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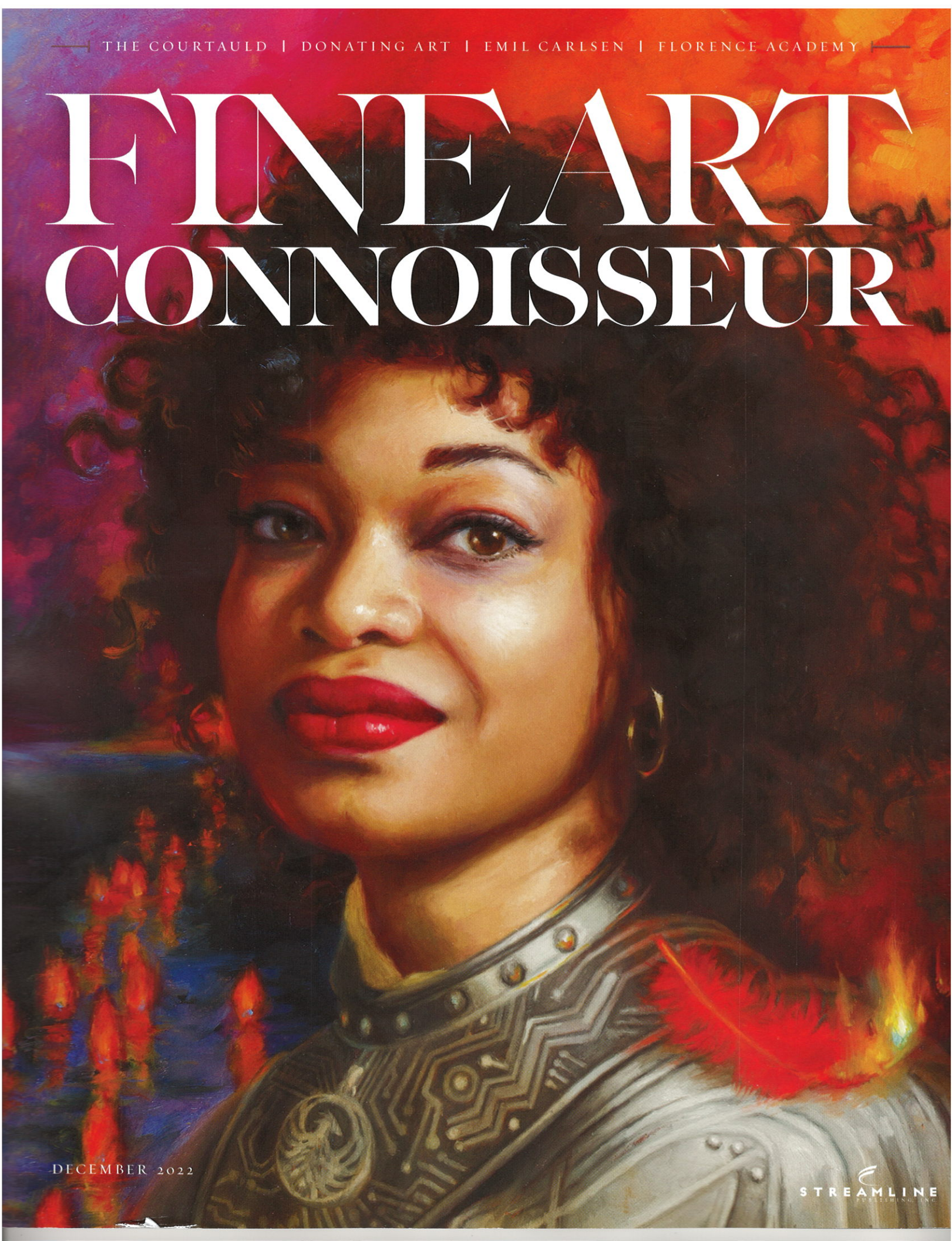

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STREAMLINE

HISTORIC MASTERS

BY LILLY WEI

MARGUERITE LOUPPE ON HER OWN

Women artists of talent have too often been overlooked. This is something not yet banished to the past, although, yes, times have changed, and for the better. A gratifying number of women — still not enough — have emerged from undeserved obscurity, some once eclipsed by a more successful husband, lover, or son. A now-famous example is Suzanne Valadon, whose son was Maurice Utrillo. Marguerite Louppe (1902–1988) is another: her life spanned almost the entire 20th century, a period of enormous transitions of unparalleled rapidity.

