



'Nous, les Artistes Tsiganes'. Intellectual Networks and Cultural Spaces for Ethnic Assertion in France (1949–1989)*

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Abstract

This article focuses on the cultural and artistic side of Tsigane associationism in France. Its purpose is to demonstrate that a new identity was created between the 1950s and the 1980s: the Tsigane artist and intellectual. This identity resisted both primitivist, naïve, folkloric stereotypes and the label 'Rom' coined by the Romani movement. For this to happen, several other transformations were necessary, which this article will also explore, such as the resignification of the exonym 'Tsigane' as a national and ethnic identity marker. These processes are explained with reference to two closely linked objects of study: the Association des Études Tsiganes (Association for Tsigane Studies), a circle of 'experts' on the Tsigane world, founded in 1949, and second, the Association Initiatives Tsiganes (Tsigane Initiatives Association), which was created from within the previous movement in 1983, but was led by Tsigane artists and intellectuals who put their own form of cultural activism into practice.

Keywords

Tsigane, cultural associationism, romani movement, association des Études Tsiganes, association Initiatives Tsiganes

* 'We, the Tsigane artists'. The expression in quotation marks comes from the author's interview with Gerard Gartner, hereafter, Gerard Gartner in discussion with the author, Collonges-la-Rouge (France), September 2019. In this article, the term 'Tsigane' is employed (using this spelling or that of 'Tzigane', following the way it appears in the documentation) in order to respect the terms used by the subjects to refer to themselves. Nevertheless, the generic terms 'Roma' and 'Romani' will also be used to refer to these peoples as a whole, following the nomenclature established at the 1971 World Romani Congress and currently used in European institutions.

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During the second half of the twentieth century, an entrenched secular anti-Gypsyism, rooted in official institutions as well as everyday popular practices, coexisted alongside an increasingly rich range of movements in favour of the rights of the Roma. It was clearly an unequal struggle, in as much as the emergent network of Romani associations had to contend with a long tradition of racist policies in addition to bearing the enormous weight of the negative representations of these groups. Nevertheless, despite its limitations and shortcomings, associationism was also instrumental in paving the way for Romani activism in the new century, building on its successes and having learned from its mistakes. Because of this, and also because the experience of this minority – the largest in Europe – has served to inspire other marginalized or excluded groups to demand their rights, the history of the Roma movement deserves to be approached from all angles.

This article focuses on the cultural and artistic side of ethnic associationism in France. This is a relatively unexplored area, in which the paucity of research and lack of documentary sources (many destroyed because they were not considered valuable by their authors) contrasts with an increasingly abundant bibliography and the wealth of written or visual evidence that exists on more politicized aspects of the movement. Despite these difficulties, the study of this cultural and artistic phenomenon remains a necessary task in order to understand the crucible of experiences that shaped Romani advocacy action. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate that a new identity was created between the 1950s and the 1980s: the Tsigane artist and intellectual. This identity resisted both primitivist, naïve, folkloric stereotypes and the label 'Rom' coined by the Romani movement. For this to happen, several other transformations were necessary, which this article will also explore, such as the resignification of the exonym 'Tsigane' as a national and ethnic identity marker. These processes are explained with reference to two closely linked objects of study: the Association des Études Tsiganes (Association for Tsigane Studies), a circle of 'experts' on the Tsigane world, founded in 1949, and second, the Association Initiatives Tsiganes (Tsigane Initiatives Association), which was created from within the previous movement in 1983, but was led by Tsigane artists and intellectuals who put their own form of cultural activism into practice. The originality and importance of the cultural activism that flourished during those years is demonstrated in the national and transnational contacts that were established around these organizations, the networks – both Tsigane and mixed – constructed by the principal figures, as well as the memory of these events.

Tsiganology and the Tsiganes

Since their arrival in Europe in the Early Modern Age, the population referred to as 'Gypsies' has been the victim of structural racism, whose consequences have been manifested in all areas of social life. In France, as in other Western countries, this persecution intensified from the eighteenth century onwards, as the advance of political democratization and the emergence of a more egalitarian system made it necessary to refine the legal and governmental instruments of discrimination that would exclude these minorities from that democratization process. From the beginning of the twentieth century, therefore,

a hostile administrative system was introduced that monitored, identified and, in general, controlled these groups using such instruments as the anthropometric cards that all French ‘nomads’ – a definition that included but was not limited to the Roma population – were required to have after 1912. This persecution reached its peak during the Second World War, when the nomadic population was put under surveillance by the French State, and its freedom of movement completely abolished.¹ In France, the control policies and negative attitudes towards the different groups – classified variously and confusingly as ‘tsiganes’, ‘gens du voyage’ (travelling people), ‘nomades’ (nomads), ‘bohémien(s)’ (Bohemians) or ‘gitans’ (Gypsies) – continued after the war, in tune with ethnic tensions elsewhere in Europe.² These groups hardly benefited from the economic recovery and expansion fostered during ‘the long reconstruction’. On the contrary, their exclusion from social protection policies, the rise in immigration, population growth on the peripheries of towns and cities, as well as increasing unemployment meant that they were completely overlooked during the ‘Trente Glorieuses’ (The Glorious Thirty).³

The desire to alleviate State neglect of the Tsigane population and mitigate their exclusion and inequality in the eyes of the law gave rise to three different responses. The first, ethnic associationism, which had taken its first steps in the interwar period but found itself thwarted after 1939, resurfaced at the end of the 1950s, rallying around figures such as Ionel Rotaru and the Communauté Mondiale Gitane (CMG) (World Gypsy Community) and his successor, Vanko Rouda and the Comité International Tzigane (CIT) (International Gypsy Committee), which paved the way for transnational Romani activism in the 1970s with the Comité International Rom (CIR) (International Gypsy Committee).⁴

Unlike the first movement, whose successive leaders were or claimed to be Tsiganes, the other two attempts to resolve the ‘Gypsy question’ were sponsored and led, at least initially, by non-Roma. This was the case with the religious and charitable organizations – both in their Roman Catholic and Messianic Pentecostal versions – which were highly prolific and active from the 1950s, especially the Association Notre-Dame-des-Gitanes (Notre-Dame-of-Gypsies Association) and the Pentecostal Mission Évangélique Tzigane (Tzigane Evangelical Mission).⁵ Also led by non-Romanies were the associations

¹ Ilsen About, ‘Underclass Gypsies: An Historical Approach on Categorisation and Exclusion in France, in the Nineteenth and the Twentieth Centuries’, in Michael Stewart, ed., *The Gypsy ‘Menace’: Populism and the New Anti-Gypsy Politics* (London 2012), 95–114.

² For ethnic conflicts after the Second World War, see Keith Lowe, *Savage Continent: Europe in the Aftermath of World War II* (London 2013), 225–331.

³ Herrick Chapman, *France’s Long Reconstruction: In Search of the Modern Republic* (Cambridge, MA 2018); Céline Pessis, Sezin Topçu and Christophe Bonneuil, eds, *Une autre histoire des ‘Trente Glorieuses’. Modernisation, contestations et pollutions dans la France d’après-guerre* (Paris 2013).

⁴ Jean Pierre Liégeois, *Mutation Tsigane. La révolution bohémienne* (Bruxelles 1976); Ilona Klímová-Alexander, ‘Development and Institutionalization of Romani Representation and Administration. Part 3a: From National Organizations to International Umbrellas (1945–1970) – Romani Mobilization at the National Level’, *Nationalities Papers*, Vol. 34, No. 5 (2006), 599–621.

