

Using Third Space Theory to Understand Sonia Delaunay's Design Practice and to Facilitate Taiwan's New Cultural Identity

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Abstract

This study examines the neglected achievements of Sonia Delaunay (1885-1979), who contributed to art and design between the Wars in Europe (1919-1939). She established a model in the field of painting and fashion design. This paper employs postcolonialism, including hybridity, third space, and our understanding of Taiwanese history to show how Eastern elements inspired Delaunay's works. In particular, this paper illustrates how Sonia Delaunay adopted Russian folkloric, Egyptian decorative pattern and other Eastern elements for her design works. Those exotic works enriched the modern style and content of Art Deco. Delaunay's blending of Eastern elements into Western art and design enlarged the scope of her artistic realm. Thus, we believe that third space theory and the concept of hybridity can explain the how multiple cultures have shaped Taiwan's past and present. We hope the explanations will help the people in Taiwan recognize and value our multicultural heritage.

Keywords: Sonia Delaunay, Postcolonialism, Hybridity, The Third Space, Taiwan

1. Motive

When we looked at Sonia Delaunay's works, we discovered that most of her major works had been created between the Wars, a period during which Western culture and values were being reassessed and restored. We observed how Oriental styles and elements were added to Western art works of this period and revitalized the artistic culture at the time. It is also evident that Sonia Delaunay constantly incorporated Oriental elements into her works. Those new elements not only enriched the content of her work but also situated her in a unique third space, a space between art and design. We found that her tendency to blend multiple cultures and establish a third space evoked in us a sense of identification due to our life experiences in Taiwan and Taiwan's unique position as part of the global village. For years, Western art history and design history courses in Taiwan have been designed to guide students to passively accept the perspectives of the West. This traditional practice has overlooked the Oriental heritage, which should be revisited and reevaluated along with a deeper understanding of Western history. Therefore, we believe that this present study, which draws on Western research methodology and Oriental perspectives to investigate Western culture, will help us maintain a positive attitude in reflecting upon our local culture and develop a broader perspective on Taiwan in connection with the global community.

2. Research Methodology and Theories Employed in This Study

2.1. Using Bricolage as a research approach

This study uses methodology in the discipline of cultural studies. According to Schneider (2001), "The term bricoleur is used by Lévi-Strauss to define a kind of handyman who invents in the face of specific circumstances, using whatever means and materials are available" (Schneider, 2001:167). We adopted the bricolage approach when we collected data piece by piece; then we assembled and verified those pieces by comparing Sonia Delaunay's social achievements and the creative value of her works. Heartily agreeing with Rahn's assertion that "Society has become a hip-hop culture in the bricolage of cultures, multiple viewpoints, and proliferation of information, continually being recycled and reconfigured into new forms" (Rahn, 2002: 155), we hoped that through bricolaging Sonia Delaunay's creating process, we would be able to accumulate divergent viewpoints in Western Art and design

history.

Equipped with an understanding of Oriental culture, we aspired to deconstruct a form of narration that would blanket both Oriental and the Western characteristics.

Sonia Delaunay's creative works are the mixed products of multiple cultures; she invented a decorative style with exoticism and colors. A similar phenomenon exists in Taiwan, where the residents have experienced repetitive blending of external cultures/bloods and local culture/blood. It is therefore necessary to explore this complex issue in-depth. Identifying ourselves as a cultural hybrid group, we compared the merging process of divergent cultures during the Art Deco period in Europe with the transformation of our Taiwanese cultural identities. We applied Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial theory, hybridity, and third space identity (Bhabha, 1990b: 57) to describe and situate our cultural background as well as those of Sonia Delaunay's creative styles.



Image 1. 1926-28 Sonia Delaunay's costume design for the opening of Carnival in Rio, witnessed the mixture of exoticism and geometric forms.

