of Sonia Delaunay’s work in different media which disconnected her work in different media. In addition to her interest in design, Sonia Delaunay also produced paintings in the early 1910s. One of the most prominent paintings that she created during this period was *Le Bal Bullier* (figure 6).³³ The painting depicted couples dancing the tango on the nightclub's stage which metaphorically represented the movements of the art world, becoming an embodiment of modernity and



Figure 6: Sonia Delaunay, Le Bal Bullier (97 x 390 cm, Centre national d'art et de culture Georges-Pompidou)

²⁹ Desanti, *Sonia Delaunay*, 143.

³⁰ Madsen, *Sonia Delaunay*, 144.

³¹ Madsen, 143.

³² Madsen, 144.

³³ Sonia Delaunay, “Le Bal Bullier,” 1913. Oil on mattress ticking. Source: Centre Pompidou, <https://www.centrepompidou.fr/en/ressources/oeuvre/zBYSmX5>.

simultaneity. The painting presented the nightclub and human figures as abstract patches of color, hinting at the volume and contours of an object but never fully displaying it. Human bodies were depicted in the same manner as the background, as if they were merging with it, creating a simultaneous experience. The rhythmic curvilinear transitions between different forms as well as the juxtaposition of colors created a sense of movement. The swirls of colors vibrated with energy, evoking the passion and tension of the dancers, and reflecting the atmosphere of the stage without actually depicting it representationally. Instead, Sonia tried to capture, condense and render the atmosphere and experience of that evening. Unfortunately, despite Sonia's view of her work in design and painting as a unified practice, and her conviction that art is an integral part of life, in her reception — even now — her work is usually separated into decorative arts and paintings, her early period and her later period. This approach significantly influenced the curatorial approaches towards exhibiting Sonia's work in the late 20th and 21st century. Regrettably, this firmly established a pattern of viewing Sonia's work as separate practices of different periods and media.

Although Sonia Delaunay's friends misinterpreted her work because of gender, civil status and nationality in the 1920s, they somehow still recognized her artistic merit as a *painter* or as a proponent of the *métier simultané*.³⁴ That was not always the case. For instance, when Sonia and Robert ventured to Spain in 1914, without established connections, the newspapers presented Sonia as “Madame Delaunay, de nacionalidad rusa, y esposa de Robert Delaunay, famoso pintor francés...”³⁵ Here Sonia was denied even the smallest recognition of her artistic merit, of that ‘s’

³⁴ Courout, “De la Mode,” 24; Apollinaire, “La Vie,” 216-220; Guégan, “Reliures d’Aujourd’hui,”

³⁵ “Mme Delaunay, of Russian nationality, and wife of Robert Delaunay, famous French painter...” in a photograph of the untitled newspaper column is reproduced in Paulo Ferreira, *Correspondance de Quatre Artistes Portugais: Almada-Negreiros, José Pacheco, Souza-Cardoso, Eduardo Vianna, avec Robert et Sonia Delaunay* (Paris: Presse Universitaire de France, 1981) [my translation].

that Apollinaire adds to “les Delaunays, les peintres.”³⁶ The battle for the ‘s’ in “les Delaunays” would continue to take place in the next decade.

Over the next decade, from 1920 to 1930, Sonia Delaunay would receive nationwide recognition from the art world due to the reversal of the hierarchy of genres. This reversal was caused by the elevation of craft and decorative works at the 1925 *Exposition internationale des Arts Décoratifs et industriels modernes*.³⁷ Sonia Delaunay’s work in the applied arts offered her recognition as it comfortably ranked her innovations among the traditional sphere of the female decorative sphere of art, as opposed to the high arts. Therefore, her merit in decorative works did not threaten either to overshadow her husband’s work — as he worked in other media, or to question her existence within spheres of art traditionally marked as feminine. Prior to the 1925 Exposition Sonia Delaunay’s choice of media, among the “lower” arts (decorative arts, costume and fashion, illustration), was a way of lowering the status of her high art (painting) by referencing the “hierarchic prejudice in art.”³⁸ Scholars and critics underlined this even more by comparing it to the status of her husband, who was a practitioner of high arts.³⁹

However, in the 1925 *Expo*, the applied arts became “the sole reason for the exhibition,”⁴⁰ drastically upheaving the status of the decorative arts. Sonia Delaunay was invited to take part in the exhibition where her Atelier Simultané stand, in collaboration with Jacques Heim’s firm, Heim

³⁶ Apollinaire, “La Vie”, 216-220.

³⁷ Armand Lanoux, *Paris 1925*, (Paris: R. Delpire, 1957); Martin Battersby, “The 1925 Paris Exhibition,” in *The Decorative Twenties* (New York: Walker and Company, 1969), 15-16.

³⁸ René Crevel, “A Visit to Sonia Delaunay,” in *The New Art of Color: The Writings of Robert and Sonia Delaunay*, eds. Arthur A. Cohen (New York: Viking Press, 1978), 185-189 [Originally published in *La Voz de Guipuzcoa* (1920), translated by the editor].

³⁹ Joseph Delteil feedback on how Sonia illustrated his poem “La mode qui vient” with her fashion show at the Claridge’s Hotel in London in Georges Le Rider, Florence Callu, Jean Toulet, Sabine Coron, *Sonia & Robert Delaunay* (Paris: éditions de la Bibliothèque nationale de France, 1977), 83.

⁴⁰ Battersby, “The 1925 Paris Exhibition,” 15-16.

Furs, made her a “shaper of modernity and new woman.”⁴¹ From this moment onwards, the status of her work in the fashion industry also changed: “The Paris Exhibition of 1925 gave considerable prominence to the creations of the leading dressmakers in two sections devoted to fashion — 'Le Pavillon d'Elégance' and a large area of 'Le Grand Palais' ...Sonia Delaunay...”⁴² The applied arts gained the same power and importance as easel painting and her dresses were “no longer pieces of material draped according to the current fashion but coherent compositions, living paintings or sculptures using living forms.”⁴³ Claire Goll's 1924 review of Sonia Delaunay's work for the *Atelier Simultané* also argued that Sonia's work had proclaimed modernity in her textile works and deconstructed the wall between high and low arts.⁴⁴ Sonia received recognition as a designer in the aftermath of the 1925 exhibition, but her easel painting continued to suffer. Sonia Delaunay's talk at the Sorbonne in 1927 confirmed this trend: the academic world continued to call her a 'couturier' rather than an artist.⁴⁵ Because of her initial success as a designer, not as an artist in traditional fine arts media, Sonia Delaunay continued to be relegated to the role of mere designer, and most art historical publications limit themselves to discussions of her fashion and textile works.

Despite Sonia Delaunay's innovations in the sphere of textile designs, their impact on Robert's painting and the new status of the applied arts from the mid-1920s onwards, certain scholars still continued to emphasize the lower status of her work. They promoted Sonia as a

⁴¹ Matteo de Leeuw-de Monti, “Sonia Delaunay: The Force of Color” in *Sonia Delaunay: Art, Design, and Fashion*, eds. Marta Ruiz del Arbol with texts by Cécile Godefroy, Matteo de Leeuw-de Monti (Madrid: Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, 2017), 152-204.

⁴² Martin Battersby, “Fashion,” in *The Decorative Twenties* (New York: Walker and Company, 1969), 110.

⁴³ Battersby, “Fashion,” 91.

⁴⁴ Claire Goll, “Simultaneous Clothing,” in *The New Art of Color: The Writings of Robert and Sonia Delaunay*, eds. Arthur A. Cohen (New York: Viking Press, 1978), 183-185 [Originally published in *Bilder Courier* 3 (April 1924), translated by Joachim Neugroschel].

⁴⁵ Sonia Delaunay, “The Influence of Painting on Fashion Design,” in *The New Art of Color: The Writings of Robert and Sonia Delaunay*, eds. Arthur A. Cohen (New York: Viking Press, 1978) [Originally a lecture delivered at Sorbonne Université (Paris) on 27th Jan 1927].

revolutionary circumscribed to the supposedly female sphere of textiles. However, they failed to recognize her work as a painter until the late 1980s. At the end of the 1920s, the Great Depression significantly changed Sonia Delaunay's status from designer to a painter. As the demand in her luxurious dresses disappeared, so did her fashion business, and she was pushed to close Atelier Simultané. In 1930 Sonia Delaunay's fame as a designer rapidly faded, as public taste changed from rich colors to austerity in light of the economic crisis and Wall Street Crash of 1929. British Vogue succinctly summarized this shift in fashion as: "It is no longer chic to be smart."⁴⁶ Despite economic loss and bankruptcy hearings, in her autobiography she described this decade as "the freedom years."⁴⁷ This closure allowed Sonia to concentrate on painting. As she returned to easel painting, her husband's work stagnated. At this moment, "Robert was only vaguely remembered, if at all, for his Eiffel Tower paintings."⁴⁸ As Robert Delaunay could not produce finished works because of economic precarity, Sonia Delaunay loosened her associations with him. For example, in 1935 Jean Cassou wrote equally about the couple's work at the Salon de la Lumière: "Robert Delaunay ... le stand qu'il partage avec Sonia Delaunay."⁴⁹ This was the first mention of equal status of both Robert and Sonia Delaunay as artists and painters.

Even though Cassou granted Sonia Delaunay higher status as a painter, he still believed in the supremacy of Robert over Sonia's area of expertise, namely: combining art and life. This is clear in Cassou's other article of the same year, in which he states: "Et si l'Exposition de 1937 remplit le but qu'elle s'assigne, de réconcilier les arts et les techniques, les plasticiens et les architectes, la spéculation intellectuelle et les matières, elle se doit de faire appel à Robert

⁴⁶ Solange d'Ayen, "Paris in Its New Clothes," *Vogue UK* (7 June, 1930): 64-65.

⁴⁷ Sonia Delaunay, Jacques Damase, and Patrick Raynaud, *Nous Irons Jusqu'au Soleil*, Collection a Jeu Découvert (Paris: R. Laffont, 1978).

⁴⁸ Madsen, *Sonia Delaunay*, 301.

⁴⁹ "...Robert Delaunay, whose stand he shares with Sonia Delaunay..." in Jean Cassou, "Le Salon de la Lumière," *Marianne: grand hebdomadaire littéraire illustré* (23 October, 1935): 5 [my translation].

Delaunay.”⁵⁰ Interestingly enough, Cassou believed that Robert had greater ability in combining arts and crafts because of Robert’s experiments with sand and stone in 1936, ignoring the fact that Sonia has already been doing that in her work since the 1910s. Nevertheless, the 1930s allowed Sonia to achieve a new status, but her *oeuvre* still remained subject to the discrimination established by previous practices and prejudices.

The year 1937 was a turning point for Sonia Delaunay, as she took part with her husband in the *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes*, marking the switch from “Delaunay’s wife” to “les Delaunays.” Together, they created murals for the pavilions of *Voyages*



Figure 7: Sonia and Robert Delaunay, *The Hall Tronconique of the Aeronautical Pavillion at the Exposition*

Lointains and the *Palais de l’Air* (figure 7)⁵¹ which brought popularity to both, and ended Robert’s creative stagnation. Together Robert and Sonia Delaunay became recognized as “L’équipe Delaunay” for the first time, setting the pattern which was followed by the key players of the art world in their reception of the Delaunays until the beginning of World War II.⁵² The reason for this change was their equal contribution to the execution of the murals: “Avec une louable audace,

⁵⁰ “If the 1937 exposition is to fulfil the goal it has set itself, to reconcile art and technology, visual artists and architects, intellectual conjecture and materials, it must call upon Robert Delaunay” in Jean Cassou, “R. Delaunay et la plastique murale en couleur,” *Art et Décoration* 64, (1935): 97 [my translation].

⁵¹ Sonia and Robert Delaunay, “The Hall Tronconique of the Aeronautical Pavillion at the Exposition,” 1937. Mural. Source: Guggenheim Bilbao, <https://panoramas.guggenheim-bilbao.eus/en/did-you-know-that>.

