

Interventions



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Feature Article

Apollinaire's India

Geetha Ganapathy-Doré

Born in Rome in 1880 to a Polish Mother and an Italian father, Apollinaire wrote poems in French. His mixed parentage and his life of wandering were not appreciated by the literary establishment at that time which considered him a "métèque" and his writing a bric-à-brac of borrowed elements. However, his poetic experimentations and his familiarity with and criticism of famous painters of his time such as Matisse, Picasso, de Chirico, Delaunay and Duchamp and his invention of the term surrealism partook of and contributed to the cosmopolitanism of Paris in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. His death at age thirty-eight due to Spanish flu after getting wounded by a shell burst in the First World War was a tragic loss to the literary and artistic world.



Marie Laurencin, Group of Artists 1908, Baltimore Museum.ⁱ

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Apollinaire's conversation poems and calligrammes have fascinated and influenced modernist poets all over the world, including Indian poets in English like Arun Kolatkar, Pritish Nandy and Debasish Lahiri. Apollinaire's interest in India is perhaps a little less known. The purpose of this article is to map the intertextual references to India, Indians, Indian art and literature in his poetry and prose works to show how Apollinaire's gaze diverges from the Orientalist gaze of some of his contemporaries and argue that in some ways his curiosity about and openness towards India and Asia harbingers the hybrid genius of postcolonial writers and the internationalization of French literature.

Apollinaire and British India

Apollinaire's wish for an international and heterogeneous readership in a letter written to his foster mother on 19 November 1915 brings to mind Salman Rushdie's proclamation of a literary lineage (Rushdie 21) across historical, geographical and linguistic borders:

Me, I hope for no more than seven amateurs of my work, but I want them from different genders and nationalities ... I would like my work to be liked by an American negro boxer, an Empress of China, a German journalist, a Spanish painter, a young Italian peasant woman and an English officer of India (*my translation*).

Where could Apollinaire have possibly met this English officer from India? It is well known that Apollinaire had read Kipling. Apollinaire had at least translated one witty stanza of "The Michigan Twins" (Complete Prose II 1470) which Kipling wrote upon hearing that two cities in Michigan had been named after him:

*Wise is the child who knows his sire,
The ancient proverb ran,
But wiser far the man who knows
How, where and when his offspring grows,
For who the mischief would suppose
I've sons in Michigan?*

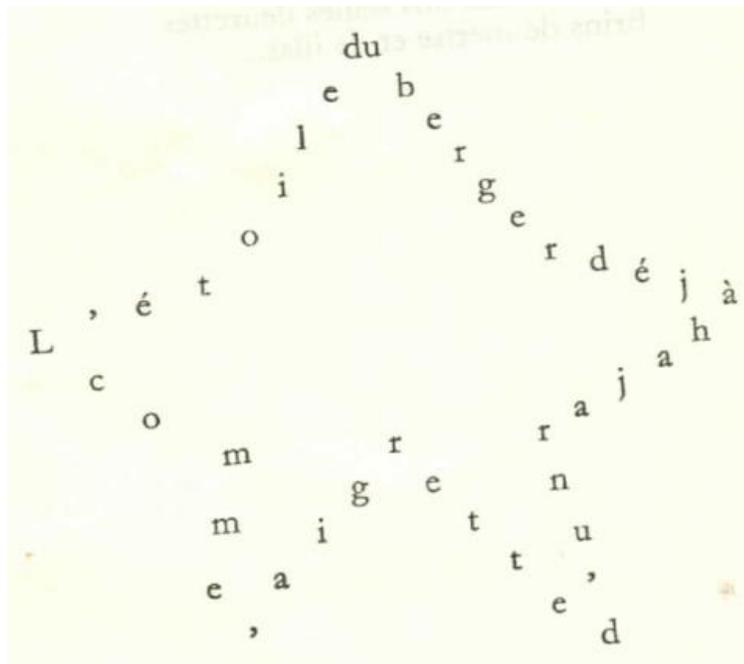
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Both Apollinaire and Kipling focused on animals in their respective poetry and prose. Apollinaire, the author of the *Bestiaire* might have even met the author of *The Jungle Books*. In a note on the sparrows in the London Zoological Gardens, he pictures Kipling standing in the crowd and applauding the clever sparrow in the cage which ate biscuits offered by the visitors without leaving any time for the fox in the case to pick them up and conjectures Kipling imagining a sequel to *The Jungle Books* (Complete Works Prose I 576). In another short report published in 1910, Apollinaire quotes Kipling. Kipling thought that he would be invited by Edmond Rostand for the Première of *Chantecler*. It was not the case. But Kipling quipped with biting irony "Mr Rostand was afraid that my wild animals would massacre the poultry in his backyard" (Complete Works Prose II 1276). Two books by Kipling, *Among the Railway Folk* and *Tiger, Tiger* featured in Apollinaire's personal library. From Kipling, he had learnt the word "Rajah" and uses it in one of his calligrammes (Complete Works Poetry 612).