Bibliography: 1926-28; "Costume design for Carnival in Rio", from Baron, S. & Damase, J. 1995, "Sonia Delaunay the life of an artist", Thames & Hudson, London, UK, p. 91, and from Morano, Elizabeth & Vreeland, Diana 1986, Sonia Delaunay Art into Fashion, George Braziller Inc., New York, USA, pp. 45, 53, 92

2.1.1 Postcolonialism

The decision on adopting postcolonial theory was made because we believe that postcolonialism would make reconciliation possible and amend the harm caused by the oppression of colonialism: The positive thinking nature embedded in postcolonialism could convert the oppressed people's afflictions and woes into positive notions of cultural transformation and expansion. In the same manner, postcolonialism could guide the colonizing party to be more reflexive to attain self discovery and a deeper understanding of the consequence of colonizing acts. Being aware of themselves and the colonized, they may make more humble gestures to repair the harm they have inflicted on the colonized people.

(1) Hybridity

By Coombes' (2001) definition, "hybridity" started life as a biological term, used to describe the outcome of a crossing of two plants or species. It is now a term for a wide range of social and cultural phenomena involving 'mixing', and has become a key concept within cultural criticism and postcolonial theory" (2000: i). Born and brought up in Taiwan, a place with a hybrid history and culture, we hope to draw on a new perspective to revisit the merging progression of Taiwanese history and culture. The theory of hybridity thus could serve to meet our need in comparing the trajectory of multiple cultures presented in the Art Deco works and that of Taiwanese culture.

(2) The Third Space Identity

As Hayward stresses, "This in between space is, then, a third space — it is neither the first nor the second of the two interdependent cultures whose hybridization makes up the postcolonial subject" (2000: 271). The concept of in-between third space applies to us. It is a totally new space, and also a new thinking territory. In this space, people may add, delete, or change their existing thoughts continuously through cultural exchanges. Homi K. Bhabha argues that, "For me, hybridity was not important for being able to determine the two original movements that gave rise to the third. Rather, hybridity itself enabled other positions to emerge" (Bhabha, in Chambers, 1994: 67).

For this study, the concept of third space is important because this innovative intersection allows a new positioning to emerge and its accompanying perspectives, attitudes, and emotions are likely to generate a new form of culture. Taking up a third space identity, Sonia Delaunay weaved the cultural elements of both the traditional generation and the Avant-Garde one and consequently managed to construct her unique style of art creation.

3. Taiwan: A Third-Space Narration

3.1. Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?

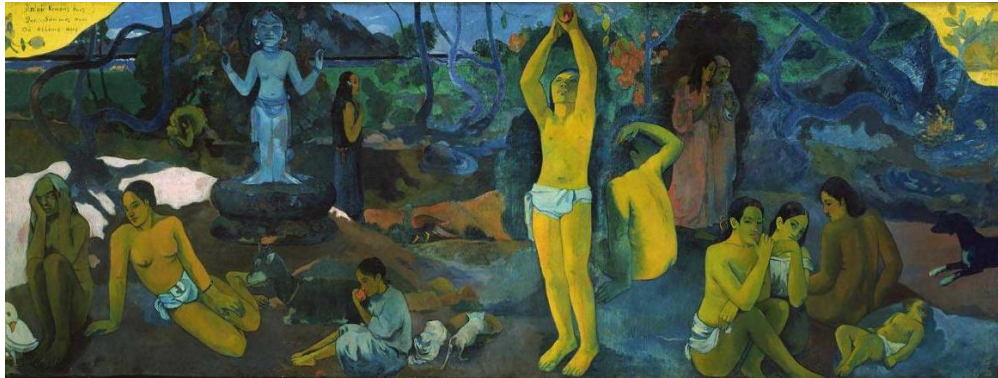


Image 2. 1897-98, Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going? A work represented the Post-Impressionist painter Paul Gauguin's latter part of his life.(Gauguin, Paul 1897–1898)

