

Chil Aronson

Scenes and Figures of Montparnasse

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Translated by Jennifer Stern (checked by [Rachel Mines](#))

Esther Carp, an original painter (pp. 633-36)

When I see Esther Carp, Montparnasse comes back to life before my eyes just as it used to be. Of course Carp has changed during the many years I've known her – but little enough that it's easy to remember the day I first met her, when she invited me to see her paintings.

She was the first female painter I met among the many Jewish artists in Montparnasse who had the potential to make her mark in Paris.

She was a small, slim young woman who was always in motion. She wasn't fashionably elegant, but her dress and demeanor were invariably neat and tidy. I knew that her life was hard, but she was always optimistic, always smiling. Her studio was in a modest little hotel room in the Avenue de Maine neighborhood. She showed me her paintings: still-lifes, landscapes, bouquets of flowers. I particularly remember a still-life with a violin, which I liked very much. I had no doubt that she was talented, and told her so.

She mentioned that the famous art dealer Zborowski was interested in her paintings, and that he had several of them in his gallery on Rue du Maine¹. That was certainly encouraging for a young and talented person; but I knew that this particular famous art dealer tended to quickly forget his enthusiasms.

I didn't see Esther Carp again after that until the Liberation. During those years she made extraordinary progress in her painting and became one of the most gifted women artists of the "Ecole de Paris." When I visited her very modest studio in Rue Guénégaud, she showed me her most recent paintings, and I was sure that an

¹ The Yiddish clearly says rue du Maine, though Zborowski's gallery was actually on rue de Seine.

exhibition of her work would be very successful. I would say that she hasn't received the recognition that her talent deserves.

Esther Carp was born in Skierniewice, not far from Warsaw. Everyone in her family was musically gifted and played several different instruments. She showed me photographs of them. Her mother had a lively expression. Her father taught music together with his young daughter. It's a shame that I can't reproduce the photograph of her father here. He had the inspired face of a poet, with deep, dreamy eyes gazing into the distance. He was genuinely artistic by nature – he painted and played the violin. But to feed his family, he worked as a photographer. Esther Carp showed an inclination toward painting as a child, and she told me with a smile: "I was the exception in the family. I cared about painting instead of music."

She first studied at an art school in Vienna, where she developed her skill as a decorative artist. After studying in Vienna for a year and a half, her dream came true. She arrived in Paris in 1925.

Montparnasse at that time was *the* international center for modern painters from all over the world. Young artists poured into the city. She remembers her first visit to the Paris art galleries and to the Louvre. She told me: "At that time, the Camondo collection in the Louvre made an unforgettable impression on me." She was enchanted by the masterpieces of Manet, Degas, Cézanne and Sisley. She saw them as the quintessence of beautiful French painting. Those words were key to my understanding of Esther Carp's work.

Zborowski organized the first exhibition of Carp's paintings. In 1931 she left Paris and returned to Poland, where the art critics were enthusiastic about her work. She stayed in Poland until 1935. But she believed that her art could mature only in Paris, so she came back to live here permanently.

Then the war came. She told me how she hid in hospitals and clinics during the years of the Occupation. “It was hell,” she told me. “No kind of life.” She suffered terribly both materially and emotionally at that time. As she summed up the experience: “It was a miracle I came out of it alive.”

It’s important to know that, despite so many years living in Paris, Esther Carp has maintained her authentic Yiddish dialect from Poland. She didn’t stop painting and especially drawing during the Nazi Occupation: “Drawing gave me courage to live, to endure.”

Soon after the Liberation, in 1946, I visited her studio in Rue Guénégaud. I was struck by the complete contrast between this studio and her radiantly colorful canvases. Her painting had changed beyond recognition. She showed me interiors with women sitting at tables, women at their toilettes, children in the Luxembourg Gardens, carousel scenes and horse-riding scenes. All the elements were impressive – the compositions were well-conceived, gracious and elegant; I was charmed by the magical colors, the luminosity, the contrasts of colors. I detected a distant echo of Van Gogh in the paintings that she created during the Nazi Occupation; but in these works I saw an independent and original style.

I once asked Esther Carp which of the artists, aside from those she saw in the Camondo collection, made an impression on her. She modestly answered: “I admire all the great modern French masters, but I strive to be independent. Take Picasso, for example. I admire him, but I don’t love everything that he does.” It’s fair to say that Esther Carp’s coloristic talent developed from her contact with French painting, and bloomed like a plant nurtured by warm sunshine. She showed me several paintings which she called “my Surrealist pictures.” What struck me most was that they were beautiful, with intense colors.

I also saw a book of poems called “Himlen in Opgrunt” (Heavens in the Abyss) by Chaïm Krul, published in 1922, with beautiful color illustrations by Esther Carp. This

album already showed her coloristic skill even though she was still a beginner in those days.

Her artistic personality is self-contained, I would say. Scenes of women in interiors bring out her best qualities. The French art critic [Pierre Descargues](#)² said that these are “like chamber music.” A very fitting description. Several of her still-lives and floral bouquets are also very subtly colored.

She’s at the height of her coloristic and compositional abilities in paintings which subtly intertwine the abstract and the figural. These paintings are based on a mosaic-like conception. Several masters of Cubism have previously used this conception. My friend, the late art dealer and perceptive art critic, Léonce Rosenberg, thought very highly of these paintings by Esther Karp. Their principal tones achieve great intensity and luminosity.

Her favorite themes are: women at the piano playing a duet; a violinist and pianist; and genre scenes such as a wagon-driver or a corrida (bullfight) and such like. Apart from their great coloristic merits, these paintings are also distinguished by their compact and highly elegant compositions. Many of them show the radiant coloring of old stained glass. She’s particularly successful at contrasting purple-red with yellow, green and silver-white. It’s fair to say that this series of paintings expresses the artist’s inner musicality.

Esther Karp once showed me a collection of her original drawings, which helped me understand the form and composition of these paintings even more clearly.

² Thanks to Levana Mizrahi for suggesting Descargues. The Yiddish פיער דערקאַר isn’t an exact match, but Descargues seems very likely.