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However, Apollinaire's review of Kipling's *In Black and White* is not kind. He finds it more boring than other "Kiplingeries"! (Complete Works Prose II 1144) because all of Kipling's short stories resembled one another. Apollinaire's considers the talent of the most well paid of writers those days to be rather mediocre. In spite of Kipling's French models like Maupassant and Zola, he had some stock elements – British civil servants, Indians in contact with Western civilization and combined them in a laborious manner. Apollinaire seems to attribute Kipling's success to the British practice of employing literary agents to position creative writers in the market (Complete Works Prose II 1446).

Besides these books, he had bought a scholarly book on India written by Ferdinand de Lanoye and published in 1858, *Inde contemporaine*. Another title found in his library (Boudar) was the *Complete Picture of the Tortures inflicted upon the Natives of India by the British East India Company*. Apollinaire's interest in military life was well known. His father Francesco Fulgi d'Aspremontⁱⁱ was after all an officer in the army. But this particular interest in torture is intriguing and reveals the darker side of Apollinaire who was interested in erotic and esoteric literature.

When Apollinaire was in the battlefield, he had undoubtedly met some Indian soldiers because he mentions them in his poetry

*There are Hindus here who look with astonishment on the
occidental style of campaignⁱⁱⁱ*

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Indian Labour Corps, Somme, 1917. ©National Army Museum 102888

By Viceroy Lord Hardinge's decision, Indian troupes were mobilized on 8th August 1914 to fight against Germany. Some 140 000 soldiers of the India Corps had disembarked in Marseille on 26th September 1914 before travelling 1000 kilometers up north to fight in the Flanders region. Mulk Raj Anand's *Across the Black Waters* depicts their trek through fog and mud as well as recent docufiction such Vijay Singh's [Farewell My Indian Soldier](#).

Apollinaire sympathizes with them and projects his own feelings on to them:

*They meditate gravely upon those who've left this place
wondering whether they'll ever see them again.^{iv}*

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Apollinaire held that sincerity of emotion and spontaneity of expression constituted the fundamentals of art. We can thus believe that his sympathy for the displaced Indian soldiers was genuine.

Another aspect of British India that Apollinaire knew very well was the story of opium in India. He refers to the end of the opium war and the transfer of Hong-Kong to the British (Complete Works Prose I 496). Indian opium was so good in quality that it fetched higher prices than Chinese opium in China. Quoting an article from *The Economic Review* which studied the impact of the Chinese decision to curb the opium trade on the Indian economy, Apollinaire observes that opium is a scourge and that it makes an egotist out of a sociable man. He tries to compare British India with French Indo-China. While British India had abandoned the monopoly on opium, Indo-China maintained state monopoly. Apollinaire, who was himself an opium smoker, points out the irony of the situation in France where use of opium was strictly forbidden, while people in portal areas smoked opium with tranquility and beatitude (Complete Works Prose I 448-449).

Apollinaire and Sanskrit Classics

William Jones and the translations from Sanskrit to English undertaken by the Asiatic Society he presided had fascinated the Romantics. Goethe's exclamation in 1792 when he discovered *Sakuntala* is oft-quoted:

*Willst du den Himmel, meurent Erde, avec Einem Namen begreifen;
Nenn 'ich, Sakuntala, Dich, et ainsi de suite Alles gesagt.* (quoted by Alain Poulter 11)

(Wouldst thou the earth and heaven itself in one sole name combine?
I name thee, O Sakuntala! and all at once is said.)

