

The École de Paris, Inside and Out

Reconsidering the Experience of the Foreign Artist in Interwar France

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I needed Paris. The root-soil of my art was Vitebsk, but like a tree, my art needed Paris like water, otherwise it would wither and die ... To achieve the combination of refined expression with an art of the earth, I felt I had to seek the vitalizing waters of Paris.

Marc Chagall, cited in James Johnson Sweeney, 'An Interview with Marc Chagall', *Partisan Review*, winter 1944, p. 92

Throughout the early twentieth century, Paris enjoyed an unrivalled cultural hegemony, attracting artists worldwide. While some may have been obliged to leave their places of birth because of pressing sociopolitical or economic factors, the choice of Paris for many was motivated by artistic pursuits. Marc Chagall gave some indication of shared ambitions when he recalled the circumstances under which he left his native Russia in 1910, driven by the search for a 'refined expression'. As an artist who dwelt visually and verbally upon his own ethnic origins, Chagall presents us with vivid attempts to describe his expatriate condition. His first self-portrait, *Self-Portrait with Seven Figures* (1912–13), at once demonstrates the pervasive influence of his newly adopted city and reminisces upon the place he has left. Hebrew characters form the word 'Russia' to the right of the artist's head, while Vitebsk, Chagall's birthplace, remembered through time and distance, appears on both the wall of the studio and the canvas upon which the 7-fingered painter works.¹ Alternatively, to the left reads the Hebrew for 'Paris', beside the atelier window which offers a view of the city itself and emblems of its modernity: an automobile, a parachutist and the Eiffel Tower. Not all of Chagall's subsequent paintings would reflect the same sense of creative anticipation with which the artist here depicted himself, but this example nevertheless marks the beginning of his idiomatic expression, the negotiation of which resulted from the modern

artistic influences with which he experimented—Fauvism, Cubism, Orphism, Surrealism—and the folklorique and mystic traditions upon which he drew. This artistic negotiation would mirror the artist's physical movements between his native Russia and his adopted French home, as well as his journeys to Palestine and later Israel.

The creative practice of foreign-born artists, like Chagall, working in Paris in the first half of the twentieth century represents an artistic corpus through which we might study (voluntary) migration as a collective artistic experience, with rich examples of the ways in which artists drew on the visual culture of their new home while dwelling upon their respective national and ethnic origins. The reaction of artists to their new environment is, however, but one part of the process engendered by migration. In the reception offered to artists by their adopted home and audience, there is equally evident a critical and institutional negotiation through which the work of migrants is alternately included in and excluded from the predominant cultural realm. The objective of this paper is thus twofold: to nominate specific examples of the idioms which artists from diverse backgrounds developed in response to their experiences in Paris; and to offer a brief comparative analysis of the way in which their work was subsequently received within the critical and institutional networks which had emerged in the late nineteenth century, and which continued to evolve throughout the interwar period.

The Querelle des Indépendants

Artists were drawn to the French capital not only by what Chagall described as 'the vitalizing waters of Paris' but likewise by the opportunities the city offered to sell and exhibit their work, notably in the fora of the Salon des Indépendants and the Salon d'Automne. The jury-less Salon des Indépendants was particularly popular—and

populated—due to a policy whereby, for a modest sum, any artist, French or foreign, male or female, might display their work, a proudly independent policy understood to be reflected in the alphabetical order according to which artists' works were hung. Yet by 1923, in the face of a perception—and its attendant disquiet—that the presence of foreign artists was increasing, the salon president, Paul Signac, sought to institute a classification by nationality.² Amid accusations equating the new format with the creation of a 'concentration camp' into which the work of foreign artists was to be 'relegated', the committee defended its proposal by arguing that the salon had grown so large as to be incomprehensible. A schema by nationality might, it was felt, provide an increasingly confused audience with the semblance of order and an art historical lesson in the contemporary practice of 'national schools'.³ In response, artists and critics averse to the new scheme publicly decried an arrangement which sought in the work of artists long practising in France the visible characteristics of diverse foreign traditions, a controversy labelled the 'Querelle des Indépendants'.

