

Dr. Jonathan Black (6 September 2006).

'The Fascination of the East': Dora Gordine, Imperialism and the Ancient Sculpture of South-East Asia'

(Derived from a lecture given at Dorich House, 8 March 2006; revised and expanded August-September 2006).

It would be useful, firstly, to briefly sketch in some of the political, ideological and cultural background to the theme of Imperialism and 'Exotic' sculpture between the world wars.

Immediately after the First World War the French and British colonial Empires reached their territorial zenith. We tend to forget just how big these Empires had become. The Treaty of Versailles, by awarding Britain mandates for Palestine, Trans-Jordan, Iraq, Togoland and Tanganyika (formerly German East Africa) increased the size of the Empire from 12.7 to 14.5 million square miles (26% of the earth's surface) and the number of people under its control from 444 to 457 million. The French also benefited, being awarded control of: Cameroon, in West Africa, and the Lebanon and Syria in the Middle East.¹

The remaining Colonial Empires –British, French, Belgian and Dutch – were generally attempting to make their possessions more economically efficient and profitable. They also wanted their home populations to take more of an interest in their Empire overseas and the people it ruled. In London the British Empire Exhibition ran for much of 1924 and 1925 at Wembley Stadium and attracted over 27 million visitors. The French Colonies Ministry sponsored a huge exhibition held in Paris between May and November 1931 to promote greater awareness of the peoples under French control and the raw materials they extracted for France.²

This was a period when the French, especially, made a series of high-profile, well-publicised expeditions within Africa and the Far East such those backed by the motor car manufacturer André Citroën: the 'Croisière Noire', from southern Algeria to Madagascar (October 1924-June 1925) and the 'Croisière Jaune', from Beirut to Saigon via Syria, Iraq, Persia, Afghanistan and China (April 1931-April 1932). Artefacts, carvings, paintings, drawings and photographs from the former were exhibited in Paris at the Louvre in October-November 1926 and from the latter in Paris in 1934.³ Meanwhile, at the Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago, in June 1933 Malvina Hoffman (1885-1966) exhibited 105 life-sized statues of different 'racial types' from around the world. She had been working on the series, for the Museum's 'Hall of Man', since 1930.⁴

Some of Gordine's British contemporaries, such as Elsa Fraenkel (1892-1975), Dora Clarke (1895-1989) and Hazel Amour (1894-1985), were producing portrait heads of Africans from British colonies in bronze or carved from wood and exhibiting them in London from c.1925-the late 1930's at the Royal Academy, the Women's International Art Club, the Royal Society of British Artists, the Leicester Galleries and the annual Goupil Gallery summer salons. Gordine appears to have known Amour

¹ *Empire: How Britain Made The Modern World*, Niall Ferguson, Penguin, London, p.240 and p.318.

² *Ibid.* pp. 315-318.

³ Dora Gordine to Lucien Pissarro, c. March 1936, Pissarro Family Papers, Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.

⁴ *Heads and Tales in Many Lands*, Malvina Hoffman, New York, Scribner's, 1936.

and Fraenkel by the late 1920's and was probably introduced to Clarke in the spring of 1936 by the painter Orovida Pissarro.⁵

A fascination with non-white 'exotic' peoples is evident in the travel writing and literature of the period i.e. T.E. Lawrence discussing the Arabs alongside whom he fought in the First World War in the *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (edition de luxe published in December 1926); André Malraux on Cambodia in *Les Conquérants* (1928) and *La Voie Royale* (1930) and on the Chinese civil war – *La Condition Humaine* (1933); André Gide wrote an account of a trip to the Belgian Congo published in 1925 as *Voyage au Congo*; Antoine de Saint-Éxupéry on flying over Morocco and the Atlas mountains in *Courrier Sud* (1928) and *Vol de Nuit* (1931 – won the Prix Femina) and in the non-fiction account *Terre des Hommes* (1939); Peter Fleming describing expeditions to Central Asia, China and Manchuria in *One's Company* (1934) and *News From Tartary* (1936) and Robert Byron's classic concerning precarious travel in Persia and Afghanistan *The Road to Oxiana* (1937) – in 1939 he sat to Gordine.⁶ On another level oriental races were crudely depicted as a threat to white Imperial rule and self-confidence i.e. witness the extremely popular series of 10 thrillers published between 1913 and 1939 by Arthur Sarsfield Ward, nome de plume Sax Rohmer, charting the exploits of the diabolically clever Chinese criminal mastermind *Dr. Fu Manchu* (played memorably on screen in 1932 by Boris Karloff who, in real life, was more prosaically an Englishman – one William Henry Pratt).⁷

Evelyn Waugh wrote, with characteristic biting sarcasm of a visit to Abyssinia, Kenya and the Belgian Congo in *Remote People* (1930) while his fictional African island of Azania – a composite of Abyssinia and French Madagascar – provided the colourful backdrop for his fictional satire *Black Mischief* (1932) in which a Westernised, Oxford-educated absolute ruler, Emperor Seth, comes seriously unstuck by trying to rule in an 'enlightened' fashion and introducing the latest 'modern' ideas on everything from dress to birth control.

