

Blaise Cendrars at the Morgan: A Modern Match of Poetry and Painting

A travelogue in verse, rich with Sonia Delaunay's art pyrotechnics, is the centerpiece of one of the most eye-opening shows of the summer.

By Jason Farago

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The Big Apple is a good place for reinvention, and the Swiss poet Frédéric-Louis Sauser had reason for a restart here in the spring of 1912. At 25 years old he'd washed up in New York Harbor, nearly penniless after trying his luck in Russia and Brazil. He couldn't vanquish his writer's block, and he could barely feed himself; he'd had a gig playing piano at a nickelodeon, but it didn't last. On April 7, 1912 — Easter Sunday, when his refuge of the public library was closed — the young poet moped into the First Presbyterian Church in Greenwich Village, where an officious priest chucked him out after Sauser failed to cough up a donation.

He walked home, furious; he hardly slept. But in that exhausted frenzy the young man finally started to write — and ended up with the landmark modernist poem “Easter in New York,” a citywide dirge of darkly beautiful alexandrines. (“I am afraid of those shadows the buildings project. / I am afraid. Someone's there. I don't dare turn my head.”) New York had given him a new life, and Sauser gave himself a phoenixlike new name. Henceforth he would be called Blaise Cendrars: a name for a poet of fire, a promise of ash (*cendres*) and art.

“Blaise Cendrars: Poetry Is Everything,” at the Morgan Library & Museum, is one of the most appealing and eye-opening shows of the summer — a concentrated pop of free-spirited trans-Atlantic modernity, alive with rich color and typographical pyrotechnics. If you haven't heard of Cendrars, you're not alone; in an intro French poetry class you are more likely to encounter his good friend Guillaume Apollinaire, a more polished example of modern alienation and fractured style.



Installation view of “Blaise Cendrars: Poetry Is Everything,” at the Morgan Library & Museum. The centerpiece is “The Prose of the Trans-Siberian and of Little Jeanne of France,” a travelogue in verse from 1913 on a tall accordion-fold booklet. The abstract bursts are by Sonia Delaunay-Terk. Janny Chiu/The Morgan Library & Museum

But Cendrars had a Zelig-like omnipresence in modern French arts and letters, collaborating with the artist Fernand Léger, the filmmaker Abel Gance, the composer Darius Milhaud, and just about every other avant-gardist in Paris a century ago. He also had a modern passion for advertising and commercial display, which he saw as coequal to poetry. The Morgan makes a virtue of his multimedia omnivorousness, especially in the masterpiece at this show’s heart: “The Prose of the Trans-Siberian and of Little Jeanne of France,” an unconstrained and nearly unpunctuated travelogue in verse from 1913, self-published on a 6.5-foot-tall accordion-fold booklet, framed by the parti-colored abstract bursts of the great French-Ukrainian artist Sonia Delaunay-Terk.

Cendrars was born in 1887 to a Swiss father and Scottish mother, but he was barely into his teens when he hit the road. In both “The Prose of the Trans-Siberian” and in his later interviews he made his youth out to be a *rocambolesque* adventure. He does seem to have witnessed the Russian Revolution of 1905, though whether he actually shoveled coal on Chinese locomotives is rather less certain. The autobiographical exaggerations were one with the writing, a classic case of a modernist desire to wed art and life. Cendrars’s verse is Whitmanesque in its expansiveness and flamboyance, but sharper, spikier. It took the libertine (and colonial) wanderlust of Rimbaud and purged it of its sentiment, leaving something estranged and wholly modern.



“The Prose of the Trans-Siberian and of Little Jeanne of France,” with its entire interior unfolded. Blaise Cendrars/Succession Cendrars/Pracusa 20230412; via The Morgan Library & Museum

A few months after his New York breakthrough Cendrars went back to Europe, with a new name and a new confidence. (He printed “Easter in New York” at his own expense in Paris, where it sold

