

**Serge**  
**Charchoune**

The achievement of the Franco-Russian painter Serge Charchoune (Шаршун) is arguably one of the least well understood and least recognised in twentieth-century European art. But as time passes his work looks more and more interesting, and highly relevant to aspects of current painting. What recognition he has had tends to be as a minor practitioner of major modernist styles – Dada, Cubism, Purism, informal abstraction. In fact his main and best work is quite independent of those ‘schools’. What is needed is a museum retrospective selected to bring out his individuality. In the meantime, the small group of works assembled here (along with a selection of publications and documents) gives just a glimpse of his amazing output over six decades.



### 1. Grossissement (1927)

Oil on canvas, 186 x 198 mm.

Signed and dated, lower right 'CHARCHOUNE 27'

Typed label on stretcher bearing Creuze number and title

Provenance:

Artist's studio

Galerie Raymond Creuze, Paris

Private collection, southern France

Exhibited:

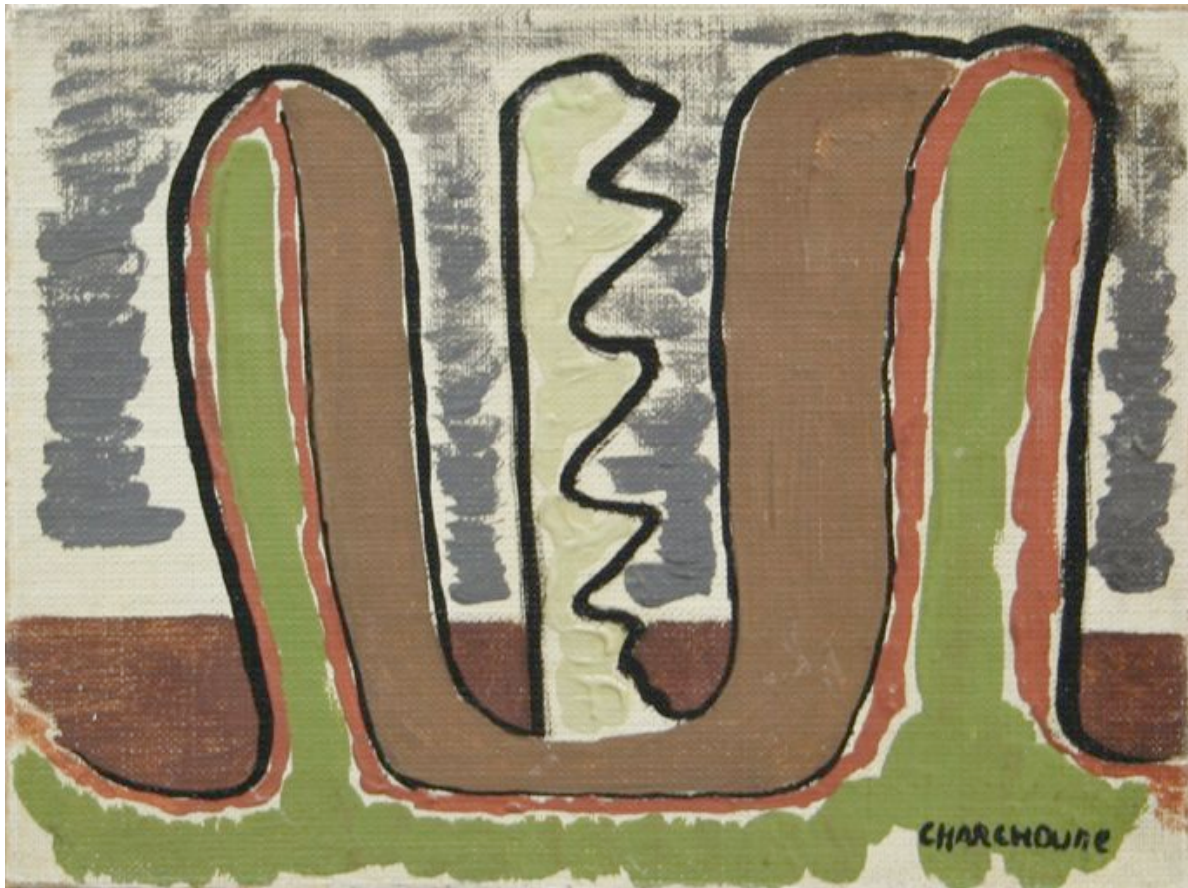
Galerie Raymond Creuze, Paris, [?] *Charchoune: Peintures de 1926 à 1931*, 1948

Literature:

Raymond Creuze, *Charchoune* (Paris, 1975), vol. I, p. 112, no. 132, (repr. col.)

