The Visionary Drawing and its Knowledge: Orients (Strasbourg, 7-8 Dec 23)

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"The Visionary Drawing and its Knowledge: Orients".

Workshop organised as part of the research programme The visionary drawing and its knowledge. From the study and valorization of the archives of Théophile Bra (University of Strasbourg Institute of Advanced Studies – USIAS).

It is because the sense of the invisible, abandoned for centuries by the Westerner, has almost totally disappeared, and because, in order to be reborn, he would have to devote the time of many human lives to the dreadful gymnastics of spiritual awakening peculiar to the East and the only guarantee of the future of the Spirit. Nevertheless, the glimmers of our visionaries are enough to indicate the only path that could save humanity from its unlimited abjection. (Gilbert-Lecomte, Roger, L'Horrible Révélation la seule, 1930, emphasis of the author)

As the “Orient” became a central object of Western knowledge and representation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Mangold 2004, Lemoine 2000), the workshop will examine the way in which visionary drawing took hold of it. Associated with the research programme on the written and drawn archives of Théophile Bra (1797-1863) and supported by the University of Strasbourg Institute of Advanced Studies – USIAS, it aspires to open up the approach to the visionary drawing in order to comprehend its participation in epistemological and philosophical changes of modern times. It seeks to renew the methods of art history by opening up to the intersecting history of artistic, scientific and political knowledge, which will encourage - beyond the definition of a visual culture - a reflection on their convergences and divergences in terms of images and graphic processes. It will thus focus on the way in which the visionary drawing of the 19th and 20th centuries participates in, or differs from, forms of visual orientalism already well studied in art history. At the dawn of the 19th century, the “Orient” remained an undefined entity, as its geographical extension and cultural diversity testify. With the exception of Venice, Andalusian Spain, and even Greece, which are sometimes associated with it, it extends from Egypt and the southern Mediterranean to China, via the Indian subcontinent; an extension that was further reinforced, as the century progressed, towards the East and South-East Asia. Its study is in the process of specialisation, as indicated by the invention of the term “orientalist” in the 18th century to designate experts dealing with oriental languages, cultures and religions. Their travels, works and translations, whether private, professional or scholarly, spread rapidly throughout Europe and then to the United States. The apparent neutrality of this new "orientalist science", up to the creation of American Area Studies after the war (Szanton 2004), has been questioned in the 20th century. In 1978,

Edward Said thus defined "Orientalism" - following other scholars (Hodgson 1993, Southern 1962, Abdel-Malek 1963, Tibawi 1964, Daniel 1966) - as a metadiscourse based on the invention of an "other" of the West in order to serve the latter's hegemony and domination (Said 1978). It is true that scientific Orientalism cannot be separated from the political structures and contexts that supported it, from missionary endeavours to the conquest of territories, and also trade and diplomacy. In art history, this awareness has made it possible to renew the approach to so-called "Orientalist" paintings (Nochlin 1983, Thompson 1988, Pouillon 1997, Peltre 1997, Porterfield 1998), the deconstruction of which has been proven to be relevant when the artists' plastic procedures, in particular the transparency effect of the medium, lead viewers to believe that they are capturing the reality and the truth of the Orient "without a filter". The exotic and fantasized vision of Eastern populations and territories is therefore based on an otherness that has been passed through the prism of the canons of classical representation, whether it be a "picturesque possession" (Almeida/Gilpin 2005) or a photographic one. Aesthetics thus converged with scientific orientalism through their joint participation, to quote Said, in a system of control of an "Orient", which served not only the affirmation of identity, but also the constitution of Western colonial empires.

But how about works that challenge the discursive dimension and “descriptive” character of scientific Orientalism and Western mimesis? In other words, what role does the "Orient" play in the invention of forms that disregard classical idealism and the tradition of academic drawing? To answer this question, the workshop will focus on the periods of crisis of representation, frequently identified by art history, from Romanticism, Symbolism, Surrealism to the Beat Generation and Psychedelism.

