

Threading Jewish Identity

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THREADING JEWISH IDENTITY

The Sara Stern in Sonia Delaunay

This essay aims to understand and contextualize the Jewish identity of the artist Sonia Delaunay, who, in 1885, was born Sara Stern to a poor family in Gradizhsk, southeast of Kiev in Ukraine, well within the Pale of Settlement, where the Russian Empire permitted Jews to live. This essay argues that her early surroundings in Ukraine affected the formation of both her aesthetic and Jewish identity. From the age of seven, she grew up in St. Petersburg, in the home of her rich maternal uncle. Rather than looking for intentional Jewish content or motifs in her art, this essay attempts to tease out the ways that her life engaged Jewish culture—from the folk culture of her early childhood in Ukraine and her sophisticated adolescence in St. Petersburg, to art school in Karlsruhe, Germany, and the worlds of avant-garde art and haute couture in Paris. Any public acknowledgement of her Jewish identity was limited by her awareness and experience of anti-Semitism in Ukraine, Russia, Germany, and France. The bold self-image she projected as a modernist and as an outsider, coupled with her eager embrace of the new, reads as her individual response to traditional society's rejection of the Jews.

Sonia Delaunay first met Alex Rosenberg, the New York art dealer and print publisher, in Paris in the late 1960s, when she was in her 80s (figure 1). Although he could not convince her to make an edition of prints for him, they became friends. Usually they conversed in English, but on one occasion, she turned to Yiddish: “I hear you are going to Israel. Would you please bring me a bottle of Judith Muller’s perfume, *Chutzpah?*” “Sure,” he replied, “but why are you speaking Yiddish?” “So the maid shouldn’t understand, because if she hears, she’ll want a bottle too.” On his way out, the maid asked Rosenberg to bring a bottle to her too, prompting him to inquire, “How did you know that Sonia asked me that?” “Because I understand Yiddish,” she replied. “Thirty years ago she hired me because I am Jewish, but by now she’s forgotten” (interview with the author, 2/27/2003).

Rosenberg’s story shows not only that Sonia Delaunay knew Yiddish, the language of Ashkenazi Jews in the diaspora, but also suggests that her Jewishness had been basic to her sense of self and the world for a very long time. It had shown its hold on her in the delicate matter of hiring a domestic, yet she can hardly have acquired Yiddish in Paris. Thus, Yiddish becomes a thread reaching back to her childhood on a *shtetl* in Ukraine. Moreover, learning that Rosenberg was about to go to Israel, she seized the moment to make a revelatory request. The idea of Israel prompted her to ask her friend to bring her



FIGURE 1 Sonia Delaunay in Paris 1977. Photo by the author. © Gail Levin 2016.

a product with the quintessential Yiddish name, *Chutzpah*, that gets translated as either “audacity” or “courage.” One ad for *Chutzpah* called it, “Arrogant! Direct! Provoking! But at the same time refreshingly natural like the Sabras [Jews born in Israel] in whose image it was created.”¹ Such ads for this perfume by Aviva Dayan, the sister of Moshe Dayan, the Israeli military leader, war hero, and politician, appeared in Israeli publications. Delaunay had her first solo show in Israel at the Nora Gallery in Jerusalem in 1960.² That Delaunay, living in Paris, where great French perfumes were marketed and where she had worked as a designer in the related couture industry, desired to acquire this particular Israeli brand, marks her identification with both *Yiddishkeit* and the Jewish nation.

And yet, Axel Madsen, in his 1989 biography of Delaunay, wrote, “Sonia grew up without any intense curiosity about Jewish life and without knowledge of the Yiddish language . . .” (1989, 24). Such a claim cries out for scholarly attention, particularly because the use of this vernacular Jewish language makes Jews aware of a psychological

and religious difference from others and, while maintaining that difference, situates them in this vibrant secular Jewish literary and folk culture.³

Accounts of Sonia Delaunay's life often note her Jewish birth only to discount it (Susak 2010, 83, 367). A notable exception is the brief discussion of Delaunay by the art historian Juliet Bellow in her essay on "Jewish Women's Art of the Twentieth Century" (Bellow 2001, 36–41). More recently, two essays in the exhibition catalogue for Delaunay's retrospective that opened in Paris at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris and travelled to the Tate Modern in the spring of 2015, touch upon her Jewishness (Montfort 2015). But these essays raise questions about her Jewish identity that deserve attention.

In this essay, I draw upon what I learned in my two interviews with Sonia Delaunay, as well as on my exploratory journey to her hometown, Gradizhsk in 2010.⁴ My aim is to understand and contextualize her early surroundings in Ukraine because of their role in the formation of both her aesthetic and her Jewish identity, which I believe are linked in this remote and distinctive place of origin. To the extent that we can know Sonia Delaunay's Jewish identity, it was shaped in the Russian Empire: first formed in the Pale of Settlement, where almost all Jews were forced to live, and then refashioned in St. Petersburg.

In 1885, Sonia Delaunay was born Sara Élievna Stern to a poor family in Gradizhsk on the north shore of the Dnieper River, 160 miles southeast of Kiev in Ukraine.⁵ This town, in Poltava province, was well within the Pale of Settlement. The little girl followed two boys, who had been welcome in the Orthodox Jewish culture, while daughters evoked the dreaded dowry they would need to provide for the expected arranged marriage. In her working-class family, Sara was one daughter too many. Her father struggled to make ends meet, working as a labourer in a nail factory, eventually becoming its foreman.

The psychoanalyst Erik H. Erikson asserted that identity begins with the first meeting of mother and baby. He explained: "what we may call group identity, is transmitted to the infant's early bodily experiences and, through them, to the beginnings of his ego" (Erikson 1968, 47–48). Thus, as Erikson sees it, traces of ethnicity have already begun to evolve through specific child-rearing practices that mark the young child as she develops. What psychological and aesthetic effects Sonia Delaunay's early experiences might have had on the way she lived her life and how she practised her art? What was her sense of self with regard to being born Jewish, rather than her active adult involvement with organized Jewish life and religious ritual? (Arnov 1994, 29–36) What early memories might have left lingering traces on how she lived her life and how she made her art and how do they relate to the Jewish milieu of her earliest years?