Pierre Guénégan, *Serge Charchoune, Catalogue Raisonné* (Carouge, n.d.[2007]), vol.

II, p. 184. no. 1927/035, (repr. mono.)



## 2. Epiderme - Paysage (1929)

Oil on canvas, 165 x 218 mm.

Signed, lower right 'CHARCHOUNE'

Typed label on stretcher bearing Creuze number and title

Provenance:

Artist's studio

Galerie Raymond Creuze, Paris

Private collections, France

Exhibited:

Galerie Raymond Creuze, Paris, [?] *Charchoune: Peintures de 1926 à 1931, 1948*

Literature:

Raymond Creuze, *Charchoune* (Paris, 1975), vol. I, p. 198, no. 283, (repr. col.)

Pierre Guénégan, *Serge Charchoune, Catalogue Raisonné* (Carouge, n.d.[2007]), vol. II, p. 222, no. 1929/006, (repr. mono.) as *Composition*



### **3. Impressionisme Ornamental No.5 (1930)**

Oil on canvas, 150 x 470 mm.

Signed and dated, lower right 'CHARCHOUne 30'

Typed label on stretcher bearing Creuze number

Provenance:

Artist's studio

Galerie Raymond Creuze, Paris

Private collection, France

Exhibited:

Galerie Raymond Creuze, Paris, *Charchoune: Peintures de 1926 à 1931*, 1948

Literature:

Raymond Creuze, *Charchoune* (Paris, 1975), vol. I, p. 156, no. 212, (repr. col.)



#### 4. Val de Loire I (1930-31)

Oil on canvas, 220 x 535 mm.

Signed and dated, lower left 'CHARCHOUNE Charchoune 30-31'

Typed label on stretcher bearing Creuze number and title *Fruits Mystiques*

Provenance:

Artist's studio

Galerie Raymond Creuze, Paris

Private collection, France

Gilden's Arts, London

Exhibited:

Galerie Raymond Creuze, Paris, [?] *Charchoune: Peintures de 1926 à 1931*, 1948

Literature:

Raymond Creuze, *Charchoune* (Paris, 1975), vol. I, p. 178, no. 257, (repr. col.)  
as *Fruits Mystiques*



### **5. Rue Fontenay à Montrouge (1931)**

Oil on canvas, 650 x 920 mm.

Signed and dated, lower right and on back

Typed label on stretcher bearing Creuze number

Provenance:

Artist's studio

Galerie Raymond Creuze, Paris

Private collection, France

Gilden's Arts, London

Exhibited:

Galerie Raymond Creuze, Paris, *Charchoune: Peintures de 1926 à 1931*, 1948

Literature:

Raymond Creuz, *Charchoune* (Paris, 1975), vol. I, p. 206, no. 293, (repr. col.)



## 6. St. Germain (1931)

Oil on canvas, 202 x 208 mm.

Signed and dated, lower right 'N3 Charchoune 20 X 31 St Germain'

Fragmentary label (in Russian?) on stretcher

Provenance:

Artist's studio

Galerie Raymond Creuze, Paris

Private collection (Monsieur A.C.), France

Gilden's Arts, London

Exhibited:

Galerie Raymond Creuze

Literature:

Raymond Creuze, *Charchoune* (Paris, 1975), vol. I, p. 181, no. 261, (repr. col.)





### 7. Nocturne (1931)

Oil on canvas, 650 x 810 mm.

