The Calligrammatic Pattern: An Aspect of Modernism in French Textile Design

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This paper is less concerned with Twentieth Century French textiles as such than with what may have inspired their designers, with the possibilities suggested to textile artists in places where art, literature and design meet. To an artist with an appetite for the new, few places offered more possibilities than Paris in the decades before and after World War I. Between 1910 and 1940, textile designers working in Paris were part of a close-knit community of the avant-garde that included writers, musicians, architects, painters, illustrators, interior and theatrical set designers, costumers and couturiers -- who not only mingled and took on multiple roles but whose work even today has the power to surprise.

In a lecture delivered at a Paris theatre in November of 1917, one of the leading members of this community said: “Surprise is the most living, the newest element of the new spirit--its mainspring. It is by the element of surprise, by the important place it assigns to surprise, that the new spirit is distinguished from all earlier artistic and literary movements. Thanks to surprise it is set apart from all of them and belongs exclusively to our own time.”

The speaker was Guillaume Apollinaire, poet, journalist, tireless champion of Fauves, Cubists and Futurists, precursor of the Surrealists, and a compelling personality whose vitality, generosity and humor made him the ringleader of the avant-garde. The idea of examining his contributions, direct and indirect, to the art of textile design sprang from surprising juxtapositions, such as a page from Apollinaire’s last poetry collection, Calligrammes: Poèmes de la Paix et de la Guerre, published six months before his death in 1918, and a dress attributed to an unidentified Paris couture house, dated to the late 1920s, which was included in the Metropolitan Museum’s exhibition Wordrobe in 1997. The dress is made of an extraordinary black cotton lace, which the exhibition’s curator, Richard Martin, has described as “a high art of alphabet soup.” Could Apollinaire’s poems have been an ingredient in this alphabet soup?

Both the poem and the lace use the substance of writing to create a visual pattern, and both depend upon the element of surprise for their impact. In the same lecture of 1917, published a year later as L’Esprit Nouveau et les Poètes, Apollinaire claimed that: “typographical devices, employed with great daring, have given rise to a visual lyricism almost unknown before our time.” Just as the use of inscriptions and decorative calligraphy in textile art dates back to antiquity, Apollinaire’s experiments with typography, and with calligraphy in the autograph versions of his calligrammes, were not exactly new in the history of Western literature. The earliest known author-designer of “calligrammes,” to retain Apollinaire’s own term for these ideographs or pictorial poems, was the ancient Greek Simeon of Rhodes, who lived during the 4th Century B.C.E. There were precedents for Apollinaire’s experiments in French literature as well. His immediate precursor was Stéphane Mallarmé, but Mallarmé’s single typographically unorthodox poem, titled “A Throw of the Dice,” was not printed according to his original design until 1914, sixteen years after his death. By that time, Apollinaire had already created his first calligrammes, and they had begun to appear in the magazine he edited, Les Soirées de Paris. For both poets, the blank expanse of the page was not merely communicative space, but figurative space, space to be designed. By using multiple fonts and varying their size, words were made to move dynamically across the page, shattering the void dreaded by all writers.

It must be admitted that Apollinaire scholars, some of whom were the poet’s personal friends, have for the most part taken a dim view of Calligrammes. André Billy wrote that “Apollinaire could not have harbored any illusions as to the originality of his
discovery; ... his attempt is worthy of interest, and there are delicious things in the Calligrammes. They are unfortunately difficult to decode..."

And when we do succeed in decoding them, some critics complain, the poetry does not always reward our efforts.

Some see these poems as symptoms of Apollinaire's infatuation with Futurism. The Italian Futurists, led by the poet Filippo Marinetti, had originally published their Manifesto on the front page of the Paris newspaper Le Figaro in 1909. Apollinaire's interest in Futurism, however, dates to the period 1911-1914, when the Futurists were preparing for their first exhibition in Paris, which opened in February of 1912. In February of 1913, a group of Russian Futurists in Paris proclaimed the poet's right to attribute meaning to words according to their graphic character, and to use even isolated letters and numbers in their works. The following month, Marinetti published Words at Liberty. By the middle of 1913, Apollinaire had written L'Antitradiation Futuriste, which claimed the allegiance of the Parisian avant-garde to the Futurist cause. This is also the period when Apollinaire wrote his first calligrammes.