One might assume, for example, that like most Jews, Sonia Delaunay was early to develop feelings of collective vulnerability, a classic part of Jewish identity, usually conveyed by parents who want to protect their offspring. This sense of vulnerability shaped Delaunay's public Jewish identity. Like so many others, she had had to learn when to keep her Jewish identity private to protect herself. It was a lesson conveyed by those who survived pogroms and other such anti-Semitic attacks. The last pogrom in Gradizhsk was in 1882 (Desanti 1988, 14). This was just three years before her birth and well-seared into the collective memory of her parents and their contemporaries, as well as threatening for her older brothers. Knowing how to conceal one's Jewish

identity would prove invaluable, most urgently in Occupied France during the Second World War.

When Sara was only seven, her mother's wealthy but childless brother, Henry Terk, and his wife, Anna Zack Terk, took her to live in their comfortable home in St. Petersburg.⁶ There, Sara's uncle, an assimilated and successful lawyer, had married the well-to-do niece of the Zack banking family. The Terks unofficially changed their niece's name from the identifiably Jewish, "Sara Stern" to the more Russian sounding name, "Sonia Terk." Thus, they imposed upon their niece the adoption of Russian names, subjecting her to a trend that has been called "a revolution against Jewishness" (Slezkine 2004, 167, 171). This push to modernize reflects an affinity for the secular and modern age that became pronounced among Russian Jews in the early twentieth century. The sophisticated, well-educated, and secular Terks embodied modernity.

Yet Sara Stern's earliest Jewish experience and identity formation were complicated by her sense that her birth parents rejected her. Her memories of the years of her life in Gradizhsk were punctuated by being abruptly sent away from her immediate family. This move, confirming her birth parents' willingness to part with her, ultimately ruptured her identity formation. Instead of depending on her bond with her birth parents, "little Sara" had to become "little Sonia" and learn to fend for herself in a sophisticated urban environment not at all familiar to her. Her mother took her to St. Petersburg as if they were going on a vacation and then left her there without warning. That her adoptive parents (uncle and aunt) could offer her much more must have seemed irrelevant in the face of such a rejection.

To her credit, Sonia learned to make the most of her situation and developed excellent coping skills: "I had never been weak enough to let anyone suspect my real inner self. . . . I was an extremely energetic character, invulnerable, almost unreal, one who would smile at fate, never complaining and with an innate sense of happiness" (Buckberrough 1980, 14, quoting Delaunay 1978). Although she retained her ability to speak Yiddish, her primary language became Russian. Her aunt and uncle provided private tutors for French, English, and German, all of which she spoke in later life.

The art historian, Sherry A. Buckberrough, who organized a major touring American retrospective exhibition of Sonia Delaunay in 1980–1981, wrote:

The Terk family was Jewish. If Sonia had remained in the village her character might have been more clearly marked by this aspect of her heritage. Wealthy Jewish families in St. Petersburg, however, were generally well assimilated. They profited intellectually and financially from the liberalizing periods of the 1860s and 1870s. (1980, 14)

Buckberrough goes on to explain that:

Moves toward equality in Russia engendered a feeling of kinship between Jews and Russians and many Jews chose to absorb Russian culture fully. Although there was harsh repression of Jews again in the 1880s and 1890s, Henri Terk's household remained a product of that earlier liberal epoch. (14)

We can assume, however, that the alert teenaged Sonia knew about this renewed repression of the Jews taking place in St. Petersburg as elsewhere in the Russian Empire.

Grappling with such a *Zeitgeist* must complicate one's developing identity, even when protected by a prosperous family.

The generous couple gave Sonia many advantages, including instruction in music and art. The family vacationed in their home at the shore in Finland and travelled to cultural sites across Europe. In 1900, when she was 14, the family took Sonia to Berlin to meet the prominent Jewish painter, Max Liebermann, in his studio. Known for his portraits and reputed to be "the most famous Jewish painter in the second half of the nineteenth century in Germany," (Landsberger 1946, 284) he responded to the family's initiative by giving Sonia a box of colours and a professional's encouragement that she never forgot. She would focus on portraiture in her own early work. This meeting with a major artist reinforced the interest that would take her to Germany to study painting.

The next year, at 15, Sonia won a book as a school prize, a history of Western philosophy. In her brief autobiography, she tells of her great interest in philosophy and says "Spinoza was my master" (Delaunay 1978, 14). One can imagine her reading Spinoza's argument that God exists, but is abstract and impersonal and that God and Nature were the same reality. She would also have read that in the seventeenth century, the Jewish congregation in Amsterdam expelled Spinoza, just 23 years of age, for his "evil opinions" (Nadler 1999, 120). Her early taste for Spinoza hints of the complexity of her own identity as a modern, secular Jew.

This developing consciousness soon took a painful turn at the news of the first Kishinev pogrom in April 1903, in which some 47 Jews were killed, nearly 100 were severely injured, and Jewish homes were destroyed and pillaged. Sonia was moved to read the newly published novel, *Evrei (The Jews)* by the popular Russian-Jewish writer, Semyon Yushkevich, about which she wrote in her diary on 13 August 1904:

I read this narrative with great emotion—yet another incomprehensible thing, more questions, more tales of human suffering. And the people I belong to, but which I do not know at all, this universally despised people, is presented to me in a new light. They are able, talented, intelligent—that is how they are described here. (Montfort/Marcadé 2015, 20, n.11)

In this novel, Sonia read Yushkevich's graphic description of a massive pogrom full of menace, anger, and violence:

They burst into houses, sought out the Jews in cellars and in attics, they killed, defiled, raped young girls, beat them, or ripped open their bellies, or cut off their breasts, or strangled their babies, and when they ran off they left behind a pile of unconscious bodies or corpses. (Yushevich, trans. Shroyer, 2007, 137)

Clearly she empathized with the plight of her fellow Jews, writing:

And perhaps it is true that behind their appearance, which others find repulsive because of their typical facial features and behaviour, are hidden martyrs, heroes ... My God, how much suffering, it is everywhere, but they feel they have the right to live where they live, they are in their homeland. Everywhere the Jews are foreigners, unwanted ... What can be done? (Montfort/Marcadé 2015, 20, n.11)

She concluded that day, “Peoples should aim to unite, to amalgamate, they should not isolate themselves” (Montfort/Marcadé 2015, 20, n.11). Her use of third person pronouns to refer to “the people to which I belong,” suggests her ambivalence, as she both identifies with the Jews, yet holds them at a distance.