Several works have begun to answer these questions. Even within a painting that is sometimes hastily labelled 'Orientalist' because of its subjects, some scholars are now providing nuances, for example between Delacroix and other painters of his time (see Vauday 2006 responding to Porterfield 1998, Porra/Wedekind 2017). Moreover, historians of literature and philosophy have long shown that the Romantic interest in India offers a counterpoint to scientific orientalism because it is supported by a harsh critique of the future of the West (Gérard 1963, Wilson 1964, Droit 20041, Polaschegg 2005). Taking up an idea that haunted many Romantic authors discovering Sanskrit texts, Raymond Schwab thus identified a desire for an "Oriental renaissance" consisting less in learning about the East than in learning from it (Schwab 1950), a position that is found in American transcendentalism (Christy 1982, Versluis 1993). In the visual arts, this tendency is expressed from the beginning of the nineteenth century by artists who practice what can be called visionary drawing, for example Théophile Bra and William Blake (Weir 2003, Ramos 2022). Other works have identified the shock caused by the discovery of Islamic ornaments, particularly from the Great Exhibition in London in 1851, and their impact on the emancipation of the artists from the Western tradition of representation and hierarchies between major and minor arts (Werckmeister 1982, Ettinghausen 1989, Munich 2010, Labrusse 2011). Again, the 'arabesque' is seen as creating a future language, of which Jules Bourgoin's visionary “graphique” is perhaps the peak in the scholarly field (Bideault/Thibault/Volait 2015), but which also constituted a stimulus to modern art (Basel 2001). Leaving aside the already well-studied perspectives of Japanism, we can also mention, as knowledge of Oriental arts and cultures increases, their multifaceted receptions, amongst others by Gustave Moreau (Paris 1997), Auguste Rodin (Garnier 2017, Paris 2006, Blair 2014), Odilon Redon (Zimmermann 2020), Ivan Aguéli (Sedgwick 2021), Claude-Émile Schuffenecker (Welsch 1986), Paul Gauguin (Hartford 2001), Jan Toorop (Grotenhuis 2010), or Andrée Karpelès (Dazevedo 2022, Olivier 2022). These artists shape their works in part through confronta-

tion with objects, texts and images from or about the Orient. The same is true of the avant-gardes who, in their direct or indirect contact with the Orient, forge the impulse for new practices and experiments in form - František Kupka, Kandinsky, Klee and Matisse, amongst others (Jones 2012, Benjamin/Ashjian 2015, Gerlach-Laxner/Schwinzer 1994, Bern 2009, Granada 2010, Rome 2010). Some artists, such as Johannes Itten and Georg Muche at the Bauhaus, even made it the basis for a future society and life (Busch 1999, Schwinzer 2005, Ackermann 2005). Finally, in this perspective, research has shown that the encounter between the Bauhaus and India, or surrealism and Egypt, did not only take place on European territory, but that it is part of an artistic modernity nourished by various places (Mitter 2007, Dessau 2013, Manjapra 2014, Kravagna 2017, Monaco 2021).

These initial examples lead us to a few observations. Whether the artists were travellers or not, their visions of the Orient were often conditioned by mediations, whether it was the artefacts, collections and reproductions they saw, the texts they read, the lessons they received or the people they met. However, are these resources purely “oriental”? To take only the example of the "passers" who increasingly came from non-Western countries from the beginning of the twentieth century, the answer is complex - one could think of Vivekananda, Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy and Abindranath Tagore for Hinduism, Sheikh Elîsh El-Kebîr for Islam, Daisetz Teitarō Suzuki concerning Zen Buddhism, or Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche concerning Tibetan Buddhism. As Guillaume Bridet writes about the Eastern contributors to the journal Europe, they are often “male individuals belonging to a Westernised elite, educated in England, mastering the English language as well as whole sections of Western culture” (in Lançon 2014, § 4). Moreover, they are sometimes reformers in their own countries or themselves in search of a transcultural universalism, which undoubtedly facilitated their reception by artists. These hybrid paths require caution as to the existence of fixed identities. Roger-Pol Droit explains, in the new preface to his study on the reception of Buddhism in Europe, that it does not aim to "compare entities that are already defined in their entirety", but to "contribute to the understanding of the dynamic processes in which these representations have shaped each other" (Droit 2004(2), p. ii). In another way, Sanjay Subrahmanyam calls for a “connected” history attentive to individuals and sources as actors of exchange and places of transformation and commutation (Subrahmanyam 2018). Finally, Monica Juneja defends a “transcultural oriented art history”, which has the goal, rather than studying Orientalism, “of working out on “manifold processes of appropriation, demarcation, reconfiguration and translation in new contexts in order to question the constitutive repercussion of these processes on all agents and visual systems involved” (Juneja 2012: 7). These developments should guard against the idea of a mere 'influence' of already constituted Eastern arts and thoughts, as well as an abstract comparatism. Such pitfalls have not always spared the history of art that, contrary to the Saidian position, has wished to value the renewal of artistic forms and practices permitted by exchanges between East and West. We are thinking, for example, of the identification of the numerous artists who turned to Asia after 1945, which is certainly necessary but sometimes scarcely problematised (Clarke 1988, Westgeest 1997, Baas 2005, New York 2009). Instead, the case studies emphasise the evolutionary character and intertwining of ancient and contemporary oriental references, as well as exchanges with Asian and European mediators, for example Georgia O'Keeffe (Chance 2018), Ad Reinhardt (Smith 1990), John Cage (Delfiner 2011), Nam June Paik (Smith 2000), Laurie Anderson (Anderson 2005), Agnes Martin (Schwarz 1992), Anne Truitt (Meyer 2001, pp. 63-74) or Yves Klein (Génévrier-Tausti/Riout 2020). A final observation: however positive the artists' appreciation of the Orient may have been, fantasies are still expressed, particu-