In France, Théophile Gautier had written a ballet entitled *Sacountala* in 1858. Indeed between 1963 and 1896, there had been at least five different translations of this same story sourced from

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The Mahabharata. Apollinaire had a copy of a French translation of Kalidasa's play by Philippe Edouard Foucaux published in 1867 as well its German translation published earlier in 1833, *Sakuntala oder der Erkennungsring*. Apollinaire had travelled in Rhenania in 1902 while working as a preceptor for Gabrielle de Milhau. He was in love with Annie Playden, Gabrielle's English governess. But his love was not reciprocated which resulted in Apollinaire writing a long plaintive poem about his grief. Sakuntala is first mentioned in this poem written in 1903. Claude Morhange-Bégué, who had focused on "La Chanson du Mal Aimé" thinks that Apollinaire's source was the translation done by Abel Bergaigne in 1884. Apollinaire could have very well purchased his old German copy from a bookstall on the banks of the Seine river at St. Michel.

*Sakuntala's royal husband
Tired of conquering rejoiced
When he found her paler
From waiting and her eyes faded from love
Stroking her male gazelle (Burnshaw 84):*



Camille Claudel, Sakountala (L'Abandon) 1888.

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From the semiotic point of view, Sakuntala is the archetype of the loyal and waiting wife like Penelope who is also mentioned in the poem. Claude Morhange-Bégué notices that neither in the translation of Kalidasa's *Sakuntala* nor in Gautier's ballet is the gazelle mentioned. According to her, it is a poetic invention by Apollinaire. Indeed in another poem devoted to Sakuntala and written in 1905, Apollinaire again mentions the gazelle.

Four stars spinning in the skies

Look like one another

Weary of examining myself, let my eyes

Look like those of gazelles.

Majestic, with his bow bent, if

The king comes hunting here,

Let him let my gazelle live

And wound me by love beside her (Complete Works Poetry 853, my translation)

Apollinaire seems to have creatively mixed Pandu killing the stag story in *The Mahabharata* with Sita's attraction for the spotted deer in *The Ramayana* and produced his own legend of *Sakuntala* with the superimposed image of Sita.

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Rama Chasing the Magic Deer, Pahari Kangra Miniature 1785.

The figure of the gazelle helps Apollinaire link Indian mythology with Greek mythology apart from adding a sensual dimension. Apollinaire likens himself to Apollo who pursues Daphne. Apollo does this because he was wounded by Eros's arrow. In iconography, Daphne or Artemis, the huntress and chaste nymph is always represented with a deer. Let us remember that in an answer to a survey on Homer published in 1908, Apollinaire opined "If one were to listen to me, not only would one not abandon Greek studies, but one would also inculcate some rudiments of Sanskrit to young French students" (Complete Works Prose II 1498, my translation). Apollinaire was also fond of another play by Kalidasa, *Malavika and Agnimitra* translated by Philippe Edouard Foucaux into French in 1877.

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While *Contes indiens* adapted from Mary Summer's *Contes et legends de l'Inde ancienne* by Stéphane Mallarmé in 1893 included the story of Nala and Damayanti, Gérard de Nerval had translated and adapted *Mrcchakatika* by Sudraka for the Théâtre de l'Odéon with the title *Chariot d'enfant* (Child's Chariot). He had worked with the English translation of the play by Harold Wilson. Apollinaire had a French translation of *Mrcchakatika* by Barucand Victor in his personal library entitled *Chariot de terre cuite* (Clay chariot).



In a poem entitled "Honor's Hymn" written after the war, Apollinaire refers to this play.

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*I remember tonight the Indian drama
The Boy's Chariot a thief arrives
Who considers before he cuts a hole in the wall
What shape to give to the notch
So that beauty will never lose her rights
Even at a moment of crime
 And I think we should show
 at the instant of dying we poets we men
The same kind of concern in this war we are in
But in this I know as in all things beauty
Is mainly no more than simplicity
So many I have seen dead in the trenches
Who remained standing their heads bowed
Leaning simply against the parapet. (Hyde-Greet 323)*