In September 1904, just 18, Sonia left her uncle and aunt’s home in St. Petersburg and went to Karlsruhe, Germany, eager to study art at the Staatliche Akademie der Bildenden Künste Karlsruhe (founded in 1854). She studied there with Karl Schmid-Reutte for two academic years. Among her friends were the music student and future composer, Arnold Schoenberg and his wife, who came from Vienna, where Schoenberg had converted to Christianity, in part as a response to anti-Semitism. Sonia and her friends surely observed anti-Semitism in Germany, since it was an endemic problem and a theme for German nationalists (Levy 1975).⁷

In October 1906, Sonia left for Paris, hoping never to return to Russia. Her move followed the Russo-Japanese War and the Russian Revolution of 1905, which, on 22 January, on Bloody Sunday, resulted in many dead and wounded in St. Petersburg. Paris seemed like a better option.

During the summer of 1907 in Finland, she painted some portraits of *Philomène*, 2) the Terks’ Finnish maid.⁸ In one, Sonia rendered Philomena outlined in a heavy black line as she posed in a red high-necked blouse. She showed her model against a yellow ground covered in bold red flowers with green leaves. Although the influence of Gauguin and Matisse are often cited when discussing this painting, its floral background and the blouse Philomena wears closely resemble Ukrainian folk costumes that Sonia knew from her childhood and even the mass-produced printed scarves worn there today.⁹ Her work relates to the embroidery that one sees all over Ukraine and to the painted decorations on the exterior of homes. These are the vivid colours Delaunay claimed to remember from her earliest years (figure 2).

Sonia had enjoyed such bright colours and bold floral patterns as found in *Philomène* in the environment of Gradizhsk. She recalled images of Ukraine in her autobiography: “memories of the peasant weddings of my country, where the red and green dresses,



FIGURE 2 Ukrainian embroidery, photographed by the author in 2010. © Gail Levin 2016.

ornamented with many ribbons, flew about in dancing” (Delaunay 1978, 17). As a young girl, she had gone inside a friend’s house in the country and was struck by the colours and the decorative patterns she saw (Peppiatt 1975, 88). Before folk art and culture became trendy in international art circles during the early twentieth century, she had already acquired this taste in her hometown.

From the time she left for art school, each of Sonia’s visits with the Terks meant enduring their insistence that it was time for her to marry. Fearful that her adoptive parents would make her return to Russia for good and wanting to come into the dowry that they had set aside for her, Sonia agreed in December 1908 to a marriage of convenience with an art dealer, Wilhelm Uhde, a secular German Jew and a homosexual, living with his male lover in Paris, who wanted to conceal his private life from his family. Uhde had given her a solo show at his gallery earlier that year. Early the next year Sonia got to know Robert Delaunay, whose mother was a frequent visitor to Uhde’s gallery. By April, Sonia and Robert had become lovers. After her divorce from Uhde became final in August 1910, she and Robert married in November. On 18 January 1911, she gave birth to their son Charles.

The patchwork quilt Sonia made for the baby was an important innovation in abstract art, deemed cubist by her contemporaries. According to her, however, she was working in the tradition of Russian peasants. Interest in folk art was then becoming fashionable in both France and Germany. In Paris, a show of contemporary Russian folk art from the Talachkino workshop took place in July 1911.¹⁰ Since 1909, Sonia had also been working in embroidery, which peasants in Ukraine had made to decorate their clothing and their homes.

Embroidery had an important presence in Jewish homes in the Pale of Settlement and is documented in fiction by Delaunay’s contemporaries, Jewish women authors born in the Pale, such as Dvora Baron (1887–1956) and Anzia Yezierska (1885–1970). Baron, the daughter of a rabbi, wrote short stories that often describe Jewish girls and women embroidering: “lace tablecloths and runners for the table and sideboard, pillowcases with patchwork appliqué, and a wall hanging with an embroidered proverb to adorn the wall” (Baron 2001, 7, 18, 27, 64, 84, 137). Baron tells that once in a while an artistically talented girl might invent her own designs instead of copying the usual pattern out of a book. Others then recognized such talent, attempted to purchase her work for their own bridal trousseaus. (Baron 1969, 7–8, 115–118). Handcrafted dowry got further attention in Yezierska’s 1925 immigrant novel, *Bread Givers*, where a character proudly proclaims: “All my sheets had my name embroidered with a beautiful wreath of flowers over it. All my towels were half covered with red and blue embroidery ...” ([1925] 1975, 32).

Sonia’s later comment that she held on to “memories of the gay colours” of her earliest years “in the plains of Ukraine” suggests that she found something positive to retain from that time and place despite the pain of her parents’ decision to turn her over to her aunt and uncle (Delaunay 1978, 1).¹¹ Her recollection is in keeping with some scholars’ assertion that artists of the Ukrainian avant-garde responded to visual impressions that they all absorbed as children: lots of sunlight, bright colours, and the broad expanse of the steppe. One contrasts these stimuli to the darker climate and dense forests known to Russian artists (Marcadé 1990, 1993, 42). Another scholar has stated, “Ukrainian Neoprimativism developed in the fertile soil of folk art” (Horbachov 1993, 65). Looking at Delaunay’s Jewish roots, the impact of the Ukraine on her aesthetic sensibility emerges

as an influence closer to home than either Gauguin or Matisse, whose art must have reinforced her earlier taste for both the bright colours and vivid patterns that she found in their painting.