⁵² “Team Delaunay” in Louis Cheronnet, “L’Homme et ses transports,” *Marianne: grand hebdomadaire littéraire illustré*, (18 August, 1937): 6 [my translation].

les Delaunay avaient tout préparé, tout mis au point...”⁵³ In his review of the 1937 Exposition, Henri Kazan congratulated both Sonia and Robert for their creative innovativeness and bravery: “Nous ne doutons pas qu'ils prennent rang parmi les artistes à qui sont dus les meilleures réalisations que l'on a pu admirer au cours de la grandiose manifestation d'art et de technique qu'est l'Exposition Internationale de Paris 1937.”⁵⁴ Also, it was the first time when art critics recognized Sonia’s creative influence in the *équipe Delaunay*, and talked about her influence on the team which nonetheless was still run by Robert: “Son équipe: cinquante artistes, parmi lesquels Sonia Delaunay, sa femme, dont on sait l’activité et influence créatrices...”⁵⁵ Also, it was the first time when the Delaunays were seen as a unified team and their relationship was perceived as an artistic collaboration: “Une entente absolue avait été réalisée entre camarades épris d'un même idéal. Les Delaunay...”⁵⁶ Despite the presence of reviews that clearly highlighted the spirit of collaboration in the couple’s shared project, the press still dedicated less space to Sonia Delaunay’s works than to her husband's. Also, the press did not illustrate her work even when articles discussed *l'équipe Delaunay*, instead only Robert’s work was illustrated. This pattern was reflected too in the amount of text, illustrations and index references that books about Sonia and Robert Delaunay dedicate to her work in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

⁵³ “With praiseworthy courage, the Delaunays had prepared everything, perfected everything...” in Louis Cheronnet, “L’Homme et ses transports,” *Marianne: grand hebdomadaire littéraire illustré* (18 August, 1937): 6 [my translation].

⁵⁴ “We have no doubt that they rank among the artists to whom are due the best achievements that we could admire during the grandiose manifestation of art and technique that is the International Exhibition of Paris 1937” in Henri Kazan, “Le Palais de l’Aéronautique et des Chemins de Fer à l’Exposition Internationale de Paris 1937,” *Les Nouvelles des Expositions*, no. 9 (1 September, 1937): 2 [my translation].

⁵⁵ “His team: fifty artists, including Sonia Delaunay, his wife, whose creative activity and influence we know...” in Fernand Lot, “Une grande orchestration de l’art abstrait,” *Marianne: grand hebdomadaire littéraire illustré* (7 July, 1937): 6 [my translation].

⁵⁶ “An absolute understanding had been achieved between comrades in love with the same idea” in Marc Asie, “Au Palais de l’air et des chemins de fer. Une décoration peinte d’un esprit nouveau,” *Les Nouvelles des Expositions*, no. 9 (1 September, 1937): 2 [my translation].

The patterns of the late 1930s, after the 1937 Exposition which might have elevated Sonia Delaunay's status as a painter, were hindered by the onset of World War II. The war limited the possibilities of art: materials became scarce, exhibitions were suspended and collectors stopped buying. Two years later, Robert Delaunay died, leaving Sonia alone with the arduous task of preserving his work during this unstable time, shifting focus from creating new artworks to saving old ones. This resulted in the absence of literature published on Sonia or Robert Delaunay's art during the 1940s.⁵⁷ Therefore, not much is known of Sonia Delaunay during this period, except for her entries in her diary, her letters, and the accounts from her autobiography.

During this period it seems her actions became focused on preserving her husband's legacy. After 1941, Sonia wished to organize a retrospective for Robert, and publish a book on his *œuvre* because "Robert is known only by a small group of people, of admirers, but the general public does not know him..."⁵⁸ However, to promote Robert's work, she repeatedly diminished her own achievements, giving credit to Robert for the ideas and innovations she developed. This sealed her role as 'an assistant to Robert' among the public and among scholars, preventing her from receiving any credit for Orphism. This pattern defined the historiography for the next thirty-five years. However, after Sonia Delaunay's death in 1979, the shocking discovery of her actual role as a co-founder of Orphism was made, when her letters were given to the French state.⁵⁹ Despite this discovery, this pattern had been a crucial point of reference in understanding Robert and Sonia's artistic relationship for 35 years, producing an enormous amount of literature that reiterates Sonia's secondary role. This literature is still referenced with no disclaimers by contemporary scholars, keeping a false framework alive to this day.

⁵⁷ Delaunay, Damase, and Raynaud, *Nous Irons*, 50-85.

⁵⁸ Sonia Delaunay's diary, quoted by Bernadette Contensou, "Foreword" in *Robert Delaunay (1885-1941)*, (Musée de l'Orangerie: Paris, 1976), 7 [exhibition catalogue].

⁵⁹ BnF, Paris, département des Manuscrits (NAF 28443) [Sonia Delaunay. Journal du 1902-1969] .

In France in the early 1950s Sonia Delaunay's painting began to receive academic interest and she became publicly recognized as a painter. She switched her attention to her own practice, concentrated on easel paintings, controlled communication about her work with the key art world players, became a powerful member of avant-garde groups, and appealed to both younger and older generations. In her diary, Sonia spoke about her readiness to switch attention to her practice: “When Robert’s work takes its rightful place, and is valued as it should be, it will be time for me to live for myself.”⁶⁰ Thus, after dedicating an entire decade to Robert, she attempted to restore her own position in the art world. This time, Sonia dedicated herself fully to large-scale easel painting, challenging the stereotypical dichotomy of female craft and male high art. Sonia took control of communication with the key art world players, contrary to what happened prior to Robert’s death, when Robert controlled all correspondence. She also controlled major business arrangements and deals. Her connections allowed her to promote her work in the art world: “The personal and professional connections she had so steadfastly maintained, even during the Occupation, provided the basis that allowed her to put her project of defense and promotion efficiently into action.”⁶¹ Her connections and personal control of communications allowed her to increase her the influence. This is clear through her engagement with powerful associations and groups, which not only promoted abstract art but also significantly influenced its reception. Sonia Delaunay was engaged in two of these groups, *Groupe Espace* and *Salon des Réalités Nouvelles*. She was first the Secretary General of the *Groupe Espace* in 1953-1956, and then its Vice-President in 1956-60, and a member and donor of the *Salon des Réalités Nouvelles* in the 1940s

⁶⁰ Sonia Delaunay’s diary, quoted by Bernadette Contensou, “Foreword” in *Robert Delaunay (1885-1941)*, (Musée de l’Orangerie: Paris, 1976), 7 [exhibition catalogue].

⁶¹ Domitille d’Orgeval, “Conquering the Paris Art Scene in the 1950’s and 1960’s,” in *Sonia Delaunay* (London: Tate Publishing, 2014), 243.

and 1950s.⁶² Her successful return to the art world allowed Sonia to organize her first solo show (previously she only exhibited alongside her husband's works) in forty years at the Galerie Bing in 1954. Even though Sonia Delaunay gained the majority of her popularity in the 1920s-1930s, her work was still current and appealed to both younger and older generations in the 1950s. For instance, in 1950 she took part in the exhibition "L'Art Abstrait: Ses Origines, Ses Premiers Maîtres"⁶³ as being "significant for its historical dimension."⁶⁴ At the same time Léon Degand wrote that Sonia Delaunay's work was refreshingly current: "Et cette œuvre n'a pas encore cessé d'être actuelle. Les dernières générations s'y rafraîchissent comme à la meilleure des sources."⁶⁵ In the 1950s, art critics recognized Sonia as an individual artist, and finally dedicated whole articles to her.⁶⁶ They began to acknowledge the bilateral exchange of ideas between Robert and Sonia: "Les recherches de ces deux novateurs devinrent très profondément solidaires."⁶⁷ Also, they gave Sonia Delaunay the possibility to explain the complexity of artistic cooperation. For instance, in the article for *XXe siècle* she explained how she and her husband experimented with different techniques and inspired each other.⁶⁸ First, she did a collage for *Der Sturm* covers in 1913, then in 1914, Robert experimented with a half-painting and half-collage. Sonia returned to this technique in 1915 and then applied collage to her other applied art objects and clothes in 1922.⁶⁹ While in France, Sonia received recognition as an independent painter and spoke about how sophisticated their cooperation was.

⁶² d'Orgeval, "Conquering the Paris Art Scene," 242-248.

⁶³ Michel Seuphor and Galerie Maeght, *L'art Abstrait: Ses Origines, Ses Premiers Maîtres*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Maeght, 1950); d'Orgeval, "Conquering the Paris Art Scene," 245.

⁶⁴ Seuphor, *L'art Abstrait*; d'Orgeval, 245.

⁶⁵ "And this work has not yet ceased to be current. The last generations are refreshing themselves as if at the best of sources" in Léon Degand, "Sonia Delaunay et l'exaltation chromatique," *XXe siècle* 7 (1956): 80-82 [my translation].

⁶⁶ Sonia Delaunay, "Collages de Sonia et Robert Delaunay," *XXe siècle*, no.6 (January 1956): 19-21.

⁶⁷ "The research of these two innovators became deeply united" in Degand, "Sonia Delaunay," 81 [my translation].

⁶⁸ Delaunay, "Collages de Sonia et Robert," 19-21.

⁶⁹ Delaunay, 19-21.

Abroad Sonia remained overshadowed by her husband's fame. Take for instance Herschel B. Chipp's 1958 claim that "Robert Delaunay is the artist most closely identified with Orphism" without recognizing the merit of his wife.⁷⁰ Sonia Delaunay understood this and inaugurated exhibitions in Turin and New York.⁷¹ Even though the expansion of her art abroad would reach its peak in the 1960s and 1970s, the 1950s marked the beginning of Sonia's "life for myself" of which she speaks in her diary: "I have had three lives. One for Robert, one for my son and my grandsons, and one, all too short, for myself."⁷²

In the 1960s Sonia Delaunay's "life for herself" culminates with the peak of her artistic career, the success of her art abroad, and her recognition by the French government and institutions. In his 1968 article R.V. Gindertael confirmed that specifically in the 1960s Sonia reached the highest point in her career: "La richesse de l'œuvre de Sonia Delaunay peut se mesurer ... mais elle a atteint son point culminant, au cours des quinze dernières années, avec l'affirmation triomphale du rythme coloré basé sur l'ordre d'une abstraction géométrique sensible et émouvante."⁷³ Her work's contemporary relevance continued to be recognized in the 1960s: "Sonia Delaunay a su garder intacte la fraîcheur de ses dons et sa ferveur. Admirable jeunesse, inaltérable depuis le début du siècle!"⁷⁴ Two major retrospectives of her *œuvre* at the two major French national museums — the Musée du Louvre and the Musée National d'Art Moderne, —

⁷⁰ Herschel B Chipp, "Orphism and Color Theory," *The Art Bulletin* 40, no. 1 (1958): 55-63, doi:10.2307/3047747.

⁷¹ Galleria civica d'arte moderna, and Musée des beaux-arts (Lyon, France). *Robert E Sonia Delaunay* (Torino: Galleria civica d'arte moderna, 1960 and Lyon: Musée des beaux-arts, 1960); Rose Fried Gallery (New York, N.Y.). *Sonia Delaunay* (New York: Gallery, 1955).

⁷² Madsen, *Sonia Delaunay*, 320.

⁷³ "Wealth of Sonia Delaunay's work can be measured... but it has not reached its peak until the last fifteen years, with the triumphant assertion of the coloured rhythm based on the order of a sensitive and moving geometrical abstraction" in R.V. Gindertael, "Les gouaches de Sonia Delaunay," *XXe siècle*, no. 31, (December 1968): 73 [my translation].

⁷⁴ "Sonia Delaunay knew how to keep the freshness intact of her talent and enthusiasm. Admirable youth, inalterable since the beginning of the century!" in Gindertael, "Les gouaches de Sonia," 74 [my translation].

payed tribute to her career.⁷⁵ The latter exhibition, however, marked a slight shift in Sonia's reception, as it emphasized the significance of Sonia's work in founding Orphism together with Robert: "cette rétrospective a mis d'abord en évidence l'importance de la part prise par l'épouse aux recherches communes du couple Delaunay."⁷⁶ The 1960s established the equal recognition for Sonia Delaunay's artistic merit as for her husband.