Elsewhere, dealers and art critics such as Paul Guillaume and Paul Rosenberg in Paris; Roger Fry, Oscar Raphael, Ralph Heniker-Heaton, George Eumorfopoulos (he sat for a Gordine portrait head in 1937-38) and Sydney Burney in London were actively collecting/selling/exhibiting examples of tribal art from Africa, North America and Melanesia as well as carvings and bronzes from ancient civilisations of China, India, Indonesia, Cambodia and Central America.⁸

'Exotic' materials in furniture were all the rage in the wake of the 1925 Art Deco exhibition in Paris as was the dancing of Josephine Baker in her 'Revue nègre', launched in October 1925 at the Théâtre des Champs Élysées, which triggered a veritable wave of 'négrophilie' in Paris.⁹

During this period French, British and Dutch colonial rule was actively resisted by indigenous peoples. In April 1925 Emir Abd el-Krim, leader of the Berber Rif in

⁵ *La Vie en bleu: France and the French since 1900*, Red Kedward, London, Penguin-Allen Lane, 2005, p. 144.

⁶ The bronze head of Byron (1905-1941), now in a private collection, was exhibited at the Leicester Galleries in October 1945

⁷ *Master of Villainy: A Biography of Sax Rohmer*, Cay van Ash, London, T. Stacey, 1972.

⁸ *Negrophilia: Avant-Garde Paris and Black Culture in the 1920's*, Petrine Archer-Shaw, Thames & Hudson, London, 2000, p. 60.

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 75.

Spanish Morocco, invaded French Moroccan territory. In May 1926 el-Krim surrendered to French forces and was deported to the French controlled island of Réunion.¹⁰ Throughout the 1920's the Dutch attempted to crush, with mounting savagery, a rebellion in the province of Aceh on Sumatra. The French faced resistance from nationalist guerrillas in Vietnam while the British found it increasingly difficult to control India amidst the campaign of non-violent confrontation from the Congress Party led by Mahatma Gandhi. Meanwhile, in the Far East, the colonial powers faced a challenge to their continued power from the emergent and aggressively expansionist Empire of Japan. The Japanese annexed Manchuria in September 1931, bombed European owned business in Shanghai in 1932 and invaded central China in July 1937.¹¹

After her arrival in Paris in 1924, and prior to her departure for Singapore in the winter of 1929-30, Gordine's earliest example of an 'ethnic head' was *Chinese Head/The Chinese Philosopher* (c. 1925-26) exhibited, to great acclaim, at the Salon des Tuileries, Paris, during May-June 1926.¹² It is likely that, by this time, Gordine was aware of the work Charles Despiau who was beginning to exhibit his serene, severely classical heads, such as *Mlle. Jeanne Kamienska* (1921) and *Madame André Derain* (1923), informed by the examples of Etruscan, Indian and Khmer sculpture that Gordine also evidently admired.¹³ She also freely acknowledged her admiration for the sculpture of Maillol.¹⁴

According to the sitter's son, Professor Richard Chang of Yale University, the name of the 'Chinese Philosopher' was actually Chia-chu Chang. He was born in 1902 in a small town in the vicinity of Shanghai. His father was a doctor and a philanthropist who also was an art collector. His paternal grandfather had been a high-ranking provincial judge in the Imperial service. He was the youngest of eight brothers and also had four sisters. The fourth brother became a high-ranking member of the Nationalist Party – the Koumintang - (founded by Sun-Yat-Sen)¹⁵ and played a key role in founding the Bank of China in the early 1930's.¹⁶

In the early 1920's Chia-chu Chang was sent to the United States to learn English and had studied firstly at Clark College, Worcester Mass. and then at Columbia University, New York. In 1925 he decided to return to China, with one of his four sister's, via the Trans-Siberian Express.¹⁷ He travelled from the US to Paris where, presumably, he boarded the Paris-Moscow Express which reached the then Soviet Union via Berlin and Warsaw. Apparently, while in Paris to sort out tickets and visas,

¹⁰ Kedward, 2005, pp. 138-139.

¹¹ Ferguson, 2004, p. 339.

¹² Between 1925 and 1938 Gordine produced some 19 bronzes that could be labelled 'exotic, including 12 portrait heads. Between 1944 and 1949 she produced a further 9 works depicting non-Western Europeans (1 portrait in bas-relief, 4 portrait heads and 4 statuettes). Thus, over a total of 18 years Gordine produced 28 'exotic' sculptures.

¹³ *Charles Despiau 1874-1948*, Elizabeth Lebon, Paris, ADGAP, 1997, pp. 60-61.

¹⁴ Gordine interviewed by Marie Dormoy in *L'Amour de l'Art*, May 1927, p.166.

¹⁵ In 1944 the Sun-Yat-Sen Memorial Fund, based at the School of Oriental Studies, London University, commissioned a bronze bas-relief portrait plaque of him from Gordine. The plaque was unveiled near Gray's Inn Square in May 1946. *The Times*, 3 April 1946, p. 5.