The lively qualities of folk art appealed to sophisticated artists, who wanted to capture a similar “primitive” vitality in their own work. Sonia Delaunay’s appreciation for such work began in her early childhood. Her taste coincided with Vassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc’s 1912 almanac, *Der Blaue Reiter*, which mixed modern, non-Western, and folk art, and with *Neo-Primitivism*, both a term and the title of Aleksandr Shevchenko’s 1913 book (as cited in Parton 1993, 77).¹² Among the kinds of art that this book featured as “primitive” were ancient and peasant art forms including icons, eastern fabrics, and children’s art. For some, like Delaunay’s Russian contemporary, the painter, Mikhail Larionov, “peasant tradition represented the complete integration of art with life ...” (Parton 1993, 78). Not just the bright colours of the folk textiles and garments, but also the boldness of the patterns, from floral to stripes, recur in Delaunay’s creations. This merger of art and life is what Delaunay recreated with her own fabrics and interior designs.

Such bold colours and patterns led Yuri Slezkine to write in his book about modernism and Russian Jews, *The Jewish Century*: “A Jewish house in Ukraine did not resemble the peasant hut next door, not because it was Jewish in architecture (there was no such thing) but because it was never painted, mended, or decorated” (Slezkine 2004, 9). His implication is that the Jews would have seen and recognized the colourful exterior decorations of their Christian neighbours (figure 3). Yet, as literary references above make clear, Jews also enjoyed some embroidered decorations inside their own

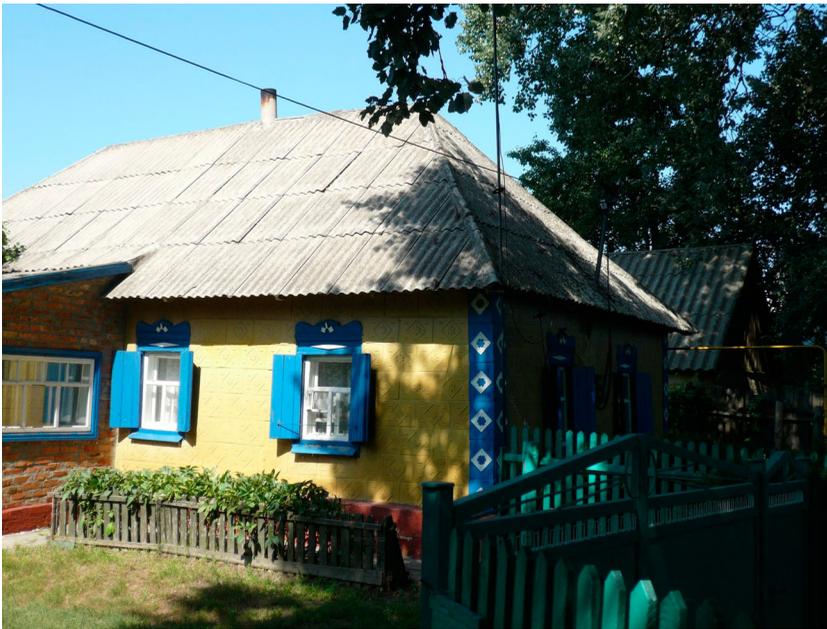


FIGURE 3 Ukrainian house in Gradizhsk, photographed by the author in 2010. © Gail Levin 2016.

homes. The traditions of home decoration (interior and exterior) in rural Ukraine persist to the present day.

At least one scholar has remarked that “avant-garde artists in or from the Ukraine also display a preference for interdisciplinary art and the *gesamtkunstwerk* (the total or all-encompassing work of art)” (Danzker 1993, 15). Such elaborate home decorations and the folk costumes the inhabitants wore formed a part of little Sara Stern’s world. Some of them resemble the designs she produced decades later. She must have absorbed both the taste for decoration and the desire to create it during her years in Ukraine.

Delaunay’s adoptive uncle also nurtured this interest. Returning from a business trip to Stockholm, Henri Terk brought her a book about Swedish folklore with illustrations of costumes that reminded her of Ukraine (Delaunay 1978, 17). In addition, Jewish folk art and culture in the Russian Empire became fashionable among the vanguard when Sonia was growing up in Saint Petersburg. This development was a part of the growing interest in Jewish nationalism and Yiddish folk culture among the Russian-Jewish intelligentsia that extended from the late 1890s through the early 1900s. At the same time, non-Jewish Russians, such as the composer Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, were also developing interest in Jewish folk culture, especially music from the Pale of Settlement.¹³ The author, playwright, researcher, and activist, S. Ansky, was about to begin his ethnographic excursions to various Jewish towns across the Pale. Thus, when she was still in Russia, Jewish folk culture began to penetrate Sonia’s art world.

Once in Paris, the Delaunays’ network of friends included American Jews such as modernist painters Samuel Halpert and Leon Kroll and the expatriate American art collectors and writers, Gertrude Stein and her brother Leo Stein (interview with the author, 1975). It was probably at the Steins’ salon that the Delaunays encountered two young American expatriates, Morgan Russell and Stanton Macdonald-Wright, who started their own abstract art movement called Synchronism in Paris and shared the Delaunays’ interest in experimenting with colour, setting themselves up as the Delaunays’ rivals (Levin 1978, 18–19). Gertrude Stein wrote to a friend that year: “We have not seen much of the Delaunays lately. There is a feud on. He wanted to wean Apollinaire and me from liking Picasso and there was a great deal of amusing intrigue” (Mellow 1974, 98).

Gertrude clearly identified with Robert Delaunay rather than with Sonia, though Sonia would maintain a rich network of Jewish friends, many of them vanguard visual artists or writers with Eastern European roots. The Steins, however, were descended from a family of wealthy German Jews. Leo Stein shared both a mistress and an appreciation of Cézanne with Morgan Russell, who also corresponded with the Delaunays’ friend, the critic Guillaume Apollinaire, whose acquaintance he probably made at the Steins. It was Apollinaire who coined the term, “Orphism,” in 1912, as an alternative term for the abstraction the Delaunays called “Simultaneism.” To the average observer, Orphism, Simultaneism, and Synchronism could appear confusing, as if all three were just cubism with bright colours, but all the artists involved developed their own particular notions of how to compose such paintings.