While Keats, the romantic equated beauty with joy and truth, Apollinaire, the modernist identifies beauty with simplicity. His image of the artist as thief drawn from Kalidasa's play is also reminiscent of one of Picasso's ideas: "Bad artists copy. Good ones steal" (quoted by Damien). In Sudraka's play, Sarvilaka, a poor Brahmin decides to become a thief in order to buy the freedom of his love Mandanika. In front of Charudatta's house where some precious jewels are hidden, Sarvilaka collects and orders his thoughts. He tries to find some moral justification for his transformation as thief and an epic precedent for acting stealthily while his victims are sleeping. Then he chooses the spot where he will drill a whole. Then he picks one among four methods to do so. Finally he has to decide about the shape. After considering five options (lotus, sun, moon, swastika and holywater jug), he settles for the last. For a modern reader, this delaying tactics looks hilarious. However, the way Apollinaire highlights Sarvilaka's aesthetic concerns in the poem erases the distance between cultures and enhances the analytical prowess of the Sanskrit text, rather than exoticise it.

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In her authoritative biography of Apollinaire, Laurence Campa notes how Apollinaire liked the form of letters and "calligraphied" Hebrew and Sanskrit letters and Chinese poems in his formative years. Apollinaire's Albanian friend Faik Beg Konitza had studied Sanskrit and gave Apollinaire his essay on *Natural and Artificial Languages* (Starova 179). Though it is not possible to know how much Sanskrit Apollinaire knew, we might reasonably surmise that Apollinaire probably had access to the notion of *chitrakavya* that Sanskrit poetics had included in its categorization of literary forms. Using letters of the alphabet to draw pictures and patterns and breaking away from linear logic of making meaning and using spatial logic to write striking visual poems which he called *Calligrammes* Apollinaire blazed the trail for later poets such as Ezra Pound and e.e.cummings. A poet among painters, Apollinaire had the talent and ability to successfully experiment with concrete poetry. It should also be remembered that many soldiers in the First World War used their time to manually craft little pieces of artwork. By hammering out calligrammes, Apollinaire was trying to emulate other soldiers.

Apollinaire's particular attention to the swastika stems from both his interest in the interpretation of symbols as well as in the materiality of the sign as such as an icon. The poem entitled "Saillant" in the calligrammes mentions the swastika (Complete Works Poetry 227). He uses the word once (Complete Works Prose I 18) and the visual symbol thrice in his prose in its reversed form (Complete Works Prose I 509, 583, 725). In *La fin de Babylone*, Apollinaire's oriental tale, the druid tells Vietrix, the protagonist, that he will be saved by a woman from the East born under the sacred sign of the swastika. Later Pythagoras himself praises this sign as the essence of geometry, which contained in its combination of straight, lines an infinite number of new theorems. However, only the Hindus know its symbolic meaning. Vietrix has a discussion with men of letters from the land of the Aryas. One of them explains that the swastika symbolizes the movement itself, the divinity and harmony of the universe:

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Vibration comes from vibration. The swastika means unity, the primordial movement, the initial locomotive, the gesture of Anu, Vishnu and those whose name it is forbidden to pronounce. (Complete Work Prose II 719).

The sign was tattooed on the navel of women to protect them during child birth. And those who married them were blessed. By some miracle, the sacred sign of the swastika was transmitted to the descendants of Vietrix.

Apollinaire's meddling with the swastika should not be confused with Nazi Germany's obsession with it. Count Eugène Goblet d'Alviella had published a book in France entitled *La Migration des symboles* in 1891 the second chapter of which (41-108) is devoted the symbol of swastika across ages and cultures including India. Many of Apollinaire's ideas on the meaning of the swastika seem to come from this book (editor's note, Complete Works Prose II 1414) where the major interpretation of the symbol points to the movement of the sun. The counterclockwise swastika symbolizes night and the woman's body as in Indian tantrism.

India as an erotic and esoteric palimpsest in some of Apollinaire's Poems

Apollinaire was an assiduous reader at the National Library and has published a book entitled *L'Enfer de la bibliothèque nationale*, a catalogue of erotic books found in the respectable library. He thus discovered Vatsyayana's *Kama Sutra*, Kalya Malla's *Ananga Ranga* and *Venus in India or Love Adventures in Hindustan* written by a certain Captain Devereux. He bought a copy of the last title for his personal library. According to Apollinaire, it is the work of an army officer who did not lack money and leisure. The British of the Victorian age turned to French naturalist writing as a relief from the prudery prevalent at that time. Similarly, this book, which is a compliment to Kipling's accounts of British India, might have been inspired by Théophile Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (Complete Works Prose I 851).

