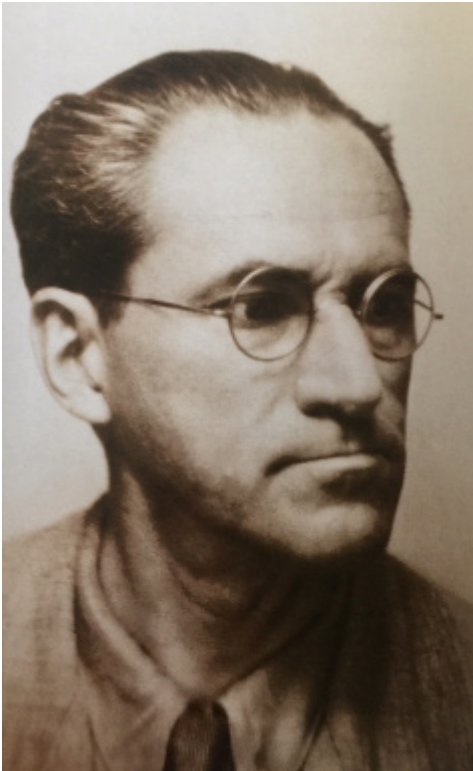


Serge CHARCHOUNE (1888–1975)



Russian-born painter and poet Serge Charchoune was a major 20th-century artist. Through his use of the ornamental, as well as Cubism, Dadaism and Purism, Charchoune offered us a poetic and multi-faceted body of work.

SERGE CHARCHOUNE'S EARLY LIFE IN RUSSIA

Serge Charchoune was born on 4 August 1888 in Buguruslan, Russia. After developing an interest in poetry and music, Charchoune, the son of a merchant, entered the business school in Ulyanovsk (formerly Simbirsk). He was not particularly fond of his studies, however, and turned to painting. He applied to the School of Art in Kazan but was not accepted. In his own words, "I drew very badly. I have always hated drawing. Drawing and painting are

in my opinion the greatest enemies." Serge Charchoune then began to paint landscapes inspired by the banks of the Volga river, where he had spent his childhood. It was in Moscow, in 1909, that he discovered French painting, presented to the Russian public through the collections of the merchants Morozov and Stchoukine.

THE PAINTER SERGE CHARCHOUNE IN PARIS

Called up for military service, Serge Charchoune however deserted and found himself in Paris in 1912. In the French capital, he joined the Académie Russe Libre and then the cubist Académie de la Palette, where he would meet a number of pivotal teachers: André Dunoyer de Segonzac, Henri Le Fauconnier and Jean Metzinger. Serge Charchoune exhibited his work for the first time at the Salon des Indépendants in 1913, where he presented a selection of cubist works. He also showed three paintings there the following year.

SERGE CHARCHOUNE IN BARCELONA

When war broke out in 1914, Serge Charchoune took refuge in Barcelona with his partner, the sculptor Helena Grunhoff. Other artists who found themselves in the city at the same time included Sonia and Robert Delaunay, Albert Gleizes and Marie Laurencin, as well as Francis Picabia, who launched the Dadaist review *391*. Charchoune also met the poet and boxer Arthur Cravan, along with Josef Dalmau, an antique dealer with a passion for avant-garde art. It was in the latter's gallery that Charchoune exhibited his abstract paintings, which he described as "ornamental". Presented in 1916, the artist's first solo exhibition also marked the first exhibition of abstract painting in Spain. A second solo exhibition of the artist's work took place the following year.