Still another factor in the genesis of the calligrammes is the influence of the painters with whom Apollinaire was intimately associated. Beginning in 1912 with Picasso's Still Life with Chair Caning, he and Georges Braque and other Cubist painters produced dozens of collages that incorporated paper with either printed or hand-lettered text. Louis Marcoussis's portrait of Apollinaire in that year shows him surrounded by crystalline Cubist forms, some of which bear the titles of his published or soon-to-be-published works. As avant-garde artists whose work was misunderstood by the public, Apollinaire and the Cubists enjoyed a mutually satisfying relationship in which he defended and promoted their work, and they stimulated and supported his. Charting the flow of currents of influence is therefore difficult.

In 1912, Apollinaire was reminding readers of his regular column in the Mercure de France that "it should not be forgotten that... most of the Cubist painters lived in the company of poets." The following year he would deliver his greatest gift to the Cubists, Les Peintres Cubistes, which for good or ill, would define their work for generations of art historians. Yet when one of his biographers, several decades later, asked Braque the question: "How was Apollinaire most marked by his association with the painters? Did he--as has sometimes been said--become a 'Cubist poet'?," the painter replied: "I suppose that when he printed some of his poems in the shape of guitars and other objects that we used to use in our canvases, that could be called 'Cubist poetry,' though personally I should prefer to call it 'Cubist typography!'" The tone of that reply suggests that the painters surrounding Apollinaire didn't take his claim "I too am a painter" very seriously. His reputation as an art critic fared no better, with the benefit of hindsight. Marcel Duchamps, for example, said of him: "Apollinaire was a very charming man. Of course he was always sounding off on all kinds of subjects he knew nothing about." Among the subjects Apollinaire apparently knew nothing about was the long tradition of the use of inscriptions and calligraphy in decorative art. In Les Peintres Cubistes, he wrote: "It is perfectly legitimate to use numbers and printed letters as pictorial elements; new, in art, they are already soaked with humanity." While aware of the history of ideographs in literature, it is evident that he had not made a study of the history of textiles. We might be tempted, therefore, to give up the attempt to relate his work to textile design, but the fact remains that by 1911 he had already influenced the textiles of his day.

It is well known that in 1910 Apollinaire commissioned the Fauve painter Raoul Dufy to illustrate his first book of poetry, Le Bestiaire ou Cortège d'Orphée with a series of wood-engravings, and that this commission led to Dufy's earliest textiles, made for Paul Poiret in 1911. What is less well-known, however, is that from the beginning of their collaboration, Apollinaire gave Dufy precise descriptions of the kinds of images that he had in mind, both in writing and in a series of drawings. In his letters, Apollinaire told Dufy...
how to position the figures of the animals that make up the procession trailing after the mythical poet Orpheus. For example, the illustration of the “Le Paon”: “must represent a peacock seen from the back with its tail trailing behind; in the background you can put another one, turned around if you like, but we must have one, the main one, that has a trailing tail.” Moreover, wood-engraved illustration, although it had been revived during the 1890s after a long eclipse, in a development that parallels the revival of block printed textiles by the Arts & Crafts Movement, was costly and rare. Apollinaire had insisted upon it, due to his desire to imitate the look of early printed books illustrated with wood-cuts. Since using carved or engraved wood blocks to print on paper or textiles are essentially similar methods, the development of design skill in one medium can be readily transferred to the other, if the artist has an aptitude for the rhythms of decorative patterns and can cast his designs into repeats. Dufy mastered this ability during 1911, carving his own blocks and printing by hand at the workshop Poirot created for him. While Poirot has been justly credited with giving Dufy this opportunity, it was Apollinaire who introduced him to the medium.