¹⁶ Professor R. Chang interviewed by Dr. J. Black, 6 January 2006, Dorich House Archives.

¹⁷ *Bound Feet and Western Dress*, Pang-Mei Natasha Chang, London, Bantam, 1997, p.167.

Chang and his sister were approached by a man sent by Gordine who asked Chang whether he would be prepared to sit for a portrait head. Chang agreed and the sittings took three intensive days. On returning to China he went to work as a branch manager of the Bank of China. As evidence, perhaps, of latent Bohemian inclinations he also became part-owner of the 'Yanchung Dress Shop', Shanghai's most exclusive women's fashion emporium on Nanjing East Road - the city's smartest street.¹⁸

Gordine's exotic heads were not really widely the subject for critical discussion until her shared exhibition in October 1928, with painter C.R.W. Nevinson, held at the fashionable Leicester Galleries – just off Leicester Square.

In *The Observer*, its art critic P.G. Konody commented: '... Miss Gordine, where she contents herself with following in Maillol's footsteps – the large bronze of a *Javanese Dancer* (6) is a notable instance – somehow misses the significance of Maillol's departure from the classical ideal. In this, her most ambitious work, distortion seems to be resorted to for distraction's sake. It holds no particular rhythm. The heaviness of the limbs contradicts the snake-like sinuous litheness of the typical Javanese dance. Moreover, there seems to be inextricable confusion in the muscular articulation of the torso ...'¹⁹

Gordine's bronze *Torso/Walking Male Torso*, also on show at the Leicester Galleries, was well received. Indeed, in November 1928, a cast of this bronze was bought by the British Colonial Office for the Achimota College and School, opened as the Prince of Wales College and Co-Educational Secondary School in January 1927. This was the first occasion when the Colonial Office had purchased a work of art to advertise its commitment to improve educational facilities within the British Empire.

It would appear the school's first Principal, the Rev. Alexander G. Fraser (1873-1972) MA, CBE, urged the Colonial Office to buy Gordine's *Torso*. Ironically, one of his first pupils was the future President of an independent Ghana Kwame Nkrumah in 1957. The last British Governor-General (1957-60) to oversee the transition of authority was none other than a brother-in-law of Gordine's: William Hare, 5th Earl of Listowel.²⁰

In the main critics responding to the Leicester Galleries exhibition were far more impressed by Gordine's portrait heads than her figures. In the *Daily Telegraph* Robert Tatlock praised her for: '... the extraordinarily sensitively expressed *Gaudeloupe Head* and for the massive *Mongolian Head* and *Chinese Head*. The busts ... show that the artist has, quite apart from her sense of plastic beauty, a distinct gift for portraiture. [Maillol's and Gordine's exhibitions were] two of the most important and altogether enjoyable ... seen in London this year.'²¹

P.G. Konody, again in *The Observer*, opined that: '[Gordine's] real gifts, which are very considerable, are best expressed in her bronze heads, whether they be actual portraits of individual sitters, or types of Mongolians, Negroes, or other races. They are essentially sculptural conceptions, as interesting in the building of the forms as in the varied surface treatment. Throughout, one can see her aim to let the general type dominate the individual characteristics, though the often very subtle deviations from the type which constitute a person's individuality are by no means

¹⁸ Ibid. pp. 179-180.

¹⁹ *The Observer*, 7 October 1928, p.14.

²⁰ *The State of Africa: A History of Fifty Years of Independence*, Martin Meredith, London, Free Press, pp. 17-26.

²¹ *Daily Telegraph*, 6 October 1928, p.15.

neglected. I know of few living sculptor's who could surpass the artistry of Miss Gordine's *Breton Head* (11) and *Guadeloupe Head, Negress* (7) though the latter, obviously, owes much of its entrancing beauty to the artist's intimate acquaintance with the famous 'Nefretiti' bust at the Berlin Museum.²²

Thus, there is considerable evidence for a widespread vogue for 'exotic' portrait heads of types of non western Europeans, exhibited without distinguishing, individualised identities, during the 1920's. On the one hand there was a perception of the world becoming smaller through the after-effects of modern technology (film, radio, ocean liners and aircraft). The North American/Western European model, disseminated by Empire and economic might, seemed unstoppable. However, some important commentators suspected difference would never entirely be dissolved by free market capitalism and Hollywood. For example, in 1929, Aldous Huxley published *Do You What You Will* – a selection of essays. In the first, *One and Many*, he argued that the world was becoming increasingly 'Americanised' by the US film industry. However, he strongly asserted that: 'There is such a thing as absolute alienness. An absolute alienness which no amount of Esperanto and international government of movies and thousand-miles-an-hour aeroplanes and standardised education will ever ... completely abolish.' He did not think Christianity would take over the world either. People would want to remain Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists etc.²³ Thus, this highly influential thinker was convinced that the North American/Western European model of capitalism and democracy would be all-conquering. Difference at every level would continue to dominate the planet.