Gertrude and Sonia first met when she was engaged to Wilhelm Uhde, who presented her at the Steins’ salon one Saturday evening. Gertrude later wrote, “Uhde’s morals were not all that they should be and as his fiancée seemed a very well-to-do and very conventional young woman we were all surprised” (Stein 1933, 92). Snubbing Sonia, Gertrude Stein made Robert Delaunay, Morgan Russell, and Arthur Burdett

Frost, Jr., another young American painter in the Delaunays' circle and, like Russell, a student in the Académie Matisse, subjects of some of her early prose portraits (Stein 1951, 336; Corn and Latimer 2011, 179).

Gertrude wrote in her portrait of Frost: "He certainly did listen and listen again and again, he certainly quite steadily did this thing. He certainly quite clearly asked a question then" (Stein 1951, 332). Frost became close friends with the Delaunays and followed their work. Frost was excited by the talk about Cubism at the Steins and he wrote to his mother:

Leo Stein is not interested except in one man, Delaunay. We are all interested in Delaunay. He seems to be the strong man who has come out of cubisme as Matisse was the strong man who came out of the Fauves. (Levin 1978, 125, n. 6)

In later years, Sonia proudly claimed that the Delaunays had invented the style of abstraction called Synchronism; indeed, her use of the term *Synchrone* preceded the Synchronists' first exhibition (in 1913 Munich) by nearly a calendar year (interview with the author, 1975). However, Robert Delaunay, in his notebooks of 1938, wrote about his own "influence on all contemporary painting; rayonism in Russia, synchronism in America, orphism in France, simultaneism in France, and even on the cubists who were not concerned with colour, like Leger, Gleizes, Villon, etc . . ." (Cohen 1978, 14).

Robert Delaunay's claim to have influenced the American Synchronist Morgan Russell is instructive; it reminds us just how different an approach Sonia Delaunay took for her own abstract painting. Russell based a small abstract painting, *Creavit Deus Hominem* (1913), on the forms of Michelangelo's *God Creating Adam* in the Sistine Chapel. But no such explicit biblical or Jewish motifs or references ever appear in Sonia Delaunay's abstract art, even when she retains figural references, as in her depictions of dancers at the Bal Bullier, the popular Montparnasse dance hall. Sonia Delaunay showed me a photograph of Arthur Burdett Frost, Jr.'s lost abstract painting inscribed "Descente de croix (simultané) Frost (Americain)" [Descent from the Cross (simultaneous)] of 1913–1914, where the shapes hint at a figural reference to Christ's body (figure 4). In contrast to both Frost and Russell, Sonia Delaunay kept her own imagery resolutely secular.

In December 1913, the Delaunays, together with Frost and the young American painter, Patrick Henry Bruce, went to the Bal Bullier, where Sonia attracted attention in her bold Simultaneous dress, which she had created by juxtaposing many fabrics of varied textures combined with unexpected protuberances, in different geometric shapes and colours like a patchwork, all designed to stimulate the eye, when she danced the popular Tango (figure 5). In her painting *Bal Bullier* (1913), she recorded her impressions of the abstract geometric shapes of colour seen in the crowds of whirling dancers. In Paris, the cultural patterns of Jewish life in the Pale appear to have affected her art and life.

Even the Delaunays' marriage evokes that of the typical *shtetl*, where Sonia spent her early childhood as Sara. As Isaac Bashevis Singer observed, it was the accepted lot of women to "bear children, cook, run the household and earn a living—while the man studied Torah" (Singer 1962, 12). Though her husband was not even Jewish, if one substitutes his study of art theory and practice for the Torah, Sonia was living the same kind

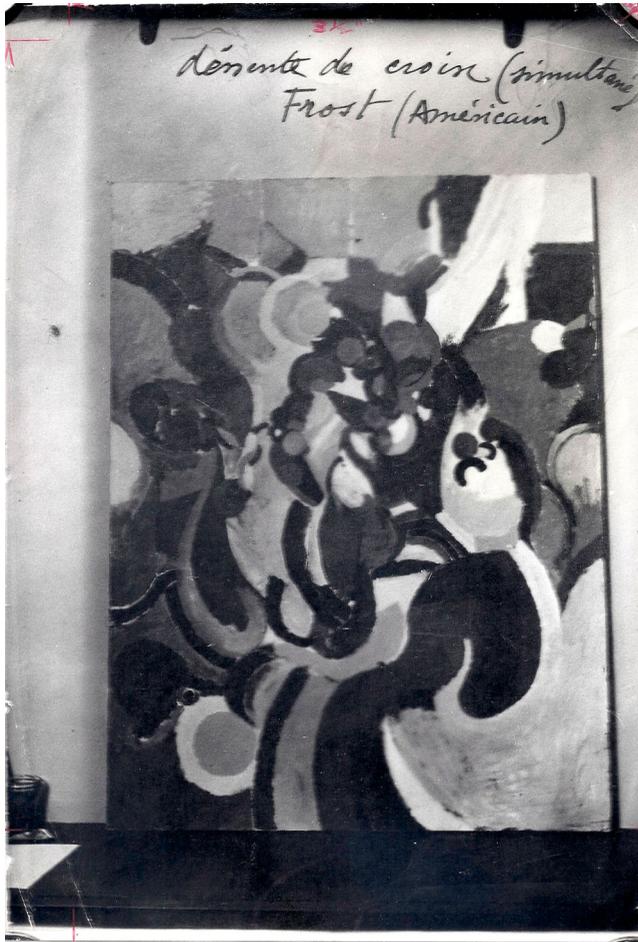


FIGURE 4 Arthurs B. Frost, Jr., *Descent from the Cross*, 1913-1914, anonymous photograph provided to the author by Sonia Delaunay, 1977.

of existence. And like the typical woman on the *shtetl*, Sonia was thankful for such a husband. Robert Delaunay, a painter and theorist, lived a life that paralleled the pattern of the “Hebrew scholar and dreamer who was always too much up in the air to come down to such sordid thoughts as bread and rent” (Weinberg 2011, 138). After the Russian Revolution ended the income set up for her by her uncle, it was Sonia who scrambled to support Robert and their son, Charles.¹⁴ She managed this by selling her designs for fabric, fashion, costumes for the dance, opera, and cinema, as well as other decorative objects. Whether consciously or not, she replicated what she must have observed: women working and selling things they had designed and crafted at the market in Gradizhsk.