The tenuous ties of nationality in the case of several artists certainly called into question the validity of the committee's didactic ambitions, with Jules Pascin offering a prime example. Born in Bulgaria to a father of Sephardic origins and a Serbo-Italian mother, Pascin had changed his name from Julius Mordecai Pincas upon his arrival in Paris from Munich in 1905, where he was known initially as a German artist, due to his association with other German-speaking painters. He had left Paris for America in 1914, where he remained for the duration of World War I, returning to France in 1920 as an American citizen. If Pascin's formal status was therefore ambiguous, his artistic affiliation was nevertheless beyond dispute. His portraits of colleagues and friends, his documentation of the city's lively cabarets, cafés and private spaces, were seen to epitomise *les années folles* in the same way as those of Henri Toulouse-Lautrec had characterised *la belle époque*, and comparisons between the two artists were frequent. As the critic André Warnod was later to remark, 'If we had to nominate one painter capable of representing all the lively forces that animate Montparnasse, there would be no hesitation. We would name Pascin'.⁴ Pascin's 1921 work *André Salmon et Montmartre*, a near life-size portrait of one of the most prolific critics of the time, represents the sense of that shared bohemia and its painted record. Salmon stands before the motley life of the metropolis: the unmistakable domes of Sacré Cœur, the arches of the Pont Neuf spanning the Seine, and the

revellers inhabiting the city's cafés and bars all appear like a human and architectural *feu d'artifice* around the poet. Pascin's own response to the proposed reorganisation of the salon consisted of a facetious concern that, during the course of the exhibition, Jewish painters would be baptised and Christian sculptors circumcised, but he otherwise welcomed 'any change which would add new interest to a display' where one could expect to see everything but the very worst of 'Sunday painters'.⁵ Others more seriously questioned the wisdom of any scheme in which the artist's quintessential Parisian scenes could be displayed as characteristic of the American School.

The rearrangement of the Salon des Indépendants, as well as the creation in 1922 of a museum devoted to contemporary foreign art at the Jeu de Paume, have been seen as symptomatic of an increasingly conservative cultural landscape in France in the interwar period, and of the exclusionary measures to which foreign artists were subject.⁶ The Querelle des Indépendants was certainly indicative of an emerging discourse within critical and institutional circles regarding the nature of French art and the contribution of artists born outside France to its contemporary practice. The critic Waldemar George, in his review of the reorganised 1924 Salon des Indépendants, typified the debate which framed the subsequent display when he asked: 'Should we consider French art as an ethnic notion or as a purely aesthetic notion?'⁷ Implicit in the author's rhetorical question—regardless of his own developing ambivalence—was at least the possibility that a case might be made for an expansive definition of French art, beyond the ethnicity or nationality of artists⁸; or, as the author went on to suggest, that as France imposed its sense of order, discipline and harmony upon foreign artists practising within its borders, so must those same artists be considered an enrichment of the national school. A peculiarly French notion is at work here, one in which a sense of belonging is seen to come not only from ethnicity—shared blood—but equally from broader affiliation—shared experience and volition. This was most famously expressed by Ernest Renan in his 1882 address 'Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?', in which he insisted that the existence of a nation was a 'daily plebiscite' at the heart of which lay two equally important parts, 'the common possession of a rich legacy of memories [and] actual consent, the desire to live together'.⁹ Further elaboration of this point is beyond the scope of this paper, but suffice it to say for the present argument that Renan's 'daily plebiscite' was enshrined in French citizenship laws, which ascribed nationality not only by



Léonard Tsuguharu Foujita
Nu couché à la toile de Jouy, 1922
 130 × 195 cm
 oil on canvas
 Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris
 © ADAGP, Paris, 2008

blood—*jus sanguinis*—but also to the role of residence and socialisation—*jus soli*.¹⁰

The concept of *jus soli*, the right of the territory, often tacitly underscored accounts regarding artistic migrants, collectively known as *les transplantés*—the transplanted ones.¹¹ Chagall's recollection of seeking 'the vitalizing waters of Paris' in order to sustain the 'root-soil of his art' is indicative of the way in which artists themselves internalised this metaphor to describe their own experience. Francis de Miomandre, in an extensive review of the Japanese artist Léonard Tsuguharu Foujita, appropriated the same analogy to characterise the circumstances of his subject: 'Every plant that is uprooted from its native milieu knows the listless, unproductive hours needed to acclimate to another soil, before the moment that it picks up again and doubles its yield'.¹² 'Transplantation' thus functioned neatly as a metaphor for the migratory experience, acknowledging different origins and the efforts required to put down new roots, while articulating the belief that once a plant—or artist—took to the French soil, it necessarily flourished. Foujita himself throughout the interwar

period certainly enjoyed increasing critical and commercial success, recognised above all for a distinctive style known as '*grand fond blanc*', which fused Western oil painting with the traditional Japanese medium of black ink, realised through a series of monochromatic reclining nudes executed from 1921 onwards.¹³ The 1922 depiction of the model Kiki de Montparnasse in *Nu couché à la toile de Jouy* (see figure) typifies the celebrated velutinous and sensuous effect with which Foujita infused the female form, through a combination of painted ground and rigorous linear technique. Like Chagall, the Japanese artist thus developed a synthetic style, drawing on a major thematic interest of French painting—the *odalisque*—but visualising it through a method which reflected his own national origins, namely monochromatic ink painting.