⁵ Patrick Williams, ‘Le Miracle et la nécessité: à propos du développement du pentecôtisme chez les tsiganes’, *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, No. 73 (1991), 81–98.

dedicated to ‘expert knowledge’ of the different groups of Tsiganes. The most senior of these was the Association des Études Tsiganes, founded in Paris in 1949. Its stated purpose was to acquire more in-depth knowledge of the ‘history, traditions and current situation of the Tsiganes’ and to promote initiatives that would improve their situation.⁶ Nevertheless, these three spaces were not closed spaces oblivious to the thinking and methods of the others; the movement of figures between groups, occasional collaborations between several of the organizations, and the animosity and discrepancies over how the ‘Gypsy question’ should be tackled linked their development in the second part of the twentieth century, which in turn created hybrid spaces from which new forms of action would emerge.

This constant movement of actors between one space and another and the tensions between disparate projects required sustained effort to bring out the originality and relevance of their work. Études Tsiganes, in particular, was set up by a group of scholars seeking to emulate the British Gypsy Lore Society. The latter, dating from 1888, was a pioneer in defining ‘Gypsyism’ (occasionally also referred to as ‘the Gypsy problem’) as a specific field of study restricted to a small group of non-Roma ‘specialists’ familiar with the research on folklore and eager to make contact with that primitive atavism that their romantic imagination attributed to the Gypsies.⁷ The Gypsy Lore Society was the cradle of Gypsyism. This phenomenon was indebted to Orientalism, for both were founded on the epistemic privilege of those who construct ‘others’ as an object of study. Unlike Orientalism, however, Gypsyism exerted its power of representation over a European otherness: the Roma populations.⁸ The Association des Études Tsiganes was the first association created outside the United Kingdom with a marked gypsyist spirit, which led to long-lasting harmony and admiration between the two groups.⁹

The rapid growth of Études Tsiganes from the mid-1950s was the direct consequence of the political and cultural influence of the members of the Board of Directors. While some, such as its first President, Pierre Meile, Professor of Oriental Languages, had strong academic profiles, the Association Board was dominated by those holding some State office. André Holleaux and Pierre Join-Lambert, for example, were both State Councillors and members of the Inter-Ministerial Commission for the Study of Questions Concerning the Population of Nomadic Origin, which Join-Lambert himself chaired. Despite its inefficiency in defining specific policies,¹⁰ the foundation of this Commission in 1949, the same year as the Association des Études Tsiganes, was particularly beneficial for the latter, since Join-Lambert proved to be an invaluable connection to French political life. The joint action of Holleaux and Join-Lambert also led to explicit support from personalities such as André Malraux (Holleaux headed his cabinet in the

⁶ ‘Présentation’, *Études Tsiganes* (henceforth *ÉT*), No. 1 (1955), 2.

⁷ David Mayall, *Gypsy Identities 1500–2000: From Egipcians and Moon-men to the Ethnic Romany* (London 2004), ch. 6.

⁸ Ken Lee, ‘Orientalism and Gypsyism’, *Social Analysis*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (2002), 129–56.

⁹ *ÉT*, Nos 2–3 (1959), 19.

¹⁰ María Sierra, ‘Creating Romanestan: A Place to be a Gypsy in Post-Nazi Europe’, *European History Quarterly*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (2019), 279.

Ministry of Culture).¹¹ At the same time, there was space in *Études Tsiganes* for clergymen such as Jean Fleury, ‘National Chaplain for the *Gitans* and *Tsiganes*’ (‘Aumônier des Gitans et Tsiganes’),¹² or André Barthélémy, who took over from Fleury in this post in the mid-1960s, and was an active member of the Association Notre-Dame-des-Gitanes from that time, which enabled a direct connection between the two most important associations devoted to the ‘Gypsy question’.

The work of this network of ‘experts’ addressed all those areas that they considered necessary to understand what they called ‘the world of the Tsiganes’, with culture and art being accorded a prominent place. Nevertheless, it was an area of study that was fraught with tension. From the mid-1950s until well into the 1970s, the pages of *Études Tsiganes* reflected the strong influence of Gypsyism among the *tsiganologues* in the association. French ‘experts’ who studied the cultural production of Tsigane communities paid special attention to their music, dance and circus performances, using them to build up a highly folkloric image of these forms of expression. It was demonstrated, for example, in events held in March 1967, such as the ‘Gala Tsigane y Gitan’ (Tsigane and Gypsy gala), in which those who attended had ‘the impression of having been admitted to a real Tsigane fiesta, the fiestas that the Tsiganes organize for themselves, for their own enjoyment’.¹³

At the same time as the Association was promoting gypsyist readings of Tsigane culture, another line of action rich in possibilities was opening up within *Études Tsiganes* itself. The source of this second interpretation was Matéo Maximoff (1917–1999), an early member of the Association and the only Tsigane present at the beginning of this project. Maximoff, the son of a Kalderash father and Manouche mother, was well known among the Parisian intelligentsia at the beginning of the 1950s. His first novels, all literary portraits of his community, had been published by the well-known publishers, Flammarion, earning him the nickname ‘Tsigane writer’.¹⁴ The texts that he sent to Dora Yates, editor of the *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society*, after 1945, telling the story of the Romani genocide during the Holocaust, were among the first by members of the community to denounce that historical episode.¹⁵ His declarations, as well as permanent contact with the Tsigane families who populated the peripheral areas of Paris (such as Montreuil and Romainville, where he lived) earned him the respect and support of a large part of these groups.

In 1955, Father Fleury put Maximoff in touch with Pierre Join-Lambert and the recently created Association *Études Tsiganes*, which immediately invited the writer to

¹¹ André Holleaux, *Malraux ministre au jour le jour. Souvenirs d'André Holleaux* (Paris 2014); *Études Tsiganes*, Nos 1–2 (1964), 33–4.

¹² Limor Yagil, *La France, terre de refuge et de désobéissance civile (1936–1944): Implication des fonctionnaires, le sauvetage aux frontières et dans les villages-refuges* (Paris 2010).

¹³ Jacqueline Charlemagne, ‘L’association et la revue *Études Tsiganes*’, *Études Tsiganes*, Nos 23–24 (2005), 12.

¹⁴ Gérard Gartner, *Matéo Maximoff. Carnets de route* (Paris 2006).

¹⁵ Matéo Maximoff, ‘Germany and the Gypsies: From the Gypsy’s Point of View’, *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society*, No. 25 (1946).

join the list of 'experts' that it was gathering together.¹⁶ A good example of the collective enthusiasm that his addition sparked in this circle was the publication of the first issue of the bulletin, *Études Tsiganes*, which opened with a study of 'the main Tsigane groups in France', signed by Maximoff.¹⁷ After that, his authority in Romani studies was not only never questioned, but also received the unwavering support of all members of the Association. In the 1960s, Maximoff started to interact with the other two spaces of activity devoted to the Tsiganes. After converting to Pentecostalism in 1962, Maximoff devoted himself to his work as a pastor, which led to the strengthening of his friendship with another pastor, Clement le Cossec, and the Mission Evangélique Tzigane. His influence in the French Tsigane community also increased.¹⁸ At the same time, Maximoff maintained a cautious involvement with the associationism that had reappeared at the end of the 1950s. Although his desire to demand compensation from Germany for the suffering caused to the Roma during the Holocaust – and probably a similar intellectual profile and artistic vocation – had prompted Maximoff to make contact with Ionel Rotaru, the latter's self-proclamation as Vaida Voïvod III, supreme leader of the Tsiganes, aroused his scepticism.¹⁹ Despite his reservations about the work of Rotaru and his successor, Vanko Rouda, he did not hesitate to participate in the First World Romani Congress, held in London in 1971, the objective of which was to unify the European Roma movement around common purposes and symbols.²⁰

As a result of moving in such different spheres of activity, Maximoff recognized in himself qualities, attributes and practices not previously associated with Tsiganes. Through his texts, and thanks to his public activity, Maximoff was able to assert that he was a writer, one of the hundreds striving to have their manuscripts published, exchanging their interests and concerns in the bohemian brasseries and cafés of Paris;²¹ he could consider himself an authority on Tsigane affairs, a member of learned circles devoted to the study of Tsigane culture alongside other non-Roma scholars.²² He also presented himself as a religious leader, strongly committed to fighting the situation of legal inequality and social deprivation endured by the Romani community, and also as their intellectual representative entitled to resolve historical or linguistic questions.²³ At the same

¹⁶ Jacqueline Charlemagne, 'La presence tsigane au monde', *ÉT*, No. 60 (2017), 135.