Bibliography: 1897–1898, Paul Gauguin (1848-1903),

D'où venons nous? Que sommes-nous? Où allons-nous? From Réunion des musées nationaux:
<http://www.rmnm.fr/fr/03expo/01calendrier/2004/gauguin/page.html>

In 1517, the Portuguese navigated to Japan from Southeast Asia. During the journey, they discovered an island of natural beauty. Therefore, they named this newly found land “Ilha Formosa” (Copper, 1999: 25), which means a beautiful island. Since then, escalating numbers of Chinese immigrated to Formosa to escape from famine and wars. These newcomers included pirates, convicts, war refugees and poor people. Most of them were male. Each of them crossed the notorious Black-Water Channel, currently called the Taiwan Strait, eagerly looking for a wonderland and a better life (“Paving the Way for a Sustainable Taiwan”, Government Information Office Taiwan, 2004). To survive and to reproduce, they chased away, intermingled with or slaughtered the aborigines and appropriated their lands and women. In a sense, they were crossing the border from an old tradition toward a new free zone. This crossing act thus created a new space for them. These Chinese immigrants escaped from an oppressive authority; but ironically they became the colonizers of the Formosan aborigines.

On this tiny island, just 7% bigger than the size of Belgium, more than twenty languages

were spoken by the aborigines, who “constitute three of the oldest branches of the Indonesian group” (Rubinstein, 1999: 37). Formosa was viewed as the Austronesian Homeland (Bellwood, 1991: 88–91). For hundreds of years, despite that the aborigines' cultures were assimilated into Chinese culture, aboriginal cultures did not disappear altogether. Instead, the Austronesian blood has merged with a large percentage of Taiwanese population. Both Chinese and Aborigines' blood coexist in 60% of Taiwanese's blood in DNA tests. (Rubinstein, 1999:41). The 'Han Culture' has also undergone a qualitative change and become a hybrid culture — the Formosan culture or Taiwanese culture. The merging of different ethnic groups has formed a new Taiwanese population, whose culture was later reshaped over and over again. From 1624 to 1945, the Dutch (dispatched by the Dutch East India Company), the Spanish, the Taywan kingdom, the Manchu Dynasty, Japan, and Chiang Kai-Shek's KMT successively colonized Formosa. It is historically a rare phenomenon that such a small island was colonized by so many diverse ethnic groups.



Image 3. 1640, “Het Eyland Formosa” The reversed map of Taiwan enable us to think our position in the world.

Bibliography: “Het Eyland Formosa” , Blusse, Leonard/ M.E. van Opstall /Ts'ao Yung-Ho, De dagregisters van het kasteel Zeelandia, Taiwan, 1629-1662 , 1984-1996, s-Gravenhage: M. Nijhoff.

Image 4. 1748, French map, “L'Isle Formose et Partie des Costes de la Chine”

Bibliography: 1748, French map, “L'Isle Formose et Partie des Costes de la Chine” , http://www.nmp.gov.tw/enews/no112/page_01.html

Having undergone various colonization eras, Taiwan is thus an excellent example of a third space with the inclusion of Eastern and Western cultures. Throughout the process of colonization, the external cultures had made powerful impacts on the Taiwanese culture.

However, cultural recognition and respect have not fully established on this beautiful island. Misunderstanding and conflicts arise due to the confusion of cultural identity among Taiwanese. Therefore, it is crucial for Taiwanese to be aware that we are all products of hybridity and situated in the third space of multiple cultures. It is also critical to reach the consensus that we Taiwanese have faith and duty to our motherland. The consensus will be out of reach without our reflections on Taiwan's international status: Only twenty-four countries in the world recognize Taiwan as an independent unity; moreover, despite Taiwan's economic and democratic achievements, its national identity is still decided by the international body in place of its own perception. In this study, we positioned ourselves in the third space and used Taiwan's historical background as the foundation to describe how Sonia Delaunay in the Art Deco period had a similarly colonization experience – She was once ignored by her society because of her gender. More importantly, she overcame the discrimination and became a successful designer. In our study, we described her struggling efforts and outcome in the hope that the descriptions of her experience will inspire our fellow Taiwanese to bear a forgiving and tolerant attitude when looking back on their colonized past, to reexamine their existing national and cultural identities, and to work collaboratively with positive images of themselves and others to make Taiwan a better place to live in.