In Barcelona, Serge Charchoune discovered Moorish ceramics, azulejos and Mozarabic art, which reminded the artist of decorative Slavic art. He integrated these motifs into colourful geometric compositions, creating his concept of "ornamental cubism". The artist explained: "Azulejos! The painted tiles have transformed my pictorial approach by liberating my innate Slavic nature. My paintings have become colourful and ornamental." In this way, Serge Charchoune blended his traditional

Russian heritage with the rigour of French cubism. As the French art critic Pierre Brisset wrote: “The Russian, who has remained deeply attached to the deserted Orient, its fragrances, its icons, its shimmering fabrics and its ‘sonorous treasures’, has thus created a form of ornament or rather, to use his term, an ‘ornamental impressionism’, itself a successor to his ‘ornamental cubism’ of the 1920s. A form of ornamental impressionism sometimes so rich, so bright, so thunderous, in which forms and colours vibrate and clash so strongly, that it can still seem to us today (...) on the verge of the barbaric and the insane. But also sometimes, as in certain ‘still lifes’, there is a kind of ornamental that knows how to be serious, austere, silent, of a mystical beauty that is almost Benedictine, in which volumes melt and lose themselves in a barely perceptible chromatism of whites, browns and greys closer to the monk’s bure than to Byzantine artifices.”

SERGE CHARCHOUNE AND THE DADA MOVEMENT

In 1917, the Russian Revolution prompted Charchoune to return home. He thus joined the Russian Expeditionary Corps in France but failed and he was discharged in 1919, perhaps due to his naturally rebellious nature.

Charchoune returned to Paris in 1920, where he took part in the Dada Festival at the Salle Gaveau, where he met Picabia. Through Picabia, he met the bookseller André Forr and the artist Tristan Tzara. Charchoune’s first Parisian exhibition took place in André Forr’s bookshop and the artist thus became part of the Dada movement: he sent Picabia an illustration for his magazine *391* and was invited to take part in the group’s meetings at the Café Certá, as well as other events such as the *Salon Parallèle des Dadaïstes* at the Galerie Montaigne with Jean Arp, Max Ernst, Man Ray and Tristan Tzara. Charchoune also contributed to the collective work *L’Œil Cacodylate*, in which Picabia painted “the third eye of knowledge” and Charchoune wrote the words “Soleil Russe” around the eye. In the Dada movement, the painter found once more a sense of the absurd that he had appreciated in Russian poetry. In 1921, he published his first poem in French, *Foule immobile*, which he illustrated with 12 drawings. He also took part in the “Barrès trial”—a fictitious criminal trial of the nationalist Maurice Barrès by the Dadaists—organised by André Breton in May 1921.

The artist Serge Charchoune created the Dada group Palata Poetov [The Poets’ Room], which met at the Café Caméléon at 146 Boulevard du Montparnasse in Paris. He organised a “Russian Dadaist” evening on 21 December 1921, which was attended by André Breton and Louis Aragon.

SERGE CHARCHOUNE IN BERLIN

In May 1922, Charchoune travelled to Berlin in the hope of obtaining a visa for entry to the Soviet Union. While there, he published the Russian-language Dada review

Perevoz Dada [The Dada Ferry], the first issue of which he wrote alone. He then edited an anthology of German, French and Russian Dadaist poetry: *Dadaïzm, kompilacija*. Charchoune also contributed to various magazines such as *Merz* by Kurt Schwitters. In the end, Serge Charchoune failed to return to Russia but found a Russian community in Berlin, including the dancer Isadora Duncan, the painters Ivan Albertovitch Pigni (known as Jean Pougny), Lazar Lissitzky and Michel Andreenko, as well as the poets Andreï Biely, Sergueï Essénine, Vladimir Maïakovski, Alexandre Koussikov and Boris Pasternak.

Serge Charchoune took part in the *Der Sturm* exhibition in 1922, presenting a new series of “ornamental cubism” paintings. He also had a solo exhibition at the Sarja bookshop and took part in an exhibition of Russian art at the Van Diemen Gallery. After 14 months in Berlin, Charchoune returned to Paris for good.