In June 1929 Gordine exhibited a fine *African Head* (c.1928-29) at the Salon des Tuileries. By the late 1890's the French colonial Empire in West Africa included: Senegal, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, Upper Volta, Dahomy (renamed Benin in 1975), Niger, the French Congo and Gabon. As a consequence of such rule there were hundreds of Black Africans living in Paris during the 1920's. No doubt Gordine found a sitter from among them. The head struck a chord with Ruth Green Harris, the influential Paris art critic of the *New York Times*. She wrote: 'Of the younger artists Dora Gordine is one of the most talented; and since her exhibition at the Leicester Galleries in the autumn she has begun to attract the attention she deserves. She has the ability to animate a surface without any sacrifice to the plastic whole. The head of an African is firmly modelled, so strong in its contour that one is moved to touch it, convinced that there is nourishment to be drawn out of the physical contact. The head is tilted slightly forward, the features curve up, the full mouth following in harmonic relation the slanting eyes; the flatness of the nose prevents plastic distortion. The temper is very grave and quiet.'²⁴

Between 18 September and 10 October 1929 Gordine exhibited at the prestigious Galerie Alfred Flechtheim in Berlin. In the *Deutsche Tagenzeitung*, critic Hugo Kubsch described Gordine as: 'a very special talent ... she has a strong sense of tactile forms ... which is especially noticeable in her portrait heads ... *Chinese Head* [and] *Woman from Guadeloupe*, are undoubtedly sculptural masterpieces, impressive for both their tranquil beauty and technical perfection ...'²⁵

²² *The Observer*, 7 October 1928, p.14. Many years later, in April 1946, Gordine selected this very head as a 'Masterpiece of Oriental Art' for the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*.

²³ *Do What You Will*, Aldous Huxley, London, Watts & Co., 1936, pp.26-27.

²⁴ *New York Times*, 30 June 1929, p.17.

²⁵ *Deutsche Tagenzeitung*, 20 September 1929.

As an indication of her recently acquired renown Gordine's *Breton Head* and *Mongolian Head* were included in the 'Modern and African Sculpture' show held November-December 1929 at the Sydney Burney Gallery, 13 St. James's Place, London. Other exhibitors included: Ossip Zadkine; Aristide Maillol; Jacob Epstein; Barbara Hepworth; John Skeaping and Frank Dobson, alongside carvings from: Gabon; Nigeria; Benin; Guinea and the Congo. By the end of the year, however, she had decided to leave Europe for Singapore in British Malaya.

Interviewed by the *Straits Times of Singapore*, in August 1930, Gordine declared that: 'In Europe she ... always felt cramped and thought of going to Africa, or the East. Later she decided on the East for here she felt sure she could find ideal types to model. She arrived here [in Singapore] five months ago [March 1930] and started work in her attap studio [roofed with the attap or nipa palm leaf] in Johore. She said that the naturally graceful movements of the Eastern peoples fascinated her. She contrasted the efforts the average European has to make to maintain a dignified appearance and the quiet and naturally dignified bearing of the Eastern. The figures of the Tamils, she said, are ideal for her work, for their excellent proportions and grace of line express a beauty unknown in Europe. Work is a little difficult here, she admitted, for she has not yet become accustomed to the heat. She has completed two casts, a Chinese and a Hindu. She has four more under way and will give the casts to be fashioned in bronze by the Municipality [of Singapore]. She is at present studying Hindu classic poses in the nude. Speaking generally of the art of sculpture she said: "Few people really understand it, for they do not know where to search for its beauty. They see a figure which is gross and unwieldy to the eye in a room, or confined space, but they never view it in its proper background. Place the same figure in a garden, where the largeness of the atmosphere brings out the qualities of the work and it is totally different. Why is the East noted for its art, except because here one has the large atmosphere necessary to nourish art? Could the monuments of the Golden Hindu era to be seen in Borobudhur [on Java] and the art treasures of Angkor [in Cambodia] ever have been produced in the narrow confines of a teeming city? I am enthralled by the East, fascinated by its movement, but cannot help deploring the western influences which tend to kill its natural beauty.'²⁶

In September 1930, after her marriage to Dr. George Herbert Garlick of the Malay Medical Service, Gordine settled in Johor Bahru – capital of the semi-independent Sultanate of Johor, just across the causeway from Singapore Island. The Unfederated State of Johor was ruled by the autocratic Sultan Sir Ibrahim ibn Abu Bakr (1873-1959) who caused a scandal in October 1930 by marrying, as his second wife, Mrs. Helen Wilson a divorced white woman who was seventeen years his junior.²⁷ Though she found the countryside fascinating, and the relaxed pace of life attractive, it soon became clear that the local wildlife posed dangers to the unwary. In July 1931 the British General Advisor for Johore, reported that for the period 1930-31 the total number of persons killed by 'noxious animals' was 55: 48 by tigers/leopards

²⁶ *Straits Times*, 12 August 1930, p.14. Borobudhur is the largest Buddhist extant temple complex ever built. It was erected c.750-830 ACE by the Sailendra Dynasty of south-central Javanese Kings. It was rediscovered in 1814 by Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles and extensively photographed by the Dutch colonial authorities in the 1870's. The site was also restored c.1907-1911 by a Dutch military engineer, Theodoor van Erp. Angkor Wat was built in the early 12th Century ACE by the Hindu Khmer King Suryavarman II (reigned c.1115-1150 ACE) as his capitol city in what is now north-western Cambodia. Angkor Wat was sacked by a Cham army from what is now Thailand in 1177 and a new capitol was built by Jayavarnam VII towards the end of the 12th Century ACE at Angkor Thom.