The École de Paris Exists

The decision in 1923 to reorganise the Salon des Indépendants according to nationality represented one institutional reaction to the increasing presence and success of 'transplanted' artists like Chagall, Pascin and Foujita. The subsequent Querelle des Indépendants gave rise to a conflicting critical response which disputed the wisdom of dividing from their French peers artists who had, in the words of André Warnod, come to France 'to sample the gentle climate, the light, to know

the *bonheur de vivre* and rejoice in this liberty, without which art cannot flower'.¹⁴ It was ultimately Warnod who, writing in 1925 in the literary broadsheet *Comœdia*, sought to give a name to, and validate, the contribution of foreign-born artists to contemporary practices: 'The *École de Paris* exists. Later art historians will be able, better than we, to define its character and study its makeup, but we can still today affirm its existence and its power of attraction which brings to us artists from around the world'.¹⁵ The author was thus retrospectively according a collective identity to a diverse group of artists who often had little in common beyond a 'love of art' which had, since the turn of the century, driven them to Paris, whether from within France or beyond. For, as Warnod intended it, 'École de Paris' was a designation which described artists both French and foreign-born, often working within a loose network of affiliation, whose collective talents and production offered an alternative—and preferred—'School' to the obsolete academic model. The author's optimism that the phenomenon he sought to describe might later be subject to definitive study has proved misplaced. In its broadest terms, 'École de Paris' has served as an alternative term for works that were, in the first half of the twentieth century, 'made in Paris'. A more recent, restrictive art historical paradigm has, to the contrary, contended that the label operated as a mechanism of exclusion, specifically intended to indicate work other than French painting produced by French men and to maintain the position of the foreign artist as working outside the French tradition, namely the *École Française*.¹⁶ From this perspective, the contemporary criticism of figures such as Fritz Vanderpyl, Adolphe Basler and Waldemar George, who lamented the idea of an *École de Paris* as a stylistic 'Esperanto' signalling loss of all 'local feeling, local spirit, local subjects and local colour' to generic cosmopolitanism, has been frequently referenced.¹⁷ Likewise, one can point to the anti-Semitic vitriol of Camille Mauclair, for whom Jewish artists were no less than the catalysts of Occidental decline.¹⁸

Critical accounts which embraced the integrative vision of Warnod's coinage—for the author's thesis found both its supporters and its detractors—have been less consistently documented. Charles Fegdal argued in his 1927 publication *Essais critiques sur l'art moderne* that French visual culture 'exercised a marvellous and inevitable hold' over each and every artist that came to Paris. In Fegdal's terms, French art, to which migrant artists unswervingly gave 'their voluntary ardour and feverish faith', no less than '[gave] birth to these foreign artists'; accordingly, each day they passed on

French soil brought with it 'certain naturalization'.¹⁹ Fegdal's reflections echoed Marc Chagall's account of his own artistic genesis, as quoted in Florent Fels's 1925 volume *Propos d'artistes*: 'I was born in Vitebsk, but I was also born in France'.²⁰ In the 1931 volume of the *Dictionnaire biographique des artistes contemporains*, George Charensol, in his entry on the Polish-born Moïse Kisling, likewise drew on the motif of *jus soli* in describing the practice of foreign-born artists as de facto French by virtue of the influence that 'the atmosphere of the gentle French soil' had exercised upon them.²¹ Kisling, a naturalised French citizen having served France during World War I, was described as having equally undergone an artistic naturalisation, made visible, according to Charensol, in the artist's richer and more vibrant palette, and in the clarity and polish of his portraits of the Parisian *illuminati* or the city's most iconic figure, Kiki de Montparnasse.

Not all migrant artists were equally well served by a label which designated their inclusion—or naturalisation—as by one which sought to exclude their work from contemporary French practice. Even an integrative understanding of the denomination *École de Paris* implicitly fixed the direction of influence, acknowledging in the work of foreign artists specific French sources, but largely disavowing the inspiration they might have in turn offered their French peers. The work of Chaim Soutine offers one final example. When not heavily damned for his visceral technique and apparently unbridled application of paint, labelled *Schmiermalerei* (smear painting), Soutine's unassuming portraits of humble Parisian figures and numerous still lifes featuring eviscerated game and fowl were appreciated for continuing in the tradition of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century models of Jean-Baptiste Oudry and Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin.²² Neglecting the influence Soutine exerted on his contemporaries, including the French-born Jean Fautrier, represents as great a disservice to the painter as the contention that his work stood entirely outside the French tradition from which he drew. Few critics suggested, as Warnod had, that it was 'difficult to specify what foreign artists have borrowed from us and what we borrow from them'.²³ Nevertheless, to treat the term 'École de Paris' only as a mechanism of exclusion dividing the foreign from the indigenous is to negate a more nuanced exploration of the conditions under which the work of Parisian artists was both produced and received in the interwar period. This includes acknowledging that the processes of inclusion and exclusion to which all artists were subject were themselves more complex than

an opposition between French and foreign (or foreign-born), but might equally have been framed by ideology, class, gender or questions of style. The École de Paris in the interwar context is then best understood as a series of conflicting historical arguments about the nature of French contemporary practice itself, including the place of immigrant artists and the validity of their work. Its continuing significance is a historical site through which we might re-examine the processes of negotiation endemic to artistic migration.

