Stephen Ongpin Fine Art



Fikret MUALLA (Constantinople 1903 - Reillanne 1967)

Barges on the Seine

Gouache on paper.

Signed Fikret / Moualla at the lower right.

332 x 545 mm. (13 1/8 x 21 1/2 in.) [image]

347 x 557 mm. (13 3/4 x 22 in.) [sheet]

This large gouache drawing is a splendid example of Fikret Mualla's vibrant, painterly style. The subject of barges on the Seine or the Marne rivers was a particular favourite of the artist, and appears in several gouaches, most of which are today in private collections.

Exhibitions

New York and London, Stephen Ongpin Fine Art, Master Drawings, 2008, no.59.

Artist description:

Born into a well-to-do family in Ottoman Constantinople, Fikret Mualla Saygi was educated at a French school in Galatasaray and left Turkey in 1919, at the age of seventeen, to study engineering in Switzerland and Germany. Living in Berlin, he began to show signs of the alcoholism and extreme paranoia that was to plague him throughout his life, and for which he frequently received hospital treatment. It was in Berlin that Mualla was encouraged to take up painting, although he was almost completely self-taught, and he soon abandoned his engineering career. In 1926, on his return to Constantinople (soon to be officially renamed Istanbul), he settled in the Beyoğlu district of the city. He worked as a theatrical scene painter and art teacher, and also illustrated a book by the eminent Turkish poet Nazim Hikmet and contributed drawings to the literary journal Yeni Adam.

Despite living a dissolute life in poverty and having no studio of his own - he kept many of his sketchbooks, pencils and brushes in the several pockets of a voluminous overcoat that he constantly wore - Mualla was included as one of five Turkish painters in a Russian book dedicated to the art of different countries, published in 1934, the same year that a small exhibition of his work was held. Mualla had several stays in the Bakirköy Psychiatric Hospital in Istanbul, where he was allowed to continue to paint. He once attempted to interest the director of the Istanbul State Academy of Fine Arts in his work, but when he tried to gift a painting for the academy's modern art collection, it was summarily rejected,

and in anger and frustration Mualla threw all the works he had brought with him into the waters of the nearby Bosphorus. Nevertheless, he won a significant commission to paint thirty picturesque views of Istanbul for the Turkish pavilion at the 1939 World's Fair in New York, and with the payment for this work decided to leave Turkey for France.

At the end of 1938 or the very beginning of 1939 Mualla moved to Paris, where he continued to live in abject poverty and was soon mired in debt. He had little time for the artists who congregated on the Place du Tertre in Montmartre, which he described as being full of 'fake painters selling fake works to fake collectors for fake money', but spent a brief period of time studying at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière and in the studio schools of the artists Othon Friesz and André Lhote. Mualla's first paintings were sold to waiters and bartenders, usually in exchange for food or drink; a practice that was to continue throughout his career. A difficult and belligerent character, Mualla was institutionalized at several times, largely due to his alcoholism. He often got into fights, and was frequently in trouble with the police.

As the Turkish painter and poet Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu later recalled of Fikret Mualla in Paris, 'Imagine an artist responsible for nothing but painting pictures whenever the impulse takes him. An artist who is prepared to go hungry and thirsty three days a week; who picks up cigarette butts from the street as if gathering berries in the countryside. An artist who, the moment he manages to sell a few pictures with the help of friends and acquaintances, gets drunk on the hardest liquor, eats the most expensive food, and rages at those around him, flinging the most outrageous insults.' One day, at the Parisian artist's café La Palette, Mualla met Picasso who, impressed with his talent, offered to help him find lodging on the condition that he give up drinking, which he refused to do. Nonetheless, Picasso bought a painting from him and also gave him a drawing of his own, although Mualla subsequently gave the drawing to a bartender in exchange for a week of free drinks.

The personal troubles of the artist were not, however, reflected in his work, which is characterized by vibrant colours and happy figures. Working mainly in watercolour and gouache, and signing his name 'Moualla', he produced numerous scenes of Parisian jazz clubs, restaurants, bars and cafes, as well as circus scenes and views along the quais of the Seine. In the early 1950s Parisian gallery owners began to take an interest in Mualla's work, and he had his first one-man exhibition in November 1954, followed by a second the year after; both were very successful. Further exhibitions followed at the Marcel Bernheim gallery in 1957 and 1958, as well as at the galleries of Katia Granoff and Dina Vierny. Among Mualla's patrons was the industrialist Louis Lhermine, who supported him financially and came to own several hundred gouaches by the artist, although the relationship soured when Mualla attempted to sell the same painting to both Lhermine and a Turkish businessman. Another important and loyal patron was Mme. Fernande Anglès, with whom the artist sometimes stayed in the South of France. Although now moderately successful, he continued to drink to excess and was prone to fits of paranoia and depression.

His health continued to decline, and in 1962 he suffered a stroke which resulted in his left side being paralyzed with hemiplegia. Mualla left Paris to recuperate in the South of France, eventually settling in the Provençal hilltop village of Reillanne in the Alpes-Maritimes, where he lived for the remaining five years of his life. As he wrote in a letter to a friend, 'In my opinion, every artist should suffer hardship, anguish and hunger. Only after that should they enjoy life…That is my fate. My life has passed in a struggle against poverty. Now in this quiet village, I submit to living peacefully by myself waiting for the final period of my life as ordained by God. Apart from this, I have no problems! No pretensions. We have seen every kind of circumstance the world has to offer, we have tasted very few of the pleasures of life. Today what is left but for my tongue to recall the past and my brush to paint?'

Fikret Mualla died in Reillanne in 1967, having never returned to Paris. In 1974, more than thirty years after he had left Turkey, his body was taken to Istanbul to be buried with honour. A retrospective exhibition of his work was mounted in Ankara in 1976, while a more comprehensive show was held at the newly opened Istanbul Modern museum in 2005.