²⁷ *Straits Times*, 15 October 1930, p.11.

and panthers; 6 by crocodiles and 1 unfortunate person in the bath by a poisonous snake.²⁸ Gordine must have stood out in Johor Bahru; according to 1931 Census for Malaya, the population of Johor State was 505,309 of which only 719 were Europeans.²⁹

By the time Gordine settled in Johore, the overall economic situation in the Far East was deteriorating rapidly in the wake of the world-wide economic trade depression triggered by the Wall Street Stock Market crash of October 1929. The price of raw materials that British Malaya exported, such as rubber and tin, plummeted. Even many white Europeans in south-east Asia now found themselves unemployed and in need of assistance.³⁰ The French were experiencing major unrest in Indochina and the Dutch in what is now Indonesia (especially in the Aceh province of Sumatra). Meanwhile, the British were very concerned about tensions within the large Chinese community living on the Malayan peninsula and in the strategically vital city of Singapore which dominated commerce and banking. These tensions were generated by the political situation within China where civil war raged between the Nationalists, the Communists and a bewildering array of war lords intermittently allied to both.

The British in Malaya were also increasingly troubled by the ramifications of the campaign for Indian independence spearheaded by Gandhi and the Congress Party – who significantly stepped up their agitation from the early 1930's i.e. Gandhi's inspired public relations coup of the 'Salt March' in March 1931. In Malaya the British relied upon Sikh policemen to maintain law and order and on mainly Tamil labourers to run the lucrative rubber industry. The British colonial authorities in Malaya were in something of a quandary throughout the 1930's: on the one hand they wanted to dampen down Chinese and Indian nationalist feeling while the same time promoting a more distinct sense of there being a coherent Malayan national identity among the various communities deeply divided by ethnicity, religion, politics and economic strength. Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Confucian Chinese and animist indigenous peoples – known broadly as the Dyaks – jostled side-by-side. The goal was to unite this disparate collection of communities, especially in the face of an aggressively expansionist Japanese Empire which occupied Manchuria in 1931 and attacked Chinese Nationalist troops in Shanghai the following year with heavy loss of life. This context may also explain why the British authorities in Singapore, the Municipal Commissioners, were keen to purchase a series of four 'ethnic heads' from Gordine for the city's recently completed showpiece Municipal Buildings.³¹

In a sense Gordine's heads presented ideal feminine models from the various races within Malaya (Chinese, Malay, Javanese) which white males, single or not, could admire, desire, fantasise about but no more than that. It was presumably hoped by the Commissioners and by Sir Cecil Clementi (1875-1947), Governor of Singapore from February 1930 to November 1934, that non-whites visiting the buildings, even though it was a preserve of the white colonial elite, would see themselves as belonging to a multi-racial Malaya – in which the differences between Straits Settlements (run from London), Federated and Unfederated Sultanates were not so stark. In 1932 one of Clementi's supporters, the editor of the *Straits Times*, George Peet, complained at what he perceived to be the ever widening gulf between the races in Malaya. He thought the British were particularly to blame: ' ... for most

²⁸ Ibid. 11 July 1931, p.6.

²⁹ Ibid. 21 July 1931, p.18.

³⁰ *Out In The Midday Sun: The British in Malaya, 1880-1960*, Margaret Shennan, London, John Murray, 2004, pp.181-182.

³¹ Minutes of the Municipal Commissioners of Singapore, 29 August 1930. National Archives of Singapore.

commercial or professional Europeans [living in Malaya] there is neither time nor inclination for the study of races or languages ... [they know] little more about the Asiatic races round him ... than he did before he left his own country.³² Clementi's ambitious plans for 'Malayisation' encountered considerable resistance from the white business community and from the Sultans of the FMS and UMS alike. In the end Sir Cecil was essentially sacked, pressured to take early retirement, in 1934 and was replaced by the more emollient and cautious ex-Governor of the Gold Coast, Sir Shenton Thomas.³³

Meanwhile, Gordine had seized the opportunity to travel widely in south-east Asia. In February 1931 the *Bangkok Times* ran an 'interview' with Gordine entitled 'Angkor: Impressions of a Sculptor.' She was described as 'now on a visit to Angkor [Wat] ... ' and that she had spent a week there ' ... and have seen everything, and yet nothing. At least a year would be necessary to begin to understand this series of stupendous monuments. The fact that impresses me, above all others, is the use of sculpture and architecture as one art. Here they utterly belong to one another, as they should, and the perfection of both of them is such that the imagination is stunned into doubting the reality. The Bayon, in the town of Angkor, illustrates this well. The whole mass pleases infinitely from a distance and, when one comes closer, the perfection of the detail is a continual delight. It was a great joy to me to see sculpture standing thus in its true surroundings and not in the artificial atmosphere of museums. Many of the sculptures are so *pure* [my italics], so monumental, so powerful on form and refined in expression, as to be unrivalled anywhere. Such, for instance, are some of those in the Banyon and the headless figure of the wife of the Buddha in the Bantey Kedam which is, perhaps, the most wonderful of all. I had heard so much about Angkor that disappointment would not have surprised me. I recognise, after what I have seen, that no descriptions begin to be adequate.'³⁴