4. Analyzing Taiwan Experience, as a Method of Researching Sonia Delaunay's Artistic Characteristics

4.1. The debates between hybridity and the third space theory



Image 5. 1920c, Pin-Tung Wan-Jin, Pepohoan Aborigines converted to Hakka.
Bibliography: 1920c, Pin-Tung Wan-Jin, Pepohoan Aborigines converted to
Hakka <http://www.sinica.edu.tw/~pingpu/index.html>

Image 6. 1875, Pepohoan Aborigines, John Thomson.
Bibliography: 1875, Pepohoan Aborigines, John Thomson
<http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:%E5%B9%B3%E5%9F%94%E6%97%8F2.jpg>

As researchers, we are standing in third space, positioning ourselves as Oriental persons exploring a new territory vis-a-vis Sonia Delaunay's contributions and works.

When we examined Taiwan's colonial history, we observed the trend of Western culture merging into the East, which contrasted with the trend in the Art Deco era during which Eastern elements merged into the West. Most of Taiwan's populations are cultural compounds and hybrids by blood. According to Dr. Chen, "It is very joyful that we the physicians started since 1990 to investigate in Taiwan inhabitants' ethnic groups with their HLA or mitochondrial DNA research. We discovered that 88% of so called 'Han people' are different from the mainlanders; they are in-between the aborigines and Han, this finding evident the social humanity science research" (Chen, 1997:269). The research above proves that Taiwanese are hybrids of aborigines and Hans, and historical records and the scientific evidence also confirm this result. We inherit both blood and culture from both sides. Therefore, we are situated 'in-between both camps'.

Homi Bhabha (1990a) describes the third space as, "... the in-between space of hybridity from where cultural change can be brought about quietly, without revolutionary zeal, by 'contaminating' established narratives and dominant points of view" (Ang, 2001: 2). We emphasize this notion of an in-between space as a space between the limited traditions and future progress. It is a space shaped quietly because of discontent with tradition and the expectation of a better development in the future. The stories recited in the third space concern its authority.

While researching Sonia Delaunay's art, we perceived that Taiwan's experience and her personal experience share certain similarities. Taiwan has suffered from multiple times of colonization and absorbed from these external cultures, but now it is still excluded from major international trends and social values. On the other hand, Sonia Delaunay lived through a web of complex and multiple exotic cultures during the Art Deco era. She was positioned in a third space between tradition and innovation, and adopted a typical marginal identity under

a male dominant society.

The Art Deco style responded to the cultural exchanges between the East and West. “The 1920s saw the triumph of exoticism. Art Deco drew its inspiration from many sources: the mythical Orientalism of the Ballets Russes, animals and flowers from China and Japan, Ancient Egyptian imagery, African art and traditional Russian motifs” (Lussier, 2003: 22). This mysterious form was an accumulation of cultures which then became a composite of the elements and styles of many exotic countries. This new art form appropriated from the East to give new strength to Western designs. Consequently this stimulated not only cultural exchanges but also popularity within the market place. “In 1926, she began to design printed fabrics based on her experiments with embroidery. Her sources of inspiration were legion, and included African, Oriental, Slavic, antique and archaic motifs and colors” (Lussier, 2003:48).



Image 7. 1925, poster of the Art Deco Exhibition.

Bibliography: 1925, poster of the Art Deco Exhibition

<http://members.fortunecity.com/steinmetz1/English/ArtDeco/artdeco/artdeco.htm>

Image 8. 1925, Art Deco Exhibition, Grand Palais.