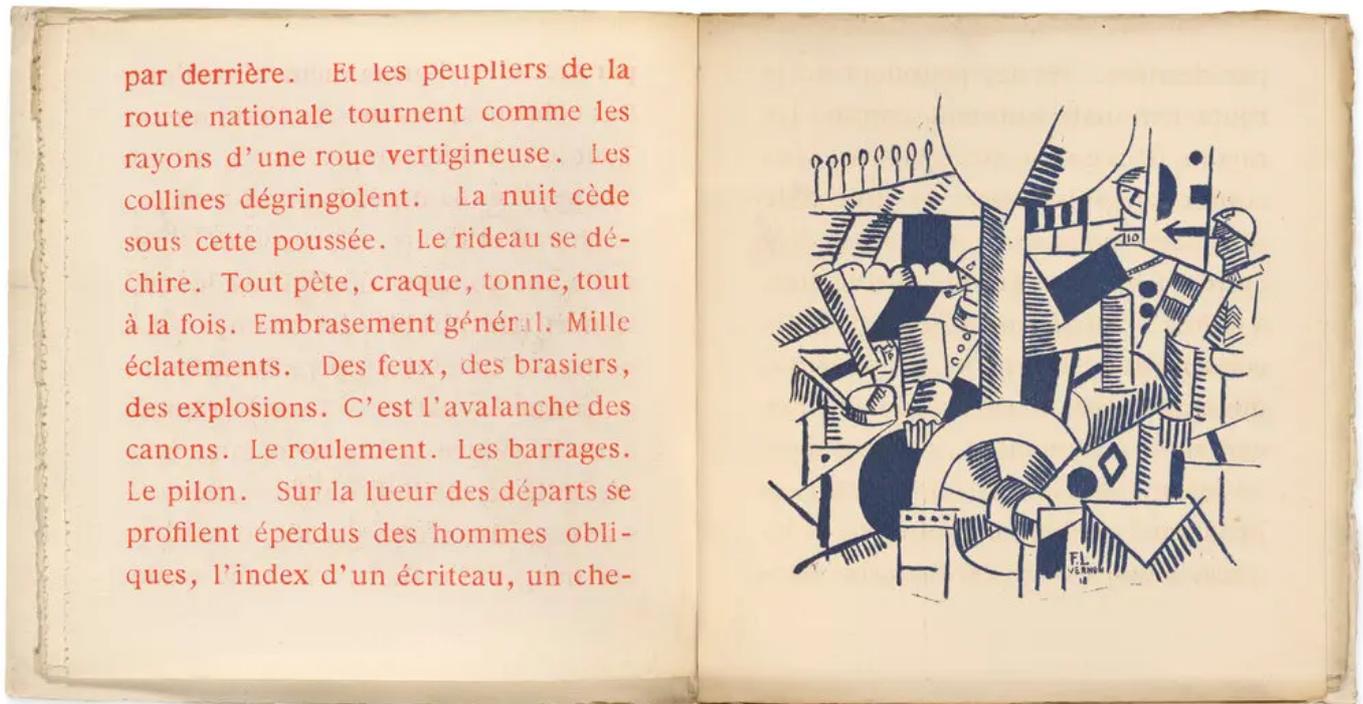
precisely zero copies.) At the start of 1913, he gave a reading at Apollinaire's apartment, and met the husband-and-wife artists Robert and Sonia Delaunay. It was Sonia who had the idea to collaborate — and together, in “The Prose of the Trans-Siberian,” they would produce one of the greatest of all modern artist publications: a percussive, fast-moving experiment with painting and poetry that constituted, in their words, “the first simultaneous book.” (The Morgan acquired one of the few dozen surviving copies in 2021; a nice digital feature on the Morgan's website lets you zoom in on all the panels, and provides a full English translation of the poem by Ron Padgett.)

It spans 22 panels, down which Cendrars's free verse runs in 30 different typefaces. At the top right, above the title, is a reproduction of a Michelin map of the Russian railway, and the poem recounts a “really bad poet” named Blaise, crossing Siberia and northern China with Jeanne, an “innocent flower” he met in a bordello back room. (In the original French, she spells her name like Joan of Arc.) As Blaise and Jeanne rattle down the right side of the book, Delaunay's abstract arcs and slices illuminate the left, and often her colors — applied by hand to each copy by the printers, in a stenciling technique called pochoir — bleed into the interstices of Cendrars's verse. Somehow the Trans-Siberian ends up making a final stop in Paris; and at bottom left, Delaunay interrupted her color riot with the telltale calligraphic arcs of the Eiffel Tower.



A section of “The Prose of the Trans-Siberian,” which Cendrars and Delaunay called “the first simultaneous book.” Blaise Cendrars/Succession Cendrars/Pracusa 20230412; via The Morgan Library & Museum

Throughout “The Prose of the Trans-Siberian” are intimations of war, and a year after its publication the Swiss poet had signed up for the French Foreign Legion. Cendrars lost his right arm at the Second Battle of Champagne in 1915 — and while he was convalescing, and teaching himself to write with his left hand, he befriended Léger, a fellow artist of urban fragmentation. (Léger was himself a veteran, and almost died from a mustard gas attack in the trenches of the Argonne Forest.) The Morgan show includes several of their collaborations, including the 1918 book “J’ai tué” (“I Have Killed”), in which Léger’s jagged Cubist gears and cylinders accompany a dense prose poem: “Devastated countryside. Frozen grass. Dead soil. Sickly pebbles. Cruciform barbed wire. The eternal waiting. We are under the arc of the shells.”



A spread from Blaise Cendrars's 1918 book, "J'ai tué" ("I Have Killed"), with illustrations by Fernand Léger. Blaise Cendrars/Succession Cendrars/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris; via The Morgan Library & Museum

A further robust collaboration came in the 1920s, when Cendrars traveled to Brazil and met Léger's greatest student, Tarsila do Amaral. Cendrars joined Tarsila and the poet Oswald de Andrade on a trip from São Paulo to the Brazilian interior, where Tarsila sketched the hills and colonial mining towns that would illustrate Cendrars's book "Feuilles de Route" ("Travel Notes"). It's no great exaggeration to say that this was the trip that birthed Brazilian modern art — Andrade would soon write a landmark manifesto for a national art breaking free from European pretensions, while Tarsila would wed African, Indigenous and European influences into a new and fully Brazilian mode.

"Poetry Is Everything" is the smallest but most exciting of four shows of 19th- and 20th-century experimentation at the Morgan this summer. There's a larger Swiss showcase of drawings by the Symbolist painter Ferdinand Hodler, whose rhythmic, hieratic nudes boil down modern life into dreamlike erotic rituals. (They are beautiful, though maybe hard to appreciate fully; many of the works on paper are preparatory drawings for murals in Europe. Luckily the Metropolitan Museum of Art has a big one on view.) Add to these the optically tricky drawings of the British artist Bridget Riley and a showcase of a major gift of 19th-century French landscapes (with not just drawings but especially fine early photography) and you've got a very pleasant afternoon. But the highlight is Cendrars, who saw his time disrupted and disrupted his style in turn, and who models today how to live up to upheaval.

"Everything is written in blood," Henry Miller wrote of Cendrars's verse and fiction, "but a blood that is saturated with starlight."

Blaise Cendrars (1887–1961): Poetry Is Everything

Through Sept. 24 at the Morgan Library & Museum, 225 Madison Avenue at 36th Street, Manhattan; 212-685-0008, themorgan.org.