Coincidentally, that same year Jacob Epstein also drew attention to the contemporary vogue for 'pure sculpture' in conversations with the critic Arnold Haskell.³⁵ A decade later, in a lecture she gave to the Royal Asiatic Society in December 1940, Gordine discussed her interpretation of what she meant by 'pure sculpture' at greater length.³⁶

Gordine did not just produce portrait heads of 'exotic' sitters during her first stay in Johore. She also made portraits of members of Singapore's white colonial elite such as: *Diana* [Murison], c.1930-32, bronze, the daughter of Sir William Murison (1872-1945), Chief Justice of the Straits Settlements from 1925 until his retirement in May 1933; *Miss Beatrice Farrer*, c.1930-33, bronze, daughter of Mr. R.J. Farrer CMG, President of Singapore's Municipal Commissioners while Gordine was living at Johor Bahru until his retirement in March 1931 and *Mr. C. Boden Kloss*, c.1930-32, Curator of the Raffles Museum and Library, Singapore (1923-1931). Boden Kloss was also something of a local authority on the sculpture of ancient Java in the Dutch East

³² Shennan, 2004, p.146.

³³ Ibid. pp.158-159.

³⁴ *Bangkok Times*, 21 February 1931.

³⁵ *The Sculptor Speaks: Jacob Epstein to Arnold L. Haskell*, London, William Heinemann, 1931, pp. 129-130.

³⁶ Gordine lectured to the Royal Asiatic Society, at the Warburg Institute, London, on 'The Beauty of Asiatic Sculpture' on 17 December 1940. The lecture was published as 'The Beauty of Indian Sculpture' in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, January 1941, pp. 42-48.

Indies.³⁷ However, it was the 'exotic' heads she exhibited at the Leicester Galleries in July 1933 that attracted by far the most sustained and favourable critical attention.

The critic of the politically conservative *Morning Post* wrote there had been: '... a distinct improvement in her [Gordine's] sculpture [since the Leicester Galleries in October 1928] thus fulfilling the high promise of her earlier efforts. The search for character is more profound and her craftsmanship has reached a degree of subtlety and emotional fervour which one misses from Epstein's oeuvre. Moreover, her sense of colour is remarkable as she shows in the ... lovely and varied patina which distinguishes the different pieces on view. It fascinates one to watch the light play over the sensitive modelling of face and figure, revealing here an accent, there a new movement in the direction of rhythm, or of surface technique, all combining to express outward beauty and strength and inward power, grace and feeling. These qualities are suggested with a rare degree of perfection, especially in the wonderful *Head of a Chinese Lady* (2 is this *Kwa Nin – Chinese Lady of Peace*), a *Dahomy Princess* (4), a *Malay Head* and the *Malay Sultana* (10) who is the sister of the Sultan of Lahore [sic] ...³⁸ Regarding the last named work, the sitter had in actual fact been the Tungku Ampuan of Johore, Sultan Ibrahim's elder sister who knew Gordine well enough to attend her wedding in September 1930.³⁹

In *The Sunday Times* Frank Rutter thought: 'Miss Gordine has a good deal in common with Mr. Epstein, not only does she seem to prefer Asiatics to Europeans as models ... Her *Head of a Chinese Lady* (2) is well-nigh perfect in beauty of subject and treatment while the astounding mastery of her modelling is seen in her *Javanese Head* (5) in which –to take one feature only – the sensitively modelled lips seem to positively quivering with life. Again, like Mr. Epstein, Miss Gordine can most conveniently be classed as a romantic sculptor.'⁴⁰

One bronze figure exhibited at the Leicester Galleries, *Male Torso/Dyak*, also attracted a great deal of comment. 'Dyak' is the term usually applied to the indigenous peoples of Borneo – who number about two million strong. The animistic dyaks were divided by British 19th century anthropologists into 'Sea Dyaks' (now known as Iban) and 'Land Dyaks' of eastern and central Borneo. Both communities engaged in highly ritualised warfare, involving headhunting (they keep skulls rather than shrinking heads) and the use of poisoned arrows and darts. The Sea Dyaks/Iban are concentrated on the north-eastern coast of Borneo – what are now the states of Sarawak and Brunei.⁴¹ In October 1931, as Dr. Garlick's new wife, Gordine attended a dinner given by the Governor of the Straits Settlements in Singapore at which the then Sultan of Brunei was present. It is possible he invited her to visit his kingdom and produce an image of one of his Dyak subjects.⁴²

Arthur Symons, a leading Decadent poet of the 1890's, wrote fulsomely of *Male Torso/Dyak* that it was '... magnificently masculine and there is an intense simplicity and that intensity of life which seems to exist in every limb. She has given him neither head nor feet. What she gives is the body of a primitive animal, ready to seize his prey like a wild beast, virile and capable of any violent action. And you feel the solidity of that immense weight, what force and reality, what sudden arrested life [is]

³⁷ *The Times*, 4 June 1930, p. 18.