Bibliography: 1925, Art Deco Exhibition, Grand Palais

http://lartnouveau.com/art_deco/cpa_expo_1925/lieux/ad6.htm

Delaunay mixed many oriental styles and elements into her works, producing a hybridity of cultures. This exotic style emerged with a fashion trend and stimulated popular consumption. “As a result of the First World War...the war had reduced the number of eligible

males by millions, leaving many women with no chance of getting a husband. It had also given women a new independence” (Hillier, 1971:38). Delaunay participated in the trends to restore Western culture and values after World War I; she represented on one hand traditional feminine value and on the other hand she participated actively in the aggressive competitions in a male dominant society, and succeeded in establishing her own unique creative style.



Image 9. 1913, the ‘Trans-Siberian Express’ poetry book.

Bibliography: 1913, the “Trans-Siberian Express” poetry book, from Baron, S. & Damase, J. 1995, Sonia Delaunay the life of an artist, Thames & Hudson, London, UK, pp. 33, 40 - 41 214



Image 10. 1918, Sonia design the costume for the ‘Ballets Russes’ directed by Diaghilev. Bibliography: 1918, Sonia design the costume for the “Ballets Russes” directed by Diaghilev, from Damase, Jacques 1972, Sonia Delaunay Rhythms and Colors, Thames and Hudson, London, UK, p 138

4.2. Analyzing Sonia Delaunay’s third space positioning through more historic evidence

Sonia Delaunay, a native Jew and later Russian, immigrated to France. Traditionally, the Europeans have seen Russia as part of the Orient. Delaunay’s Jewish origin enhanced her connection to the Orient. The cultural multiplicity in Delaunay assures her position in the third space.

Influenced by her husband, the famous Orphism-Cubist painter Robert Delaunay, she

devoted herself to the Avant-garde movement and promoted abstract painting (“Exposition Sonia Delaunay”, Musée de Lodève, 2002, lodeve.com). After World War I, Delaunay started her design career to make ends meet. While moving from art to design, Delaunay fully applied her knowledge of paintings to her design practice. She innovatively tried out such ideas as circular forms and color-word complementation; she later became the pioneer of Orphism. Spate described her design work as “the simultaneous contrast of colors and text form depths and movements of colors” (1979: 208). He held high regards for Delaunay’s vivid application of colors and circular forms. However, such compliments were rare. Delaunay’s contributions to design history are still underrated, in comparison with those of the other Orphism advocates. To date, the majority of books and textbooks on art/design history either overemphasize the importance of male artists leading the movement or focuses on Robert Delaunay’s works. Little attention has been drawn to Sonia Delaunay’s contributions (Weisman, 1992:209-212).

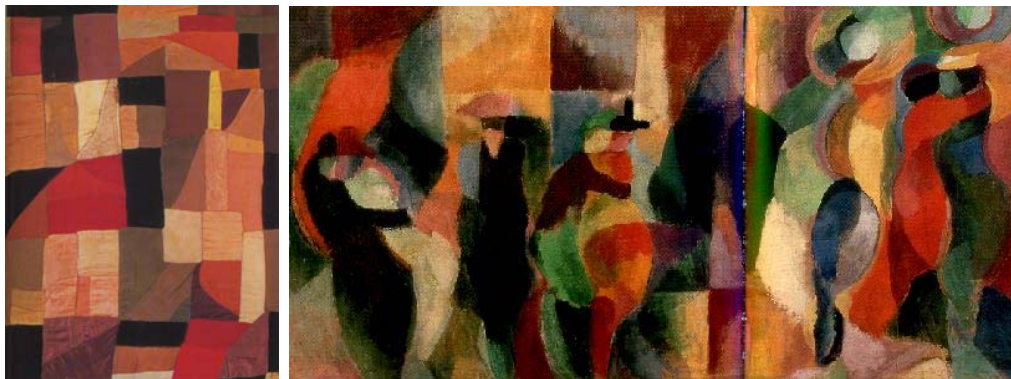


Image 11. 1911; the first abstract design work, and cover design for Ricciotto Canudo, 1913 Details of Bal Bullier.
Bibliography: 1911; the first abstract design work, and cover design for Ricciotto Canudo, from Baron, S. & Damase, J. 1995, Sonia Delaunay the life of an artist, Thames & Hudson, London, UK, pp. 37, 38. 176.
1913 Details of Bal Bullier, from Baron, S. & Damase, J. 1995, Sonia Delaunay the life of an artist, Thames & Hudson, London, UK, pp. 33, 40 – 41 214