A RETURN TO PARIS AND PURISM

On his return to Paris in 1923, the painter Serge Charchoune abandoned Dadaism as Cubism reached its closing moments. The artist organised a ceremony to bury the movement, inviting his friends to “attend the funeral of Cubism”, signing the invitation “Serge Charchoune, undertaker”. “Charchoune likes to say that he is constantly dying and being reborn throughout his works, in which he is completely in the moment of creation.”¹ At an exhibition at the Galerie Jeanne Bucher in 1926, Charchoune sold all of his works of “ornamental cubism” and began a new “purist” period. Charchoune then met the artist Amédée Ozenfant through Nadia Khodassievitch-Léger and the two artists became friends. In 1927, Charchoune exhibited his purist works at the Galerie Aubier and Amédée Ozenfant wrote the preface to the catalogue. With Ozenfant and Le Corbusier, Charchoune contributed to the review *L’Esprit Nouveau* with many other artists and writers, including André Lhote, Georges Valmier, Picasso, Apollinaire, Jean Cocteau, André Breton and Fernand Léger. Amédée Ozenfant introduced Serge Charchoune to the Galerie Percier and its director André Level, who gave him his first major exhibition. It was also at the Galerie Percier that he met the painter René Rimbart, with whom he became friends and maintained an important dialogue.

DIFFICULT TIMES

In 1929, Charchoune moved away from Purism and began working on his *Paysage Élastiques* works, which revealed a renewed Dadaist inspiration. He painted two series of works: *Feuilles de Température* and *L’Impressionnisme ornemental* (1929-1931), in which we can see the swirls and arabesques that allowed him to present such a unique and

1. René Guerra, “Profil de Charchoune” in Charchoune, Galerie Rue de Seine, Paris, 1974

original vision of nature. In 1929, the whole of Europe was affected by a huge stock market crash, leading to a period of misery and isolation for Charchoune. He painted in very small formats on leftover canvases or on paper, creating still lifes that were meditations on the modest objects of his daily life—bowls, jugs, carafes, pipes, bottles—in shades of white and beige.

Charchoune sold very little during this period, living in extreme destitution. He abandoned painting for a while to devote himself to writing and frequented Russian literary circles.

A NEW LEASE OF LIFE

In 1943, the great collector Roger Dutilleul gave the artist Charchoune new momentum by introducing him to the gallery owner Raymond Greuze, who exhibited his work for twelve years, from 1944 to 1956. The dealer Edwin W. Livengood also began representing Serge Charchoune works under contract in 1944.

The 1945 edition of the Salon des Surindépendants (20 October-13 November 1945, Parc des Expositions, Porte de Versailles, Paris) was a key event in the life of Serge Charchoune and the abstract artists of Paris. It was the first major post-war exhibition of abstract art, bringing together not only abstract works but the artists themselves. For the first time, such painters were able to meet in person and discuss their work. French nationals and foreigners in Paris exchanged ideas and forged friendships. The Salon also marked the first time that Serge Charchoune, Marie Raymond and Gérard Schneider exhibited together. Serge Charchoune was Russian and Gérard Schneider was Swiss. Marie Raymond, who was French, was married to the Dutch painter Fred Klein and was in close contact with foreign circles in Paris. An art critic, Raymond was always looking for new artists to discover. When writing about the Salon in the Dutch magazine *Kunst en Cultuur*, Marie Raymond chose to illustrate her article with a work by Serge Charchoune. In addition, she drew his portrait the following year (the portrait is now housed at the Centre Pompidou, Paris).

WATER IN SERGE CHARCHOUNE'S WORK

Serge Charchoune's works were pervaded by the theme of water from 1948 to 1950. The artist, whose life was shaped by the Volga and then by the Seine river, retained semi-figurative landscapes of tremendous poetry from his long walks along the rivers. He also created a series on Venice. Charchoune's seascapes were composed of many superimposed layers in which white is used to overlay compositions of contrasting colours. In his own words, "I was and I remain a man of nature, but I was also born a man of Art, and these three elements, forest, river, music, rapidly became for me a pictorial harmony which I attempted to put on paper."

The historian Valentine Marcadé wrote: "Charchoune's childhood and adolescence were spent in close proximity to nature, in constant contemplation of flowing water and its smooth surface, which is ever-changing, despite its apparent monotony. Like other Russian masters of the pen and brush, Charchoune remained intimately and indissolubly linked to the elements of nature that marked his childhood throughout his life, reproducing on his constructed canvases all the palpitation of running water with its pearly reflections, the complex arabesques of the undulating surface."