The peak of Sonia Delaunay's career was limited compared to Robert's, because of her civil status, a predetermined "feminizing" vocabulary to discuss her work, and the recurrence of earlier patterns regarding her ethnicity and gender. Sonia's status as the wife of an artist (even though he was dead), dictated that she was supposed to secure her husband's legacy, even through the diminishment of her own work: "Avec une admirable modestie, Sonia Delaunay s'est constamment effacée derrière l'œuvre qu'elle a si bien servie de son mari trop tôt disparu."⁷⁷ Sonia's sacrifice was not viewed as something admirable, or left to choice. In the 1960s it was predetermined that as a wife she would 'serve' her husband and his legacy. Her civil status always associated her with Robert's name: "Dans l'histoire de l'art le nom de Sonia Delaunay restera lié à celui de son mari Robert Delaunay, intimement, comme furent unies durant une trentaine d'années leurs deux existences et leurs recherches artistiques."⁷⁸ The author claimed that this association was caused by artistic and romantic unity over a prolonged period. However, in the historiography on Robert, there was no constant connection to his wife, even though he was with her for thirty

⁷⁵ Musée du Louvre (Paris), and Jean Cassou. *Sonia et Robert Delaunay (Février-Avril 1964)* (Paris: Ministère d'État Affaires culturelles, 1964); Delaunay, Sonia, and Musée national d'art moderne (France). *Rétrospective Sonia Delaunay: Musée National D'art Moderne, Paris 1967-1968* (Paris: Ministère d'Etat Affaires Culturelles, Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1967).

⁷⁶ "... this retrospective first brought to the forefront the evidence of the importance of the wife's role in the process of common research of the Delaunay's as a couple" in Gindertael, "Les gouaches de Sonia," 78 [my translation].

⁷⁷ "With a laudable modesty, Sonia devalued her art behind the works of her late husband, that she so well served" in Jacques Lassaigue, "Gouaches de Sonia Delaunay," *XXe siècle*, no 19 (June 1962): 150 [my translation].

⁷⁸ "In the history of art the name of Sonia Delaunay will remain linked to that of her husband Robert Delaunay as they were closely united for thirty years of their two lives and their artistic researches" in Gindertael, "Les gouaches de Sonia," 76 [my translation].

years. Thus, the true reason for Sonia's connection with her husband was her gender and her civil status as a wife. The limits imposed upon her by virtue of her civil status were not experienced by other independent unmarried female artists or even married male artists in the 1960s. For example, Jean Arp's dedication to securing his wife's, Sophie Tauber-Arp's, legacy was viewed by the critics as something extraordinary,⁷⁹ while Sonia's attempts were viewed as normal, due to her gender and her status of a widow.

In the 1960s, the application of pre-determined vocabulary to Sonia's art became another limitation that overshadowed materials published about her. The adjectives used to describe her work matched the qualities always attributed to females because of biological determinism. For instance, the vocabulary used throughout Jacques Lassaingne's 1962 article tried to fit Sonia into the category of female painters by imbuing her work with feminine qualities such as "modestie," "fervente," "sensible."⁸⁰ Even though the author recognized that both Robert and Sonia created Orphism; he did not use the same 'feminizing' vocabulary to describe Robert's work. Robert's work was characterized by contrasting adjectives: "dynamique," "en mouvement," "anti-conformisme." Another author, Jacques Damase, emphasized the binary qualities of Robert and Sonia's work by highlighting her dependence on intuition in her artistic process, as opposed to Robert's reliance on intellect and theory:

N'avoue-t-elle pas à propos de ces études de lumières de 1913: "je ne me rends pas compte de comment je les ai faites... Ces ondulations, ces arlequins, ces rythmes sans fin dont on ignore les origines profondes touchent aux grands mouvements mystérieux de l'humanité comme ces signes qu'on relève sur les monuments mégalithiques."⁸¹

⁷⁹ Renée Riese Hubert, "Sophie Taeuber and Hans Arp: A Community of Two," *Art Journal* 52, no. 4 (1993): 25, doi:10.2307/777621.

⁸⁰ Lassaingne, "Gouaches de Sonia," 150.

⁸¹ "Doesn't she confess about those light studies of 1913: 'I don't realize how I made them...' The deep origins of these problems are unknown, but they affect the great mysterious movements of mankind like those signs that are found on megalithic monuments" in Jacques Damase, "Sonia Delaunay: 60 ans de recherches at d'innovations," *XXe siècle*, no 29 (December 1967): 108 [my translation].

This choice of vocabulary did not completely forego her artistic merit, which was highly praised in these articles, but the language used in them subsumed her art to “female qualities.”

The reception of Sonia Delaunay’s art in the 1960s also witnessed the return of older patterns from the 1920s, mostly created or overemphasized by her husband. Sonia’s dedication in the 1950s to securing his legacy gave Robert’s voice more credibility than her own. All of Robert’s previous statements were taken at face value in the 1960s. Using Robert’s arguments on Sonia’s art and his postmortem authority, scholars gave second life to the older patterns of Orientalism and ethnic bias. For example, Sonia Delaunay’s sense of color is again attributed to her ethnicity by R.V Gindertael who disregards her artistic education in Paris in favor of her inherent sense of color: “Certainement Sonia Delaunay portait la couleur dans son cœur depuis son enfance ukrainienne, bien avant d'avoir découvert à Paris dans les œuvres de Gauguin et de Van Gogh les pouvoirs des couleurs.”⁸² In the 1960s Sonia Delaunay’s ethnicity not only undermined her artistic merit and innovativeness, but it also became a way of objectifying Sonia by casting her as an Other to French art. For example, Robert Delaunay introduced a series of contrasts like East and West, barbaric and academic, primitive and complicated, that in his view allowed Sonia to challenge academic painting and constituted her contribution to their Orphic collaboration:

Moyens anciens de s'exprimer dans le sens que cela ne se dégage pas d'un aspect primitif des moyens connus expression un peu barbare, un peu caricatural de ses portraits qui fait contraste à l'époque avec la platitude académique et apporte un certain sel à l'art ambiant français.⁸³

⁸² “Certainly Sonia Delaunay was wearing the color in her heart since her Ukrainian childhood, long before discovering in Paris in the works of Gauguin and Van Gogh” in R.V. Gindertael, “Sonia Delaunay et la poésie pure des couleurs,” *XXe siècle*, no 21 (May 1963): 41-42 [my translation].

⁸³ “Ancient means of expressions, that do not come from a primitive aspect steaming from known means of representation. The somewhat barbaric and caricature expression of her [Sonia Delaunay’s] portraits contrasts with the academic consensus of the times, and brings a certain flavor to contemporary French art” in Gindertael, “Sonia Delaunay,” 42 [my translation].

Here Robert argued that “Primitive” art challenges academic art by providing alternative methods of representation and seeing, stimulating the development of avant-garde. In this way he objectified his wife and diminished her role from active creator of Orphism to passive muse, comparing her role in inspiring him with the role of many anonymous females of non-European descent “who were more often in Meyer Schapiro’s words, art’s ‘object-matter’ than its makers,”⁸⁴ to quote Ann Gibson. The 1960s marked the division of Sonia Delaunay’s identity into a series of categories, like “wife,” “woman,” “female artist,” and “Russian.” This limited her reception to the borders and constraints of each of these categories in the 1960s, subjugating her own identity to those categories.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Ann Gibson, “Fourteen: Avant-garde,” in *Critical Terms for Art History*, eds. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff, 2nd ed, (The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2003), 202.

⁸⁵Richard Meyer, “Twenty Four: Identity,” in *Critical Terms for Art History*, eds. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff, 2nd ed., (The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2003), 356.

3. Chapter II: I'm an artist

- David Seidner: When you married Robert, you called yourself 'Sonia Delaunay Terk.' Is it because you consider yourself a feminist?

- Sonia Delaunay: No! I despise the word! Once I even refused to be president of a women's group... I refused because art is universal, outside of any classification. I never thought of myself as a woman in any conscious way. I'm an artist.⁸⁶

The assimilation of categories in which Sonia Delaunay's art is viewed during the 1960s explains why in the 1970s Sonia Delaunay publicly rejected her reception or promotion as a 'female artist' as put forth by the first wave of feminism. Initiated by Linda Nochlin's article "Why Have There Been No Great Women artists?" of 1971, the first wave of feminist studies revealed that female artists were ignored by art institutions and denied access to art education.⁸⁷ This focus on the neglected and disadvantaged category of "female artist" gave birth to the redefinition of the term and to numerous art exhibitions focused on identifying women makers. Sonia Delaunay had already been relegated to the marginal categories of gender, ethnicity, religion, and female artist in her reception until the 1960s and now, in the 1970s and 1980s, she refused to inhabit another identity category, that of women artists.⁸⁸ Therefore, not surprisingly Sonia Delaunay "always refused to exhibit at shows reserved for women. She considered her painting to be anything but feminine."⁸⁹ Her denial to participate in exhibitions of female artists

⁸⁶ David Seidner and Sonia Delaunay, "Sonia Delaunay," *BOMB* 1, no. 2 (1982): 20 [Interview].

⁸⁷ Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women artists?" in *Women, Art, and Power: And Other Essays*, Icon Editions (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 145-177 [Originally published in 1971].

⁸⁸ Meyer, "Twenty Four: Identity," 352.

⁸⁹ Madsen, *Sonia Delaunay*, 436.

was not a denial of her gender or her art. Instead, it highlights the insufficiency of the first wave of feminism's term "woman artist" to do justice to her practice.⁹⁰

First wave feminist scholars, like Linda Nochlin and Anna Sutherland introduced the concepts of essentialism and biological determinism which became the core concepts on which the term 'women artists' was formed.⁹¹ The first concept, essentialism, means that all females and males have two opposite sets of qualities inherent to their nature or essence, while the latter concept, biological determinism, means that one's body determines one's destiny, one's qualities and one's experience.⁹² Thus, according to Nochlin, all female artists have the same experience in and of the art world, the same struggles and the same values, by distinction to male experience and values. This contrast is experienced by the use of binary concepts and their vocabulary, like nature versus culture, intuition versus intellect, passion versus thought. Sonia Delaunay experienced this contradistinction to her male colleagues because of her 'essential' female qualities, maintains this position. For instance, in his article Bernard Dorival elevates Sonia's art above Mondrian's because of her ability to draw from such a small amount of forms. Dorival claims that the reason for this supremacy is embodied in Sonia's Otherness as a woman and in her essential female qualities, that Mondrian, being male, does not have:

Il ne l'a, en tout cas, jamais fait avec cette aisance, ce naturel, je dirais presque cette apparente désinvolture : privilège, peut-être, des femmes, par lequel l'art de Sonia Delaunay, si mâle à tant d'égards, conserve un charme, une tendresse, un sourire qui font évidemment défaut à celui du puritain néerlandais.⁹³

⁹⁰ Meyer, "Twenty Four: Identity," 347-348.

⁹¹ Michael Haat and Charlotte Klonk, "Feminism," in *Art History: A Critical Introduction to Its Terms* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 145-174.

⁹² Haat and Klonk, "Feminism," 148.

⁹³ "In any case, he (Mondrian) has never done so with this ease, this naturalness, I would almost say this apparent flippancy: a privilege, perhaps, of women, due to which the art of Sonia Delaunay, so male in so many ways, retains a charm, a tenderness, a smile that is obviously lacking in the works of the Dutch puritan" in Dorival, Bernard Dorival, "Les œuvres récentes de Sonia Delaunay," *XX siècle*, Nouvelle série, no. 36 (1971), Panorama 71, part 1, 50 [my translation].

The concepts of essentialism and biological determinism are embraced by scholars not only by contrasting female and male artists, but also by promoting the difference in male and female artists' choice of media and subject. For example, the first wave of feminism promotes traditionally female decorative art and female subject matter. Thus, in the 1970s, Sonia Delaunay's work in other media attracts more attention than does her easel work. This is evident, for example, in Alice Baber's article which examines only Sonia's decorative work (costumes for theater and ballet, carpets, dresses and cars) and does not include a single illustration of her paintings.⁹⁴ The application of the term 'female artist' to Sonia Delaunay decreased her value as a painter, as in the context of the 1970s this term had a much less powerful status than the term 'male genius.'⁹⁵ Therefore, sometimes male scholars who write the first books on Sonia Delaunay, like Jacques Damase and Arthur Cohen, try to intellectualize her work by distinguishing her work from the typical female artist, elevating her status in this way.⁹⁶

It is no wonder that Sonia Delaunay herself rejects the status of a female painter or the division of artists into female and male: "When *Combat*, the newspaper founded by Albert Camus, asked Sonia what she thought of women painters, she said, 'I don't see any difference. There are good and bad painters, like among the men.'"⁹⁷ This biased position is viewed by feminist scholars as a concealed form of female discrimination through the alleged rejection of historical forms of discrimination, alienation, and the integration of the rules of male dominance. However, Sonia Delaunay emphasizes here not the rejection of feminism, but an

⁹⁴ Alice Baber, "Sonia Delaunay," *Craft Horizons* 33, no. 6 (1973): 33-39.