As Slezkine notes,

in some merchant communities such as the Eastern European Jewish market traders, women are vital links to the outside world (as performers, stall attendants,



FIGURE 5 Sonia Delaunay in her simultaneous dress. 1913. Anonymous photograph provided to the author by Sonia Delaunay, 1977.

or negotiators) and are often considered sexually provocative or socially aggressive—a perception they occasionally reinforce by *deliberate displays* [italics my own]. (2004, 11)

Here we can see a possible link to Delaunay's performance as a modernist designer wearing her fabulous "Simultaneous" or "Orphic" dress at the *Bal Bullier*, where she served as an advertisement for the aesthetic theories of her painter husband (Albritton 2005, 3–13). In this performance, she defined herself as an "other," as a teasing,

mischievous “modernist.” The concept of the Jew as the “other” had long affected how Jews were perceived by non-Jews, in caricatures from medieval Germany to England in the eighteenth century or America in the nineteenth (Oisteanu 2009). Sonia took the power out of prejudice by embracing the stereotype of difference and turning it into an asset.

Sonia’s original creation of her own modernist personal display, did not, however, meet with approval from the drab Gertrude Stein, despite her enthusiasm for vanguard art and literature. She wrote to the New York art dealer and photographer, Alfred Stieglitz, in 1913, that she preferred the work of his expatriate protégé, the American painter Marsden Hartley, to that of Robert Delaunay. She called Robert Delaunay “a neo-impressionist” and grouped him with other artists who, “following out Van Gogh and Matisse, are really producing a disguised but poverty stricken realism; the realism of form having been taken away from them they have solaced themselves with the realism of light” (Mellow 1974, 188).

Not one to support women artists, Gertrude made no mention of the colourful Sonia, but Gertrude, who habitually dressed in brown sack dresses and flat sandals, certainly did not share Sonia’s flare for fashion. On the subject of art and clothing Gertrude later said:

You can either buy clothes or buy pictures. It’s that simple. No one who is not very rich can do both. Pay no attention to your clothes and no attention at all to the mode, and buy your clothes for comfort and durability, and you will have the clothes money to buy pictures. (Hemingway 1964, 25)

But with an expenditure of effort and ideas instead of money, Sonia Delaunay made a splash by producing both modernist clothes and modernist art with her own original abstract designs.

Gertrude’s failure to embrace Sonia might have manifested Gertrude’s belief that Jews should not intermarry in order to preserve themselves as a people, although it was permissible for Jews to assimilate in the public sphere. Stein expressed this opinion in an essay she wrote in 1896, while still a student at Radcliffe, but nothing suggests that she ever changed her mind on this “obligation” for which, she, as a lesbian, who neither gave birth nor adopted a child, did nothing to meet (Stein and Feinstein 2001, 416–428). Yet, since she called for endogamous marriage among Jews, she likely disapproved of Sonia’s intermarriage to Robert. When an interviewer asked Sonia if she knew Gertrude and Leo Stein and went to their home, she replied, “Oh yes, my husband liked to speak with her. I, never.” Asked why not, she replied only, “Well, it was not necessary” (Nemser 1975, 45). Sonia’s comment about not speaking with Gertrude suggests that she sensed her host’s disapproval.

Gertrude may have disapproved of Sonia’s husband and disdained her dress, but Sonia’s dress repeatedly attracted the attention of Marsden Hartley, who arrived in Paris in 1912 with a letter of introduction to Robert Delaunay, given to him by the painter, Samuel Halpert. Hartley had run into both Sonia and Robert while visiting Gertrude Stein. Writing to Stieglitz in July 1912, Hartley enthused about Sonia Delaunay’s “Orphistic” dress. On the occasion of the banquet for the First German Autumn Salon in Berlin in September 1913, Hartley, who was something of a dandy himself, once again admired Sonia’s Simultaneous costume that she wore with such aplomb (Hartley 1912–

1913). For at least 18 months Sonia assertively marked herself as both “other” and avant-garde by wearing her dress in public.

Together with Georgia O’Keeffe and Marie Laurencin, Hartley featured Sonia Delaunay in his essay, “Some Women Artists in Modern Painting,” which appears in his book of 1921. He wrote about the “work of Madame Delaunay Terk,” whom he noted that he had not seen since the war began:

... one can say that she was then running her husband a very close second for distinction in painting and intelligence of expression. When two people work so closely in harmony with each other, it is and will always remain a matter of difficulty in knowing just who is the real expressor of an idea. Whatever there is of originality in the idea of Orphisme shall be credited to Delaunay as the inventor, but whether his own examples are more replete than those of Mme Delaunay Terk is not easy of statement. (Hartley 1921, 113–114)

Hartley even attributed Robert’s “marked increase in virility in production” to Sonia’s “Russian temper,” noting: “There was nevertheless at that time marked evidence that she was in mastery of the idea of Orphisme both as to conception and execution. She showed greater signs of virility in her approach than did Delaunay himself.” Hartley compared the exchange of ideas between the Delaunays to that between Picasso and Braque. He insisted that among the Delaunays, “the more vigorous pictures were hers.” Sonia, Hartley claimed, “showed the same strength and style in her interesting personality, which was convincing without being too strained or forced” (Hartley 1921, 113–114). If the non-Jewish Hartley knew that Sonia was a Russian Jew and not just a “Russian,” he made no mention of it in his letter to Stieglitz, who was himself of German–Jewish extraction.

Contemporaneous with these encounters at the Steins, Sonia’s close friend, Alexander Smirnoff, a young Russian-Jewish academic, arrived from St. Petersburg, during the summer of 1912. He represented an acceptable link to the assimilated Jewish culture she had known at the home of her aunt and uncle, who had once approved of him as a match for Sonia. When Sonia met with Smirnoff in Paris, she presented him with posters that she had designed to decorate the interior of the St. Petersburg artist’s cabaret, *The Stray Dog*, for a lecture that he would give in July on “The Simultaneous” (Delaunay 1957, 111; Cohen 1978, 49). In effect, she enlisted her old suitor, part of her Jewish social network, to promote the new art that she and Robert were making.