NOTES

- 1 The physical anomaly makes reference to the Yiddish idiom 'mit ale zibn finger' ('with all seven fingers'), normally used to suggest that a task is completed well, quickly and with commitment.
- 2 For an example of the critical unrest vis-à-vis the increasing numbers of foreign participants at the Salon des Indépendants, see Louis Vauxcelles, 'Aux Indépendants', *L'Amour de l'Art*, January 1922, p. 14.
- 3 See 'Enquête: La Querelle des Indépendants', *Bulletin de la vie artistique*, part 1, 15 December 1923, pp. 202–9; part 2, 1 January 1924, pp. 5–12; and part 3, 15 January 1924, pp. 30–7.
- 4 André Warnod, *Les Berceaux de la jeune peinture*, Éditions Albin Michel, Paris, 1925, p. 235.
- 5 See Pascin's response to the 'Enquête: La Querelle des Indépendants', *Bulletin de la vie artistique*, 15 January 1924, pp. 33–4.
- 6 See Romy Golan, *Modernity and Nostalgia: Art and Politics in France between the Wars*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, and London, 1995, pp. 137, 151.
- 7 Waldemar George, 'Salon des Indépendants: Compte Rendu', *L'Amour de l'Art*, February 1924, p. 43.
- 8 The ambiguity of George's trajectory as a critic is discussed in Matthew Affron, 'Waldemar George: A Parisian Art Critic on Modernism and Fascism', in Matthew Affron & Mark Antliff (eds), *Fascist Visions: Art and Ideology in France and Italy*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1997, pp. 171–204.
- 9 Ernest Renan, 'Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?', in *Œuvre complètes de Ernest Renan*, vol. 1, Calmann-Lévy, Paris, 1947, p. 905.
- 10 See Rogers Brubaker, *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1992.
- 11 See, for example, Ricciotto Canudo, *Les Transplantés*, Éditions Eugène Fasquelle, Paris, 1913.
- 12 Francis de Miomandre, 'Foujita', *L'Art et les Artistes*, October 1931, p. 16.
- 13 See, for example, Michel Vaucaire, *Foujita*, Editions G Crès & Cie, Paris, 1924; see also Bert Winther-Tamaki, 'Embodiment/Disembodiment: Japanese Painting during the Fifteen-Year War', *Monumenta Nipponica*, vol. 52, no. 2, 1997, p. 148.
- 14 André Warnod, 'L'École de Paris', *Comœdia*, 27 January 1925, p. 1.
- 15 *ibid.*
- 16 See, for example, Romy Golan, 'The École Française vs. the École de Paris', in Kenneth Silver & Romy Golan (eds), *The Circle of Montparnasse: Jewish Artists in Paris 1905–1945*, Universe Books, New York, 1985, p. 83.
- 17 Fritz R Vanderpyl, 'Existe-t-il une peinture juive?', *Mercure de France*, 15 July 1925, pp. 386–96. See also Adolphe Basler, *Le Cafard après la fête*, Éditions Jean Budry & Cie, Paris, 1929; and Waldemar George, 'École française ou École de Paris?', *Formes*, part 1, June 1931, pp. 92–3; part 2, July 1931, pp. 110–11.
- 18 Mauclair's sentiments were made explicit even in the titles of his two volumes: *La Farce de l'art vivant: une campagne picturale 1928–29* [*The Farce of Modern Art: A Pictorial Campaign 1928–29*], Nouvelle revue critique, Paris, 1929; and *Les Météques contre l'art français* [*Wogs against French Art*], Nouvelle revue critique, Paris, 1930.
- 19 Charles Fegdal, *Essais critiques sur l'art moderne*, Librairie Stock, Paris, 1927, p. 65.
- 20 Florent Fels, *Propos d'artistes*, Renaissance, Paris, 1925, p. 32.
- 21 Georges Charensol, 'Kisling', *Dictionnaire biographique des artistes contemporains 1910–1930*, vol. 2, Art & Édition, Paris, 1931, p. 249. Charensol was then editor of the periodical *L'Art vivant*.
- 22 Adolphe Basler and Charles Kunstler direct the label of *Schmiermalerei* towards Soutine in their volume *La Peinture indépendant en France II: de Matisse à Segonzac*, Éditions G Crès & Cie, Paris, 1929, p. 56.
- 23 Warnod, 'L'École de Paris', p. 1.