⁹⁵ Meyer, "Twenty Four: Identity," 356.

⁹⁶ Damase, *Sonia Delaunay*; Sherry Buckberrough, "Review of Arthur Cohen's book "Sonia Delaunay" (1975)," *Woman's Art Journal* 11, no. 1 (1990): 39-4, doi:10.2307/1358386.

⁹⁷ Madsen, *Sonia Delaunay*, 437.

awareness of its limitations as a category. Sonia is conscious that she embodies these categories of gender, race, religion and sexuality, but she also wants to exceed those terms and categories: “Even at those moments when individuals openly embrace a particular form of identity, they may also experience a countervailing desire to be seen as something else or something more.”⁹⁸

Unfortunately, Sonia Delaunay died in 1979 and did not witness how much her reception would change during the second wave of feminist art historians. In the 1980s, after Sonia Delaunay’s death, the second wave of feminist art history emerged. It seemed like the second wave ‘eavesdropped’ on Sonia Delaunay’s criticism of the first wave. It transformed the understanding of sex and gender, dividing the two into biological and social categories. Influenced by Foucault’s idea that any term is constructed within a discourse, second-wave feminists stated that gender is socially constructed, while sex is biological. This theory discredits biological determinism as introduced by the first wave of feminist studies. Also, it affirms that gender is not a natural category. Thus, if gender is constructed by society, then gender is differently constructed within different societies and moments in time. In this way, second-wave feminist art historians bring the first wave’s idea of the unified, coherent identity of a female artist to an end. They criticize the first wave’s universalization of female identity and experience, which in their opinion only confirmed the male belief of a female Other: “As a position, therefore, and not an identity, a fiction produced within that formation, femininity may be something of which its defining Other, masculinity, speaks, dreams, fantasizes.”⁹⁹ First wave

⁹⁸ Meyer, “Twenty Four: Identity,” 356.

⁹⁹ Griselda Pollock, “Feminist Interventions in the Histories of Art: An Introduction,” in *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism, and Histories of Art* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), 8.

feminism did not challenge patriarchal domination throughout the centuries, instead supporting it through maintaining “a certain Eurocentric masculinist conception of art and artist.”¹⁰⁰

As an alternative, second-wave feminist art historians advocate for the existence of diverse and multiple identities of females depending on ethnic, racial, cultural, social, economic, sexual and religious factors:

To be able to understand the specificity of a feminine (classed and raced) position is not to attribute a gendered perspective to the artist because she was a woman, but to read the painting from the simultaneously social, representational and psychic spatialities out of which it was fashioned as painting.¹⁰¹

The second-wave feminist art historians start viewing Sonia Delaunay’s work not only as the work of a woman but also in function of her culture and class, her social and economic standing. Sonia Delaunay’s merit is no longer locked within the limited categories of female art, femininity, nationality, religion and craft, and is viewed as a complex system of interconnections, expanding the understanding of her art beyond those categories. This is achieved by deconstructing the dichotomies introduced by the first wave of feminist art historians. Second-wave art historians do not try to compare and contrast male and female, fine art and craft, sophistication and simplicity, theory and intuition. As an alternative, they establish a new framework which destroys the hierarchies of art-forms, treating art as a natural continuation of a life.¹⁰² As there is no dichotomy of male and female, the creative force of previously male genius becomes gender-neutral.

Unfortunately, the change in the reception of Sonia Delaunay’s work took place only in the theoretical discourse of art history, while its practical implementation in museums’ acquisition policy and exhibition programs stalled for two more decades. In the 1980s collections

¹⁰⁰ Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism, and Histories of Art* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), XX.

¹⁰¹ Pollock, *Vision and Difference*, XXXVI.

¹⁰² Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany*, 1st ed., Icon Editions (New York: Harper & Row, 1982).

of French museums were already formed, and their representation of modern art history omitted the contributions of feminist art historians.¹⁰³ Instead, museums continued to adhere to a traditional definition of ‘fine art’ when making key decisions in acquiring and exhibiting Sonia Delaunay’s work. As a result, most things that were transformed in the perception of Sonia Delaunay happened mostly in the academic literature, but not in museum practice.

Even when it became impossible to ignore the ideas put forth by the second wave of feminism in the academic field, many art historians continued to use previous dichotomies, old patterns, and methods when writing about Sonia Delaunay’s work. This slowed down new, revolutionary readings of Sonia Delaunay’s work, making the patterns established during her life almost dogmatically influential. Some art historians writing on Sonia Delaunay in the 1980s completely ignored anything that the first and the second wave did to transform her promotion and reception. It followed that Sonia Delaunay’s merit was still sometimes undermined, and when she was admitted into exhibitions, collections or publications, her value was still derived from the recognition conferred on her by her first or second husband, or by her nationality, or by the ‘essential qualities’ of her gender. As a result, the critical writings about her in the 1980s are sometimes progressive but more often biased, ignorant and outdated. Despite this divergence in approach, the effect of 1980s writings would prove crucial in establishing the current reception, promotion and related museum practices in exhibiting her work. Its impact, however, would only be felt in the late 2010s.

One of the pioneering aspects of the second wave of feminist studies on Sonia Delaunay was examining the context in which she was born, raised, married, living and working.

¹⁰³ Jordanna Bailkin, “Picturing Feminism, Selling Liberalism: The Case of the Disappearing Holbein,” in *Museum Studies: An Anthology of Contexts*, by Bettina Messias Carbonnel (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2004), 260-272; Griselda Pollock, “Art Criticism and the Problem of the Non-Modernism Story of Modern Art,” in *Sonia Delaunay* (London: Tate Publishing, 2014), 218-242 [exhibition catalogue].

Instead of generalizing the effects of her context by relying on cultural, ethnic and social stereotypes, scholars looked at specific elements of context. Griselda Pollock began this by investigating Sonia Delaunay's conscious decision to stay in the shadow of her husband by looking at the social context of the 20th century, as well as Sonia's Jewish and Russian identities. In this way, Pollock follows through with the principle that "women's studies are not just about women — but about the social systems and ideological schemata which sustain the domination of men over women within the other mutually inflecting regimes of power in the world, namely those of class and those of race."¹⁰⁴ Pollock claims that in 20th-century France it was expected of a woman that she not rival her husband, to protect his self-esteem and ego.¹⁰⁵ The Jewish tradition states that "women should work to support scholarly men."¹⁰⁶ The author also insists that it was an ordinary Russian practice for women-artists not to challenge their men (husbands, fathers, brothers) by working artistically only in daily life, such as in the domestic sphere of the decorative arts.¹⁰⁷ In sum, Pollock provides a deeper understanding of Sonia Delaunay's work and her current position in the historiography as a "shadow of her husband" by providing reasons derived from her multiple identities.

Certain male art historians paid detailed attention to the context of her work and the societal factors that 'generated' her identity. For example, Jean-François Thibault places Sonia Delaunay's work in the Russian context of the avant-garde, and of Russian artists in France, putting an end to a previous pattern of isolating Sonia Delaunay's work by reducing it to the continuation of a 'Russian peasant tradition' to emphasize her foreignness and 'otherness.'¹⁰⁸ This attempt would

¹⁰⁴ Pollock, "Feminist Interventions," 1.

¹⁰⁵ Pollock, "Art Criticism," 220.

¹⁰⁶ Pollock, 220.

¹⁰⁷ Pollock, 222.

¹⁰⁸ Jean-Francois Thibault, "Lettre Du Président Chronique D'un été," *Feuille De Routes*, no. 10 (1983): I-VIII.

be further pursued by Axel Madsen in his book *Sonia Delaunay: Artist of the Lost Generation*.¹⁰⁹ In this biography of Sonia Delaunay as told by her son, Charles Delaunay, Madsen examines Delaunay's work from multiple cultural and social perspectives without generalizing, constructing what second-wave feminism calls "generations and geographies in the visual arts."¹¹⁰ Both Madsen and Thibault show how limited it is to perceive Sonia Delaunay only as a French or Russian painter. Thibault destroys the pattern of attributing her sense of color to her nationality by revealing the diversity of other Russian avant-garde artists' œuvres.¹¹¹ For instance, he explores the social and cultural conditions of Russian female artists in Paris and the position of a female avant-garde painter in Russia. Madsen also destroys the pattern of attributing her sense of color or love of the decorative arts to her nationality by revealing Sonia's ambiguous relationship with Russia, her Russian family and her heritage.¹¹² Alternatively, they propose to study "the totality of social relations which form the conditions of the production and consumption of objects designated in that process as art,"¹¹³ further pursuing the idea of the existence of multiple agencies of Sonia Delaunay.

If second-wave feminists destroyed the generalizations and dichotomies introduced by first-wave feminists, eventually they also dismantled the ideas of male genius and of the hierarchy of the arts. The decorative works made by Sonia Delaunay achieved a new status — not as an expression of female art tested in terms of female art, but as a fully-fledged logical continuation of her practice, tested on the same terms as her easel painting. Margit Rowell was the first academic to confirm this reciprocal relationship between Sonia's work in the applied and fine arts, and to

¹⁰⁹ Madsen, *Sonia Delaunay*.

¹¹⁰ Pollock, *Vision and Difference*, XXIX.

¹¹¹ Pollock, XXIX.

¹¹² Axel Madsen, "Chapter 14: Robert," in *Sonia Delaunay: Artist of the Lost Generation* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1989), 120-146.

¹¹³ Pollock, "Feminist Interventions," 5.

admit her creative force as a gender-neutral genius. In her 1980 article, Rowell recognizes the creative power of Sonia Delaunay: “I believe she was as inventive an artist as he.”¹¹⁴ Rowell does not compare or contrast Sonia Delaunay to the idea of the male genius, but allows her to be an autonomous producer of culture and meaning.¹¹⁵ Also, Rowell annuls the distinction between craft and high art by dedicating equal attention to both of them, instead of focusing only on craft. Then, she explains how the applied arts led Sonia to transition to abstraction and to experiment with color:

Thus Sonia’s work in the decorative arts provided her with a mental and practical understanding of abstraction. It liberated her colour; it nurtured her sense of rhythmic composition. These she extended simultaneously to the syntax of pure painting, developing these premises courageously and single-mindedly throughout her lifetime.¹¹⁶

However, afterwards, she does not forget about the reciprocity of this relationship and speaks of how easel paintings opened alternative possibilities for her idea of the female body in her textile designs.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴Margit Rowell, “In Celebration of Sonia Delaunay,” *Women Artists News* 5, no. 9 (1980), 2.

¹¹⁵Pollock, “Feminist Interventions,” 23.

¹¹⁶Rowell, “In Celebration,” 2.

¹¹⁷Rowell, 19.

Evaluating Sonia Delaunay’s work in the decorative and fine arts on the same terms would be perpetuated by Elizabeth Morano. Her book *Sonia Delaunay: Art into Fashion* relates Sonia Delaunay’s textiles to her art as a whole. The author declares that “Sonia Delaunay’s radical designs will thus coerce art, fashion and life into a single bold partnership; clothes were, at last, to be given the power and self-assurance of paintings.”¹¹⁸ Morano repeats something that Sonia Delaunay herself advocated all of her life — that there is no distinction between life and art — an aspect largely



Figure 8: *Sonia Delaunay avec deux amis dans l'atelier de Robert Delaunay* (17,7 x 23,4 cm, Bibliothèque nationale de France)

ignored in Sonia Delaunay studies until the 1980s. With the inclusion of over two hundred paintings, “gouaches, prints, fabrics, bookbindings, ceramics, theatre, costume and interior design” in the Sonia Delaunay retrospective at Albright-Knox Gallery in 1981, we reached a point of no return.¹¹⁹ Including works in various media created over eight decades allowed the public, and the discipline of art history, to realize that the hierarchy of arts could not be applied to understanding Sonia’s works (figure 8).¹²⁰ Also, it was impossible to ignore this curatorial destruction of the hierarchy of art after the exhibition travelled to the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh, The Museum

¹¹⁸ Morano, *Sonia Delaunay*, 8.