Louppe's husband was Maurice Brianchon (1899–1979), an artist celebrated in his day both in France and abroad. She was his active collaborator on many projects and managed his career. He, in turn, was surprisingly supportive of her as an artist in her own right, unusual in the context of the times and within a traditionally patriarchal society. By all accounts, they had an exceptionally close relationship that seamlessly merged the professional and the personal. (Even Christo and Jeanne-Claude, one of history's most famous art couples — and from a later, more progressive generation — did not officially become a collective until 1994, three decades after they began to collaborate.)

Louppe was born in Commercy, in northeastern France, to a family of prominent engineers that included her father and an uncle, Albert Louppe, who guided construction of a strategically important bridge near Brest that was later named in his honor. Her parents moved to Paris soon after she was born and settled in the wealthy 16th arrondissement, where she was raised.

Rather than enrolling her in a Catholic school, her parents sent her to the Lycée Molière. This was the first French public school to accept girls; its rigor and high standards, as well as its more diverse

MAURICE BRIANCHON (1899–1979), *Portrait de Madame Brianchon* (Marguerite Louppe), 1939, oil on canvas, 24 x 18 1/10 in.

Le violon rouge (*The Red Violin*), oil on canvas, 31 1/2 x 38 3/4 in ■ (RIGHT) *Nestor au salon* (*Nestor Plant in the Living Room*), oil on canvas, 31 7/10 x 25 3/5 in.

student body, suited Louppe and served her well later. There she studied literature, turning to art after graduation by taking classes for the next six years at several of the private art academies that abounded in Paris: the Julian, Grande Chaumière, Scandinave, and André Lhote.

These academies were quite progressive; both men and women (who were not yet accepted at more established art schools) flocked to them. The Académie Julian was noted for its radicalism and encouragement of independent thinking, which no doubt reinforced Louppe's experimental inclinations and interest in the new. Among the fledgling artists there with her were Marcel Duchamp, Jean Dubuffet, and Louise Bourgeois. Julian's older alumni included Pierre Bonnard, André Derain, and Édouard Vuillard. Louppe met Brianchon at a Julian function through the family of a friend; they married in 1934 and the following year their only child, Pierre-Antoine, was born.

Louppe mounted her last show in 1985 and died three years later in Paris, a decade after her husband. For many years their artworks were stored in a warehouse by their son, largely unseen, although now and then he sold some of his father's paintings. Pierre-Antoine died in 2012, and, since he never married, he bequeathed his parents' estate to relatives with whom he was close. Their son, David Hirsh, began to make inquiries in consultation with William Corwin, an artist and art historian. Now their estate is represented by Rosenberg & Co., the powerhouse gallery of modern art established in Paris more than a century ago and forced to

Pot de fleurs (*Flowerpot*), oil on canvas, 36 2/5 x 28 7/10 in.

(LEFT) *Guéridon et dessin* (*Pedestal Table and Drawing*), oil on canvas, 39 4/10 x 31 9/10 in. ■ (RIGHT) *Compotier et vases bleus* (*Compote Dish and Blue* Vases), oil on canvas, 35 3/4 x 28 1/3 in.

relocate to New York during the Nazi occupation. Thanks to its efforts and those of others, Louppe's oeuvre is enjoying its moment in the sun, the focus of a string of exhibitions and overdue critical attention.

SEPARATE & TOGETHER

Louppe and Brianchon seem to have had an ideal marriage, if any relationship can be completely free from complications. She frequently exhibited where he did, no doubt at his urging, but that would have gotten her only so far without her considerable skills, even if they were not recognized as equal to his. At the time very few women artists were appreciated by critics, institutional power brokers, or the public, even when, like Louppe, they were showing at highly regarded galleries such as Charpentier, Charles Auguste Girard, and René Drouet, alongside artists like Bonnard, Georges Rouault, Georges Braque, and Maurice Denis.

Among the couple's documented collaborations were three murals for Paris's Conservatoire National de Musique et d'Art Dramatique, of which later renovations have left no trace. Louppe also made illustrations for a novel by Georges Duhamel, the celebrated critic, Nobel nominee, and member of the Académie Française — another indication that she was respected by others beyond her husband.

Louppe and Brianchon enjoyed a full social life and hosted salons for cultural luminaries — a power couple, we might say. But in 1959, after decades at the center of the Paris art world, they bought a property with a commodious farmhouse and garden in Truffières, a village in the Dordogne region of southwestern France. It simplified their life and gave them more time and space to devote to their work, something many artists long for at a certain point in their careers. Louppe got her own studio for the first time and no longer needed to juggle her workspace time with Brianchon's. She doubled down on studio paintings of still lifes, their house and garden, and the village, all filtered through her idiosyncratically diagrammed compositions.