¹⁷ Matéo Maximoff, 'Principaux groupes tsiganes en France', *ÉT*, No.1 (1955), 3–6.

¹⁸ Patrick Williams, 'Le Pasteur Matéo', *ÉT*, No. 60 (2017), 150.

¹⁹ Ulrich Baumann, 'From the Gypsy's Point of View: Politique et mémoire au travers de la vie de l'oeuvre de Matéo Maximoff', *ÉT*, No. 60 (2017), 124.

²⁰ Thomas A. Acton, *Gypsy Politics and Social Change: The Development of Ethnic Ideology and Pressure Politics Among British Gypsies from Victorian Reformism to Romany Nationalism* (London 1974), 155–74.

²¹ Cécile Kováčsházy, 'Matéo Maximoff, romancier. Une vie pour la littérature', *ÉT*, No. 60 (2017).

²² Such as the 'Mesa redonda de la tsiganologie' (Round Table on Tsiganology), organized by *Études Tsiganes* in December 1977, in which he participated accompanying the rest of the members of the association 'Bilan de la Tsiganologie', *ÉT*, No. 4 (1977), 1–9.

²³ Maximoff was a member of the commission with responsibility for the linguistic standardization of Romanès and translated the New Testament into this language, Ulrich Baumann, 'From the Gypsy's Point of View – Politique et Mémoire au travers de la vie et l'oeuvre de Matéo Maximoff', *ÉT*, No. 60 (2017), 127.

time, he lent his support to the budding international Romani associations, but maintained an increasingly critical stance towards nationalist claims (such as those that emerged at the World Romani Congress of 1971), arguing that Romanestan was not a viable proposition and that French Roma should preserve their national and ethnic identity as 'Tsiganes'.²⁴ In addition, he cultivated a more than cordial relationship with major State officials, such as his colleagues in *Études Tsiganes*, Join-Lambert and Barthélémy.

Hence, Maximoff's career – which unfolded through contact with different, apparently incompatible spaces – contributed to the reappropriation and positive signification of the exonym 'Tsigane'. The writer inaugurated a new form of identity, based on recognition as part of an ethnic group, that incorporated characteristics that had hitherto been contested, if not denied to French Tsiganes: the authority to make pronouncements on 'the Gypsy question'; closeness to the political class; intellectual prestige as scholarly creators; and entitlement to claim that they were members of the national community. Maximoff's example went beyond his own life and had a decisive influence on a generation of Tsiganes from the 1960s onwards who began to identify themselves with many of the aspects in which the writer had been a pioneer.

In time, some of those artists and intellectuals started to join *Études Tsiganes*, protected by the friendship that Maximoff bestowed on them and attracted by the enormous possibilities for action that this circle of politically influential scholars could provide. These artists and intellectuals would not only take a stand against the gypsyologist discourse that had relegated their tradition to a subaltern place in Western culture, but would aspire to reconstruct the history of 'Tsigane art' to show the world that the extraordinary intellectual and creative abilities of those who belonged to their ethnic group – the same qualities that had historically been denied them – were the very essence of their being.

Bohemians and Tsiganes

Since the fifteenth century, 'Bohémiens' (Bohemians) was one of the terms that had been used to refer to Romanies living in Western Europe, especially in the slums on the outskirts of major capitals such as Paris. The name, which originated in the popular belief that these groups came from the region of Bohemia, took firm hold in modern and contemporary times as an effective way of indicating that these communities were foreign in nature.²⁵ In the nineteenth century, far from functioning only as an exonym, the term 'bohemian' became polysemic. Because of their apparent similarity to the way of life – supposedly anarchic and contrary to bourgeois morality – of those 'foreigners'

²⁴ Maximoff had been more understanding and positive about the idea of Romanestan at the beginning of the 1960s, although he would always speak of it as something that did not concern him, Matéo Maximoff, 'Un État tzigane est-il possible', *Le front des Barbelés*, No. 152 (1961). Ten years later, however, he was completely unsympathetic to the project, Matéo Maximoff, 'Réflexions sur l'avenir de l'organisation internationale tzigane', *ÉT*, No. 4 (1971), 10–11.

²⁵ David Mayall, *Gypsy Identities*; Leonardo Plasere, 'Approche dénotationniste ou approche connotationniste: les terminologies de parenté tsiganes', *ÉT*, No. 4 (1994).

who populated the poor areas on the fringes of cities and led marginal lives, some French artists and writers started to be described as ‘Bohemians’.²⁶ By the second half of the century, famous works such as *Scènes de la vie bohème* (Scenes from Bohemian Life) (1851) by Henry Murger or *La Bohème* (1896) by Giacomo Puccini were already praising this lifestyle as a manifestation of the characteristically rebellious nature and aesthetic brilliance of contemporary artists.

Paradoxically, just as this bohemian image was taking root in Western culture, those Roma whose alleged anti-bourgeois customs had led to the definition in the first place gradually ceased to be categorized as ‘bohemian’ whenever this referred – as it frequently did up to the end of the twentieth century – to a subjectivity blessed by creative genius or a type of profession in which individuality and originality of style prevailed over belonging to a clan or family of artists.²⁷ Denial of the artistic capabilities of the Romani groups was one of the elements comprising the dense stereotypes of otherness of the Gypsy people in the Romantic period.²⁸ This did not mean that the typical creative manifestations of these communities (plastic or musical) were ignored, but that they were categorized as primitive or folkloric and became an object of ethnographic study in the course of the nineteenth century, not of art criticism, which was elitist and individualistic. Just as the embryonic modern nations defined their alleged essence in opposition to alterities such as the Gypsy, so professional European art, continuously reinvented thanks to the frenetic succession of avant-garde movements, strengthened its hegemony as a result of coming up against those archaic, naïve, ahistorical practices that seemed so exotic, and so tantalizingly fascinating and inspiring to the modern bohemian-style artists.

This boundary between professional art and the creative works produced by Romanies started to blur in the middle of the twentieth century. After that time, in contrast to what had been the case in the first half of the century among artists of Romani origin living in the capital,²⁹ a considerable number of actors on the Parisian cultural scene started to introduce themselves by adding their ethnic filiation – often Tsigane, but also Manouche or Rom, these being the most common group names in France – to their status as artist or writer. There are various explanations for this change in trend. The first was the revival of artistic life in Paris after the Second World War, encouraged by the arrival of immigrants, some seeking political asylum and others wanting to experience and be part of the city’s vibrant cultural life.³⁰ The so-called ‘School of Paris’, which had benefited from the influx of foreign artists during the interwar years, began to recognize the value of the foreign origin of these styles without exercising the Gallocentric, uniforming power of previous years. This ‘less

²⁶ Jerrold Seigel, *Bohemian Paris: Culture, Politics, and the Boundaries of Bourgeois* (Baltimore, MD 1986).

²⁷ Wojciech Szymański, ‘The Importance of Place: Romani Art, Central Europe, and the Case of Czarna Góra’, in Mary Sherman, ed., *International Opportunities in the Arts* (Wilmington, DE 2019), 405–28.