¹¹⁹ Courtney Graham Donnell, “Sonia Delaunay: A Retrospective,” *Bulletin of the Art Institute of Chicago* (1973-1982) 75, no. 1 (1981): 7.

¹²⁰ “Sonia Delaunay avec deux amis dans l'atelier de Robert Delaunay,” 1924. Photograph. Source: Bibliothèque nationale de France, <https://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb403247020>.

of Fine Arts in Houston, The High Museum of Art in Atlanta, The Grey Art Gallery and Study Center at New York University, the Art Institute of Chicago and the Musée d'art contemporain in Montreal.¹²¹ As a result, Sonia Delaunay's work in the applied arts became viewed as an essential part of her practice, not a distraction from, or a distortion of, 'high art,' as was the case from the 1920s. to the 1960s. Nor was it possible to present it as the dominant part of her "female practice" as it was in the 1970s.

These progressive ideas in establishing a novel way of understanding Sonia Delaunay's art went on a long journey before being implemented in museum practices. The support and exposure that her multi-media retrospective at the Albright-Knox Gallery gave to a shift in the discipline of

feminist art history is an exception rather than a commonly accepted practice, however. In the 1980s, theoretical discussions of Sonia Delaunay's work in the discipline of art history outpaced museum and gallery practice, as evidenced by exhibition and acquisition policies. For example, the 1985 exhibition of her and her husband's work at the Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris opened with a self-

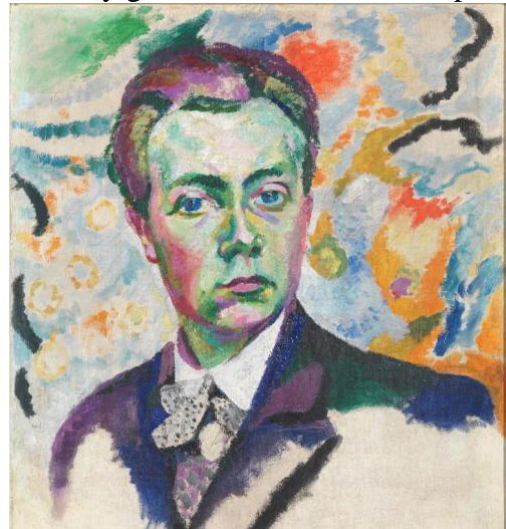


Figure 9: Robert Delaunay, *Autoportrait* (54 x 46 cm, Centre Pompidou)

portrait of Robert (figure 9),¹²² even though it was called "Robert et Sonia Delaunay. Le centenaire": "L'exposition s'ouvre sur l'autoportrait qui le montre, en 1985."¹²³ This reveals how the discipline of art history continued to present Sonia Delaunay's art in the 1980s and 1990s.

¹²¹ Sherry Buckberrough and Albright-Knox Gallery, *Sonia Delaunay: A Retrospective: Albright-Knox Gallery* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Albright-Knox Art Gallery, 1980), 7.

¹²² Robert Delaunay, "Autoportrait," 1905-1906. Oil on canvas. Source: Centre Pompidou, <https://www.centrepompidou.fr/fr/ressources/oeuvre/cej9Ej>.

¹²³ "The exhibition opens with a self-portrait that shows him in 1985" in Georges Charensol, "Les Beaux-Arts," *Revue Des Deux Mondes* (1985): 184-89 [my translation].

Sonia Delaunay was credited as being a co-creator of Orphism with the creative power of a female genius, but in museum practice, her work was still subjugated to her husband's. Museums and galleries did not risk buying Sonia Delaunay's work in the decorative arts, preferring to 'play it safe' by purchasing only those works defined as fine art. For instance, the progressive retrospective at Albright-Knox mentioned earlier exhibited more than two hundred works in different media but bought only nineteen of them.¹²⁴ Eighteen of these were paintings.¹²⁵ In her 1979 article, Susan P. Compton reveals that the Tate Gallery attempted to purchase Sonia Delaunay's illustration for Blaise Cendrars' "La prose du Transsibérien et de la Petite Jehanne de France" (figure 3).¹²⁶ However, the acquisition was unsuccessful "because it fell outside the normal category of a work of art."¹²⁷ Even though second-wave feminist art historians thought that we had already won the battle of (male) art versus (female) craft, it still needed to be confirmed by the acquisition policies of significant cultural institutions.

Unfortunately, it took two decades before museums started to acquire, and not just exhibit, Sonia's work beyond French and English definitions of fine art. Gaby Porter points out another reason the Tate Museum did not buy Sonia's illustration. The author explains that this single case reveals a bigger truth about museums of that time which do not represent "histories and experiences of women as fully and truthfully as those of men."¹²⁸ She further explains that feminist critics have not questioned museums practices regarding the "issues of representation, sexual difference, identity and cultural diversity."¹²⁹ This explains why despite the two waves of feminist

¹²⁴ Buckberrough and Albright-Knox Gallery, *Sonia Delaunay*.

¹²⁵ Buckberrough and Albright-Knox Gallery.

¹²⁶ Susan P. Compton, "Paris-Moscow 1900-1930, at the Centre Pompidou, Paris," *The Burlington Magazine* 121, no. 918 (1979): 603; Delaunay and Cendrars, "La Prose du Transsibérien," 1913.

¹²⁷ Compton, "Paris-Moscow."

¹²⁸ Gaby Porter, "A feminist perspective on Museums," in *Museum Studies: An Anthology of Contexts*, by Bettina Messias Carbonnel (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2004), 104.

¹²⁹ Porter, "A Feminist perspective," 104.

studies, the only major exhibitions of Sonia Delaunay's œuvre in museums in the 1980s were dedicated to her death, not to her rediscovery by feminist scholars. The absence of any individual exhibitions further confirms this state of affairs for thirty years after her postmortem retrospective in 1980. This also explains why still today the majority of Sonia Delaunay's work in major museum collections are paintings. For example, all of her fifty-two works at MoMA are paintings, either easel paintings or gouaches on paper. The outpacing of museum practices by feminist critique is still operative today, at least in the acquisition and exhibition policies of museums such as the Tate, the MoMA and the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum.

The progressive methodological changes in analyzing Sonia Delaunay's œuvre provided only half of what is needed to challenge previous patterns of interpretation. However, the other half abided by previous methodologies, resuming old patterns. Even when Sonia Delaunay's creative force was recognized, it was again attributed to her husband's, her nationality and her gender. When it became impossible in the 1980s not to speak about the reciprocal nature of Sonia and Robert's artistic exchange, several art historians insisted that Sonia's influence on Robert was simplistic, suggesting a dichotomy of male versus female. For example, Georges Charensol recognizes that Sonia Delaunay was a catalyst in Robert's Delaunay transition to Orphism and abstraction:

Que Robert Delaunay doive beaucoup et à Cézanne et aux cubistes de la première heure, c'est incontestable. Mais ni Picasso ni Braque n'allèrent, comme il le fit, jusqu'à rompre complètement avec la réalité objective. Ce pas décisif il le réalisa, j'en suis persuadé, sous l'influence de son épouse.¹³⁰

¹³⁰ "That Robert Delaunay owes a great deal to Cézanne and the early Cubists is indisputable. But neither Picasso nor Braque went so far as to break completely with objective reality, as he did. This decisive step he took, I am convinced, under the influence of his wife" in Charensol, "Les Beaux-Arts," 184-89 [my translation].

Charensol is confident that Sonia's contribution to Robert's departure from objective reality made him a precursor of Orphism, and an innovator. However, Charensol also states that this simplifies his work and sidetracked our understanding of his "remarquable oeuvre figurative":

L'impression que l'on rapporte de la confrontation de ses œuvres majeures, c'est qu'il était fait pour interpréter de façon très personnelle le réel et non pour le récuser en inventant des formes géométriques qui, sans doute, font de lui un précurseur, mais qui m'apparaissent simplistes comparées à sa remarquable œuvre figurative. On ne s'étonnera donc pas si je néglige aujourd'hui la peinture de Sonia pour regarder surtout celle de Robert.¹³¹

On the one hand, Charensol embraces the idea of gender-neutral genius, as suggested by the second wave of feminist art history, and, on the other hand, he rejects the presence even of the first wave of feminist art history, deciding to neglect a work of a female artist to explore the work of the male artist.

Certain art historians go even further in not speaking about Sonia Delaunay's work at all when speaking about her husband's work, echoing the 1920s reception of Sonia Delaunay as late as the 1980s. For instance, in an article on Robert Delaunay, Michael F. Zimmermann mentions Sonia Delaunay's name twice in thirty-one pages.¹³² Once he presents her as Robert's wife and the other time he mentions her while affirming Robert's position as a male genius and innovator:

Berichte Sonia Delaunay unterstreichen den experimentellen Charakter der Serie: Danach ging Robert - wie vorher Seurat, der als erster auf dem 'Simultankontrast' ein koloristisches System auf gebaut hatte - von der Beobachtung komplementärer 'Halos' um stark leuchtende Gegenstände aus.¹³³

¹³¹ "The impression one gets from the confrontation of his major works is that he was made to interpret reality in a very personal way and not to challenge it by inventing geometric forms which, no doubt, make him a precursor, but which seem simplistic to me compared to his remarkable figurative work. It is therefore not surprising if I neglect Sonia's painting today to look especially at Robert's painting" in Charensol, 184-89 [my translation].

¹³² Michael F. Zimmermann, "Delaunays 'Formes Circulaires' und Die Philosophie Henri Bergsons. Zur Methode Der Interpretation Abstrakter Kunst," *Wallraf-Richartz-Jahrbuch* 48/49 (1987): 335-64.

¹³³ "Reports by Sonia Delaunay underline the experimental character of the series: Afterwards Robert - like Seurat before him, who was the first to build up a coloristic system on the "simultaneous contrast"- proceeded from the observation of complementary "halos" around highly luminous objects" in Zimmerman "Delaunays," 335-64 [my translation].

Hence, Sonia Delaunay is not even recognized as a creator or a genius, but as a wife who affirms the greatness of her husband, a male genius. This position of the author makes one think of Sonia Delaunay's reception in the 1910s, revealing how deeply embodied this pattern became in the academic discourse and, perhaps too what a backlash against feminist art history has looked like.

Another pattern established in the 1920s that lived on in 1980s historiography was the attribution of Sonia's sense of color to her nationality. For example, in 1985, René Huyghe writes that the same dynamism and "lyrisme de l'énergie" present in her work *Electric Prisms*



(1914) (figure 10)¹³⁴ could be found "en Russie, d'où venait Sonia Delaunay et où l'influence du futurisme avait pénétré avec les conférences de Marinetti dès 1910."¹³⁵ The evocation of such old, biased patterns in the literature on Sonia Delaunay outweighs the gains of the first and second waves of feminist art history in rediscovering Sonia

Figure 10: Sonia Delaunay, *Prismes électriques* (250 x 250 cm, Musée National d'Art Moderne)

¹³⁴ Sonia Delaunay, "Prismes électriques," 1914. Oil on canvas. Source: Musée National d'Art Moderne, <https://www.mam.paris.fr/fr/expositions/exposition-sonia-delaunay>.

¹³⁵ "In Russia, where Sonia Delaunay came from and where the influence of Futurism had penetrated with Marinetti's lectures as early as 1910." in Rene Huyghe, "L'art, Revelateur de L'homme Moderne: L'aventure del'Energie," *Revue Des Deux Mondes* (1985): 565-80 [my translation].

Delaunay and her multiple identities.

The fact that half of the academic literature written on Sonia Delaunay in the 1980s cannot admit innovations of first and second-wave feminist art history, together with outdated museum practice, resulted in a delay of multilateral books or exhibitions of her diverse practices. As a result, modern art history had settled on a “role” for her, and museums started to acquire her works in other media only at the beginning of the twenty-first century. There was no place for new readings of Sonia Delaunay in the last decades of the twentieth century, as the old patterns of the 1910s-1970s were still operative. Even though it took a long time to challenge old patterns, the first and the second-wave feminist theories took the first step towards a new reception of Sonia Delaunay. Without them, feminist art history of the twenty-first century might not have recast Sonia Delaunay’s work in solo shows at the Tate Gallery and the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, and there might not have been any fundamentally new research on Sonia Delaunay.