Signed and dated, lower right 'CHARCHOUNE 31'

Signed and dated on back and inscribed '3 bis rue Baillou Paris 14e.' (the artist's address)

Printed exhibition labels on stretcher from CNAC Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, and Musée de l'Abbaye Sainte-Croix, Les Sables-d'Olonne, France

Provenance:

Artist's studio

Raymond Creuze, Paris

Exhibited:

Galerie Raymond Creuze, *Charchoune: Peintures de 1926 à 1931*, 1948

Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, *Charchoune*, 1971

Musée de l'Abbaye Sainte-Croix, Les Sables-d'Olonne, *Serge Charchoune: Peintures de 1913 à 1965*, 1980-81

Literature:

Henry-Claude Cousseau and Michel Seuphor, *Serge Charchoune: Peintures de 1913 à 1965*, Musée de l'Abbaye Sainte-Croix (Les Sables-d'Olonne, 1980)

Partick Waldberg et. al., *Charchoune*, CNAC (Paris, 1971)

Raymond Creuze, *Charchoune* (Paris, 1975), vol. I, p. 207, no. 294, (repr. col.)



### **8. Le Secret du Tombeau (1932)**

Oil on board, 150 x 200 mm.

Signed and dated, lower right 'Charchoune 25.I.32'

Typed label on verso bearing Creuze number and title

Provenance:

Artist's studio

Galerie Raymond Creuze, Paris

Private collection, France

Exhibited:

Galerie Raymond Creuze

Literature:

Raymond Creuze, *Charchoune* (Paris, 1975), vol. I., p. 219, no. 307, (repr. col.)



### 9. Pluie Colorée No. 1 (1937)

Oil on canvas, 225 x 246 mm.

Signed in pencil, lower right 'Charchoune'

Printed exhibition label on stretcher from Musée de l'Abbaye Sainte-Croix, Les Sables-d'Olonne, France

Provenance:

Artist's studio

Galerie Raymond Creuze, Paris

Private collection, southern France

Exhibited:

Musée de l'Abbaye Sainte-Croix, Les Sables-d'Olonne, *Serge Charchoune: Peintures de 1913 à 1965*, 1980-81

Literature:

Henry-Claude Cousseau and Michel Seuphor, *Serge Charchoune: Peintures de 1913 à 1965*, Musée de l'Abbaye Sainte-Croix (Les Sables-d'Olonne, 1980)

Raymond Creuze, *Charchoune* (Paris, 1975), vol. I, p. 229, no. 324, (repr. col.)



**10. Nature Morte au Soulier (1945)**

Oil on [?] canvas laid on board, 270 x 455 mm.

Signed and dated, lower right 'Charchoune 45'

Certificate of authenticity from the artist

Provenance:

Private collection, France

Gilden's Arts, London



**11. Untitled (? late 1950s)**

Gouache and pencil on Canson & Montgolfier paper, 460 x 372 mm.

Signed, lower right 'Charchoune'

Certificate of authenticity from the artist

Provenance:

Claudine Ratié, Paris, purchased directly from the artist's studio

Art Works Paris



**12. Piano, Clavecin, Harpe (1962)**

Oil on canvas, 460 x 550 mm.

Signed and dated, lower right 'Charchoune 62'

On the reverse inscribed '13 rue Chatillon, Vanves' (the artist's address)

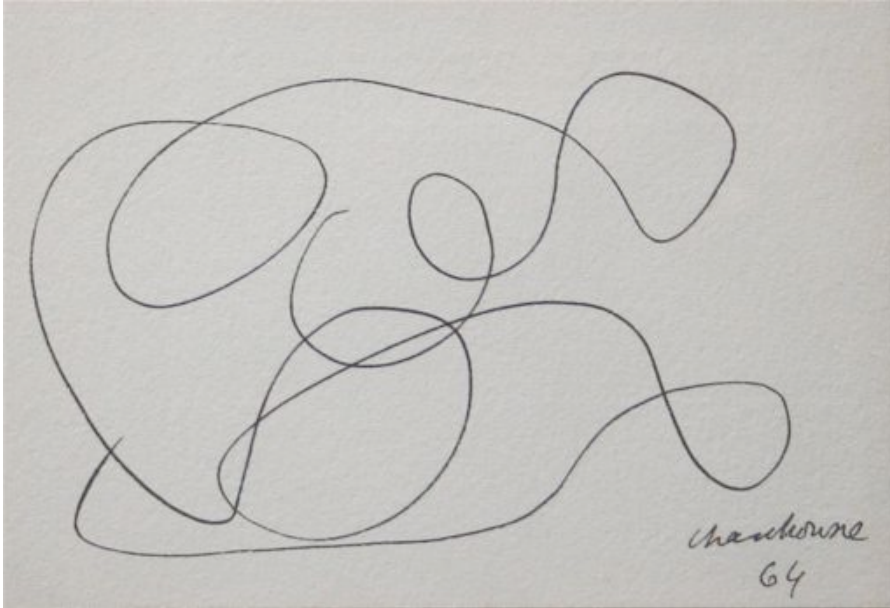
Label on stretcher from Galerie George Bongers, Paris