²⁸ María Sierra, ed., *Creando subalternos. Imágenes sobre el pueblo gitano*, *Historia Social*, No. 93 (2019).

²⁹ Gérard Gartner, *Les Sept Plasticiens précurseurs tsiganes* (Les Ormeaux-de-Baran 2011), 18.

³⁰ *Paris pese a todo. Artistas extranjeros 1944–1968* [Exhibition Catalogue] (Madrid 2018).

and less patriotic Parisianism³¹ made itself felt in all cultural manifestations, from music to literature, and gave rise to new genres such as the ‘Algerian novel’, a Parisian product of the 1950s that made every publisher yearn to have an Arab writer on its payroll. Significantly, those same years coincided with the discovery of ‘Manouche jazz’ as a musical genre. Django Reinhardt had been one of the most acclaimed musicians of the interwar period as a virtuoso guitarist, both in France and elsewhere. After his death in 1953, music critics referred to his idiosyncratic playing style as ‘Manouche jazz’ based on its supposed ‘Tsigane’ expressiveness. Although it took decades before the Manouche community from which Django came accepted his music as their own, many musicians of the 1950s and 1960s – including those who had played with him in his heyday – decided to embrace this new contemporary genre.³² The creation of Manouche jazz and the mythification of Django Reinhardt coincided in time with the fame of Matéo Maximoff as the first ‘Tsigane writer’. In Maximoff’s case, this identity was not externally attributed, but deliberately pursued and cultivated so that his fame and authority transcended the confines of his community and reached Parisian intellectual and bohemian circles. In parallel with these changes – and the final factor to be taken into account – ‘expert’ knowledge about Tsigane culture was being further reinforced in France, thanks to the growing importance of charitable and/or religious associations, and scholarly circles such as *Études Tsiganes*, which paid special attention to Tsiganes who achieved prominence in any field of art and sought to support them.

Hence, from the end of the 1950s, thanks to role models such as Django Reinhardt and Matéo Maximoff, the progressive re-evaluation of cultural difference in Parisian artistic circles, and the influence of studies on the Tsiganes, it became possible for certain creators to identify themselves according to their ethnic identity, and for the mainstream press, art critics and their own contemporaries to do likewise. Probably one of the first cases was Sandra Jayat, a writer and painter based in Montmartre, whose work used a variety of approaches to explore the Manouche culture from which she came, and who always introduced herself as Zingarina or Tsigane. From the early 1960s until well into the twenty-first century, the art and literary critics who judged Jayat’s work respected and even encouraged the term, as can be seen in the writings dedicated to her by the music critic, Michel-Claude Jalard (the same person who had coined the term ‘Jazz tzigane’ in 1959). Likewise, her professional colleagues, painters such as Marc Chagall, or writers such as Jean Cocteau and Jean-Pierre Rosnay, used the label Tsigane writer or poet in compositions dedicated to her.³³ Other painters, such as Yana Rondolotto, or his disciple,

³¹ Laurence Bertrand-Dorléac, ‘De la France aux Magiciens de la terre. Les artistes étrangers à Paris depuis 1945’, in Antoine Marès and Pierre Milza, eds, *Le Paris des étrangers depuis 1945* (Paris 1995), 403–28; for the Algerian novel, see Jean-Yves Mollier, ‘Paris capitale éditoriale des mondes étrangers’, in Antoine Marès and Pierre Milza, eds, *Le Paris des étrangers depuis 1945* (Paris 1995), 373–94.

³² Siv B. Lie, *The Cultural Politics of Jazz Manouche and Romani Representation in France* (PhD thesis, New York University 2017), 41–68.

³³ Begoña Barrera: ‘The Long Road in Search of a Tzigane Language: Sandra Jayat’, in Eve Rosenhaft and María Sierra, eds, *European Roma Lives Beyond Stereotypes* (Liverpool 2022).

Torino Zigler [sometimes written ‘Ziegler’], similarly introduced themselves by highlighting their ethnic origin and filling their compositions with symbols that they considered typical of their culture. There are a number of testimonies that describe Torino Zigler, the Manouche painter, working in the Place du Tertre in Montmartre from the end of the 1950s, sometimes accompanied by his wife, Sterna Weltz Zigler, who published, in 1975, also in Paris, a first book of poems that she referred to as the work of a Tsigane poet.³⁴ The fame of Yana Rondolotto and Torino Zigler as Tsigane creators, and their closeness to Maximoff, who was already well known, became apparent in 1959 when, on the occasion of the annual Roma pilgrimage to Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, a local newspaper highlighted three people from the group: ‘Matéo Maximoff, writer, Yana Rondolotto and Torino Zigler, painters: three Romani intellectuals’.³⁵

In the 1960s, another Parisian artist would find fame as a Tsigane sculptor. Gérard Gartner had been one of many boxers of Rom origin who used to meet at the Pantin Ring boxing club, the place that he acknowledged – along with anarchism – as the only school he had.³⁶ From 1961, while working as a bodyguard for André Malraux, Gartner was introduced to sculpture, thanks to the encouragement of Alberto Giacometti, who lived, like him, in the Montparnasse neighbourhood. The two struck up a close personal friendship that lasted until Giacometti’s death in 1966.³⁷ After he discovered sculpture, Gartner combined his presence in the world of boxing with his enthusiasm for frequenting artistic circles in Paris, where Sandra Jayat remembered him as being an habitué in the 1970s and early 1980s.³⁸ It was in the same context that the young Algerian-Romani filmmaker, Tony Gatlif, started to make a name for himself. His first production *La Terre au Ventre* (Earth in the Belly) (1979) had an Algerian theme and although Gatlif claimed in retrospect that there was already an underlying concern in the film for reflecting upon the dual Algerian-Tsigane identity, it was really in *Canta Gitano* (Sing Gypsy) (1981) and *Les Princes* (The Princes) (1982) that this ethnic identification became obvious.³⁹

Art as Assertion

The career paths of Jayat, Zigler, Rondolotto, Gartner and Gatlif, like those of so many other Tsigane writers, artists and intellectuals, started to cross in the early 1970s. A decisive factor in the creation of a network of contacts between these figures was the activity of Études Tsiganes. The Association not only began to cover the exhibitions

³⁴ See, for example, the memoirs of filmmaker Anne-Sophie Tiberghien, *Comme un chat sauvage* (Paris 1986), 250; Sterna Weltz-Zigler, *Romanes* (Paris 1975).

³⁵ Cited in Gartner, *Les Sept Plasticiens précurseurs tsiganes*, 91.

³⁶ Gérard Gartner, *Dernier coup de poing. Soliloque d'un ancien boxeur du Ring de Pantin. Mémoires* (Paris 2019).

³⁷ Gartner, *Les Sept Plasticiens précurseurs tsiganes*, 96.

³⁸ Sandra Jayat, *La Zingarina ou l'herbe sauvage* (Paris 2010), 241.

³⁹ Silvia Angrisani and Carolina Tuozzi, *Tony Gatlif. Un cinema nomade* (Turin 2003), 19–21; Sylvie Blum Reid, *Traveling in French Cinema* (New York 2016), 100.

and public appearances of these artists in its journal – thus allowing the general public and also the Tsigane community to regard them as part of the same group – but also gradually included them as an active part of its circle of scholars, following the path pioneered by Matéo Maximoff in 1955. According to its official bulletin, the general assembly of *Études Tsiganes* in 1972 was attended by many ‘Tsiganes from the Paris region’, although the numbers did not seem to be sufficient for the Board of Directors, who were calling for more of these groups to join the Association.⁴⁰ This concern to include Tsiganes in its ranks cannot be separated from the growing strength of the Roma movement in the United Kingdom after 1966 with the creation of the Gypsy Council, and especially after 1971, when the World Romani Congress displayed the strength of Romani-led activism and criticized the attempts of *gadje* organizations to patronize the Roma people.⁴¹ There can be no doubt that the progressive separation from the Gypsy Lore Society, the efforts (which bore fruit) to be recognized as an NGO by UNESCO and participate in the committees of that organization as an ‘association of Tsiganes’,⁴² and the gradually increasing prominence given to preeminent members of the Parisian Tsigane communities were driven by the desire of *Études Tsiganes* to assert itself as an organization of social and cultural action in response to Romani activism in other areas of Europe.

