

Georges Valmier (Angouleme 1885 - Paris 1937)

Portrait of Major Mayer-Simon Lambert

Watercolour and gouache, over an underdrawing in pencil.
Signed and dedicated à Monsieur le Major Lambert / Souvenir de la campagne / 1914-1915 / G. Valmier at the lower left.
630 x 506 mm. (24 3/4 x 19 7/8 in.)

Drawn between 1914 and 1915, the present sheet is a relatively early work by the artist, and one of the very few surviving works from the period of the First World War. Valmier was associated with several Cubist artists in Paris in the years leading up to the war, and was particularly influenced by the work of Albert Gleizes. Valmier met Gleizes when both artists were conscripted to serve with an infantry regiment at Toul in Lorraine in 1914. There they were under the command of Major Mayer Lambert (1870-1943), a doctor from Nancy, who allowed both artists the freedom to continue working while serving in the army.

As Gleizes noted in a later, unpublished manuscript, 'I first met Georges Valmier at the beginning of the First World War at Toul, in the 367th infantry regiment, where I myself was mobilized. With other reservists, writers, artists we formed a small group of friends who preserved faith in and enthusiasm for the vales of the intellect, to which we had devoted our lives. Thanks to the efficacious understanding of the head doctor of the depot, Doctor Lambert, professor of physiology at the faculty of Nancy, we were able to continue working.'

Both Valmier and Gleizes used Dr. Lambert as a model for several paintings and drawings during the war years, most notably in Gleizes' only major canvas of this period, the Portrait of an Army Doctor of 1914, now in the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York. Major Lambert seems to have much preferred Valmier's portrait of him to that of Gleizes, as the latter later noted in his unpublished Souvenirs: 'The portrait that he [Valmier] made of the Doctor was excellent, a very good likeness that remained in the classical idiom. But for myself, I wanted to remain faithful to Cubism and not to play games with my own convictions. So the portrait I envisaged was a little surprising for the good doctor's

habits of mind. He did not conceal his way of thinking, but let me do what I wanted. I made of him, from memory, a large number of drawings…when he saw them, the model was pretty shaken…When [the painting] was finished…he refused, definitely but amicably, to take possession of it.'

Among the very few extant works of the same period by Valmier is a stylistically comparable (albeit rapidly drawn) portrait sketch in pencil of another military figure, a Général Dourakine, which is signed and dated 1914.

Provenance:

Given by the artist to the sitter, Dr. Mayer-Simon Lambert
Private collection, France
Anonymous sale, Paris, Hôtel Drouot, 2 December 1988, lot 29
Private collection, France
Anonymous sale, Paris, Hôtel Drouot, 13 December 1999, lot 18
Private collection, France
The Triton Foundation, The Netherlands.

Exhibitions

New York, Dickinson Roundell Inc., 19th and 20th Century Works on Paper, 2000, no.33; The Hague, Gemeentemuseum, Triton collectie 4: Kubisme uit de collectie van de Triton Foundation, 2006, unnumbered.

Literature:

Albert Gleizes, Souvenirs, unpublished MS, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris, c.1942-1943, p.7; Denise Bazetoux, Georges Valmier: Catalogue raisonné, Paris, 1993, p.45, no.23; Peter Brooke, Albert Gleizes: For and Against the Twentieth Century, New Haven and London, 2001, pp.286-287, note 19; Frans Peterse, Kubisme uit de collectie van de Triton Foundation / Cubist art from the Triton Foundation, exhibition catalogue, The Hague, 2006, p.31; Philip Denis Cate, 'Une alternative cohérente', in Anisabelle Berès and Michel Arveiller, Au temps des Cubistes, 1910-1920, exhibition catalogue, Paris, Galerie Berès, 2006, p.40; Berès and Arveiller, op.cit., p.192, under no.60; Christian Briend, 'Le Chant de Guerre, un portrait de Florent Schmitt ar Albert Gleizes au musée national d'Art moderne', La Revue des Musées de France: Revue du Louvre, October 2008, p.96 and p.103, note 19; S.B., 'Le pays de Charente à Paris', Courrier de Charente, 10 April 2009.

Artist description:

Georges Valmier began his artistic training in 1905, following a period of military service. In 1906 he enrolled in a free art school, the Académie Humbert in Paris, before entering the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in September 1907. Inspired in particular by the work of Paul Cezanne and Georges Braque, and later by Pablo Picasso and Fernand Leger, Valmier's early paintings were firmly in the Cubist tradition. After serving in the First World War alongside Albert Gleizes, who was to become a close friend, Valmier was signed to a contract by the influential art dealer Léonce Rosenberg. He took part in the Section d'Or exhibition in 1920 and had his first exhibition at Rosenberg's gallery L'Effort Moderne the following year. By this time Valmier's work was dominated by abstract, geometric forms and vibrant colour. A founding member, along with Gleizes, of the group Abstract-Création, he exhibited extensively throughout the late 1920's and 1930's, both in Paris and abroad. He also contributed designs for costumes and stage sets for the Ballets Russes and several theatrical productions. Engaged on the decoration of the French railways pavilion for the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1937, Valmier died suddenly that year, just short of his 57th birthday.