Alas, Louppe did not date her works, although she signed them with a confident flourish in a distinctive lowercase imprint. Because of this, painstaking research has been necessary to establish a tentative chronology for her output. The timeline that has emerged is often based on stylistic evidence as well as content (e.g., was it painted in Paris or Truffières?), and linked to dated photographs and other archival documents. Even basic facts about Louppe are not always easily confirmed. Since there were no diaries and little correspondence between her and Brianchon, much of their relationship is based on the gathering of related data, from which an idea of their life together can be sketched.

EXPERIMENTS & EVOLUTION

Like many artists of her generation, Louppe's earliest work was indebted to Vuillard, Bonnard, and other post-impressionists. Inevitably, it includes Parisian street scenes, women at their toilette, and still lifes, the latter a genre she explored throughout life in a range of styles. She was an adept draftsperson and painter, as well as a natural colorist, her earlier works enriched by a full-spectrum palette. The School of Paris was also a great influence.

Louppe's next phase was based on a fascination with the radical theories of cubism. At first glance, *Le violon rouge* (*The Red Violin*), a painting in multiple shades of red that sometimes clash, appears to be cubist-derived, yet she never became a true cubist, even if her vision grew increasingly geometric, abstracted. Translating a three-dimensional object onto a two-dimensional surface so that all its facets were simultaneously visible was less interesting to Louppe than mapping the space, diagramming it with an engineer's eye. In her

Vue des buis à Truffières (*View of Boxwood at Truffières*), oil on canvas, 32 3/10 x 39 3/5 in.

investigation, rearrangement, and reconstruction of space, her work can be linked to that of Jacques Villon (the nom de plume of Gaston Duchamp), an artist who moved in the same circles as Louppe and Brianchon.

Purism, as proposed by Le Corbusier, Amédée Ozenfant, and Fernand Léger, prioritized the power of stripped-down forms, technology, and the machine, a point of view that echoed Louppe's predisposition toward the analytical, derived from her family's engineering background. Her art suggests she was innately precise, organized, inquiring, keenly aware of how an engineer or architect might assess space and the positions of objects within it. Appropriately, one of the props most recurrent in her still lifes is a drafting triangle.

From the late 1930s, Louppe began depicting lines radiating from objects and slashing the picture plane. She made multitudes of studies that turned objects into simplified geometric and cubist forms, like an architect's rendering, recalling Renaissance artists' intoxication with linear perspective and its rational, if not realistic, organizing of space.

Louppe staged her favorite props (which often included studio implements) into arrangements that were determined by formal concerns, avoiding the sentimental or romantic. All were offered for visual parsing, to be appreciated for the relationship of the objects to each other as well as their color tonalities, and also for spatial complexities that were, at times, enigmatic. Unlike the conventional interpretation of still lifes as metaphorical, Louppe's were not about transience and mortality but about the interconnections of objects in space, the reality and solidity of form.

After moving to the Dordogne in 1959, Louppe veered even more toward still life — and landscapes. Glimpses of her studio, with canvases and easels in the background, took precedence. In works such as *Pot de fleurs* (*Flowerpot*) and *Guéridon et dessin* (*Pedestal Table and Drawing*), she presents a variety of brushes, a palette, and other artists' tools, including that drafting triangle. These still lifes seem to pose concrete questions, not metaphysical ones: How is a painting constructed? How is a three-dimensional object translated onto a flat surface? How is space envisioned in two dimensions? And, from there, what should the subject of a painting be? Louppe's answer: tangible things.

Her later landscapes were also conceived as experiments in optical construction, with muted colors adopted from the palette of analytical cubism — earthy beiges, greys, black, and white — to emphasize structure and its linearity without distractions. For example, *Vue des buis à Truffières* (*View of Boxwood at Truffières*) sees the village as if through sharply angled, fractured glass, as if probed by the piercing shafts of a searchlight. The scene has been etched into a kind of permanence, the ephemeral transformed, though a massing of quick yellow strokes softens the crystallinity of the picture, which, for all its denatured permanence, seems fragile. The different vanishing points are unsettling, a kind of push-pull effect that adds an energizing tension, held together by the overall spatial framework.

Despite failing health — she eventually became blind — Louppe continued to work until nearly the end of her life. She believed that art demanded devotion, as well as all the time she could give it. And so she did. ●

Information: *rosenberg.co. Unless noted otherwise, all works illustrated here were painted by Marguerite Louppe in the 1950s or '60s. All images © Estate of Marguerite Louppe and Maurice Brianchon.*

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