This desire to establish its credentials by including Tsiganes in its ranks was to have unexpected consequences that would go beyond the programme and intentions of the Association itself. In 1981, the sculptor Gérard Gartner, who was a close friend of Maximoff and described *Études Tsiganes* as one of the main meeting places for Tsiganes in the Paris region, took over the literary and artist criticism in sections designated as ‘Libres propos’ (‘Free comments’) of the Association’s journal.⁴³ Gartner was the first Tsigane after Maximoff to occupy this expert position and, like Maximoff, he used his influence to continue building networks among Tsigane intellectuals. Whereas the reviews and biographical sketches he dedicated to Maximoff were laudatory in the extreme,⁴⁴ his reviews of the works of renowned researchers such as Pierre Derlon, Bertrand Solet or Jean-Pierre Liégeois were unforgiving, and often more the result of his eagerness to prove his intellectual worth than the result of a thoughtful critical reading of their works.⁴⁵ Despite the vehemence of these writings (or perhaps precisely because of it), and no doubt thanks to his personal friendship with Maximoff, Gartner was

⁴⁰ ‘Vie de l’Association: assemblée générale, conférence de Roger Renaudin sur les Tsiganes dans la Russie d’aujourd’hui, le guitariste José Piza’, *ÉT*, Noa 2–3 (1972), 12–14.

⁴¹ Acton, *Gypsy Politics and Social Change*, 155–74.

⁴² Henriette David, ‘Les Etudes Tsiganes à l’UNESCO’, *ÉT*, Nos. 2–3 (1975), 1–2.

⁴³ Gérard Gartner in discussion with the author, Collonges-la-Rouge (France), September 2019.

⁴⁴ ‘Un écrivain tsigane français: Matéo Maximoff par Gérard Gartner’, *ÉT*, No. 3 (1982), 17–18.

⁴⁵ ‘L’œuvre de Pierre Derlon, par Gérard Gartner’, *ÉT*, No. 4 (1981): 44–5; ‘Libres propos. Par Gérard Gartner’, *ÉT*, No. 4 (1982), 33. In particular, see Gérard Gartner, ‘La culture tsigane en question’, *ÉT*, No. 3 (1983), 46–9 and the response of Jean-Pierre Liégeois in Jean-Pierre Liégeois, ‘Jean-Pierre Liégeois répond aux libres-propos de Gérard Gartner’, *ÉT*, No. 1 (1984), 46–9.

able to rise to a prominent position in *Études Tsiganes* and become part of its management at the beginning of 1983.

The immediate result of the alliance between Gartner and Maximoff was the creation of a 'Tsigane literary prize', which, despite the fact that it had been their brainchild, would be sponsored, financed and publicized by *Études Tsiganes*. The Prix Romanès, launched in 1983, encouraged Tsigane writers, or those gadjé 'who had written favourably about the Tsiganes', to send their manuscripts to Maximoff's home in Romainville (Paris), which was provisionally listed as the postal address of the prize jury. This jury, besides being chaired by Maximoff and Gartner, was composed almost exclusively of Tsigane artists, writers and/or musicians such as Jarko Jovanovic, Joshep ('Coucou') Doerr, Sandra Jayat and Charles Welty.⁴⁶ Thus, the Prix Romanès represented a landmark, in so far as it turned the Tsiganes into judges of intellectual productions about themselves, and effected this transformation in collaboration with a non-Tsigane organization. These became the two main characteristics of Romani cultural activism in France for the rest of the 1980s.

At the end of 1983, a brief news item in *Études Tsiganes* reported the appearance of a new Association called *Initiatives Tsiganes* (Tsigane Initiatives), whose headquarters were located in the northeastern suburbs of Paris, in the commune of Pantin. Its small board of directors was evidence of how much the associative spirit had grown by the 1980s among those artists and intellectuals who, decades earlier, had started to identify themselves using their ethnic identity. According to the brief text, Gartner was the president of Initiatives Tsiganes, Tony Gatlif, the famous filmmaker, and Lick Dubois, one of the guitarists that *Études Tsiganes* had sponsored most since the 1967 *Tsigane et Gitan Gala*, were its secretaries, and the writer and painter, Sandra Jayat, was its treasurer.⁴⁷ To prove the importance of their careers, the same issue of the journal included an extensive feature on Tony Gatlif discussing the 'militant' nature of his films and an article about Sandra Jayat, who was presented as a regular in *Études Tsiganes*.⁴⁸ In case the relationship between the newly created *Prix Romanès* and the new Initiatives Tsiganes was not obvious, the article on the award ceremony referred to the new Association as one of the sponsors of the prize. By 1983, it seemed clear that the formerly gypsiorist *Études Tsiganes* had not only become a place of contact and exchange, but also a field of experimentation for a new type of associationism in which both ethnic identity and self-recognition as creative artists – whether plastic, literary, musical or cinematographic – played a fundamental role.

Tsigane associations had proliferated in Europe since the late 1960s. In 1975, in light of the way the phenomenon was flourishing, Jean-Pierre Liégeois commented: 'the Tsigane has discovered the power of associations'.⁴⁹ It was no surprise therefore that

⁴⁶ 'Création d'un prix littéraire tsigane. Prix Romanès', *ÉT*, No. 2 (1983); 'Prix Romanès 1983', *ÉT*, No. 4 (1983), 1.

⁴⁷ 'L'Association Initiatives Tsiganes', *ÉT*, No. 4 (1983), 55.

⁴⁸ Esteban Cobas Puente, 'Apprécier "Les Princes"', *ÉT*, No. 4 (1983), 27–34; F. de Vaux de Foletier, 'Sandra Jayat. Je ne suis née pour suivre', *ÉT*, No. 4 (1983), 59–60.

⁴⁹ Jean-Pierre Liégeois, 'Le pouvoir tsigane', *ÉT*, No. 1 (1975), 28.

the following year, Gartner should hasten to publish – in *Études Tsiganes* itself – a sort of programme or manifesto, in which he described what the new Initiatives Tsiganes was like and tried to show the innovative nature of its proposals: ‘Initiatives Tsiganes was created with the aim of raising awareness of the authenticity of the different Tsigane cultures, folklores and crafts’.⁵⁰ The project was a response to the ‘urgent need’ for ‘the Tsiganes to be presented in a different way than in the past, and that they themselves reject all ossifying images based on an alleged folkloric appearance’.⁵¹ In other words, Initiatives Tsiganes was trying to join forces in order to accomplish collectively what each of the individual artists who made up the new Association had already in fact been trying to do separately since the 1960s: reclaim the ‘true’ Tsigane culture and make it known through the works of authors who acknowledged that ethnic identity.⁵²