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It is in the love poems Apollinaire writes to Madeleine where we can discern the influence of Indian esoteric beliefs. According to the Bhagavat Gita, "the embodied soul lives in the city of nine gates." Borrowing the idea from the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad, the Bhagavat Gita specifies what they are: "The body consists of nine gates (two eyes, two nostrils, two ears, one mouth, the anus and the genitals)."^v The idea conveyed is spiritual. When all the gates of the body are illuminated by knowledge, goodness can be experienced. But Apollinaire hijacks the original meaning to signify that male desire is what illuminates the female body. Apollinaire's poem turns "war into ecstasy" as Pawel Wojtasik remarks (MacDonald 58).

The Nine Doors of Your Body

...

*You don't know my virgin your body has nine doors
I know seven and two are concealed from me*

Apollinaire sees his own body as a poem of desire. The ritual of describing the seven doors is a fantasy in the Lacanian sense. The poem ends with an invocation to the mysterious ninth door:

*Supreme threshold
Mine as I hold
The supreme key to the
Nine doors
O doors open to my voice
I am the Master of the Key*

Though Apollinaire borrows the concept of the nine doors from the Indian tradition, perhaps from the sex manual *Ananga Ranga*, we can see that Apollinaire transcends the merely sexual to underscore the magical power that resides more in poetry than in the man.

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The secret poems that Apollinaire wrote to Madeleine bear the imprint of tantrism. Tantrism does not view the fulfillment of carnal desire as immoral. Tantrism has its own secret code, diagrams, rituals and prayers. Apollinaire who was good in music transcribed the musicality of a Sanskrit prayer into his erotic and incantatory French text that parodies goddess worship. This poem transforms the poet into an explorer of virgin land. It modernizes the tantric belief that our body is the microcosm of the macrocosm of the world. Rather than rendering the woman's body sacred, the poem secularizes it by likening the female body to familiar geography.



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Ninth Secret Poem^{vi}

*I worship your fleece which is the perfect triangle
Of the Goddess
I am the lumberjack of the only virgin forest
O my Eldorado
I am the only fish in your voluptuous ocean
You my lovely Siren
I am the climber on your snowy mountains
O my whitest Alp
I am the heavenly archer at your beautiful mouth
O my darling quiver
I am the hauler of your midnight hair
O lovely ship on the canal of my kisses
And the lilies of your arms are beckoning me
O my summer garden
The fruits of your breast are ripening their honey for me
O my sweet-smelling orchard
And I am raising you O Madeleine O my beauty above the earth
Like the torch of all light.*

Similarly, in the highly erotic poem addressed to Lou (Complete Works Poetry 221), Apollinaire repeats "I love you" as an officiating priest in a temple offering adoration does by pronouncing an appropriate mantra.

*My dear little Lou, I love you
My dear little palpitating star I love you
Deliciously elastic body I love you*

The poem continues with the poet evoking the erotic zones of a woman's body and ending with an orgasmic

O Little Lou I love you love you love you

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In all the three poems quoted, India appears as a filigree through the images, sounds and structure of the poem rather than as literal representation.

A Step Away from Orientalism: Apollinaire's Focus on Tagore and the wider world

On 16th June 1918, Apollinaire translated into French for *Mercure de France* the declarations of Poet Rabindranath Tagore published by *The Manchester Guardian* in March 1918 in a special issue on India. In this article Tagore unfolded his realistic perception of the differences between East and West. The humble people of the East were major witnesses to History who could tell the Truth without fear, while Europe was fully conscious of her greatness and did not know where her greatness may fail her.

The friendship between Rabindranath Tagore and Romain Rolland has been much studied, while little has been said of Apollinaire's focus on Tagore's criticism of the war and colonial violence which shows his respect for and his silent endorsement of the ideas expressed by Tagore.

Through this present war comes a warning to Europe that her things have been getting the better of her truth, and in order to be saved, she must find her soul and her God and fulfill her purpose by carrying her ideals into all continents of the earth and not sacrifice them to her greed of money and dominion (Tagore 241).

