

after the fall: the lure of PARIS by Saul Ostrow

In the 1950s, with the triumph of the New York School, the United States for the first time in history had produced visual art of international consequence. Yet, artists from the United States and from all over Europe continued to flock to Paris just as the center of the western art world was shifting to New York. Funded by the GI Bill, those from the States came with the intent of studying at such schools as the Académie Julian, Académie de la Grande Chaumière and L'école des Beaux Arts, or at the atelier of Jacques Villon or Fernand Leger's Studio. Their reasons varied. Some saw it as an opportunity to be cosmopolitan or to satisfy their wanderlust; others may have imagined the Paris of Le Jazz Hot, café society, and the romance of the pre-war avant-garde, or the chance to see works by Vuillard, Bonnard, Matisse, etc., that they knew only from black and white reproductions. In most cases the women artists had accompanied their significant others, while like the generation before them, the Afro-American artists, sought to escape the racism that was endemic in the States.

The mobile community of artists from the States arrived in a Paris, which had known defeat, occupation by the Germans, the period of the Resistance, and finally Liberation. Subsequently, the Paris of the Fourth Republic was marked by colonial strife, labor conflicts, and political instability. In the ten-year period from 1948 to 1958, France would see 20 governments come and go — this cycle ending in a coup d'état that would be legitimized by the referendum of October 5, 1958, establishing the Fifth Republic. So while there was jazz, café society, and a vibrant world of art and culture, there were also street demonstration, public debates concerning urbanism, and radical politics. This made the Paris of the 50s brutal and poetic, rational and chaotic, passionate and intellectually aloof. This Paris was a mix of post-war politics and fantasy, as represented in the film musical, "An American in Paris," in which Gene Kelly plays the exuberant expatriate Jerry Mulligan, a World War II veteran trying to make a reputation as an artist. All of this was played out against the backdrop of the grandeur of imperial Paris, which found its counterpart in the working-class slums (*banlieues*).



The painter Al Held recounts, "The (GI) Bill provided economic freedom, permitting one to eat, sleep, and drink art, and, in a sense, become an artist in Paris through that kind of life... It was a coming-of-age, the most liberating time of my life. Paris was a free-association graduate school with no classes and [one was] on a complete scholarship."¹ All of this in the context of a Paris that was recovering from wartime privation, so life was cheap for aspiring artists: dinner and a bottle of wine could be had for the equivalent of a dollar. Many of the

young expat artists kept to themselves and formed a small coterie. Conrad Marca-Relli explains, "We met mostly with other American artists and writers. There was no communication with French painters, partly because of the language barrier and partly because there was no interest on either side. We were looked upon as being students from a provincial country that had come to learn in the center of the artworld."²

Meanwhile, French intellectuals both on the right and left shared a cultural commitment to a humanism meant to provide them with the

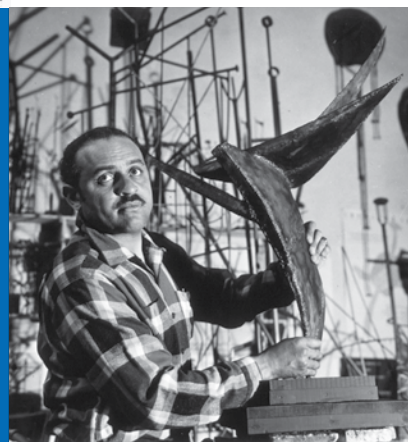
means to heal the trauma of the Occupation, and the collaboration of Vichy. The Leftist and existential views of Sartre, Merleau Ponty, Camus, Malraux, and Roland Barthe were countered by the Right-wing views of *Action française* (AF) many of whose writers would later participate in *La Table Ronde*, a review created for the purpose of contesting the predominance of *Les Temps modernes*; the review of Jean-Paul Sartre. Against this background and the exciting literary scene it supported, George Plimpton would begin the *The Paris Review*,

1. Bois, Yve-Alain, Jack Cowart, and Alfred Pacquement. . Munich: Prestel, 1992.
2. Marca-Relli, Conrad. Milano: B. Alfieri, 2008



and Norman Mailer and William Styron the more experimental journal *Merlin*, which would come to publish works by authors such as Beckett and Nabakov, both who were living in Paris at the time. Likewise, the poet John Ashbery while he lived in Paris was the Editor for *Art and Literature* and *Art International*, which were both important sources as to what was happening in Europe for their American audiences.

With the advent of the Cold War the United States sought to expand its cultural influence in Europe by sponsoring exhibitions of the new American-style abstract art, as well as trade fairs. In Paris, as part of this endeavor, the cultural center America House was opened. Meanwhile students arrived from the U.S. not only on the GI Bill, but also on the newly established Fulbright Scholarship program while the strength of the dollar was a boon to tourism. Another aspect of these policies was the export of mass culture, especially popular music (rock and roll) and film. Students and intellectuals in France found that they could identify with both the lifestyle portrayed in American films and with



the appeal of such film noir characters as the hard-boiled private eye, the plainclothes policeman, the aging boxer, the hapless grafter or the law-abiding citizen lured into a life of crime. These films would come to influence such young filmmakers as Godard and Truffaut, who would dominate French New Wave Cinema.