4. Chapter III: Sara Stern

We were two moving forces. One made one thing and one made the other.¹³⁶

Since the 1990s, the work of Sonia Delaunay has received new attention from scholars, curators and museum directors. Thanks to the publication of articles in popular media and solo exhibitions in important institutions, her work is now recognized not only by scholars but also by the general public. This increased popularity is not due to renewed scientific interest, which began in the 1970s. It is instead an effect of a new discourse introduced by postfeminist scholars in the 1990s. It has offered a new perspective on the issues of gender, ethnicity, commercialism, religion, and the relationship between Robert and Sonia Delaunay. Without this fresh breath of postfeminism, the work of Sonia Delaunay might not have survived after her retrospective at the Albright-Knox Gallery in 1980 as there were no exhibitions of her work in major institutions in the 1980s. Postfeminism tried to solve the problems previously outlined in Chapter I and Chapter II and to offer new accounts of Sonia Delaunay's art and life. However, it did not offer solutions to the old-fashioned curatorial approaches to exhibiting the artist's work. Using a postfeminist framework, this chapter will attempt to propose new solutions for the exhibition of the works of Sonia Delaunay, to outline the main ideas of art historical discourse that changed the perception of Sonia and Robert Delaunay, and to analyze the artist's problematic portraiture in mass media.

Postfeminism appeared with a series of critiques to the first and second waves of feminist studies and was devoted to establishing categories, dichotomies and distinctions of gender. This

¹³⁶ Chadwick, "Living simultaneously," 40.

self-critique or self-reevaluation is indebted to certain postmodern ideas. One of its main tenets holds that a work of art does not have a fixed meaning, but multiple meanings created by viewers and discourse.¹³⁷ Postfeminism also suggests that “there are many discourses, not just one, and that there are many feminisms, not just one.”¹³⁸ As a result, the relationship between Sonia and Robert Delaunay was revised: it was no longer taken for granted what the roles of wife and husband were, but examined their marriage as a less regulated artistic alliance that had different dynamics at different times.

The postmodern notion of diversity of meanings and discourses confront feminism with the question of the stability and coherence of female “identity” and the category of womanhood. However, postfeminism goes further by questioning the homogeneity of women as a category and status within a patriarchal society. Postfeminism insists on the need to expand the categories of womanhood because those categories hold women captive rather than liberating them. Therefore, once feminism has a distinct definition of the term ‘women,’ it inevitably excludes a certain portion of the subjects that feminism itself claims to represent.¹³⁹ Judith Butler confirms this with the assertion that: “premature insistence on a stable subject of feminism, understood as a seamless category of women, inevitably produces multiple rejections of the category.”¹⁴⁰

Thus, postfeminism leaves the category of “woman” undefined, in order to be aware of the complexity and instability of any identity: “Within a language based on unambiguous signification,

¹³⁷ Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, “Introduction: The Expanding Discourse,” in *The Expanding Discourse : Feminism and Art History*, eds. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 1992), 52.

¹³⁸ Broude and Garrard, “Introduction,” 23.

¹³⁹ Judith Butler, “From Parody to Politics,” in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 181,

<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=70541&site=ehost-live>.

¹⁴⁰ Judith Butler, “Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire,” in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 7,

<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=70541&site=ehost-live>.

the female sex represents the indomitable and indeterminable.”¹⁴¹ In this sense, women are not ‘one’ but ‘several’ genders.¹⁴² However, the lack of identification of the actor, or agent, raises the question of taking political action in favor of an unidentified subject.¹⁴³ In political systems, it is necessary to define an actor before an action is taken to represent him or her.¹⁴⁴ Judith Butler, who opposes the idea of “the actor before the act,”¹⁴⁵ affirms that identity is constructed through that process; there is nor should be, therefore, subject before a political act. A political system cannot demand a fixed identification of women, since the “legal systems of power produce the subjects that represent them later.”¹⁴⁶ Subjecthood is constructed within a discourse. Instead, Butler introduces the idea that “woman herself is a concept in becoming, an ongoing construction that cannot rightly be said to begin or end.”¹⁴⁷ Politics and ideology make the concept of womanhood appear as ‘natural’ as does a definition of gender — both concepts are artificially constructed. According to Butler, both sex and gender are thus unnatural in the sense that both are constructed within a discourse: “If the unchangeable character of gender is disputed, these constructs called ‘gender’ are perhaps as culturally constructed as gender.”¹⁴⁸ Therefore, the system disguises political constructs as natural law.¹⁴⁹ According to Butler, an alternative approach to the term ‘woman’ would guarantee the emergence of new politics. In it, the term ‘woman’ is neither shaped nor manipulated by the ruling system itself.

Another critical approach of postmodernism influential for postfeminism and the reception of Sonia Delaunay is the destruction of the aura of Otherness concerning non-Western cultures

¹⁴¹ Butler, “Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire,” 7.

¹⁴² Butler, 14.

¹⁴³ Butler, “From Parody to Politics,” 181.

¹⁴⁴ Butler, 181.

¹⁴⁵ Butler, 181.

¹⁴⁶ Butler, “Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire,” 4.

¹⁴⁷ Butler, 43.

¹⁴⁸ Butler, 10.

¹⁴⁹ Butler, “From Parody to Politics,” 189.

and their coexistence with Western cultures. Craig Owens expressed this rapid change as rapid enlightenment: “Suddenly it becomes possible that there are only others, that we ourselves are an ‘other’ among others.”¹⁵⁰ The ethnicity of Sonia Delaunay is no longer the content or explanation of her style. With ethnic explanation, art historians could attribute Robert's style to his Frenchness. Indeed Sonia's ethnicity is analyzed as an instrument to establish a detrimental otherness.¹⁵¹ In this way, female art historians become aware of the diverse social positions of female artists and deconstruct the mechanisms of establishing female artists as artists, especially if they were married to male artists.¹⁵² As a result, the complex system of exchange within artist-couples is recognized, which arouses deep interest among scholars, as evidenced by the increased number of books written about a variety of artistic relationships and the exchange of creative ideas.

Even if postfeminism uses the critical instruments of postmodernism, it does so with a high awareness of the disadvantages of postmodernism, and prevents feminism from being subsumed by postmodernism.¹⁵³ Thus, postfeminist art historians recognize that postmodernism questions the canon of quality and artistic genius “in order to avoid opening the existing canon to women and minorities.”¹⁵⁴ Postfeminism appropriates ideas supported by postmodern approaches, but also reacts in opposition to some aspects and keeps a “foot in both camps” approach.¹⁵⁵ For example, attention has been drawn to female agency in response to “the postmodern effort to absorb and

¹⁵⁰ Craig Owens, “The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism,” in *The Expanding Discourse : Feminism and Art History*, eds. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 1992), 854.

¹⁵¹ Sherry Buckberrough, “Being Russian in Paris,” in *Sonia Delaunay* (London: Tate Publishing, 2014), 44-70.

¹⁵² Broude and Garrard, “Introduction,” 43.

¹⁵³ Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, “Introduction: Reclaiming Female Agency,” in *Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History After Postmodernism*, eds. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 21.

¹⁵⁴ Broude and Garrard, “Introduction: Reclaiming,” 20.

¹⁵⁵ Broude and Garrard, 23.

neutralize feminism by welcoming its fragmentation into several ‘others.’ ”¹⁵⁶ In most of the art historical literature, women are portrayed as having neither subjectivity nor agency.¹⁵⁷

Nevertheless, this has recently been refuted by more recent scholarship, which argues that female action has always influenced culture, either through assimilation or resistance to it.¹⁵⁸ This scholarship has also argued that new forms of exercising agency, such as patronage, spectatorship, consumerism “contributed to the creation of the work.”¹⁵⁹ In this light, the work of Sonia Delaunay in the textile and fashion industry has been reassessed by art historians from a perspective that granted women power and subjectivity in the way they beautify their bodies and how they exercise power as the driving force of consumerism. The artist's work is seen in a new light of the reverse politics of the gaze and the spectator, for it is now a female gaze that textile or costume is supposed to address.¹⁶⁰

New perspectives on Sonia and Robert Delaunay’s relationship has enabled art historians to investigate their “mutually enriching exchange” at different times in their marriage.¹⁶¹ As a result, many nuances are brought to light. For instance, art historians found that their artistic relationship changed from Robert’s jealousy to Sonia’s success in the fashion in the 1920s, and his accusations of her commercialism, to the mutual exchange of colors and motifs the late 1930s.¹⁶² Recent scholarship has also stopped tracking whether it was Robert or Sonia who innovated a certain concept, who took inspiration from whom, or how Sonia’s practices compare to Robert’s. Rather, postfeminist art history is focusing on their “collaboration” as a less regulated relationship,

¹⁵⁶ Broude and Garrard, 21.

¹⁵⁷ Broude and Garrard, 26.

¹⁵⁸ Broude and Garrard, 3.

¹⁵⁹ Broude and Garrard, 11.

¹⁶⁰ Broude and Garrard, 11.

¹⁶¹ Chadwick, “Living simultaneously,” 32.

¹⁶² Chadwick, 45-46.

free from social constraints.¹⁶³ In the era of postfeminism, Sonia Delaunay's description of their reciprocal influence has been accepted by the discipline: "We were two moving forces. One made one thing, and one made the other."¹⁶⁴ This new vantage point illustrates how essential Sonia and Robert's activities in different spheres were to their own individual practices, establishing a circle of ideas without end or beginning: "Just as the artistic connections of Simultaneous designs were deployed to enhance sales of fashions and textiles, so the modern woman clad in her Simultaneous outfit could be recruited as evidence of the avant-



Figure 11: Robert Delaunay, *Portrait of Tristan Tzara* (104,5 x 75 cm, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía)

gardism of 1920s Simultaneity."¹⁶⁵ The portraits of Robert Delaunay (figure 11)¹⁶⁶ are a good example of this simultaneous partnership; in them sitters wear scarves designed by Sonia Delaunay. What is more, their relationship has now been investigated in the light of the *Künstlerepaar*, a German term for a modern marriage of companions "in which, symbolically at least, certain rights and accomplishments of women were acknowledged."¹⁶⁷ This concept was familiar to Sonia and Robert Delaunay as their close friends, Claire and Yvan Goll, were engaged

¹⁶³ Bill Moggridge and Caroline Baumann, "Foreword," in *Colour Moves: Art and Fashion by Sonia Delaunay*, eds. Matilda McQuaid and Susan Brown (London: Thames & Hudson, 2011), 7.

¹⁶⁴ Chadwick, "Living simultaneously," 40.

¹⁶⁵ Tag Gronberg, "Sonia Delaunay: Fashioning the Modern Woman," *Women: A Cultural Review* 13, no.3 (2002): 279, doi:10.1080/0957404022000026423.

¹⁶⁶ Robert Delaunay, "Portrait of Tristan Tzara," 1923. Oil on paperboard. Source: Museo Reina Sofía, <https://www.museoreinasofia.es/en/collection/artwork/retrato-tristan-tzara-portrait-tristan-tzara>.

¹⁶⁷ Gronberg, "Sonia Delaunay," 277.

in a marriage of this type.¹⁶⁸ The framework of the *Künstlerepaar* provides an explanation of why Sonia Delaunay started producing textiles on a commercial basis; in the *Künstlerepaar*, a woman provides financial support to secure her husband's practice, creating in this way a marriage of equals.¹⁶⁹ Nevertheless, even in the framework of this model, the equality in the couple is barely achieved, because a woman takes all the financial responsibility in the couple, instead of equally sharing it with her husband. Accordingly, her designs became a way to become a *femme moderne* and to obtain a new woman's relative independence, equal to her husband.

The new, unconstrained, fluid framework within which to examine their artistic cooperation poses a new set of questions. Certain scholars now view Sonia and Robert Delaunay's art as identical and indistinguishable, taking away not only Sonia's but also Robert's subjectivity: "they were instrumental to each other, so much so that neither could be seen as a separate entity."¹⁷⁰ One solution to the problems posed by such an unfixed framework is that modernism itself is of unstable definition. Robert's and Sonia's visions of modernism could well have been different, despite a shared Orphic style and commitment to Simultaneity. One of the reasons for their different views of modernism might be their different journeys through modernism. Sonia Delaunay was initially inspired by Fauvism and Expressionism during her education in Karlsruhe, while Robert had always been in close relationship with Cubism.¹⁷¹ Later, when they both developed Orphism, they still had different visions of its future: Sonia saw it as a collaboration with Dadaism and Futurism, while Robert stayed faithful to Cubism. Despite the methodological difficulties in positing intention, we can say that Sonia and Robert wielded their subjectivity

¹⁶⁸ Gronberg, 276.