By supplying the subject matter and directing the execution of the illustrations, Apollinaire also made a decisive contribution to the style which Dufy developed as a textile designer. The animals of Apollinaire’s bestiary, continually recurring in the textiles he designed for Bianchini-Férier between 1912 and 1928, became Dufy’s own decorative repertoire. The extent to which these textiles remained inspired by and indebted to the imagery of Le Bestiaire, however, has not been emphasized in textile history, despite Dufy’s own acknowledgement through the textiles themselves. The satin damask named “Cortège d’Orphée,” first woven by Bianchini in 1921, explicitly refers to Apollinaire’s book. The procession in Dufy’s textile consists not of animals but of human figures—musicians and dancers following in the poet’s wake. An interpretation of this design as an allegory of the arts in Paris in the post-War period and as a tribute to Apollinaire is not unwarranted. During the decade after Apollinaire’s death, many French writers and artists took up the challenge of creating modern interpretations of Greek myth, but for Dufy, the subject of Orpheus must have always had an Apollinairean meaning.

Dufy’s collaboration with Apollinaire also led to more work as a graphic artist and illustrator. In 1917, a second edition of Le Bestiaire was published by a new publishing house, Les Éditions de la Sirène. The name of the new house must have reminded Apollinaire of his own “Sirène,” one of three mythical beasts in Le Bestiaire. He and Dufy were soon joined by other authors and artists whose work was published by Éditions de la Sirène, the most original publishing house in Paris from 1917 to 1923. When Dufy designed a colophon for the publisher, it was wood-engraved, and adapted from the sirens of his Bestiaire illustration. Other graphic designs by Dufy also bore the stamp of Apollinaire. A print or poster promoting Bianchini’s furnishing silks illustrated another of his textiles for the firm, executed the same year as “Cortège d’Orphée,” that featured a related theme—one that was even more personal to Apollinaire, as the source of his assumed name: Apollo, god of the arts and father of Orpheus.

A trademark design for Bianchini’s Toiles de Tournon block prints, created in 1919, incorporated both ‘Cubist typography’ and flowing script to form the image of a diamond. Although it is not a poem, the trademark is a kind of calligramme.

The manuscript version of the title page for Apollinaire’s last collection of poems is a fine example of the variability of the poet’s handwriting, which at least one contemporary viewed as a reflection of his mercurial nature: “As I remember him, he seemed always to be playing the parts of several characters simultaneously. Even his handwriting was affected by this, and his bank required him to supply five or six specimens of his signature.” The desire to preserve this quality in his printed poems may have been what ultimately drove Apollinaire to explore the possibilities of expressive typography. “Lettre-Océan,” a poem published in Calligrammes, illustrates one of the
advantages of this new freedom. The reader perceives the poem at a single glance, rather than reading it line-by-line. This formal 'simultaneity,' intended to capture the experience of modern life, is of course related to the 'Simultaneous' painting of Apollinaire's friend Robert Delaunay.

Apollinaire first got to know Robert and Sonia Delaunay in 1911, and he became enthusiastic about their "painting of pure color" in 1912. He quickly came to play the same role for the Delaunays as he had for the Cubists. He mentioned them in the various magazine articles and newspaper columns that made up his daily writing life and praised their work at every opportunity. When Sonia Delaunay created her first 'Simultaneous' textiles and clothing, he praised them as well, telling readers of the *Mercure de France* on New Year's Day, 1914 that: "On Thursdays and Sundays, you have to go to the Bal Bullier, to see M. and Mme Robert Delaunay, who are busy bringing about the reform of clothing. Simultaneous Orphism has produced sartorial novelties that are not to be sneezed at." It is not known if he ever wore one of Sonia Delaunay's embroidered Simultaneous vests, but she apparently presented him with a book cover for his second collection of poems.

Apollinaire also encouraged Sonia Delaunay to collaborate with a mutual friend, the poet Blaise Cendrars, on the illustration of his book, *Le Prose du Transibirien*, which was published in 1913. Nearly a decade later, she would collaborate with Tristan Tzara on *Robe Poèmes*, which are 'simultaneously' ideographs, i.e. calligrammes, and dress designs. Had Apollinaire lived to see this book, he would have had no trouble praising it, for the lines of poetry on the book's painted textiles are calligrammatic in the Apollinairean sense. The Dada poet and dramatist Tzara had known and admired Apollinaire during the War years in Paris, and sought contributions from him for Dada publications.