For the Delaunays, simultaneity suggested modernity, motion, machines, and the obliteration of traditional succession in time and space. This particular moment, according to Robert, was the: “Formation de l’expression Synchrone.” The colourful posters that Sonia designed for Smirnoff’s lecture featured the words “Représentation Synchrom [e]” (figure 6). With handwritten letters and curved areas of a variety of colours, the posters employed words as images in a formal sense, making them into abstractions.

In 1913, she collaborated with the Swiss poet, Blaise Cendrars, illustrating and creating a cover for his poem *La Prose du Transsibérien et la petite Jehanne de France* (figure 7). Cendrars called himself “the poet of the Simultaneous” and this poem the “first Simultaneous book.” Measuring over 6.5 feet high and 14 inches wide and folding up accordion-style, its complex coloured shapes echo the rhythms of the poem itself, the story of a train ride across Russia from the primitive village to the



FIGURE 6 Publicity for *Prose du Transsibérien*, 1913, detail of painting *Electric prisms with word, "synchrome."*



FIGURE 7 Blaise Cendrars and Sonia Delaunay, *La Prose du Transsibérien et la petite Jehanne de France*, 1913, detail, private collection.

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metropolis, as Sonia herself had made. Her grand design for Cendrars' poem reflects her identification with its content.

Despite her standoff with Gertrude Stein, Sonia had a gift for friendship. Many of her close bonds were with other Jews, often those with whom she shared East European origins, for example, the Romanian Dada poet, Tristan Tzara and the Ukrainian artist, Vladimir Baranoff-Rossiné. The American painters, Samuel Halpert and Leon Kroll were also a part of the Jewish social networks that continued to contribute to the Delaunays' professional success.¹⁵

Halpert, who had given Hartley his letter of introduction to the Delaunays, had first been a friend of Robert's since early days, around 1907, when the two spent time in Brittany. Initially, Halpert had experimented with impressionism and then with Fauvist colour about 1909 or 1910. Later he visited the Delaunays in Spain and in Portugal, where they sat out the First World War. Sonia loved the light and the local colour of the Iberian Peninsula. She painted Flamenco singers and brightly coloured still lifes, which reminded her of the Ukraine. Halpert, too, painted colourful still lifes inspired by the Delaunays with whom he was then living in a villa they rented together in Portugal during 1915. Although Halpert wrote that he and Robert Delaunay were "trying to paint subjects, figures in movements with still life, direct from nature," (Halpert 1915) the surviving example seems closer to work by Sonia.

When the Delaunays moved to Portugal in August 1915, they shared a home with Halpert and Eduardo Viana and saw a lot of their friend Amadeo de Souza-Cardoso, a Portuguese-Jewish painter (Mann 1989, 160), whom the Delaunays had already met in Paris, possibly through their mutual friend, the Jewish-American painter Walter Pach (Müller et al. 2007, 122, 234). It was also Halpert who had first shown the Delaunays the American critic Willard Huntington Wright's new book, *Modern Painting, Its Tendency and Its Meaning* (Wright 1915). Sonia translated long excerpts from it into French for Robert, the manuscript of which she showed me in Paris. Wright's brother was the same Stanton Macdonald-Wright who had teamed up with his colleague, Morgan Russell, to show as the Synchronists. Their American friends caused the Delaunays to consider moving to New York, but, instead, in 1918, Sonia opened her own design firm, Casa Sonia in Madrid. Its success supported her family and prepared the way for a similar enterprise in France.

By 1921, with the First World War over, the Delaunays decided to move back to Paris, where Sonia began to collaborate with Tristan Tzara, born Shmuel Rosenstock in 1896, in Romania (Mansbach 1998, 536; Heyd 2010, 193–219).¹⁶ These two cosmopolitan artists shared in Paris their status as Jewish outsiders with changed names. Both began to experiment, creating an avant-garde identity to replace what each kept more or less hidden. Each understood anti-Semitism, felt the need to obscure biographical detail, and was preoccupied with personal appearance.

Delaunay designed costumes for Tzara's *Le Cœur à gaz*, a three-act absurdist play, first produced in 1921. Its notorious 1923 stage production led to an offer for Sonia to design fabrics and launched that aspect of her career in Paris. She opened her Atelier Simultané in 1924, where she designed and produced textiles, clothing, and accessories. In 1925, at the International Exhibition of Decorative Arts, she collaborated with Jacques Heim, the Paris-born son of an immigrant furrier. In 1923, Heim had taken over his Polish-Jewish family's traditional business and now working with her, moved into high fashion, first marketing fur coats with Sonia's geometric, Art Deco designs.

By now the Delaunays' renewed and expanded social circle included Tzara, the Jewish-Alsatian poet, Yvan Goll and his wife, as well as several other Jewish artists such as Man Ray and Marc Chagall, whom Charles Delaunay remembered as always speaking of misery and pogroms (Madsen 1989, 183). Chagall's anxieties were not without reason, as the tragic fate of another of Sonia's Russian-Jewish artist friends, Vladimir Baranoff-Rossiné, makes clear.

Born in Kherson, Ukraine, Baranoff-Rossiné had attended the Imperial Academy of Arts in St. Petersburg from 1903 to 1907 and moved to Paris in 1910. He met Sonia and Robert Delaunay, whom he saw until he returned to Russia in 1914 at the declaration of war. Years later Sonia Delaunay wrote to the artist's son, lamenting his father's destruction of his sculpture, which he threw into the Seine before he fled Paris: "I consider it to be one the greatest losses of modern sculpture."¹⁷ Baranoff-Rossiné returned to Paris in 1925. During the German occupation, however, he was arrested by the Nazis in November 1943 and then deported to a German concentration camp, where he died. Sonia Delaunay was more fortunate, but the danger of her Jewish identity—still inscribed on her passport as "Sara Stern," born in Gradizhsk—remained a constant threat.