Provenance:

Galerie George Bongers, Paris

Private collection, France

Ravenscourt Galleries, Moscow and London



**13. Drawing (1964)**

Ink on card, 95 x 154 mm.

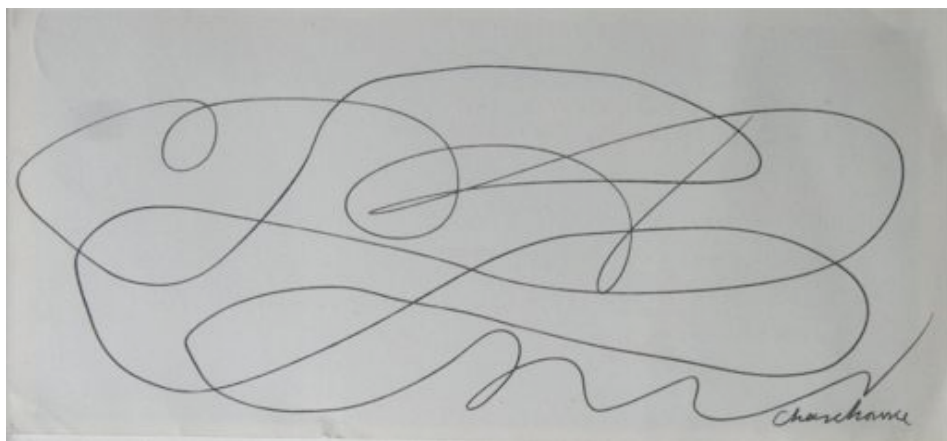
Signed and dated, lower right 'Charchoune 64'

Provenance:

[?] Vente Succession Serge Charchoune

Private collection, Paris

Art Works Paris



**14. Drawing (mid 1960s)**

Ink on paper, 98 x 210 mm.

Signed, lower right 'Charchoune'

Provenance:

[?] Vente Succession Serge Charchoune

Private collection, Paris

Art Works Paris



**15. Weber Concerto Pour Clarinette Var. II (1960s)**

Oil on canvas, 460 x 655 mm.

Signed in pencil, lower right 'CHARCHOUNE'

On the reverse, titled and inscribed [right] '13 rue Chatillon, Vanves' (the artist's address). Label on stretcher from Lieu d'Art Contemporaien, Sigean, France

Provenance:

Private collection, Belgium

Exhibited:

LAC, Sigean, France, *Charchoune: Les Peintures, La Peinture*, 1994





**16. Untitled (1973)**

Oil on canvas, 542 x 322 mm.

Signed and dated, lower right 'Charchoune 1973'

On the reverse, right, signed 'Charchoune' and inscribed [?]'17 a.r.' and '22 Juin 1973 23 24 25'. On the left, inscribed indistinctly [?]'13 r. Chatillon, Vanves' (the artist's address)

Provenance:

Françoise Tournier, Paris

Ravenscourt Galleries, Moscow and London

## Charchoune's Pan-Modernism

Merlin James

After some art training and exposure to international modernism in Moscow, Serge Ivanovich Charchoune (as he would spell it in French) made his way to Paris, like so many Eastern European artists, around 1912. He was about twenty-four. He absorbed Cubism at the Académie de la Palette, and was just beginning to adapt it to his own vision when World War One broke out. Sheltering in Barcelona, he created a remarkable group of symmetrical paintings – arabesque or cartouchesque, sometimes a little heraldic, sometimes mandala-like. Frankly decorative, they nevertheless have gravitas and grace and urgency. Their hieratic qualities invoke the sacred, but they are entirely unmystificatory. They could often be hung any way up, and were sometimes signed in more than one orientation. The artist cited the influence of Moorish ceramic tiles and affinities he perceived between these and the Byzantine aesthetic of his Russian background. Five years or so before