In 1911, Sonia Delaunay presented one of the very first abstract design works in history. She once mentioned an anecdote: “When Charles was born in January 1911...I tucked him in with a quilt made from fragments of cloth ... our friends exclaimed: ‘But that is Cubist!’ This fabric mosaic was simply spontaneous. I continued to use this construction method for other objects. Art critics have seen a ‘geometrized’ form

and singing colors in these works which predicted my later work.” (Waller, 1991: 294–295) Slatkin commented the above anecdote: “A major turning point in Sonia Delaunay's development was triggered by the creation of a quilt for her infant son in 1911... Delaunay was prepared to appreciate the possibilities of this abstract language for painting. The results of this breakthrough were soon visible in her work, ” (2001: 187)

If we carefully examine the books on art and design history, such big names as Frank Kupka, Wassily Kandinsky and Robert Delaunay can be easily found; however, female designers like Sonia Delaunay are left out. It is our assertion that this absence took place partly because Sonia Delaunay was a woman, and partly because her first abstract decoration design did not match the traditional standard of art work. She then was marginalized and labeled by the public as female, Jew, and a craftsperson. In the field of the arts, fine art has been overrated, whereas crafts and design creation have been underrated. The experts in this field seem to neglect that originality, meaningfulness and contribution of an artistic work are more important than its material and form. Additionally, ethnicity and gender should not be used to exclude certain artists.

4.3. Comparing Sonia Delaunay's marginalized experience with Taiwan's position in the third space

Sonia Delaunay's contributions to art and design have been overshadowed by her husband's achievements. Therefore, tracking this lost chapter in art and design history has a historical value. Additionally, this is an educational mission because revealing Delaunay's efforts to free herself from gender constraints can raise students' awareness of gender inequality. In fact, as art and design educators, we are supposed to value and emphasize the contributions of female artists and designers. Delaunay used bright colors and circular form to enrich the content of her works.

Delaunay's position as marginalized by her contemporaries parallels Taiwan's marginalized status in the global community. We were considered and treated historically as 'other' through so many reprisals. Taiwan is now facing constant military threats and missile menaces from Mainland China. These experiences have resulted in the mistrust of China by many Taiwanese.

In addition to external forces, Taiwan faces internal problems such as opaque national policies and biased media. The external positioning and internal problems form a vicious cycle. The third space theory may guide Taiwanese to break this cycle. Looking back on the

colonized past with hatred will yield more harm on the Taiwanese people. Placing ourselves in a third space, we can transform the negative colonization experiences into constructive and positive thinking. In the same manner, if we place the complex Taiwanese history, culture and blood relationships in third space, we may be more able to think and reflect more objectively.