Unlike the majority of Romani associations in Europe, Initiatives Tsiganes did not join the Comité International Rom (CIR) (International Roma Committee), which had been trying since 1971 to coordinate all European Romani groups under a single authority that would channel the demands of the various communities to international bodies. Furthermore, as its own name indicated, the new association did not adopt the term ‘Rom’, which was the endonym established after the 1971 World Romani Congress to unify the variety of terms that these groups had historically used to define themselves; on the contrary, it preserved the term ‘Tsigane’, denoting the dual ethnic and French affiliation that Maximoff had called for.⁵³ While the president’s less than cordial relationship with historical leaders of the CIR may have been behind the reluctance to engage with that organization, the desire to act without political commitment seemed to be the main reason why Initiatives Tsiganes chose to remain detached from the Roma movement.⁵⁴ As they argued in their programme, ‘authority among the Tsiganes is not the authority of law, but the authority of duty[;] it cannot therefore have any political or governmental meaning whatsoever. Representativeness centred on this alleged power would be artificial, anti-cultural, and anti-traditional, as far as the Tsigane world was concerned’.⁵⁵ This refusal to recognize any higher Romani authority and their decision to proceed ‘by ourselves and without intermediaries in the artistic, folkloric and cultural field’ even meant that some of the central issues at the birth and subsequent development of the Romani movement, such as the trauma of persecution during the Second World War and claims against Germany for war crimes, were sidelined: ‘Certainly, [Tsiganes] were deeply scarred by the war and any consideration of their pain will never be enough. But there is another way to prove that we exist than by dwelling on the past’.⁵⁶

⁵⁰ Gérard Gartner, ‘Initiatives Tsiganes’, *ÉT*, No. 1 (1984), 44–5.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Gérard Gartner in discussion with the author, Collonges-la-Rouge (France), September 2019.

⁵⁴ With respect to Rouda, Gérard Gartner in discussion with the author, Collonges-la-Rouge (France), September 2019.

⁵⁵ Gartner, ‘Initiatives Tsiganes’, *ÉT*, 44.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 45.

The Initiatives Tsiganes project (by providing its own Romani interpretation) was in tune with the different forms of ‘cultural activism’ that were being generated in Europe and the United States, which Faye Ginsburg defined as ‘*self-conscious mobilization of their own culture practices* in order to defend, extend, complicate, and sometimes transform both their immediate worlds and the larger sociopolitical structures that shape them’.⁵⁷ At the same time, and without this in any way detracting from the importance of its cultural activism, Initiatives Tsiganes set itself up as the project of a very select circle of French Tsigane intellectuals and artists who saw themselves as an elite who chose the space of culture and art as the place from which to make their demands and pushed protesting for social and political rights into the background: ‘we now need to show ourselves through cultural practice (not cultural policy). This practice alone can create the conditions for our full realization and full respect for our dignity’.⁵⁸ The idea, according to Gartner, speaking on behalf of Initiatives Tsiganes, was to prevent the Tsiganes from being dispossessed of their practices through ‘forced integration’ by bringing together those artists without political ties who knew what ‘the essence’ of the Tsiganes was and were capable of communicating it: ‘the soul of a human group is open to its poets and artists, but cannot be open to politicians’.⁵⁹ They were, therefore, appealing to ‘lucid, informed Tsiganes, regardless of their ideological leanings, to give shape to a cluster of beliefs that were much more representative than a group of opinions or passions’.⁶⁰ Jarko Jovanic, who was well known as the composer of the official Romani hymn *Djelem, Djelem* was one of the later additions to the Association. He had been called upon by Gartner, who had praised him in his critical reviews of those years, to serve on the panel of judges of the Prix Romanès. Such additions as his to the Association are testimony to the effort to attract personalities with prestigious artistic or intellectual careers to Initiatives Tsiganes.⁶¹

This elite consciousness also explains the manifest desire to maintain close links with every agency of power, especially French cultural organizations, starting with the Association from which it sprang, *Études Tsiganes*. This link between Initiatives Tsiganes and *Études Tsiganes* was maintained until the decline of the former, and would affect the future of both of them. The older organization, *Études Tsiganes*, supplied considerable support and assistance to Initiatives Tsiganes, providing contacts and official backing for its plans. Meanwhile, the fact that Initiatives Tsiganes had

⁵⁷ Faye Ginsburg, ‘Foreword’, in Melissa Checker and Maggie Fishman, eds, *Local Actions: Cultural Activism, Power and Public Life in America* (New York 2004), xiii (original emphasis).

⁵⁸ Gartner, ‘Initiatives Tsiganes’, *ÉT*, 44. The distinction between ‘cultural practice and ‘cultural policy’ had already appeared in Gartner’s criticisms of Liégeois’ work and, despite its conceptual inaccuracy, it seemed to refer to the difference between the use of culture for the ‘political’ end of ‘forced integration’ and the preservation of practices that belonged to a particular people. Gérard Gartner, ‘La culture tsigane en question’, *ÉT*, No. 3 (1983), 47.

⁵⁹ Gartner, ‘Initiatives Tsiganes’, *ÉT*, 44.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Gérard Gartner, ‘Jarko Jovanic Jagdino’, *ÉT*, No. 1 (1985), 50–1; Gartner mentions him as a member of Initiatives Tsiganes in *Les Sept Plasticiens précurseurs tsiganes*, 10.

emerged from *Études Tsiganes*, and that its founders participated in the life of the Association and its journal, helped promote a concept of what it meant to be a Tsigane that was far removed from (but never totally devoid of) the primitivist, folkloric clichés that had predominated in the studies published in the first thirty years of the Association's life.

Indeed, Initiatives Tsiganes used the journal *Études Tsiganes* as its main channel for communicating progress reports of its plan to 'raise public awareness through the creation and organization of various symbolic events and a range of shows and exhibitions'.⁶² The first of these symbolic events was the creation of a new award, the Prix International Tzigane des Neuf Muses (Nine Muses International Tsigane Prize), aimed at 'rewarding not just one, but any artistic discipline whatsoever, practised by a Tsigane'.⁶³ Gartner and Jayat presented the first of these awards to Vladimir Poliakov, a 97-year-old veteran musician who had made a name for himself on the French music scene with his compilations of Russian Romani compositions. This Prix International Tzigane Des Neuf Muses was – like its predecessor, the Prix Romanès – the preamble to a more ambitious event that was still in the making at the beginning of 1985.

In that same year, Gartner published a short story entitled 'Voyou le messenger' (Voyou the messenger), which told the story of Justo, a young, blue-eyed Tsigane who sees an apparition of his deceased grandfather. The spirit of the old man, a symbol of ancestral Tsigane wisdom, offers to answer the questions that haunt the young man.⁶⁴ Justo wants to know where the Tsiganes come from and where they are going, whether he is truly Tsigane – despite not being 'so dark-skinned' – and who is the highest authority among his people. His grandfather enlightens him: 'the Tziganes are not a uniform people', because 'many of us have already stopped being Tsiganes and many others have become so'.⁶⁵ Appearance, like provenance, does not matter, since 'some no longer look like Tziganes on the outside, yet they still are. ... The important thing is to do what the first Tzigane did: choose one's own life'.⁶⁶ With respect to the idea of authority, the grandfather figure assures him that 'no Tzigane has power over another. ... There is no king, no president, no boss', but adds that 'a Tzigane will always be proud of a great musician or a great painter. Some masters in this sense only will we accept'.⁶⁷ For that reason, providence ordains that Justo's mission is to help 'the Tziganes to express themselves freely': the grandfather explains that one day his old cane will be transformed into a tree, and 'Tziganes, men and women who are working to become artists, will come from all

⁶² Gartner, 'Initiatives Tsiganes', *ÉT*, 45.

⁶³ Michèle Brabo, 'Prix International tzigane des neuf muses Vladimir Poliakov', *ÉT*, No. 1 (1985), 31.