MUSIC: THE ULTIMATE SOURCE OF INSPIRATION

From 1954 to 1975, Serge Charchoune's painted works were nourished by music, in particular Bach, Mozart and Beethoven, as well as Romantic composers such as Mussorgsky, Tchaikovsky and Stravinsky. The painter thus arrived at his "ornamental abstract" style, in which he transposed sound waves onto the canvas. "Music gives me the subject. Listening to music, I can see the painting with my eyes closed, like a coloured thread unwinding, I see it first with primary colours and my painting starts out as very colourful. I listen and make telepathic marks on the canvas. It becomes ornamental. I begin to spit colour and it becomes decorative, very colourful..."² explained the artist.

Charchoune wrote very early on about the link between painting and music, including entries in his diary in 1922, in which he composed aphorisms such as: "The harpsichord music of Bach and Couperin, I perceive as the painted work of Kandinsky and Klee. It is the world that is dear to me, the ornamental world..." and "The brush is the bow of my violin".

THE ARTIST SERGE CHARCHOUNE'S LEGACY

The painter Serge Charchoune was often described as "forgotten" or "unrecognised" by the authors of his time, such as Gaston Diehl, Charles Estienne, Alain Jouffroy, Pierre Schneider and Philippe Soupault. And yet, he was always supported and admired by other artists and gallery owners. Jacques Villon wrote the following words to Charchoune in 1941: "I am thrilled that I will soon be able to commune with your stripped-down art." Philippe Hosiasson noted in 1957: "What can be said about Charchoune, who seeks only the unspeakable...? Colour — when he uses it — is emptied of all resonance: his painted work is an inspired whisper... Whoever has perceived it cannot forget it..." In the words of Picasso, "For me, there are two painters: Juan Gris and Charchoune." In 1954, Serge Charchoune met the poet Pierre Lecuire and the painter Nicolas de Staël. The latter, who admired the artist and owned one of his paintings, described Charchoune as "the greatest among us".

2. Interview with Michel Ragon, *Jardin des arts*, 1966

Serge Charchoune's work was celebrated in 1971 with a retrospective at the Musée National d'Art Moderne in Paris that presented about a hundred of the artist's works, retracing his entire career. It was, at last, a national recognition of the artist's work. On the subject of the artist, the poet Patrick Waldberg wrote: The conflict between the material and the spiritual is [...] underlying all of the phases of his work [...] From the monochromes agitated by undulating tremors to the superimposed volumes forming 'soul palaces' and the spirals and orbs intertwining their swirls in the mysterious mauve glow, and, always, it is an ascending movement that prevails, a rhythm that originates in the heart of the being and tends to bring it into harmony with the elemental forces of the universe." Serge Charchoune died in 1975 after creating a body of more than 5,000 paintings.

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Marie Raymond
Portrait de Serge Charchoune - 1946 - Charcoal on paper - 30,5 x 24 cm
Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris

SELECTED COLLECTIONS

Belgrade (Serbia), National Museum
Berlin (Germany), Neue Nationalgalerie
Caen (France), Fonds Régional d'Art Contemporain (FRAC) – Normandy
Grenoble (France), Musée des Beaux-Arts
Lodz (Poland), Muzeum Sztuki
Nantes (France), Musée d'Arts
New Haven (CT), Yale University Art Gallery
Nice (France), MAMAC
Paris (France), Musée National d'Art Moderne – Centre Pompidou
Paris (France), Musée d'Art Moderne
Paris (France), Centre National des Arts Plastiques
Provincetown (MA), Chrysler Museum
Roubaix (France), La Piscine
Saint-Étienne (France), Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain
Strasbourg (France), Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain
Villeneuve-d'Ascq (France), LaM