*Ornamental Cubism* c.1917, oil on canvas  
545 x 458 mm. Private collection

progressive Dalmau Gallery, Charchoune twice exhibited his own ornamental (sub)version of abstraction there. He announced some of the works as ‘film paintings’ (though it is not clear what this implied, whether there was any literal animation envisaged). A musical score accompanied one exhibition. Like many of his contemporaries he had syn/kinaesthetic ideas about the correspondences between different senses and arts and dimensions. He met Picabia, Tzara, Cravan and others of the Dada group, contributed to their journals and happenings back in Paris, and then propagandised for Dada in Berlin in the early ‘20s, where he encountered Rudolf Steiner.

By the mid ‘20s he was back in Paris working in a cubo-purist idiom. But though calling himself a ‘cubist straggler’, and indeed making some quite orthodox cubistic still lifes, yet in his best works he goes way beyond and outside any known style, exploring density of burnished surface, closeness of tone (no. 4; 7), spatial and surface variety, oddness of image (no.6). He

makes strange, wriggling quasi-abstractions (no.1), curvilinear '*élastique*' compositions on flat grounds, emblematic formscapes (no.2), fragmented views of parkland and plan-like architectural compositions that use windows, shutters and mansard roofs as pictorial elements. All this vocabulary recurs through the ensuing years, and the sense of a cumulative, intermixable lexicon of imagery, forms, spatial devices, symbolism, compositional structures and mark-making is what gives Charchoune's oeuvre a complex coherence across its great diversity.

Towards the '30s he adds radically elongated horizontal formats, the use of spattering and dripping (no. 3), combinations of abstraction and depiction, odd forms of divisionism, forays into impressionist handling, poetic landscape (no.5) esoteric and mystical motifs (no.8), biomorphic ambiguity and almost neo-plastic geometry. The spatter and speckle paintings around 1930 are especially radical. Equally inexplicable are the slashing, streaked 'coloured rain' pictures (no.9). Perhaps such striking and prescient works have been overlooked partly due to their small sizes, often said to be the result of poverty. The artist used cheap canvas or board off-cuts, and paint scrounged from friends. (Jean Hé lion, then a true believer in primary abstractions, gave him a lot of unwanted earth colours.) But in fact Charchoune always liked small formats. While he made some superb larger canvases, and designs for tapestries and mural cycles, there's something significant in the scale itself of his tiny paintings. Their very modesty and meagreness, their secrecy even, and within that their paradoxical expansiveness and energy – all this is part of what makes them engaging.

For most of the decade up to WW2 Charchoune had no real dealer. He had shown at all of the hip places (including Percier, Quatre Chemins, Aubier, Jeanne Bucher, Boneparte, der Sturm, Dalmau) up until the financial crash of 1929; but now he was in the wilderness. He would pretty much remain there. A wide range of galleries would exhibit him later on, but rarely ones that could show his work in dialogue with other serious, exploratory art of his time. He was a total innocent when it came to career tactics. All he wanted to do was make the paintings. Under dire economic pressure he at various points sold works from his studio to dealers at very low prices – including, probably, early works of great historic importance. Later he would be rueful, though never it seems bitter, at the prices those works began to command, with no profit to himself. At some level he was acknowledged as a pioneering modernist; and yet he was half forgotten – lost amidst much mediocrity in the inter- and post-war Ecole de Paris. Critics began calling him 'inconnu', 'méconnu', 'oublié', 'solitaire'.