⁶⁴ The wisdom embodied in the oldest in the group, particularly the author's grandparents, is a literary device exploited by other Tsigane writers, among them his female companion in Initiatives Tsiganes, Sandra Jayat. See Sandra Jayat, *La longue route d'une Zingarina* (Paris 1978) and Sterna Weltz, *Mes secrets tziganes* (Paris 1989).

⁶⁵ Gérard Gartner, 'Voyou le messenger', in *Extrait du recueil de contes. Eitima* (Paris 1985).

⁶⁶ Gartner, 'Voyou le messenger'.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

parts to gather together under the foliage of this tree. You will take to the road with them to let people know what we really are'.⁶⁸

On the face of it, 'Voyou le messenger' was more of an autobiographical narrative than a fantasy tale, as commentators in *Études Tsiganes* were quick to appreciate,⁶⁹ not only because the way Justo was described (blue eyes, 'not very dark-skinned') matched the physical description of Gartner, but also because the providential message of the ghostly grandfather mirrored the discourse that he had maintained in recent years on the illegitimacy of political authority among the Tsiganes, and the role that the plastic arts should play in their collective action. The virtue of this text was to demonstrate that those intentions that were presented as the collective endeavour of Initiatives Tsiganes also contained much that was highly individual and closely linked to the biography of a young, self-taught artist and anarchist.

It is not clear, however, whose idea it was to make those longings come true by organizing a major event for 1985. Sandra Jayat, who had much better connections with Parisian artistic circles at the time and was widely recognized as a painter and writer, claims in her memoirs that it was something that she and Gartner planned together,⁷⁰ whereas Gartner, in his books, takes sole credit for it.⁷¹ What we do know is that, at the beginning of the year, a new article by Gartner published in *Études Tsiganes* described it as the joint commitment of all members of Initiatives Tsiganes to put an end to the 'vast and generalized conspiracy of silence' and the 'organized censorship' that had concealed the artistic abilities of the Tsiganes for centuries.⁷² Some of the expressions in his text struck an aggrieved note: 'The existence of the Tsiganes is maintained only in the social domain. They are denied artistic and creative faculties. To prevent the awakening of the Tziganes, nothing else needed to be done! People don't want the Tziganes to be any different from what they consider they should be'.⁷³ It was necessary therefore to 'organize ourselves socially in order to ensure that we are taken into account. The time has come to show ourselves as we are'.⁷⁴

In this spirit, Initiatives Tsiganes prepared the Première Mondiale d'Art Tzigane (World Premiere of Tzigane Art), an exhibition that would clearly manifest the intention of the Association to turn culture, specifically the plastic arts, into a site of symbolic struggle. Only a world event, one that was global in scope, would succeed in 'destroying the Tzigane stereotype as it exists today' and allow the Tziganes to 'earn their letters of nobility', in other words, leave behind the phase of anonymous craftsmen and folklore producers and attain the status of artists.⁷⁵ It was not a question of demanding it for each

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ A. M. T, 'Gérard Gartner: Voyou le messenger', *ÉT*, No. 1 (1986), 62.

⁷⁰ Jayat, *La Zingarina ou l'herbe sauvage*, 242.

⁷¹ Gartner, *Les Sept Plasticiens précurseurs tsiganes*, 12.

⁷² Gérard Gartner, 'Initiatives Tsiganes: Première Mondiale d'Art Tzigane', *ÉT*, No. 1 (1985), 29.

⁷³ Gartner, 'Initiatives Tsiganes: Première Mondiale d'Art Tzigane', 30.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

of them individually – they had already had that for years – but of identifying the Tsigane with creative genius.⁷⁶ If ‘the Tziganes are essentially creators’, if ‘they feel a permanent need to create’ and if ‘the visual sensations that are decisive in the painter and the tactile sensations that are decisive in the sculptor are precisely those that are felt most acutely in the Tziganes’, it seemed fair to state that the Tsigane identity was nothing less than the quintessence of creative genius in its purest form.⁷⁷ Whereas the appearance in the 1960s of figures who linked their artistic identities to their ethnic origin challenged the status quo that had excluded Tziganes from the world of high culture since the Early Modern Age, the aim of the *Première Mondiale d’Art Tzigane*, in the mid-1980s, was to completely subvert it; rather than project the fossilized state commonly ascribed to primitive, folkloric Tsigane practices – all exactly the same as each other – the exhibition would tell the story of the transformation over time of a transnational ‘Tsigane art’; faced with the reluctance to admit the artistic talent of the Tziganes, the exhibition would display a complete genealogy of names and narrate their trajectories as creators; faced with the denial of the influence that these works had had on the development of world art, *Première Mondiale* would be able to demonstrate how much these creations had contributed to the development of mainstream art.

Études Tziganes were not the only supporters of the Initiatives Tziganes project. Gartner and Jayat managed to approach some of the political authorities of the day and persuaded them to back their plan. In her memoirs, Jayat tells how, after a chance meeting with Jack Lang at an opening, the then Minister of Culture promised her his full support for the project.⁷⁸ This support was entirely consistent with the policy of Lang, whose arrival in government in 1981 led to an unprecedented increase in the budget for this Ministry, which would, under his mandate, finally implement the cultural modernization plan that had been gradually evolving since the time of Malraux. This meant, among other things, extending the very notion of ‘culture’ and promoting other manifestations regarded as minor, from fashion to the decorative arts, and including jazz music.⁷⁹ Despite Lang’s enthusiasm, funding from the Ministry did not seem to be sufficient for the Association, which also turned to the Paris City Council and its then mayor, Jacques Chirac, who paid for part of the exhibition and provided the venue for the event, *La Conciergerie*, right in the heart of the capital. The result of all this, as Jayat recalled, involved a reworking of the title so that, in the end, more importance would be given to the institutional support than to the Association that had conceived the idea: ‘*Première Mondiale d’Art Tzigane avec le soutien du Ministère de la Culture et de la Mairie de Paris par l’Association des Initiatives Tziganes*’ (World *Première* of Tsigane Art with the support of the Ministry of Culture and the Paris City Council on behalf of the Initiatives Tziganes Association).⁸⁰

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁷⁸ Jayat, *La Zingarina ou l’herbe sauvage*, 242–6.

⁷⁹ Augustin Girard, ‘French Cultural Policy from André Malraux to Jack Lang: A Tale of Modernisation’, *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (1997), 107–25, at 116 and 119.

⁸⁰ Jayat, *La Zingarina ou l’herbe sauvage*, 242–6.

The challenge of achieving institutional support was compounded by the no less arduous task of finding artists who could construct the official narrative of the exhibition. Gartner recalled the lack of documentation on Tsigane art – ‘there were no references to or information about active artists, let alone their predecessors’ – which forced them to engage in protracted correspondence with several European museums and art galleries that they contacted to ask whether they had any information about Tsigane artists.⁸¹ The result of their collective research was a compilation of works and artists who had a well-documented Tsigane origin and self-identified as such (for instance, Django Reinhardt, Torino Zigler, Gartner and Jayat), or had a Tsigane origin but did not acknowledge it (like Otto Mueller), or did not have a proven Tsigane filiation but the exhibition organizers wanted to recognize one as such (like Serge Poliakoff), given their proximity to different Tsigane groups and the subject matter of their work. As Jayat acknowledged in the catalogue, the organizers had used the once exclusively French ‘Tsigane’ to label all the Rom, Manouche, Kalderash, Sinti, Gitan, Gypsy, etc. minorities, although, as Jayat pointed out, the term referred mainly to individuals who shared certain ‘tastes’, ‘external habits’ or ‘customs and ways of life similar to those of the Tsiganes’.⁸² Some time later, recalling the feat of organizing the *Première Mondiale*, Gartner declared that defining Tsigane identity in ethnic terms only led to ‘ridiculous misunderstandings’. After all, he himself knew how frustrating the search for an artist’s ethnic origins could be. During the years he had been friends with Giacometti, Gartner had looked into the sculptor’s ancestors with the intention of proving a Tsigane ancestry that Giacometti himself had eventually denied.⁸³