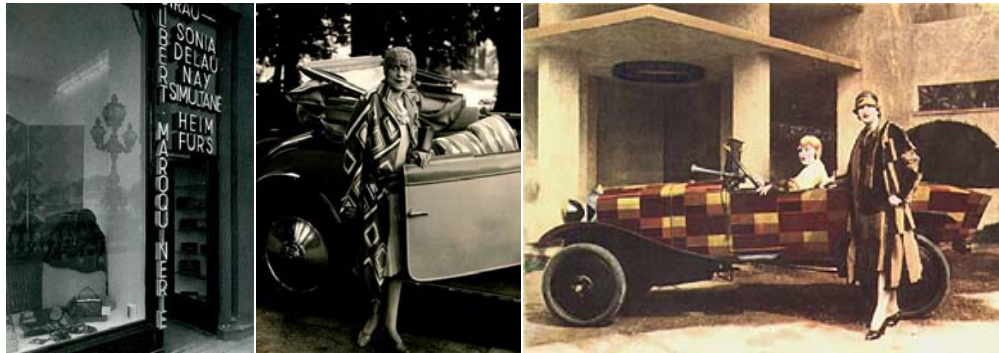


Image 12. 1925, Art Deco Exhibition, Cooperation with Heim; 1926 fabric Design.
Bibliography: 1925, Art Deco Exhibition, Cooperation with Heim; 1926 fabric Design, from Baron, S. & Damase, J. 1995, *Sonia Delaunay the life of an artist*, Thames & Hudson, London, UK, pp. 66, 70.

4.4. Sonia Delaunay' contributions to the design field

Delaunay's work and creative value are often linked with the fashion design business. ("Sonia Delaunay" the permanent Collection, nmwa.Org, 2004). Sonia Delaunay generated a hybrid form in her creative works. Sonia Delaunay was the only woman designer in the Machine Age Art Deco field in the 1920's; she designed in fashion and automotive decor, applying her simultaneous contrast theory to decorating the Citroen B12 in 1925, the Air Pavilion at the 1937 Paris Exhibition, and the exterior design of the automobile, Matra B530, in 1967. All were part of her contribution to design practice (Wosk, 2002:147-148). Delaunay is the only designer who successfully applied Orphism to the field of decorative art. She is also without doubt of one of the very first abstract designer in the history of creative arts. As Wosk explains, "Sonia Delaunay adapted her costume design pattern to the automobile, merging two different cultures into one social image and applying them as fashion trends. The combination of her creative pattern with the sophisticated man-made machine was an important step for her" (Wosk, 2002:148). Her adoption of technology in art and design symbolized that she was ahead of her field.



Image 13. 1930, Fabric Design, From Damase, Jacques 1991.
Bibliography: 1930, Fabric Design, From Damase, Jacques 1991, *Fashion and Fabrics*, Sonia Delaunay, Abrams, New York, USA, pp. 29, 34, 98, 126 241

5. Conclusion

Sonia Delaunay's Works Manifested the Merging Process of Multiple Cultures. She incorporated various styles into her works and visualized exoticism in her works. Her works also corresponded to the movement of the Art Deco, which demonstrated the exchange of cultures and hybridity of visual styles. The incorporation of fine art and decorative application in her works was also a manifestation of third space, a unique space between fine art and design fields. Sonia Delaunay adopted at least two cultures and integrated the Western style with Oriental elements. She originated a fashion trend which applied fine art to decorative design. Being a native Jewish and later a Russian immigrant to France, Sonia Delaunay liberated herself from the gender and professional constraints imposed by the post-War patriarchal system and became a master in her career. By doing so, she elevated women's social status. Looking into Sonia Delaunay's artistic career, we found a similar process which has been undergoing in Taiwan. We should have a deeper understanding of our culture and heritage, make use of our cultural advantages and cherish the uniqueness of our hybrid culture. Taiwan has experienced several colonial transitions, and we Taiwanese should transform the experience of colonization into our unique asset. Unfortunately, this important asset has never been recognized and valued by our society. It has been ignored and even abused. The merging of those diverse cultures not only shapes an exceptional Formosan culture but also creates a third space that

manifests the hybrid experience in both our culture and origin. Looking back into the past of Taiwan's colonization history, we believe post-colonialism provides a remedy and eases our pain after the trauma. We should learn to embrace and respect all cultures and diverse ethnic groups so and see this as a positive driving force for Taiwan. Education and mass communication can make us truly understand and appreciate our ethnicity. Hopefully, the cultivation of a new Taiwanese identity will attain ethnic harmony locally and globally.

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