

DUKE STREET GALLERY
INFORMATION SHEET



MARCEL DYF (1899-1985)
VASE OF FLOWERS

Materials

Oil on Canvas, Signed
21" x 18"

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Marcel Dyf
1899-1985

In the late 1950's when the work of Marcel Dyf first began to be seen in London and New York, at a price range of £85 - £135, very little was known about the man. Dyf had always been a very private person who kept himself very much to himself, whilst he strove to teach himself to paint. In no way was he lacking in the social graces, he was very good looking with an engaging and cultivated personality and was a constant hit with the opposite sex. He had a sparkle in his eye that remained undimmed all his life; but teaching yourself to express your thoughts in line and colour is a very lonely trait and can often result in the reclusive side of ones nature becoming predominant.

All the more surprising then, that at the age of 56, most of which time Dyf had spent with no responsibilities to anybody but himself, he should fall hopelessly, deeply and so romantically in love with a girl aged 20. Claudine Godat, who was studying in Cannes was literally swept off her feet by Dyf's whirlwind courtship, which continued unabated throughout their life together, until his death in 1985. They shared thirty wonderful, magical years and were rarely further apart than the range of a shouted conversation when she was posing for him as a scale, in a cornfield, whilst he worked at his easel. When I first met Claudine in a gallery in London in 1957, she asked me why so many of the English Victorian painters put cows in their pictures. I replied that the artists would use the animals as a scale so that the onlooker could judge the height of a tree, the size of a cottage or a distance. Claudine looked thoughtful for a moment and then smiled an impish grin "I suppose I must be Dyf's cow!" In truth Claudine was an immensely important factor and influence where Dyf's painting was concerned, thought at that time she probably did not realise it, and even today would shrug it off. "Mais non, c'est tout Dyf". But it was her youth and her vibrant vitality that provided the catalyst that Dyf's painting needed. When she came into his life, she provided that vital sparkle which up to that point his work lacked; but which sets him apart from his contemporaries. Claudine gave his life an exuberance that races through the best of his works; they appear to glow with their own light source. His palette changed – became stronger, brighter and he began to see afresh the drama of changing weather and the patterns of light and shadow on the landscape below. His very understanding of how to set a composition became mature and masterful. For the first time in his life Dyf was responsible for someone he adorned, and it shows in every stroke.

For two years they continued to live in Cannes, then decided to move to Paris to be nearer the commercial centre. Dyf took a studio with a small apartment in Montmartre, but just a year later they found what Claudine describes as the house and studio of their dreams. Situated in Bois-d'Arcy, just down the road from Versailles, it became the base from which all their adventures started and which they always came home to. It's where Claudine still lives, surrounded by the pictures that form her personal collection and their things with which they built their life together.

Dyf's year would begin in the spring. The return of the light, the strength of the sun awakening the beauty of the Ile de France seemed to awaken the artist too. There were abundant subjects at every turn. The apple orchards coming into bloom, clear streams, slow rivers and the landscape turning green and providing a back cloth to wild flowers in profusion; all caught Dyf's attention. So began a year's work of producing a flow of jewel like canvases vibrant with life and colour, through the succeeding seasons.

Although Dyf had spent time in Normandy during his childhood, he had never been to Brittany and it was Claudine who introduced him to it. It was, in Dyf's own words "like being seduced again" with its soft rolling cornfields sweeping down to the Atlantic. They bought a small house in Arzon with a long garden at the end of which Dyf built a studio. Claudine objected that there was no sea view, so Dyf painted three arches on the garden wall, through which the sea (constantly blue) appeared with sail boats and a seagull called Philbert "There" he said – "now you have your own private view!" Claudine's sister Jacqueline and her daughter Corinne now own this little Dyf haven; they were frequent sitters for Dyf's 'dejeuners sur l'herbe' subjects. Most summers Claudine spends time visiting Arzon, reliving and recreating her long summers with Dyf. She writes "The Arzon summers have been a great joy, a place where we felt like children again. Dyf would walk the shores of the Golf de Morbihan to greet the rising sun and to find subjects. Work would be followed by delicious swims in the clear water, then long, languorous dinners of fish or meat bought in the local market that morning. Sometimes our dear friend Madame Rozo (who sold her flowers in the same market) would present us with a glorious bouquet of sunflowers which set the studio ablaze and invariably became a subject for Dyf's imagination. Often Madame Rozo's garden itself would be a radiant subject, along with the golden wheat fields and the silken waters of the countless inlets and harbour of the bay. I am still surprised at the number of 'subjects'. I can still discover but where, for one reason or another, Dyf did not get to plant his easel and paint."

The end of summer and the coming of Autumn would signal their return to Bois d'Arcy; the car laden with painted canvases to be "tweaked" in the studio at home, before being shipped to Dyf's ever increasing circle of admirers and collectors in the UK and the USA. This was the time of year when Dyf would paint his wonderfully feminine full flower pieces; peonies, dahlias, margharites, amonemies and asters. Autumn was the time when Claudine would pose for Dyf, sometimes for him to paint those intimate tender studies: "Claudine à sa toilette" or "Au Boudoir" or sometimes dressed as "My Fair Lady" or "Chez la Modiste". Often they would take a break and travel out of France, perhaps to Belgium or Holland "to drop a curtesy to the Maitres 'd'autres fois'". Occasionally they would venture further afield to visit friends in England or the USA, but always the portable easel and a supply of blank canvas with the ever present travelling paint-box would go along for the journey.

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With the arrival of winter, Dyf and Claudine would migrate to the South of France and Provence, escaping the dark skies and indoor work to find the warmth of the sun and the pure light that goes with it. Here Dyf would re-charge his batteries, perhaps re-visiting those places in Arles and Avignon where he had spent so much of his youth in the struggle to discover his talents for himself.

Claudine recalls two of Dyf's favourite sayings: "Les merveilleux c'est de s'émerveiller" (What is wonderful is to marvel at things), and "L'ennui est le vice supreme" (Boredom is the greatest vice). Even if one never had the privilege of meeting Dyf, to see his pictures is to know the man. There is so much of his soul in them, that they speak for him across the years. Asked to sum up her life with Dyf, Claudine replies without hesitation; "I can witness that for thirty years, all the seasons we shared seemed to me like too short a spring."