But he continued, quietly confident of his own worth. Around the '40s his most fascinating pictures are often jewel-like in encrusted colour and bristling texture. They have intense, almost incendiary surfaces and explosive structures. Or he goes the other way and makes very reduced monochromes, criss-crossed with diagonals or curves. Again, nobody was making paintings like him at this time. Fragments of imagery emerge or are compartmentalised within them. And always there are oddball pictures, like *Nature Morte au Soulier* (no. 10), with its strange slipper sitting in front of an architecture of soft, divisionist building blocks. When he makes larger, more involved compositions (fantasias on a marine theme or, again, cubist fragmentations of violins) he admittedly can become a bit pedestrian; and the early '50s are maybe the low point, with bland or whimsical designs, sometimes referencing Venetian cupolas and gondolas. But even in these years he can still pull off great things, either jumping to other parts of his pictorial repertoire, or managing against the odds to make his grand thematic machines dense, unexpected and absorbing. Even when he might seem just silly (circles becoming suns and moons with clownish faces), he can sometimes win one over. An element of the goofy is anyway central to his work; there's always humour in with the poetry and the piquancy. It makes sense that Duchamp admired him and nominated him in the mid '50s for a Copley Foundation prize. Administered by the artist William Copley, the award gave Charchoune some exposure in America, where he had rarely shown before.

Towards the 1960s comes a big return to form, with reprises of ornamental symmetry (no.11) and many new departures. Impasto becomes common, with monochrome, especially white monochrome, predominant. Charchoune had always tended to rework canvases many times over long periods. The paucity of sales meant there was plenty of work in the studio to return to. Now he overpainted more and more, sometimes retitling, redating, resigning, reorientating, suppressing earlier layers of colour, leaving forms described in a kind of surface Braille (no.12). Comparison with monochromes by other artists (in Arte Povera, minimalism or conceptualism) might be salutary here. So might serious consideration of the diagrammatic or calligraphic drawings Charchoune continued to make through his career (nos.13; 14), often playing with the idea of signature and language as he does in various ways in the paintings (e.g. no.15). He can be as radical, without being as reductive, as his contemporaries in mainstream American painting of the '50s and '60s. And if he had anticipated – in miniature, but by decades – Pollock, Still, Guston and others, his true soul-mates in the USA turn out to be figures like Alfred Jensen, Milton Avery, Myron Stout, Forrest Bess.

By now Charchoune was increasingly using classical music to inspire the rhythms and structures of works. He listened to the radio continually in the studio, attended concerts regularly, and his pictures are often named after composers or specific scores. Again though, as with his supposed mystical symbolism or allusions to a remembered homeland (the forests and waters of the Volga-Ural valleys), the pretext of the work does not pre- or proscribe meaning for the viewer. One critic in the '70s politely dismissed the artist's talk of musical analogy, and very suggestively read the recent work as archaeological – a kind of 'dig' below the humus of human consciousness. Alternatively you can find a zany sci-fi dimension in Charchoune, electrifying his lyricism. Ever surprising, in the early 1970s when he was nearing ninety (and after recent trips to Slovakia and Russia), he set off for a spell working in the Galapagos islands. The trip was surely prompted by sheer curiosity about the evolution and metamorphosis of life forms, and during it he reverted again to representation, depicting the strange birds and animals in the landscape.

On his return to Paris there is a final synthesis of abstraction and imagery (no.16) in his last works. But really his whole career was a continual process of re-assimilating and synthesising. There is no simple arc of stylistic development of the kind we like to look for in artists' careers. Late, early and mid-career works are often interchangeable, and when not dated they can be hard to place chronologically. And that is also somehow central to what's important about Charchoune.

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All of the above is just a crude précis of a long and involved career. A lot remains to be discovered about Charchoune's life, and said about his work. His few loyal supporters (though not so few once you look into it) have often suggested that, just as he is marginalised in art history because he's uncategorisable, so his uncompromising individualism made him a 'misfit' in life. He was very private, taciturn; an outsider to Paris art society. Despite perfect manners and sober dress, he was a bit of a crank – a sometime theosophist, vegetarian, free thinker, an ascetic who only bathed in cold water and went everywhere on foot. He said about his lack of girlfriends 'my muteness soon puts them off'. Early on a sculptor called Hélène Grünhoff had been his partner for perhaps ten years. Thereafter he lived alone, mostly around Montparnasse (see no.7, signed at rue Baillou). For fifteen years he was in the Cité Falguière studios (where Soutine, Chagall and others had painted). From 1960 his studio was in the more southerly suburb of Vanves.