larly when they are motivated by a desire for spiritual or religious renewal, when they cross paths with fin-de-siècle syncretisms and esoteric currents (Lardinois 2007), or more generally when they stem from a critique of rationality, materialism and the Western art market. The approaches to the East are thus contrasted, depending on whether they derive from an interest in art or from a desire for intellectual and spiritual renewal; depending on whether they focus on supposedly ancient arts and thoughts or on contemporary practices. Geographical mobility is sometimes combined with a shift in time, which raises the question of the supposed anhistoricity and timelessness of the East, whether it is expressed through the search for the original, the ancestral or the primitive. The question is then to know how these positions are combined with a questioning of Western conceptions and arts.
The tensions that have been mentioned mark the approach and appropriations of the East by visionary artists, who will occupy the workshop discussions, both by their multidirectional projection into the past and the future and by their graphic processes emancipating themselves from the mere representation of the visible. Let us specify that any work of art marked by a pre-vision of the future can be qualified as visionary (Didi-Huberman 2021). Moreover, as Jacques Derrida writes, the drawing of a picture proceeds "in the night [and] escapes the field of sight" (Derrida 1990, p. 50). However, the workshop proposes to question the way in which oriental resources nourish an other or an elsewhere of the visible that bursts into the phenomenal world (Henry 1988), whether the invisible underlies it, opposes it or intertwines with it. We thus wish to follow Jean-François Chevrier's reflections on L'hallucination artistique (Chevrier 2015) by suggesting to define temporarily the visionary drawing as an ''experience and a poetic process'' (ibid., p. 445, emphasis in original) conveying a capacity ''to see beyond actual appearances" (ibid., p. 253). The term "visionary drawing", rather than hallucinatory, is intended to preserve the double movement that marked the work of Théophile Bra: that of a resistance to secularisation, to the scientific reduction of the ontological Being to the visible or to an objectification of the invisible which links him to the mystical tradition (Certeau 1982, Pires-Marques 2010); and that of a desire to see the invisible, haunted by a search for truth expressed in processes of visualisation and transmission of the invisible shared with other fields of knowledge.

Several research perspectives can already be suggested. Without being restrictive, they allow to test the characteristics of Théophile Bra's practise of portrait drawing over a long period of time.

– The visual resources deserve to be studied in greater detail, and their examination renewed: apart from the works seen during travels and the constitution of oriental collections in museums and universal exhibitions, we could look at less studied media, such as mythographic collections of the 19th century, illustrations in magazines and publications of a globalised art history, which constitute "paper museums" (Décultot 2010). How do visionary artists use them? Do they remain identifiable sources or are they transformed to the point of being indistinguishable?
– The textual resources will be considered in the light of their multiform dissemination in the West, from specialised and generalist journals (Lançon 2014) to orientalist symposia (Rabault-Feuerhahn 2010), via the way in which they are intertwined with oriental and western texts contemporary to the artists. The aim is to confront their readings and their possible hybridisation with their plastic uses.
– Eastern writings: the evolution of epigraphy and the functioning of non-Western writings has been studied (Christin 1982-1988 and 1995), the role of writing in modern works is now well known (Butor 1967, Marseille 1993, Gibhardt/Grave 2018, Geneva 2020, Dauxais 2022, Metz

2021). The aim is to take up this reflection in order to shed light on the participation of oriental writings in visionary drawing, whether by visual artists or writers who also draw (Mainberger 2020, Linarès 2007).
– Orientalism and transculturality: are the representational frameworks of scientific orientalism shared by artists, whether they endorse them, oppose them or emancipate themselves from them by developing a critical dimension of the drawing practice? In order to renew the examination of the relationship between scientific orientalism and visionary drawing, we can question the articulation of ideologies and forms. It would then be a matter of considering how this articulation participates in a politics of forms that allows us to move beyond the opposition between autonomous and heteronomous art (Rancière 2004).

Selection Committee
Nourane Ben Azzouna, lecturer in Islamic arts history, ARCHE, University of Strasbourg
Guillaume Bridet, professor of French literature CPTC, University of Bourgogne
Judith Delfiner, lecturer in contemporary art history, HAR, University of Paris Nanterre
Monica Juneja, professor of "Global Art History", Heidelberg Center for Transcultural Studies, University of Heidelberg
Julie Ramos, professor of contemporary art history, ARCHE, University of Strasbourg
More details

Workshop scheduled for the 7th and 8th of December, 2023, at the University of Strasbourg. Paper proposals consisting of a title, a presentation of no more than 2,500 characters including spaces and a biographical note of approximately 1,000 characters including spaces are to be sent before the 15th of May 2023 to: dessin.visionnaire.usias@gmail.com
Languages: English, French
The participants having received a confirmation will submit a synopsis of their work by the end of September. A publication combining the three workshops of the programme - "Portraits and Faces" (19th-20th of October, 2023), "Orients" (7th-8th of December, 2023), "Tables and Diagrams" (early 2024) - will be considered after their completion.

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