³⁸ *Morning Post*, 5 July 1933. Clipping, Dorich House Archives.

³⁹ *Straits Times*, 20 September 1930, p.10.

⁴⁰ *Sunday Times*, 9 July 1933, p.7.

⁴¹ *Tales from the South China Seas*, Charles Allen, London, Abacus, 2001, pp. 149-151.

⁴² *Straits Times*, 14 October 1931, p. 12.

in those long arms and furiously clenched hands. When one has all these qualities, then the sculpture becomes neither ancient nor modern but a great force of sculpture, neither of today nor of tomorrow.⁴³ In the same article he also indicated how impressed he had been with Gordine's languid seated female figure *Pagan*. He thought she possessed a 'deeply erotic appeal ... her limbs have been caught in a suddenly arrested dance. Over the face plays a scarcely perceptible smile, and the peaceful, intent features seem to suggest that the whole mind of the figure is bent on listening to the harmonious life of the body within. Nothing is exaggerated, there is no hint of dramatic strain, for this figure is like a strange force of nature, perfectly self-contained, and obeying no laws save those which it derives from its own sense of harmony and perfection.'⁴⁴ In July 1933 Symons was also very taken with the reclining bronze figure *Cingalese Girl* (1930-31).⁴⁵

On works such as *Cingalese Girl*, *Male Torso/Dyak* and *Pagan* one can detect the clear imprint of ancient Indian, Chinese, Khmer (from Angkor Wat) and Javanese (from Borobudhur) sculpture in lectures she later gave to the Royal Asiatic Society in December 1940 and in May 1942.⁴⁶

Having by now divorced Dr. Garlick, Gordine returned to settle in London in July 1935. While the economic situation in the Far East displayed no signs of reviving, the economy in certain parts of the British Isles such as the South-East of England and in London, began to significantly improve. Dora had decided to live on Kingston Vale in a house of her own design and to be paid for by a new second husband – the Hon. Richard Hare (1907-1966). They were married on 6 November 1936 and, shortly thereafter, they moved into a recently completed Dorich House. Gordine submitted work successfully to the Royal Academy for exhibition in May 1937 – and regularly exhibited there until 1960. She began to receive official recognition from the British art establishment. In April 1938, alongside Frank Dobson and Eric Gill, she was elected an Associate member of the Royal Society of British Sculpture.⁴⁷

At the Leicester Galleries in November 1938 she exhibited relatively little work with overtly 'exotic' content, apart from an attractive bronze head of Kazuko Yoshida (1915-1996) - the daughter of the Japanese ambassador to London displayed as *Eastern Moon*. Dora perhaps was interested in her as a much-photographed and commented upon society belle and adornment of the London diplomatic scene (Kazuko, after her mother fell ill, acted as Embassy Hostess for her father for a year until she returned to Japan to marry in July 1938).⁴⁸ However, after Japan invaded mainland China in July 1937, the Far East seemed less exotic and playfully enticing than threatening and as the arena for horrific atrocities committed by the Imperial Japanese army such as the justly named 'Rape of Nanking' (December 1937 to March 1938) during which Japanese soldiers executed between 250 and 300,000 Chinese prisoners of war and civilians and sexually assaulted between 20,000 and 80,000 women regardless of age.⁴⁹

⁴³ *The Spectator*, 14 July 1933, pp. 45-46.

⁴⁴ *The Spectator*, 4 November 1938, p.768.

⁴⁵ 'Cingalese' is an old-fashioned form of 'Sinhalese', the majority ethnic group on the island of Sri Lanka.

⁴⁶ On 27 May 1942 Gordine lectured to the Royal Asiatic Society, at the Royal Empire Society Building, on 'The Indonesian Sculpture of Indo-China and Java.'

⁴⁷ *The Times*, 12 April 1938, p.12.

⁴⁸ *Whispering Leaves in Grosvenor Square*, Yuki Yoshida, London, Longmans [1937], 1997, p. 45.

⁴⁹ Ferguson, 2004, p.338 and *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War Two*, Iris Chang, London, Penguin, 1998.