Sonia Delaunay's earlier illustrations for Cendrars, like her paintings and textile designs, were concerned with, as she wrote in 1925, "the sonority and the visual movements of colors," but during the period 1922-1924, she came under the influence of a designer for whom the sonorities and visual movements of letters were the wellspring of art.

This was Ilia Zdanévitch, called Iliazd, a Russian Futurist theorist, poet, playwright, publisher, graphic artist, and typographer. He emigrated from the Soviet Union in 1920, and in need of work, contacted Sonia Delaunay, who hired him as an assistant at her studio. In his spare time, he worked on a cycle of dramatic poems written in *zaum*, a "transmental" language developed by several Russian Futurist poets, which had already influenced the Dadaists of Zurich. *Zaum* was based on the belief that ordinary use had destroyed the poetic value of words. In order to restore their power, words had to be broken down, giving primary attention to their sounds. The typography that Iliazd designed was intended to make intelligible this invented language rebuilt from deconstructed Russian, by scoring the text as if it were a musical composition. However, by the last poem in the cycle, *Ledentu as Beacon*, published in 1923, the visual composition of the page was most important. In the words of one critic, "for Zdanévitch, typography was more than a means, it was the substance of his expression."

Iliazd's work in Sonia Delaunay's studio, where he remained until 1924, consisted chiefly of recopying her designs and preparing *maquettes* for printing, but in January of 1922, he produced some designs of his own, for a collar and a pair of sleeves for Vera Soudeikine, the wife of Igor Stravinsky. They were intended to create an actual "robe poème." The patterns, which at first appear to be purely decorative Cyrillic letters, actually consist of legible Russian verse sprinkled with small decorative motifs. When the three pieces were worn together, the poem was complete.

The presence of Iliazd, for whom typography was artistic material, in Sonia Delaunay's studio could not but have an effect on her work. Her *Robe Poème* images were created during 1922, and that year witnessed her involvement in other design projects with literary connections: bindings for books by Tzara and Iliazd, the décor for *Au Sans Pareil*, a publishing house and bookstore founded by the Surrealists André Breton, Louis
Aragon, and Philippe Souppault, and an embroidered “curtain-poem” for Souppault’s apartment. Her drawings from this period sometimes incorporate stylized letters.

During 1923, she became involved with several theatrical performances and fancy-dress balls organized by Iliazd, a founder of the Union of Russian Artists. She designed the sets and costumes for a “Fashion Boutique” at the group’s “Transmental Ball,” as well as the costumes for Tzara’s play, The Evening of the Bearded Heart, for which Iliazd supplied a poster. For a fancy-dress ball held at a Paris hotel, she designed a costume that effectively created a ‘typographic man.

Throughout this period, which saw the beginning of her contract with Bianchini-Ferier, Sonia Delaunay’s textiles remained thoroughly abstract. Two printed silks designed for Chanel in 1925 and 1928, however, were subtly patterned with the couturière’s initials. By the end of 1924, Iliazd had left her employ and in 1927, was hired by Blaques-Bélar, the firm that supplied Chanel with her trademark patterned wool jerseys, and which would become Tissus Chanel after 1928. In addition to the jerseys, from May of 1931, Iliazd designed prints and embroideries made for Tissus Chanel in Lyon. In 1933, he hired a fellow Russian, the painter Léopold Survage, as a textile designer, an arrangement which lasted only three and a half months. Survage, however, holds the distinction of being the only textile designer who was also the subject of one of Apollinaire’s calligrammes.