At the start of the Second World War, the Delaunays' patron Solomon Guggenheim tried to rescue them and bring them to New York. By the time their papers were ready, however, Robert's poor health kept them from travelling. Instead, they fled Paris for the South, retreating to what they considered was the relative safety of the Vichy government. Robert died in Montpellier on 25 October 1941. She then went to live in Grasse.

Not long afterwards, Sonia recorded in her diary that André Farcy, a French museum director, whom she had long known, had asked her, "As an 'Israelite,' aren't you afraid?" She later considered that he meant to use her Jewishness as a pretext to take advantage of the situation and buy Robert's paintings at prices that would be tantamount to plunder (Madsen 1989, 266–267). From her comment, Delaunay makes clear that others identified her as Jewish at this dangerous time: the Vichy regime did not protect Jews from the Gestapo.

By July 1944, she had fled from Grasse, which was then occupied, heading for Spain by way of Toulouse, where by chance she ran into her former husband, Wilhelm Uhde in a cafe, when the Gestapo stopped them both. She managed to insist once more that she was a Russian Orthodox Christian and fended off the officer's inquiry as to whether she knew the Ukrainian cities of Kiev and Kharkov, as would a Jew coming from the Pale (Madsen 1989, 5). Uhde, who was staying at a castle in nearby Grisolles with the former curator Jean Cassou (and his Jewish wife) and Sonia's old friend, Tristan Tzara, invited her to take refuge with them. Tzara, who had joined the Republican cause in the Spanish Civil War, was now working in the French Resistance as was Cassou (and the Delaunays' son, Charles). She stayed with this cohort for three months and worked on her interior decoration projects for the headquarters of the International Red Cross. Sonia's history as a Jew, born and raised in Eastern European, continued to inflect her life, affecting both her security and the friends that she made and kept. It is inconceivable that it did not also affect her art, albeit safely abstract.

Stephen Pile and Roger Thrift point out that in the modern world, people begin "to think of themselves, of their identities and their relationship to culture and to place" (as quoted in Silberstein 2000, 5). Movement from place to place results in multiplicity and hybridity. Indeed, the formation and survival of Sonia Delaunay's evolving Jewish identity would be carried out in many places and cultures.

Samantha Baskind has argued that Jewishness “is much more than a religious evocation. Parochial imagery, as of a menorah, a rabbi, or a biblical subject, is only one expression of the Jewish experience”; her point is the dual position of Judaism “as both a religion and a secular culture” (Baskind 2006, xiii). Thus, rather than looking for intentional Jewish content or motifs in Sonia Delaunay’s art, I have tried to tease out the ways that her life engaged Jewish culture—from the Eastern Europe of her early childhood in Ukraine and sophisticated adolescence in St. Petersburg to the worlds of Parisian avant-garde art and haute couture. Any *public* acknowledgement of her Jewish identity was limited by her awareness and experience of anti-Semitism in Ukraine, Russia, Germany, and France. The bold self-image she projected as a modernist and as an outsider, coupled with her eager embrace of the new, reads as her individual response to traditional society’s rejection of the Jews.

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Notes

1. Such an ad reported from *Jerusalem Post*, presumably before 1967, when Aviva died. See <http://www.selfgrowth.com/articles/holy-chutzpah>.
2. Nora Gallery opened in Jerusalem in 1942, founded by Nora Wlenska (1899–1980).
3. See <http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Language/Yiddish>.
4. Due to the confusion produced by referring to Sonia and Robert Delaunay, as well as their son Charles, only by their last name, I will often refer to her as Sonia.
5. Some give her birthplace as Odessa, but scholars agree that she spent her early childhood in Gradizhsk.
6. I am accepting Jean-Claude Marcadé’s claim in the current Tate Catalogue that she went to live in St. Petersburg at the age of seven, not five, as is usually stated. See 19, note 3, for details on the archival evidence.
7. Schoenberg reclaimed his Jewish faith in 1933. In 1923, he famously accused Wassily Kandinsky of rejecting him because he was a Jew.
8. See <http://www.wikiart.org/en/sonia-delaunay/philomene>.
9. See <http://sandrachiricocouture.weebly.com/blog/-sonia-delaunay-textile-artist>.
10. Buckberrough, 112, note 27, mentions this show and its review by Louis Vauxcelles, “Les Arts . . . Broderie Russes,” *Gil Blas* (Paris), 26 July 1911, but states that the works included did not resemble Sonia’s quilt.
11. Delaunay (1978, 1): “Les souvenirs d’une petite fille qui vit dans les plaines de l’Ukraine restent des souvenirs de couleurs gaies.”

12. Sonia Delaunay began to correspond with Kandinsky through their mutual friend, Elisabeth Epstein, a Russian Jewish artist with whom she roomed upon first moving to Paris. Shevchenko (1913 cited in Parton 1993, 77). See also Bowlt (1974).
13. See http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Society_for_Jewish_Folk_Music on Rimsky-Korsakov. For an example of visual art a few years later, there is *The Jewish Family* of 1912, painted by the non-Jewish Russian artist, Natalia Goncharova, who painted this theme multiple times. See Kramer (2002).
14. Bellow (2001, 37) noted that many feminist art historians have remarked on the Delaunays' "striking division of artistic labor," but neither she nor her predecessors commented on the parallel that I see to life on the *shtetl*.
15. I take issue with Marcadé's comment, 19, "In France, Sonia did not frequent Jewish circles, but she did stay in contact with her aunt's family, the Sacks, and with her Jewish friends." Marcadé's claim that Sonia did not recall in the 1970s that "her friend Barinoff-Rossiné was Jewish," may reflect survivor's guilt since the cause of "his death had been his Jewish origins (at the time we did not know that he had been sent from Paris in 1944 on the last convoy to Auschwitz, where he died . . ." 19, n. 8. Sonia seems to have responded differently to Jews such as myself and Alex Rosenberg than she did to Marcadé.
16. For Tzara. See Mansbach (1998, 536) and Heyd (2010, 193–219).
17. Sonia Delaunay to Evgeny Baranoff-Rossiné, 19 July 1971, Manuscripts Department of the State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg, quoted in Susak, *Ukrainian Artists in Paris*, 86.

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