The community of expatriate artists encountered a maelstrom of conflicting experiences, points of views, and a profusion of aesthetic possibilities. This ranged from Jean Dubuffet's *Art Brute*, with its exploration of child-like drawing, graffiti, cartoons, and base materials, on one hand, to the residual influence of the School of Paris on the other. As for the new Parisian avant-garde, it consisted of a generation of young artists and intellectuals who had emerged from

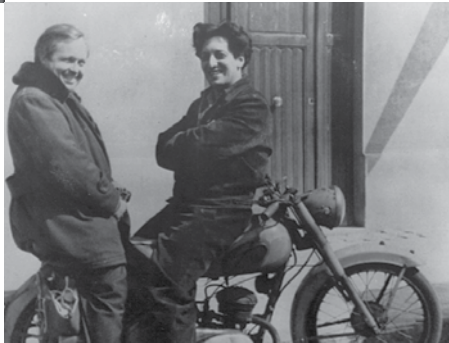
from left
Joan Mitchell and Jean-Paul Riopelle, Rue Frémicourt, Paris, c. 1960, Courtesy of the Joan Mitchell Foundation
Movie poster, MGM 1951
Jacques Villon, *Untitled (Cleve Gray)*, Ink on paper, 12 x 19 1/2 inches
Harold Cousins, Paris, c. 1950s Courtesy of the Estate of Harold Cousins, and Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY

pre-war surrealist circles. They sought to confront life with a radical and capricious disregard for the past. Café society was the incubator of these discussions Sam Francis wrote in a letter, "The cafe, it's marvelous — you walk in, sit down, discuss, then leave, no one asks for anything more than a sign of friendship on coming and going. It's an intellectual mass without equal and of tremendous richness." Although the remnants of the School of Paris such as deStael and Vera DeSilva continued to gain international recognition, yet they were shunned by the avant-garde who criticized them for being aesthetic, subjective, and formalist.



"Bill" Rivers (an African American painter), who turned the studio into Galerie Huit, the only one in Paris run by Americans. In the slightly more than two years of its existence the gallery would exhibit the work of more than 50 painters and sculptors, many of them American expatriates. Meanwhile, in 1951, for the first time French and American abstract artists were presented side by side in the exhibition *Véhémences Confrontées*, held at Nina Dausset's gallery. The exhibition had been organized by the critic Michel Tapié, who was the principle defender of this movement. So while Paris offered

a diversity of modernist models, which twisted and reformed the very acts and processes of creation, the artists from the States in a sense had become part of the transformation of Parisian life which was taking place all around them. Likewise, when they returned to the States, they brought with them a wealth of experiences, practices and insights that would come to revitalize and re-define the diversity of abstract painting in the wake of Abstract Expressionism.



from top
Joan Mitchell in her studio, 1957, photo Rudy Burckhardt, Courtesy of the Joan Mitchell Foundation
Sam Francis (left) and Jean-Paul Riopelle on their shared Moto Peugeot motorcycle, Paris, c. 1953. Photo by Carol Haerer. Image courtesy Sam Francis Foundation, California
front: The Eiffel tower taken of the Trocadero, Paris. (Photo by LAPI/Roger Violette/Getty Images)

In turn, French abstract art moved along two courses. There were those artists who continued to engage in surrealist experimentation: *L'art informel* was characterized by an absence of premeditation, structure, conception, or approach. In this it differed from the other track of French abstract art, namely Tachism and Lyrical Abstraction, which took on the challenge of Abstract Expressionism (action painting). What differentiated the Tachists from the Lyrical Abstractionists was that the latter were opposed not only to "l'Ecole de Paris" pre-war style, but also to Cubism, Surrealism, and geometric abstraction ("Cold Abstraction"). Lyrical Abstraction in some ways applied the lessons of Kandinsky's 1908 gestural abstract paintings, which represented for many artists an opening to personal expression. Works by many of these artists would have been seen at such galleries as Arnaud, Drouin, Jeanne Bucher, Louis Carré, Galerie de France, as well as the "Salon des Réalités Nouvelles" and "Salon de Mai". Those associated with Lyrical Abstraction constituted a mélange of international artists and included many of those who would come to form COBRA (Copenhagen, Brussels, Amsterdam) and Japan's Gutai group. In 1947, Georges Mathieu organized two exhibitions; the first, *L'Imaginaire* (which he had wanted to call Lyrical Abstraction so as to advance that name), was held at the Palais du Luxembourg; the second held in 1948, was titled *HWPSMTB*³.

As for the American artists, in the spring of 1950, the sculptor Robert Rosenwald left his small studio at number 8, rue St. Julian le Pauvre, turning it over to his friend Haywood

3. Hans Hartung, Wols, Francis Picabia, François Stahly (a sculptor), Georges Mathieu, Michel Tapié and Camille Bryen.



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