“Léopold Survage,” a portrait literally made of poetry, is especially interesting because in order to create the image, Apollinaire broke some words up into syllables in the manner of musical scores and the zaum which he had probably seen in Dada publications. It was written in Paris during World War I. Apollinaire had enlisted in the French army by the end of 1914, where he distinguished himself, rising to the rank of second lieutenant. In March of 1916, he received a head wound that required his evacuation to a Paris hospital and two operations. Early the following year, when he was sufficiently recovered and wanted to revive his magazine Les Soirées de Paris, he organized an exhibition under its auspices, which featured paintings by Survage. In the catalogue which Apollinaire wrote and where this calligramme first appeared, he praised Survage’s “lyric urban transfiguration,” which he said had a special affinity with his own poetry. After Apollinaire’s death, the magazine Sic devoted an entire issue to him in 1919, where his friend the Baroness d’Oettingen published a poem that was a kind of pseudo-calligramme—i.e., the poem did not form the image, it was superimposed upon the image: it is designed to fit inside a form created not by the author but by the illustrator, Léopold Survage.

Apollinaire’s death from pneumonia on November 9, 1918, the day the Armistice ending World War I was announced, was a great tragedy for French literature and for modern art. Chroniclers of the avant-garde have spawned a small industry speculating on what Apollinaire would have written and done had he lived. His friend André Billy firmly believed that Apollinaire would have abandoned the calligrammes, both typographic and autographic: “Apollinaire would certainly not have persevered along this path, which is a dead-end where no one has followed.” Yet the year before his death Apollinaire said of typographical experimentation: “These devices are capable of being carried much further, to the point of bringing about the synthesis of the arts—music, painting, and literature.”

While it is true that Apollinaire’s calligrammes are unique in modern French poetry, artists and designers during the 1920s and beyond did indeed follow along the path of expressive typography and calligrammatic form. Fernand Léger took as his subject the experience of modern urban life, placing the human figure amidst machine-made forms and fragments of billboards. Fragmented text also appears in his designs for Blaise Cendrars’s La Fin du monde filmée par l’Ange N.D., published by Éditions de la Sirène in 1919.

Through the medium of book illustration, artists remained attuned to the designers of typography, some of whom were as committed to modernism as they were. In 1927, the printer Charles Peignot launched a publication that would have delighted...
Apollinaire. *Divertissements Typographiques* brought printers' demonstration pieces or "compositions," designed to display the characteristics of a new typeface, to publishers and to the public at large. Reflections of the elegant typography of the Twenties could also be seen in the textile designs of Edouard Bénédictus.

Léger's 1919 painting *Le Typographe* offered another vision of 'typographic man,' and there were several designers working in Paris after the War with connections to the world of textiles who could be viewed in this light. Iliazd, for example, left Tissus Chanel in 1933 to devote himself to his typographical experiments and to publishing artist-illustrated books. Raymond Duncan, brother of the dancer Isadora, was a poet, textile artist, printer, typographer, and eccentric American in Paris. He designed his own typeface, which like all of his work, was inspired by his vision of ancient Greece. Duncan's books were illustrated with his own wood-engraved prints depicting mythological subjects such as Orpheus. Similar subjects appeared on the printed and painted textiles he displayed at the 1925 Decorative Arts Exhibition, and when these are compared to Dufy's *Bestiaire* illustrations, the Apollinairean connection becomes clear.

As for Léger, his experience with graphic illustration in the period immediately following World War I was also eventually translated into the medium of textiles. In the mid-1950s, he designed "Parade Sauvage," a printed cotton used by Claire McCardell for a shirtwaist dress of 1955. The style of the design, however, could already be seen in his first book illustrations, for Blaise Cendrars' *I Have Killed*, published in Paris in 1918. The textile contains an echo of *Parade*, the ballet by Jean Cocteau first performed in Paris in 1917 by the Ballets Russes, with music by Eric Satie and sets and costumes by Picasso. In the foreword to the program, written by Apollinaire at Cocteau's request, the word "Surrealism" was used for the first time.