In her November 1938 exhibition the majority of sitters for Gordine's portrait heads now firmly belonged to the ranks of the British Establishment for example: H.S. Goodhart-Rendel (then President of the Royal Institute of British Architects), Lord Glenconner (Chairman of the brewers Tennants and a Director of Imperial Chemical Industries), Sir Alec Martin (Managing Director of Christie's Auction House), Sir Harry Vanderpant (Lord Mayor of Westminster and a prominent philanthropist); Fred Brown (Emeritus Professor of Fine Art at the Slade and grand old man of British Impressionism); Lionel Brett (a budding modernist architect and heir to the second Lord Esher); Edith Evans (celebrated actress); Dugald Sutherland MacColl (eminent art critic and art historian); society beauty Lady Ida Cholmondeley and society gossip columnist Charles Chichester (Marquis of Donegall). This expansive and impressive range of sitters suggests just how far Dora had travelled from when she first came to the attention of the British public in October 1928 as exotic émigré Russian 'girl-sculptor genius'.⁵⁰

This exhibition certainly established her as a major figure within British sculpture. Indeed, in *The Observer*, the influential critic Jan Gordon wrote: 'Dora Gordine's exhibition at the Leicester Galleries is most important, it suggests that she is very possibly becoming the finest woman sculptor in the world.'⁵¹

However, Gordine was also very keen to show that she could also talk and write eloquently about the examples of ancient sculpture from beyond Western Europe which she so admired. Invited by her old friend Sir Richard Winstedt (1878-1966), formerly General Adviser to the Sultan of Johore between 1931 and 1935 and now President of the Royal Asiatic Society, she gave a lecture to the Society in December 1940 on the subject of 'The Beauty of Asiatic Sculpture'.⁵² The following month the lecture was published in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* with the title 'The Beauty of Indian Sculpture'. Gordine discussed examples of carvings and bronzes from 7th to 13th century AD Khajuraho, Ellora, Sanchi, Ajanta, Jodhpur and Konarka. As noted previously, she discussed the vital importance of 'pure sculpture', that concept Epstein had discussed in detail with Arnold Haskell in 1931, and robustly declared her conviction that the best examples of Indian, Chinese and Indochinese sculpture were superior to that produced by ancient Greek and Rome:

'... Greek sculptors sought to standardise beauty in one cold ideal type, medieval Christians to impress the mind by suppressing the body, but in Indian sculpture there is an ease, a natural warmth, an abundance of life and love, which does not try to force the mind to any intellectual conclusions ... the deep sense of visual beauty which existed in India expressed itself also in an exuberant architecture which was the background of almost all of its sculpture. In great periods of art sculpture and architecture have always been closely allied ... rich voluptuous Indian bodies inspired artists to create the utmost plastic beauty of which sculpture is capable – sculpture which is in many examples at once static and dynamic.'⁵³

⁵⁰ R.H. Wilenski, *The Evening Standard*, 5 October 1928. Clipping Dorich House Archives.

⁵¹ *The Observer*, 6 November 1938, p.14.

⁵² *The Times*, 17 December 1940, p. 5. The lecture was given in conjunction with a exhibition of photographs of Indian sculpture and architecture at the Warburg Institute curated by Dr. Stella Kramrisch (1896-1993), Lecturer in Indian Art at the Courtauld Institute of Art, London University. An Austrian from a Jewish background, Kramrisch had fled Vienna for London shortly before the Nazi takeover of her country in March 1938.

⁵³ *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, January 1941, pp.42-48.

In February 1940, as a further indication that Gordine had been accepted by Britain's social elite, she was photographed by Tunbridge Sedgwick for *The Bystander* magazine. In one image she stands by an ornate Persian jar resting on a mahjong table from Singapore, static but certainly brimming with dynamism and on the cusp of a new career as a lecturer.⁵⁴ Indeed, during the Second World War she not only give several further lectures to the Royal Asiatic Society but lectured on various aspects of Indian, Chinese and South-East Asian Art to the Royal India Society (September 1944), Cambridge and Oxford Universities (May 1943 and June 1941 respectively), the School of Oriental Studies at London University [now SOAS] (July 1943), the Institut Français, London (June 1943) and the Alpine Club in London (June and July 1944). She also published, between 1941 and 1947, a series of eight articles entitled 'Masterpieces of Oriental Art in the Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society. Thus, through the examples of her work and the written and the spoken word she was able to share with hundreds her enduring 'fascination' with the East. Ironically, by the time of her last article for the Royal Asiatic Society (published in December 1947), Britain had been compelled to give India, Pakistan and Burma their independence⁵⁵ while time was fast running out for British colonial power in the Far East.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ *The Bystander*, 28 February 1940. Clipping, Dorich House Archives.

⁵⁵ *Never Again: Britain 1945-1951*, Peter Hennessy, London, Vintage, 1993, pp. 230-236.

⁵⁶ After the 'Emergency' against Communist guerrillas declared in June 1948, British Malaya eventually became an independent Malaysia at the end of August 1957. *Last Post; The End of Empire in the Far East*, John Keay, London, John Murray, 2005, p. 315. It is worthy of note that one of Gordine's brothers-in-law, William Hare (5th Earl of Listowel), was the last British Secretary of State for India (1947) and then for Burma (1948). He had essentially been appointed by Clement Attlee to ensure the British departure from the sub-continent was as swift as possible. Listowel later served as Attlee's Minister for Colonial Affairs (1948-50). He finished his political life as the last Governor General of the Gold Coast – supervising its transition into the independent state of Ghana (1957-60). Meanwhile, another brother-in-law, John (later Viscount Blakenham), was Minister for Colonial Affairs (1955-1956) in Anthony Eden's Conservative government.