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

Salon des Indépendants, Paris, 1913
Solo exhibition, Galeries Dalmau, Barcelona, 1916, 1917
Solo exhibition, Andrée Forny bookshop, Paris, 1920
Salon Dada, Galerie Montaigne, Paris, 1921
Group exhibition, Galerie Der Sturm, Berlin, 1922
Solo exhibition, Galerie Der Sturm, Berlin, 1922
Group exhibition, *Grosse Berliner Ausstellung*, Galerie van Diemen, Berlin, 1922
Solo exhibition, Sarja Gallery, Berlin, 1923
Solo exhibition, Galerie Jeanne Bucher, Paris, 1926
Solo exhibition, Galerie Aubier, Paris, 1927
Solo exhibition, Galerie Percier, Paris, 1929
Solo exhibition, Galerie Bonaparte, Paris, 1930
Solo exhibition, Galerie aux Quatre Chemins, Paris, 1932
Group exhibition, *European and American Moderns*, New York, 1933
Group exhibition, Retrospektivni Vystavy rushéko Malirstvi, Prague, 1935
Solo exhibition, Galerie du Verseau, Paris, 1944
Solo exhibitions, Galerie Raymond Creuze, Paris, 1944, 1947, 1948, 1949, 1951, 1952, 1956
Group exhibition, Galerie du Verseau, Paris, 1945
Group exhibition, Galerie Berri-Raspail, Paris, 1946
Group exhibition, *Exposition d'Art et Humanisme*, Galerie Art Vivant, Paris, 1946
Group exhibitions, Galerie Berri-Raspail, Paris, 1947, 1948
Group exhibition, *Peinture d'aujourd'hui: France-Italie*, Palazzo Belle Arti, Turin, 1951
Group exhibition, *L'École de Paris*, Hachette bookshop, Montreal, 1952
Group exhibition, *Dix ans de peinture française 1945-1955*, Musée de Grenoble, Grenoble (France), 1956

Salon Comparaisons, Paris from 1956 to 1961
Réalités Nouvelles, in 1956 with Beethoven's 7th Symphony, in 1957 with Concerto for piano by Tchaikovsky, and from 1958 to 1963
Solo exhibition, L'Actuelle Gallery, Montreal, 1957
Solo exhibition, Galerie Dina Vierny, Paris, 1957
Solo exhibition, Galerie J.C. de Chaudun, Paris, 1957
Group exhibition, *Cinquante ans de Peinture Abstraite*, Galerie Creuze, Paris, 1957
Group exhibition, *Exposition Rétrospective Dada 1916-1922*, Galerie de l'Institut, Paris, 1957
Group exhibition, *Art abstrait*, Musée de Saint-Étienne, Saint-Étienne (France), 1957
Solo exhibition, Galerie Michel Warren, Paris, 1958
Group exhibition, Rose Fried Gallery, New York, 1958
Group exhibition, Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1958
Solo exhibition, Hybler Gallery, Copenhagen, 1959
Group exhibition, *Beitrag der Russen zur modernen Kunst*, Frankfurt, 1959
Salon de Mai, Paris, 1960
Solo exhibition, Alexandre Iolas Gallery, New York, 1960
Solo exhibition, Graphisches Kabinett of Dr Anna Grisebach, Heidelberg (Germany), 1960
Solo exhibition, Galerie H. Bénézit, Paris, 1960
Solo exhibition, Galerie Jacques Peron, Paris, 1960
Solo exhibition, Galerie Cahiers d'Art, Paris, 1961
Group exhibition, *Modern Masters*, Rose Fried Gallery, New York, 1961
Group exhibition, *Der Sturm*, Nationalgalerie, Berlin, 1961
Onzième Salon d'Art Sacré et Exposition collective Réalités Spirituelles, Musée d'Art Moderne, Paris, 1961
Group exhibition, Graphisches Kabinett, Heidelberg (Germany), 1961
Solo exhibition, Toninelli Gallery, Milan, 1962
Solo exhibition, Galerie Yvon Lambert, Vence (France), 1962
Group exhibition, Galerie de La Baume, Paris, 1962
Group exhibition, Toninelli Gallery, Milan, 1962
Solo exhibition, Schmela Gallery, Düsseldorf, 1963
Group exhibition, *Maestri astratti*, Lorenzelli Gallery, Milan, 1963
Group exhibition, *Esquisse d'un Salon*, Galerie Denise René, Paris, 1963
Group exhibition, *La Grande Aventure de l'art du XX^e siècle*, Rohan Castle, Strasbourg (France), 1963
Solo exhibition, Galerie Chimène, Saint-Etienne (France), 1964
Group exhibition, *Maestri Russi, - Il contributo russo alle avanguardie plastiche*, Galleria del Levante, Milan, 1964
Solo exhibition, *Dessins : 22 Variations sur Icare en hommage à Serge Lifar*, Galerie G. Cornaud, Paris, 1965
Solo exhibition, Galerie Georges Bongers, Paris, 1965, 1967
Group exhibition, *Exposition Dada* [Dada Exhibition], Kunsthaus, Zurich, 1966
Solo exhibition, Paul Bruck Gallery, Luxembourg, 1967
Solo exhibition, Bernador Gallery, Geneva, 1967
Group exhibition, *Exposition Dada* [Dada Exhibition], Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris, 1967