¹⁶⁹ Gronberg, 277.

¹⁷⁰ Petra Timmer, "Sonia Delaunay: Fashion and Fabric Designer," in *Colour Moves: Art and Fashion by Sonia Delaunay*, eds. Matilda McQuaid and Susan Brown (London: Thames & Hudson, 2011), 34.

¹⁷¹ Marilyn McCully, "Robert and Sonia Delaunay. Barcelona," *The Burlington Magazine* 143, no. 1175 (2001): 117–119, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/889193>.

differently. The differences in their modernist views, while vague, nonetheless provide important distinctions between their practices.

Postfeminist interest in subjectivity and agency shifted the discipline's focus from Sonia Delaunay's designs to her modern women's subjectivity. Hence, new ways of wielding female agency were discovered, such as agency through consumption, viewing, self-representation, and even driving, all of which were encapsulated in the artist's work both for prêt-à-porter and for the Ballets Russes. As postfeminism revised the idea of agency, an old dichotomy of active production and passive consumption was reassessed. Consumption is not a passive activity but instead an active tool for affecting a culture through one's consumeristic choices: "The emergence of a culture of consumption helped to shape new forms of subjectivity for women, whose intimate needs, desires, and perceptions of self were mediated by public representations of commodities and the gratifications that they promised."¹⁷² The representation of a woman in public became a mediator between her as an individual and society at large. Therefore, clothes as a form of bodily representation plays one of the most important roles in this non-verbal communication.¹⁷³ Buying a dress becomes an act of exercising power as a woman without breaking old societal norms because shopping was both a female task in the household and a necessity.¹⁷⁴ This power of consumption shaped production, so the modern female consumer defined modernity itself.¹⁷⁵ The owner of Selfridges confirmed that "it is the woman customer who is responsible (indirectly) for the taste and distinction of our merchandise."¹⁷⁶ Consumption allowed women to extend their

¹⁷² Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA:Harvard University Press, 1995), 62.

¹⁷³ Tom Slevin, "Sonia Delaunay's *Robe Simultanée*: Modernity, Fashion, and Transmediality," *Fashion Theory - Journal of Dress Body and Culture* 17, no. 1 (2013): 27–54, <https://doi.org/10.2752/175174113X13502904240695>.

¹⁷⁴ Felski, *The Gender of Modernity*.

¹⁷⁵ Gronberg, "Sonia Delaunay," 273.

¹⁷⁶ Mica Nava, "The Cosmopolitanism of Commerce and the Allure of Difference: Selfridges, the Russian Ballet and Tango, 1911-1914," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 1, no.2 (1998): 186.

subjectivity from the private realm to the public sphere.¹⁷⁷ The main places where a woman had agency as a viewer and as a consumer were fashion, the cinema, and the theatre. Therefore, Sonia Delaunay's work in and for these areas acquire new import in the light of new postfeminist meanings.

Sonia Delaunay's textile works reflect this desire of the *femme moderne* to change her self-representation and, through it, to claim her power. In her designs, the artist reflects the female customer's, and the viewer's, aspirations and also constructs them. This reciprocal



relationship of reflecting and shaping is most apparent in her ballet costumes for the Ballets Russes' "Cléopâtre" (figure 12).¹⁷⁸ Juliet Bellow suggests that during the Ballets Russes performances, this reciprocal female self-display took place both on stage and in the parterre (the majority of the Ballets Russes audience were female).¹⁷⁹ The audience is looking to the performers for inspiration and model of behavior. The audience is in turn being looked at by the performer, embodying a Russian idiom about

Figure 12: Sonia Delaunay, *Costume for Cléopâtre* in Ballets Russes production of *Cléopâtre* (size, Costume Council Fund of Los Angeles County Museum of Art)

going to the theatre "На других посмотреть"

¹⁷⁷ Felski, *The Gender of Modernity*, 61.

¹⁷⁸ Sonia Delaunay, "Costume for Cléopâtre in Ballets Russes production of Cléopâtre," 1918. Silk, sequins, mirror and beads, wool yarn, metallic thread braid, lamé. Source: LACMA, <https://collections.lacma.org/node/236410>.

¹⁷⁹ Juliet Bellow, "Fashioning Cléopâtre: Sonia Delaunay's New Woman," *Art Journal* 68, no. 2 (2009): 7, www.jstor.org/stable/25676480.

и себя показать.”¹⁸⁰ Sonia implemented this Russian proverb and the new ambiguous position of a woman as a subject and an object simultaneously into Cleopatra’s costume. The dress both attracts the viewer’s gaze due to its intricate lines and reflects that gaze through the use of a mirror. Being both a subject and object of sexual desire in the ballet’s narrative, Cleopatra becomes a role model for the new women who wants to claim agency.¹⁸¹ Therefore, it is suggested, females were encouraged to dress like powerful Ballets Russes characters to exercise power and agency.¹⁸² Sonia Delaunay’s dress, like Cleopatra, enabled women to communicate “a new, less constrained, more insubordinate femininity.”¹⁸³

The transition from the Leon Bakst costume for Cléopâtre in 1909 (figure 13)¹⁸⁴ to Sonia Delaunay’s costume of Cléopâtre in 1918 symbolically marks the historical shift from appealing to the male gaze to empowering the female gaze and founding female agency as a viewer. As the main viewer, a woman became the main reference point and consumer of advertisements and goods, taking the lead over from the male gaze. While a male artist created Bakst’s costume of Cléopâtre for male pleasure and a male



Figure 13: Léon Bakst, Costume sketch for Ida Rubinstein (Cléopâtre) in the Ballets Russes production of Cléopâtre (28cm x 21cm, Private collection of Nikita Lobanov-Rostovsky)

¹⁸⁰ Going out to a public event (i.e.theatre, opera, ball, reception, etc.) where one might observe everybody and be observed as well. A Russian idiom first mentioned in *Proverbs of the Russian People* (section Work-Idleness) by Vladimir Dal in 1853. Also, widely used by famous Russian writer, Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, in his private correspondence. Sonia Delaunay must have been familiar with Vladimir Dal’s vocabulary as any other well-educated woman from St. Petersburg at that time [my translation].

¹⁸¹ Bellow, “Fashioning Cléopâtre,” 21-22.

¹⁸² Bellow, 21-22.

¹⁸³ Nava, “The Cosmopolitanism,” 178.

¹⁸⁴ Léon Bakst, “Costume sketch for Ida Rubinstein (Cléopâtre) in the Ballets Russes production of Cléopâtre,” 1909. Pencil, watercolor. Source: Heritage Images, <https://www.heritage-images.com/preview/1154507>.

audience, Sonia Delaunay's costume (figure 12)¹⁸⁵ is created by a female artist and speaks to the female audiences.¹⁸⁶ Delaunay abandons the floral prints, revealing and almost transparent fabrics, Orientalizing elements that referenced harems, and the seductively curvy silhouette used by her predecessor.¹⁸⁷ Instead she liberates the woman from an erotic function by shifting attention away from the body and to the costume.¹⁸⁸ Rather than displaying a female body as an object for a male gaze, Sonia hides it under a myriad of colorful patches to reclaim female subjectivity: "Under the veil of the textile, the woman gathered her power. Like a serpent shedding its skin, she emerged renewed," argues Buckberrough.¹⁸⁹ As clothes were providing new forms of subjectivity for women, they also expressed the identity of the subject they enveloped. Sonia Delaunay's dresses and scarves help construct a new identity, that of the *femme moderne*: "Sonia creates, but what she creates is less a dress or a scarf than a new person."¹⁹⁰ Her designs reshape the body into a new form constructed according to a woman's desires as a subject and a viewer, instead of embodying male desires. The dress's new body is so drastically different from the actual female body that even Blaise Cendrars claimed, as I mentioned in my first chapter, that "sur la robe elle a un corps" (or "atop the dress, she has a body"). It follows that a constructed body becomes a tool of non-verbal communication. In this way, Delaunay's designs allow a woman to write her biography, if symbolically, and to express her position without words: "She wanted to push the inner self, the personality of the wearer, to the surface to make it visible, readable, as it interacted with colors

¹⁸⁵ Delaunay, "Costume for Cléopâtre," 1918.

¹⁸⁶ Bellow, "Fashioning Cléopâtre:," 8.

¹⁸⁷ Toswend, "On the dress she wears a (printed) body."

¹⁸⁸ Bellow, "Fashioning Cléopâtre," 19.

¹⁸⁹ Sherry Buckberrough, "Delaunay Design: Aesthetics, Immigration, and the New Woman," *Art Journal* 54, no. 1 (1995): 53, doi:10.2307/777507.

¹⁹⁰ Cristina Giorcelli, "Wearing the Body Over the Dress : Sonia Delaunay's Fashionable Clothes," in *Accessorizing the Body: Habits of Being*, eds. Paula Rabinovitz and Cristina Giorcelli (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 45, <https://doi.org/10.5749/minnesota/9780816675784.003.0005>.

and words.”¹⁹¹ Sonia Delaunay’s designs presented women with a freedom of silhouette, consumeristic choice, communication, and even movement. The freedom of physical movement further became available to women due to invention of the automobile. Sonia Delaunay’s active use of cars in her advertisement campaigns for the Atelier Simultané was one more way of reflecting and shaping dynamic modernity: “By the 1920s women were pictured behind the wheel, creating a visual image of female mobility and power, which became all the more colorful and dynamic through Delaunay’s creations.”¹⁹² All in all, Sonia Delaunay’s work in fashion contributed to the creation of modernity by giving women the freedom to represent, mirror, and keep up with the quick pace of modern life, giving them a chance not just to have a say in defining modernity, but to be its locomotive.

The importance of Sonia Delaunay’s heritage and prolific work in fashion is undeniable. However, renewed interest in her textiles contributed to creating a literature that disconnects Sonia’s fiber art from her easel paintings. It was further incorporated in the discourse by the display practices of the Cooper-Hewitt Museum, which in 2011 exhibited more than 300 fashion designs and illustrations by Sonia Delaunay, and only one easel painting.¹⁹³ Consequently, lots of literature turns a deaf ear to her easel works.¹⁹⁴ This fragmented attention to her work in one media at the Cooper-Hewitt also limits the discourse to twenty out of eighty years of her practice.¹⁹⁵ This focus summons Robert’s 1970s dichotomy as a painter and Sonia as the producer of luxury goods, again.¹⁹⁶ All of the drawbacks of putting the emphasis only on Sonia Delaunay’s

¹⁹¹ Giocelli, “Wearing the Body,” 40.

¹⁹² Matilda McQuaid, “Introduction,” in *Colour Moves: Art and Fashion by Sonia Delaunay*, eds. Matilda McQuaid and Susan Brown (London: Thames & Hudson, 2011), 13.

¹⁹³ Lance Esplund, “Art: Overdue but Underdone,” *Wall Street Journal* 6 (May 12, 2011): 6, <https://search-proquest-com.jcu.idm.oclc.org/docview/866010122>.

¹⁹⁴ Melanie Abrams, “Prints with Va-Va-Voom,” *Financial Times* 5 (March 25, 2011): 5, <https://search-proquest-com.jcu.idm.oclc.org/docview/858673146>.

¹⁹⁵ Esplund, “Art: Overdue but Underdone,” 6.

¹⁹⁶ Timmer, “Sonia Delaunay,” 34.

work in fashion were encapsulated in the 2011 Cooper-Hewitt exhibition. The press paid major attention to this exhibition; it was the first big solo show of Sonia Delaunay in a major institution in thirty years.¹⁹⁷ However, the media was misguided about Sonia Delaunay's œuvre due to exhibition's portrayal of Sonia as a fashion designer largely disregarding her easel works.¹⁹⁸ As a result, Sonia Delaunay's image in the media remains limited, fragmented, and inadequate.