Among the questions asked about Apollinaire's lost future are: whether he would have forged the same close relationship with the Surrealists as he had done with the Cubists and others, whether he would have pursued his growing interest in theatre, and whether like the Surrealists he would have explored the artistic possibilities of film, a medium which like all that was new, fascinated him. One possible answer to these questions is offered by the career of Jean Cocteau, who did all of the above, and who appeared to pattern himself after Apollinaire, taking up the same themes of Greek mythology, collaborating with many of the same artists, experimenting with typography and illustration and declaring: "Writing for me is drawing." His 1929 book *Opium* was in the tradition of Apollinaire's autographic calligrammes, but as both poet and artist, he could make Apollinaire's claim "I, too, am a painter" with greater authority. In his work, text and image merge, writing and drawing are one and the same. During the 1930s, as is well-known, Cocteau "drew" embroidery designs for Elsa Schiaparelli, and while it is difficult to imagine the sartorially indifferent Apollinaire collaborating with a couturière, he would have enjoyed the wit of the newspaper prints commissioned by Schiaparelli, and in a fashion illustration published in *Harper's Bazaar* in 1938, he would have recognized his own typographic calligrammes. He would also be pleased that recent literary critics have taken a more positive view of the *Calligrammes*, praising them for freeing "the expressive potential of written language."

Apollinaire's instinctive love of artistic freedom in every medium, and his unbounded enthusiasm for the new led to his engagement in many aspects of Modernism. Although he did not live to see his contributions to the Modern movement fulfilled in the art and design of the Twenties and Thirties, they are discernible to us today. Since then, many textiles with typographic or calligraphic patterns, both European and American, have been produced and they are enjoying renewed popularity in the 1990s. It's worth remembering that Apollinaire is one of the ingredients in our century's "alphabet soup."
Notes

7. Steegmuller, p. 218-222.
9. Billy, p. xliii. Johanna Drucker attributes the negative view of *Calligrammes* to “the prejudices of the literary critic toward the visual aspect which is in many ways a mere annoyance as far as he is concerned...” (Drucker, p.155).
10. Steegmuller, p. 218-222.
11. See Pouot, p. 361 for the “rich convergences” that took place in Paris during this two-year period.
13. Steegmuller, p. 139.
20. It is a historian of graphic art, Anne Hyde Greet, who most accurately evaluates the relationship between the collaborators: “Prenant comme point de départ les poèmes d’Apollinaire sur des animaux réels et légendaires, Dufy s’est mis à créer des nouveaux mondes plastiques qui restent miraculeusement en contact avec la parole du poète.” (Hyde Greet, p. 151).
21. This textile is illustrated in Bowman, p. 51, and should be compared with the “Orphée” illustrations in *Le Bestiaire*. Apollinaire, *Oeuvres Poétiques*, p. 15, 26.
22. Jean Cocteau’s 1926 play *Orphée* is the most prominent example.
24. The colophon is illustrated by Fouché in Martin v. 4, p. 192. Also see “Les Sirènes” in Apollinaire, *Oeuvres Poétiques*, p. 27.
26. The trademark design is illustrated in Tushscherer, pl. 40.
30. In October of 1912, he delivered a lecture proclaiming the “Simultaneous Orphism” of Robert Delaunay. Steegmuller, 201-203.
33. Steegmuller, 263-264.
34. Letter from Sonia Delaunay to Jacques Damase, quoted by Damase, p. 72.
37. Ibid., 170.
38. The designs, which are dated January 14, 1922 and are in the Bibliothèque Nationale (fonds Sonia Delaunay, cat. no. 229), are reproduced in Musée de la Mode et du Costume. Europe 1910-1939, p. 87-88.
39. Damase, 171.
40. An example dated 1923 in the collection of Jacques Damase is reproduced in Damase, p. 67.
41. Ibid., 171.
42. This costume is illustrated in Damase, p. 12.
43. These patterns are illustrated in Damase, p. 38-39, p. 106.
45. Apollinaire, Oeuvres Poétiques, p. 675.
47. Léonard Pieux [Baronne d’Oettingen]. “Accordez-moi une audience. . .”, ill. by Léopold Survage, Sic, 1919.
50. See for example, his 1919 painting La Ville, in the Philadelphia Museum of Art.
51. Pouot, p. 360.
54. P.B., p. 110.
58. Steegmuller, p.262-263.


Bibliography


___ *Les Peintres Cubistes*. Paris, 1913


