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Portrait of the Artist as Wanderer: Alix Aymé's Art Explores a World in Upheaval

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By Marcus Civin

The underappreciated French artist Alix Aymé is getting some well-deserved attention in Baltimore. In 2011, the Johns Hopkins Evergreen Museum and Library bought one of Aymé's late works, "Portrait d'une Africaine, 1962." And now, 35 of Aymé's lean drawings and colorful paintings, mostly loaned from private collections, are on view at the Evergreen Museum through Sept. 30. The drawings, adept and impressive in their simplicity, are especially gorgeous.

During her lifetime, from 1894 to 1989, Aymé exhibited in Paris, Saigon, and Florence; earned a commission from the Laotian Royal Family; and painted 14 lacquer panels for a church in Normandy, but she never became famous. While two of her closest artistic compatriots, French artist Maurice Denis and Japanese artist Tsuguharu Foujita, likewise, have not become household names, they are better collected and more often historicized—Denis significantly as a proponent of abstraction in painting. Aymé's production and place in the artistic milieu have not yet been widely assessed. The Evergreen Museum seeks to correct that error with Alix Aymé: European Perception and Asian Poeticism.

Perhaps Aymé was too much on the road to be concerned with making a name for herself. She was preoccupied with travel, traversing France, Algeria, Turkey, Egypt, India, Sri Lanka, China, Laos, Vietnam, Korea, Japan, and the Republic of Congo. Her life became a trippy in-between, a minefield on real fault lines. At times, she was almost lost, moving through a world full of aching and ugliness.

During World War II, Aymé's husband was commander of the French army in what the French then called Indochina. In March 1945, the Japanese captured the Aymés and their two sons. The eldest, Michel, died in an internment camp. Aymé's two portraits of Michel, "Portrait of a Young Man Lost in Thought (Michel)" and "Michel/Christ," create a startling contrast.

Aymé painted "Portrait of a Young Man Lost in Thought" before Michel's death. Settled in an ornate high-backed loveseat, Michel is shirtless, wearing grey-green trousers. He has not yet grown into his shoulders. The mere beginnings of a mustache mark his face above his blush-colored lips. His skin is yellow, pink, white, orange, and brown. His right hand cups his left elbow. His left fingertips graze his left cheek. He gazes down. His eyes are red-orange, holding the sun, which sets on his right side.

"Michel/Christ," drawn after Michel's death, is a quick charcoal drawing, a sketch, a mother's memory, pieces of Michel's final days. The picture scarcely holds the young man: He is made of wisps, some brown chalk accents, and abbreviated charcoal strokes. He is big, muscled, and broad-shouldered. But now he is despondent, his face too thin. As he did in the previous picture, he gazes down.

The bold, dominant charcoal lines of Aymé's portrait drawings are stunning. In these drawings, nearly every mark seems to have hit the page just right, working at maximum efficiency to suggest the space around a fingertip or to show how a shirt folds.

"Portrait of Young African Woman Holding Her Head in Both Hands, 1962" is one of a series of sensitively rendered observations from Aymé's eight-month stay in the Republic of Congo in that year, only two years after it declared independence from France. The young African woman looks straight out—resolute, tough, as if bored with posing. Aymé's drawing considers the young woman closely and renders her precisely. And the young woman seems to consider Aymé in

the act of drawing her: The model considers the artist as the artist considers the model.

What does this young African woman in newly independent Congo think of her French portraitist? Aymé could have gone anywhere to draw. Why newly independent Congo? Is it possible that Aymé supported the new postcolonial world order? Did she want to represent a hint of the world's burgeoning, fighting spirit?

Two of Aymé's short fictional narratives, from 1927 and 1930, republished in Pascal Lacombe and Guy Ferrer's recent monograph on Aymé, are not exactly flattering in their portrayals of the French colonial characters in Laos. In presenting cultural misunderstandings, her sympathies seem to lie with the Laotians.

By contrast, in "Female Nude with a Vase," circa 1921-1925, Aymé paints a young Asian woman in Hanoi nude from the waist up. The picture is not erotic or creepy. The figure is lost in thought. But it doesn't seem to be rendered in the same spirit as the 1962 painting. In the 1920s, the French controlled Hanoi, and the viewer wonders if Aymé can separate herself from this time and her position as a French colonialist. Even if she is skeptical of others who wield colonial cudgels, can she make a neutral, singular picture of an Asian woman, breasts exposed, without framing her observations through the lens of her own undeniable colonial presence and power?

These problems and unanswerable questions are part of what make Aymé's portraits and drawings so fascinating. Maybe taking on problems of representation—as Aymé does—only further messes up the mess. But her work shows that centuries-worth of political turpitude, personal loss, violence, massive shifts, and continental upheavals can be communicated by a stroke from the side of the charcoal stick or communicated in daubs of radically contrasting color, suggesting the sides women's faces.

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