Unfortunately, Sonia Delaunay's portrayal in the media even incorporates old patterns inherited from her reception between the 1910s and the 1970s, such as her commercialism (as opposed to artistic value), her feminine (as essentially opposed to masculine) role in her marriage, and her ethnicity or nationality (concerning her use of color, often to sustain an argument about her commercialism). This portrayal explains her switch to textiles as being "a choice born of necessity."¹⁹⁹ Furthermore, the popular press now often states that Sonia Delaunay's colors were "hot" so as to appeal to Latin American, Spanish, and other emerging markets.²⁰⁰ Her relationship with Robert is again too often reduced to fixed social roles, such as when we read:

He took the idealist fork — believing his *Windows*, 1912-13, paintings to be transparent to pure light and immediate vision — and she the materialist: At once more intuitive and more practical than her husband, she rechanneled her energies into designing fabrics, interiors, painted ceramics, and neon-light sculptures.²⁰¹

Such distortions are present in the general press due to their own function: the rapid exchange of information, and the desire to catch the reader's attention with provocative headings. However, it poses a real threat when periodicals such as *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, and *The Wall Street Journal* follow that path, reinforcing a distorted perception of her practice, one rooted in old, biased academic literature.

¹⁹⁷ Moggridge and Baumann, "Foreword," 9.

¹⁹⁸ Esplund, "Art: Overdue but Underdone," 6.

¹⁹⁹ Lisa Turvey, "Sonia Delaunay: Cooper-Hewitt, national design museum," *Artforum International*, vol. 49, no. 10 (2011): 403, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A259695059/LitRC?u=jcu_i&sid=LitRC&xid=bb4ba896.

²⁰⁰ Abrams, "Prints with Va-Va-Voom," 5.

²⁰¹ Turvey, "Sonia Delaunay," 403.

One of the first solutions offered to avoid such a distorted vision of Sonia Delaunay's œuvre is to include her more in general art history books, which can quickly provide a more holistic overview of her work and its varied media, as well as inducting her into the modernist canon. In this way, the standard reference for press articles might avoid perpetuating old patterns.

A second solution would be the much-needed organization of a well-rounded exhibition representative of her practice as a whole, at different times and in different media, in a major institution. This would generate enough publicity to help forge a new image of Sonia to the media, and to a variety of publics. This would require collaboration between academics, the press, and cultural institutions.

Interestingly, it is not only the press that still evokes old patterns and slows down the implementation of postmodernist and postfeminist perspectives in the perception of Sonia Delaunay's work. Museums and their practices of display also contribute to this issue. Major institutions either do not acquire Sonia Delaunay's work or, when they do, choose not to display them, or display them inappropriately. For instance, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art has not exhibited any of Sonia Delaunay's work in the last six years, despite the rarity of some of the works in its collection. LACMA owns a unique version of Sonia Delaunay's *Cléopâtre costume* (1918) (figure 12)²⁰² and one of the one hundred fifty editions of *La Prose du Transsibérien et de la petite Jehanne de France* (1913) (figure 3)²⁰³. By contrast, the New York MoMA does display Sonia Delaunay's work. Its display, however, evokes an old pattern: Robert Delaunay represents high art and Sonia Delaunay, low art. The MoMA always exhibits Robert's work *Simultaneous*

²⁰² Delaunay, "Costume for Cléopâtre," 1918.

²⁰³ Delaunay and Cendrars, "La Prose du Transsibérien," 1913.

Contrasts: Sun and Moon (1913) (figure 14)²⁰⁴ together with Sonia's *La Prose du Transsibérien*



Figure 14: Robert Delaunay, *Simultaneous Contrasts: Sun and Moon* (134.5 cm in diameter, Museum of Modern Art)

et de la petite Jehanne de France (1913) (figure 3),²⁰⁵ juxtaposing her illustration and pochoir design to his easel painting. Also, out of fifty-two works by Sonia Delaunay owned by MoMA, only one is an easel painting. This single easel painting was not even acquired through purchase; it was a gift. As a result, the MoMA does not present the full extent of Sonia Delaunay's practice, focusing on a limited

amount of work in one media. The 2015 Tate Modern exhibition, in cooperation with Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, was intended to correct the mistakes that LACMA, the MoMA and the Cooper-Hewitt perpetuated and finally present an exhibition that covered the whole span of Sonia Delaunay's work in different media, from her early works in 1904 to her last works of 1978. The Tate succeeded in fulfilling this task and shifting the perception of Sonia Delaunay's practice. But its success was only superficial. Even though the Tate organized an ambitious exhibition, it did not update its acquisition policy concerning Sonia Delaunay's work; most were on loan from the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. The only two works by Sonia Delaunay that the

²⁰⁴ Robert Delaunay, "Simultaneous Contrasts: Sun and Moon," 1912-1913. Oil on canvas. Source: Museum of Modern Art, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/78302>.

²⁰⁵ Delaunay and Cendrars, "La Prose du Transsibérien," 1913.

Tate owns were bought before 1980. Also, the Tate has fewer works than LACMA, even though LACMA, unlike the Tate, never organized any monographic exhibitions of Sonia Delaunay. Her art is rarely bought and is poorly exhibited outside of France (where the exhibition narratives perpetuate old patterns of reception). Consequently, even in the twenty-first century, Sonia Delaunay's art struggles to transcend the borders of academic recognition and museum recognition in France and to receive proper attention. The possible solution to this problem may be a reorganization of the museum's display and acquisition practices, starting with the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris.

Postmodern frameworks produced new studies about Sonia Delaunay's ethnicity as one of the many communities present in Paris, instead of underlining her Russian otherness. Juliet Bellow supports this argument by claiming that the artistic circles in which Sonia Delaunay moved initially perceived the Ballets Russes as Other, then as part of Self. The Ballets Russes quickly integrated French society and started to dictate the way Parisian streets, department stores, households, and even people looked.²⁰⁶ Therefore, Sonia Delaunay's conscious emphasis on her Russian ethnicity was one way to claim the power of agency in the art world and establish a relatively powerful position belonging to society, not exotic to it. It was, furthermore, women who fueled the new fashion for Russianness and ensured its quick assimilation to French society. The East was now addressing not the male gaze, but a female gaze.²⁰⁷ So in positioning herself as a Russian artist, Delaunay was effectively representing modern women's interests. Through her practice, she addressed a female audience, and gave subjectivity and agency to modern women freed from the observing and controlling male gaze. It is no wonder that the artist also used her ethnicity as one of the ways to distinguish her work from her husband's work, while avoiding

²⁰⁶ Bellow, "Fashioning Cléopâtre," 10.

²⁰⁷ Nava, "The Cosmopolitanism," 187.

being pigeon-holed as female Other. “Being Russian, in turn, positioned her to attempt a unique redefinition of gender expectations within the eruptive field of the Parisian avant-garde and allowed her to thrive as a woman artist,” Buckberrough argued in 2014.²⁰⁸ Her emphasis on Russianness, which was soon Orientalized by critics and scholars and which stripped her of agency, was a powerful tool to avoid male eroticization, dress women of other nationalities, establish links between cultures, embody cosmopolitanism, and integrate French society as an artist on her own terms, not as a product of her husband’s last name.

One of the main issues avoided in Sonia Delaunay’s reception is how the artist should be named: Terk? Delaunay? Terk-Delaunay? Which is best to respect her subjectivity and her independent identity? Unfortunately, the question has never been truly investigated. In the 1970s, when the first wave of feminism emerged, art historians added her maiden name Terk to her married surname Delaunay. This was done to distinguish Sonia from Robert, informing the reader or the viewer about her individual identity before and during her marriage to Robert. However, the last name Terk imposes certain restrictions on Sonia Delaunay’s subjectivity because, originally, the artist was called Sara Stern. Her first and last names were changed upon her uncle’s unexpected adoption when Sara was six years old. This change was provoked by her uncle’s desire to conceal her Jewish identity and establish her as a daughter.²⁰⁹ Nevertheless, Sara remembered her original name and origins, which is confirmed by her knowledge of Yiddish, the constant presence of a Jewish maid, her familiarity with Jewish products, her travel to Jerusalem, and her close friendships with Jewish artists.²¹⁰ Even though Sara was stripped of her real name at a young age, she consciously preserved it with an acute awareness of the consequences that would

²⁰⁸ Buckberrough, “Being Russian in Paris,” 48.

²⁰⁹ Slevin, “Sonia Delaunay’s *Robe Simultanée*” 27-54.

²¹⁰ Slevin, 27-54.

follow if she revealed her true origins. As a result, the name has never been used for official publications, exhibitions, or biographies. Nevertheless, to reclaim female agency, the first thing that we need to do is to give back Sonia Delaunay her proper name: Sara Stern.

Sara Stern's reception has made drastic breakthroughs recently. A more flexible understanding of her practice in relation to her husband, her ethnicity, her religion, her social role as wife and mother, and her work in various media in the 21st century. Unfortunately, the two solo exhibitions mounted in main museums, that of Cooper-Hewitt and the Tate Modern, did not solve these problems. As such, they shed light on the ambiguity of the position of art institutions towards the promotion of the art of Sara Stern. Ultimately, it seems that the works of Sonia Delaunay are not adequately presented inside or outside French institutions, and it is noteworthy that they receive more attention from American and English scholars than from French art historians and curators. The current goal of both of these should be to stabilize, balance and secure the perception of the work of Sara Stern in cultural institutions, academic and popular writings around the globe. A good start would be a valid, well-founded introduction to general art history books and a proper retrospective. Unfortunately, Robert died before Sara, and she had time to secure his contribution to art history, but no-one secured hers. There is no doubt that it is an urgent task of the 21st century to create an appropriate place in art history for Sara Stern's *oeuvre*.

5. Conclusion

How does one want to be remembered? It is a question that any human being asks oneself, an eternal and unavoidable, universal dilemma. After a death, relatives and friends ask themselves that question. On the tombstone one always writes to whom the tomb is dedicated and how the departed might want to be remembered: as a mother or father, as a friend, as a daughter or a son, as a sister or a brother, as an artist or a businessman. The living always try to impose their categories and definitions when the subject of those categories has already passed away and cannot make sure his or her place in their memory is secured.

In art history, a similar question arises, not only during an artist's life but also afterward. How will one be encoded into art history? What will be one's place in it? How is Sonia Delaunay remembered in art history? How did she want to be remembered?²¹¹ What was written by art history on her 'tombstone'? Artist or a designer? Wife or amuse? Mother or daughter? Russian or French? Unfortunately, her history was written not from her perspective but overwhelmingly by male art critics, male scholars, male friends, and colleagues. As a result, what has been written on her tomb was written from the male vantage point. The mechanism of encoding and remembering her are distinctively patriarchal and distorted.²¹² Her place in art history was dictated by a series of stereotypes and categories connected to her ethnicity, religion, social and civic position, choice of media, aesthetic and commercial qualities of her work.²¹³ The place had

²¹¹ Kristen Pai Buick, *The Flesh Made Word: Soft Power, The Female Nude, and the Autobiography of Louise Havemeyer* (Washington D.C.: National Art Gallery, 4-11 December 2020), video presentation.

²¹² Aruna D'Souza, *Lorraine O'Grady, Simone Leigh and the Problem and Power of Invisibility* (Washington D.C.: National Art Gallery, 4-11 December 2020), video presentation.

²¹³ D'Souza, *Lorraine O'Grady*.

already been taken, in a similar way, as her husband took her spotlight, and again in the public eye and museum collections. Sonia became visible in the categories, patterns, and limits established by art history and invisible as Sara Stern, as a person exceeding these biases. Nevertheless, it was in her invisibility that she asserted agency.²¹⁴ Sonia Delaunay knew that the traditional ways of navigating the art world were closed for her due to her gender, but she learned how to find inroads into its blind spots. She was not allowed to exercise direct visible power, but she always wielded soft power, an invisible one.²¹⁵ Therefore, she was both an object and a subject of the Parisian art world, the one who was looking and the one who was seen. In her designs, she used invisibility as a force, as a quest for power to be seen in a new way, transforming her soft power into a direct one.²¹⁶ She allowed women to be seen not in the way the society wanted them to be seen, but in a way, she as a woman wanted to be seen herself. She gave back women the power of subjectivity. Her designs revealed that a body existing underneath it could exist independently of the male gaze's expectations and constructs, that its subject could itself define the way it wants to be remembered in history.²¹⁷ Now it is art history's turn to do what Sonia did a hundred years ago with much more social constraints than in 2020: to give the subject a right to be remembered and encoded in the way it desired to be, independent of the discipline's constructs.

²¹⁴ D'Souza.

²¹⁵ Buick, *The Flesh Made Word*.

²¹⁶ Buick.

²¹⁷ D'Souza, *Lorraine O'Grady*.

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