But the idea that he was a reclusive solitary turns out, of course, to be not entirely accurate. Rather like another supposed hermit, Morandi (whom he half admired), he had a stream of pilgrims coming to the studio, interrupting his meditations. And he did plenty of visiting himself. His many artist friends included not just Duchamp and Bill ('Cply') Copley but also John Graham, Jean Hélion, Nicolas de Staël, Jean-Paul Riopelle (who was a neighbour at Vanves), Yves Klein, Fernand Léger, Sam Francis, Wilfredo Lam and Gino Severini. The title of *St. Germain* here (no.6) possibly refers to St. Germain-en-Laye where he would often go to see the painter Erik



Olson. Paris painters like Zao Wou-Ki, Charles Lapique and Raoul Ubac were all familiar with him. He frequented anarchist circles, too. Before accepting a government grant for impoverished intellectuals in the early 30s, he had joined Louis Rimbault's radical 'new age' commune in the Val de Loire (no.4), surviving on foraged and home-grown food.

But it was probably the world of cultured Russian ex-pats into which he was best integrated. Artists like Lansky, Tutundjian, Survage, Kandinsky, Larionov and Goncharova all knew him in that context. The Paris-Russian cultural milieu is not much studied in anglophone art history and was as much a world of literature (and politics, dance, music) as of visual art. Charchoune himself wrote lots of poetry and prose, mostly in Russian. He usually self-published his books and pamphlets, first by duplicator then in revised print editions. Aphorisms were a favoured form, and these he sometimes did publish in French, in catalogues for his exhibitions. Enigmatic fragments quite unique to himself, their nearest affinity in modern poetry may be to the *proverbios* of the Spanish poet Machado. But Charchoune also wrote extensive narrative prose-poetry, building to a kind of mock epic centred on an anti-hero called Dolgolikov. Charchoune's books are hard to find, but they are lodged in various libraries, awaiting attention. The relationship of the writing to the painting largely remains to be explored (though a start has been made by the Slovak critic Oskár Čepan).

Charchoune died in 1975, leaving to the State a few works of his own and a stack of portrait sketches his friends had made of him (clearly a custom he encouraged.) His former dealer of the 1940s and '50s, Raymond Creuze, had amassed important works from all periods and he brought out two fat volumes of reproductions around 1975-6. Charchoune had been given a retrospective at the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris in 1971, and now there were some commemorative exhibitions. Various galleries and museums did shows over the subsequent decades. In the mid '90s there was an exhibition in Martin, Slovakia, based on strong links the artist had forged in the country in the 1960s, when he had twice visited. (Charchoune, whose father was Slovak and who sometimes used the spelling 'Sergej Šaršun', gave several works to the national gallery in Bratislava. There is a body of Slovakian criticism on him, notably by Oskár Čepan, and the archives at Martin hold various important documents, including an autobiographical text.) Recently there have been quite big monographic museum exhibitions in Spain and Russia, with substantial catalogues. Hopefully some significant groups of work still in private hands are destined for museum collections. And hopefully the discovery of Charchoune will continue, not only among art historians but also artists. His resistance to the categorical and the categorisable has already sometimes been called post-modern. Perhaps now, more than that, he can be seen as *pan*-modernist. He doesn't simply evade or subvert all of Modernism's definitions, ideals and absolutes. Rather – and this is a more considerable thing – he compassionately, uncondescendingly, adapts them and absorbs them into something utterly personal.

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#### Bibliographical note.

Two recent monographic exhibition catalogues are in print, one from the Russian State Museums (Palace Editions, Saint Petersburg, 2006), the other from the Mapfre Vida cultural foundation (Madrid, 2004). The emphasis however, in the former particularly, is on the cubo-purist work. A catalogue raisonné is also in progress, two volumes of which have appeared (Lanwell and Leeds, Carouge, Switzerland, undated [2006-07]); but see my review in the *Burlington Magazine* (January 2009). All the above books have bibliographies listing most of the earlier literature. A recent memoir by Raymond Creuze, *Charchoune mon ami* (Paris, 2006), is catalogued at the Bibliothèque Nationale but does not seem to be generally available. On Charchoune as a writer, see Annick Morard, 'Andrej Belyj et Sergej Šaršun: de l'épopée au discours sur soi' in *Modernités russes* No.7 (Lyon, 2007). On Charchoune's relevance to contemporary painting, see Merlin James, 'Serge Charchoune: the abstract school' in *Turps Banana* No.3 (London, undated [2007]).