Group exhibition, *4 Pittori dell'avanguardia russia Goncjarova, Larionov, Mansurov, Sarsun*, Galleria del Teatro, Parma, 1967

Group exhibition, Galerie La Roue, Paris, 1967

Group exhibition, *Avant-garde Osteuropa 1910-1930*, Berlin, 1967

Touring group exhibition across the United States: *Painting in France 1900-1967*, 1968

Group exhibition, *Savremeno francusko slikarsvo*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade, 1968

Group exhibition, *Russische Kunstler aus dem 20 Jahrhundert*, Gmurzynska Gallery, Cologne (Germany), 1968

Solo exhibition, Lorenzelli Gallery, Bergamo (Italy), 1969

Solo exhibition, San Fedele Gallery, Milan, 1969

Group exhibition, *Aspects de l'Avant Garde Russe 1905-1925*, Galerie J. Chauvelin, Paris, 1969

Solo exhibition, Galerie J.L. Roque, Paris, 1970

Solo exhibition, Bettie Thommen Gallery, Basel, 1970

First retrospective exhibition, Musée Saint-Denis, Reims (France), 1970

Group exhibition, Galerie de Seine, Paris, 1970

Group exhibition, *Astrattisti Russi*, Vittorio Emanuele Gallery, Milan, 1970

Group exhibition, *The Non-Objective World 1914-1924*, Annely Juda Fine Art, London, 1970

Solo exhibition, Galerie Marbach, Paris, 1971

Solo exhibition, Galerie J.L. Roque, Paris, 1971

Solo exhibition, St Leger Gallery, Geneva, 1971

Retrospective exhibition, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris, 1971

Group exhibition, Galerie Jacob, Paris, 1971

Group exhibition, Galerie Berri-Lardy, Paris, 1971

Group exhibition, *La Peinture Non-Objective 1924-1939*, Galerie J. Chauvelin, Paris, 1971

Group exhibition, *The Non-Objective World 1924-1939*, Annely Juda Fine Art, London, 1971, 1973

Group exhibition, *Il mondo della Non-Oggettivita 1924-1039*, Galleria Milano, Milan, 1971

Group exhibition, Galerie Agora, Paris, 1971

Group exhibition, *Konstruktivismus*, Gmurzynska Gallery, Cologne (Germany), 1972

Group exhibition, *Vision Russe*, Galerie Motte, Paris/Geneva, 1973

Group exhibition, *Philippe Soupault Collection Fantôme*, Galerie de Seine, Paris, 1973

Group exhibition, *The Non-Objective World 1914-1955*, University Art Museum of Texas, Austin (TX), 1973

Group exhibition, *Charchoune, harmonies blanches 1924-197*, Galerie de Seine, Paris, 1974

S. Charchoune, peintures de 1913 à 1965, Musée de l'Abbaye Sainte-Croix, Les Sables-d'Olonne (France), 1980-1981

S. Charchoune œuvres 1913-1975, Galerie des Ponchettes, Nice, 1981

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Patrick Waldberg, *Serge Charchoune*, preface for the exhibition at the Galerie Michel Warren, Paris, December 1958 - January 1959

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