Despite the funding, the official support for the exhibition (the catalogue reads ‘Held under the High Patronage of Jack Lang, Minister of Culture’ [Placée sous le haut patronage de Jack Lang, Ministre de la Culture], and the extensive Honorary Committee of 28 personalities who supported the proposal (its members included politicians such as Juan de Dios Ramírez Heredia, writers such as Pierre Seghers, founders of *Études Tsiganes* such as the Councillor of State André Holleaux, and representatives of European Romani associations such as Mirella Karpati),⁸⁴ the *Première Mondiale* did not have the impact that its sponsors had hoped for. Although attendance was not poor for an exhibition that lasted barely a month, the media response did not live up to the expectations of the feature writers of *Études Tsiganes*, who reported ‘excessive silence’ in the media, or of Gartner himself, who mentioned the ‘silent indifference of radio and television stations’.⁸⁵ The exhibition did in fact have some follow-up in the press, perhaps not so much while it was in Paris, but rather more in the four years that it toured several

⁸¹ The list of museums and galleries that finally collaborated with the exhibition can be found in *Première Mondiale d’Art Tzigane. La Conciergerie, Paris, du 6 mai au 30 mai 1985* [Exhibition catalogue] (Paris 1985).

⁸² Sandra Jayat, ‘Introduction’, in *Première Mondiale d’Art Tzigane. La Conciergerie, Paris, du 6 mai au 30 mai 1985* [Exhibition catalogue] (Paris 1985), 14.

⁸³ Gartner, *Les Sept Plasticiens*, 16 and 96.

⁸⁴ *Première Mondiale d’Art Tzigane. La Conciergerie, Paris, du 6 mai au 30 mai 1985* [Exhibition catalogue] (Paris 1985), 7.

⁸⁵ Gartner, *Les Sept Plasticiens*, 11.

French and Spanish towns, during which time Initiatives Tsiganes was gaining recognition in France as one of the 'main Tsigane organizations', as it was referred to in the press.⁸⁶ By 1989, however, the adventure had come to an end as a result of a 'misunderstanding' between one of the painters exhibiting his work at the exhibition and Gartner, who left the association after the altercation. The vitality and boldness that had driven them to begin that journey in 1983 faded with the change of decade. In 2001, Gartner declared bitterly that 'little remains to this day of the close, warm relationship of that generation of the Conciergerie'.⁸⁷

Conclusions

The history of the Romani movement is, in large measure, the history of the different ways in which its leading figures have conceptualized the meaning of ethnic belonging and the successive attempts to transform that shared identity into a springboard for group action. Like all experiences of the search for collective emancipation, it is a history marked by the tension between the divergent, sometimes contradictory, options espoused by different leaders and branches of the movement. In the second half of the twentieth century, France was the setting where some of these proposals developed and intersected, ranging from those with more political and social content to those, like the one studied here, that chose to focus on the field of culture and art.

As we have seen, the Association des Études Tsiganes played a large role in the birth of this second option. From its creation in 1949 as the birthplace of French Gypsyism, it was gradually reshaped from within to become the meeting point for Tsigane intellectuals with their own agendas. The importance of the writer Matéo Maximoff in these events was paramount, since the heterodox nature of his career inaugurated a new concept of ethnic filiation that was much richer in opportunities and allowed him to establish a dialogue between spaces that had previously seemed to turn their backs on each other. Études Tsiganes became a more open place thanks to his efforts in acting as a bridge between Tsigane artists and writers working in the French capital and that circle of non-Romani 'experts'. The birth of the Initiatives Tsiganes Association in 1983 was the result of the intersection of two processes: on the one hand, the consolidation of an identity by a minority of Tsiganes that reconciled recognition of their own intellectual talent with ethnic reassertion, and, on the other, the entry of some of these intellectuals into circles such as Études Tsiganes, where they managed to place themselves on an equal footing with the rest of the members, reach positions of prestige and imagine new horizons of action.

⁸⁶ Reviews published in national magazines after the closure of the exhibition showed that Initiatives Tsiganes had indeed succeeded in getting some critics to consider Tsigane artists as part of contemporary art, Jean-Claude Queroy, 'Back Stage. Une exposition d'Art gitan', *Jazz Hot*, June 1985. Some passages from the news published in local newspapers were collected in Marzhina Tilly 'Prochaine étape Blois', *Études Tsiganes*, No. 1 (1987); José Heredia Maya, 'Un gitano bien vale una flor', *Diario 16*, 16 June 1986. Included in *Revista de la asociación de enseñantes con gitanos*, No. 27, 57. Recognition of Initiatives Tsiganes in *Droit et liberté. Mensuel du Mouvement contre le racisme et pour l'amitié entre les peuples*, No. 458 (1987), 7.

⁸⁷ Gartner, *Les Sept Plasticiens*, 12.

This alone would have been enough to make the cultural activism of Initiatives Tsiganes worthwhile, since their experience showed that, without affiliating to or being dependent on the more politicized Roma movement, it was possible to denounce injustice and overcome barriers of cultural exclusion. Nevertheless, the Association went further, and the celebration of the *Première Mondiale d'Art Tzigane* pointed to an even more ambitious goal. The purpose of the exhibition was to organize an account of the past that would make it possible to argue a thesis that would definitely have a future: that Tsigane identity was inseparable from their creative talent, from an inventiveness and aesthetic taste that had been captured in hundreds of works over the centuries, but had ended up being silenced by a racist history of art. Although neither Initiatives Tsiganes nor the *Première Mondiale d'Art Tzigane* survived the turn of the century, their spirit did manage to survive for a long time. Events such as the Hidden Holocaust exhibition (Budapest, 2004), which marked a turning point in the consideration of contemporary Romani art,⁸⁸ and the Roma Pavilion at the 52nd Venice Biennale (2007), in which its curator, Tímea Junghaus, proposed going against the national narratives – which have dominated the Biennale from 1985 to the present day – by offering a transnational vision of Romani art that would allow its artists to escape from the ‘conceptual ghetto’ of folklorism.⁸⁹

Another equally valuable observation can be made about that collective dream of Initiatives Tsiganes: by going back to the past in search of solid foundations on which to base their message, the promoters of the *Première Mondiale* also demonstrated the very historicity of the ethnic identity that they alluded to. Paradoxically, in their efforts to essentialize the meaning of ‘Tsigane’, they ended up revealing how much plasticity there can be in identity categories that seem cast in stone, but which can occasionally be moulded by the subjects who use them, depending on their expectations and the opportunities they have for negotiation. The members of Initiatives Tsiganes, artists and intellectuals, located the essence of the Tsigane in what they believed to be their most exalted attributes (‘their letters of nobility’), since acquiring them had been the great achievement of their lives and they could not conceive of a more important contribution to the common project of emancipation than to fight for this excellence to be universally recognized. But theirs was only one case among many. Romani history is full of similar undertakings, ones that chose to champion different meanings of Tsigane or Romani in the hope that, by doing so, another step forward would be taken towards realizing the common aspiration to eradicate the social, political and cultural structures that maintained age-old discrimination.

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⁸⁸ Wojciech Szymański, ‘The Importance of Place: Romani Art, Central Europe, and the Case of Czarna Góra’, in Mary Sherman, ed., *International Opportunities in the Arts* (Wilmington, DE 2019), 410.


⁸⁹ Tímea Junghaus, ‘Roma Art: Theory and Practice’, *Acta Ethnographica*, Vol. 59, No. 1 (2014).

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