In another short note on Ananda Coomaraswamy's *The Dance of Shiva*, Apollinaire draws attention to the idea of decline of Europe (Complete Works Prose II 1473). He reiterates the fact that the poet Rabindranath Tagore had repeatedly proclaimed the failure of Western civilization. Apollinaire's interest in India is an integral part of his interest in the wider Eastern world that encompassed China and Japan. His journal entries included articles on Buddhist Art in the Cernushi and Guimet museums and exhibitions of Persian Miniatures (Complete Works Prose II 747) and Batiks (Complete Works Prose II 767), Chinese paintings and generally Orientalist art in Paris. In a write-up on Albert Besnard's exhibition of Indian paintings published in 1912,

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Apollinaire sees in him a representative of modern orientalism who can vivify European art and ends his note by quoting a letter from Flaubert to Huysmans: "There is the Ganges, for God's sake" (Complete Works Prose II 456).



Albert Besnard, Trichinopoly Bridge and Benares

In another article on the French Orientalists, Apollinaire devotes a whole paragraph to Albert Besnard for showing India and its profound light. During his sojourn in England (1879-1883) Albert Besnard was influenced by Pre-Raphaelite painters. Later he travelled to India and Algeria. "With their saturated colours, his big Indian oils and gouaches were a sensation at the Galerie Georges Petit in Paris in 1913" says the press release of a 2017 exhibition of his

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paintings in Petit Palais. From these paintings, Apollinaire could gather that big Indian cities were unstable and men did not change their manners in the name of virtue (Complete Works Prose II 512).

"Yellow Art" published in the journal *L'Intransigeant* in 1911(Complete Works Prose II 250-252) tells the story of German prejudice concerning the collection of Chinese paintings by Olga-Julia Wegener which had let the British Museum acquire many of these precious silk kakemonos. Originally planned to be shown at the Musée Guimet in 1909, they were shown at the Bernheim-Jeune gallery in 1911 where the light was better. Apollinaire refrains from giving the names of the Chinese painters saying that they were difficult to retain while conceding that the powerful and lofty Chinese art deserved admiration. In another highly visionary article, Apollinaire explores the impact of China in the 20th century and thinks that the European sensibility will be thoroughly altered by Chinese input. "France is well placed to import into the West, the superior ideas that keep alive the oldest of civilizations, thanks to its possessions in Indo-China and trading posts in Annam, Tonkin and Yunnan" (Complete Works Prose II 995, my translation), he says and concludes that "Western order should not perish. It should be vivified and enhanced by absorbing the subtlety of intellect of the Chinese East" (Complete Works Prose II 996, my translation). Such a syncretic standpoint is indeed a far cry from the attitude of typical Orientalists whose representations of the East were not intended to put the East on par with the West.

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A friend of Picasso who admired primitive art, Apollinaire also pleaded for the recognition of artistic work from other geographical areas and colonies such as Australia, Easter Island, New Caledonia, New Hebrides, Tahiti, diverse African regions, Madagascar etc (Complete Works Prose II 123). Indeed the Quai Branley Jacques Chirac opened in 2006 seems to respond to his visionary dream of an ethnographic museum of France. Apollinaire's inclusive gaze incorporated not only Eastern horizons but also areas conquered by Europeans in Africa and the Pacific. He also embraced the idea of female artists (Marie Laurencin, Odile Redon) and feminine literature

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(Colette Willy, Lucie Delarue-Mardrus). Thanks to his modernist aesthetics, this truly cosmopolitan writer had found a path that veered away from Orientalism as Edward Said later conceptualized it and internationalized French literature through his travels, knowledge of other languages and receptivity to other cultures. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said himself refers to Raymond William's citing of Apollinaire as an example of the restlessly mobile immigré or exile, the internationally antibourgeois artist (Said 244). The reception of Apollinaire's creative critical work in the decade after 1920 on both sides of the Atlantic was to transform him into "the patron saint of the modern movement" (Bohn 2).

NOTES

ⁱ . All the illustrations in this article are used for academic purposes as per the fair use clause. The copyright belongs to their authors.

ⁱⁱ It was rumoured that the real father of Apollinaire was the son of Napoleon II.

ⁱⁱⁱ https://www.poemhunter.com/i/ebooks/pdf/guillaume_apollinaire_2012_6.pdf, 168.

^{iv} *ibid.*

^v https://vaniquotes.org/wiki/The_body_consists_of_nine_gates_-_two_eyes,_two_nostrils,_two_ears,_one_mouth,_the_anus_and_the_genitals

^{vi} <http://www.artofeurope.com/apollinaire/apo2.htm>

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