



*Self-portrait with hat, Indian ink*  
26 x 20 cm / 10,23 x 7,87in.

## Oscar Chelimsky, from Paris to Saint-Maurice-d'Ibie

At the end of the 1940s, a number of foreign artists, from all continents, came to Paris. Some stayed for a few months, others lived there for a long time. They formed dense, varied and lively communities. You could spot them at the end of courtyards or alleys where their studios were located. So many "beehives," big or small. In Paris, these artists had their favorite spots and rallying points. In general, it was enough to say the name of a café or a brasserie for a group to gather there.

Among these groups was that of the American artists. Galleries were looking for them to vivify their spaces with the breath of contemporary art that they brought from New York, California, or elsewhere. Art critics wanted to meet them. Curators, that is those who were in touch with their time, observed them with interest. These artists tended to settle on the Left Bank, near Montparnasse, where they set up their studios, which were sometimes also their living quarters. They came there to breathe the air of Paris and draw inspiration from a city that had ruled the art world for over a century. They were also looking for a way of life, unlike any they had known until then. French mores and customs were far removed from those found in America. And then, after the dark war years, they wanted to dance every night - at least in their minds - as if every night were Bastille Day, and to indulge in many pleasures. They were

young, aspiring to a different kind of freedom. Among these painters, engravers and sculptors, some became famous, artists like Sam Francis, Ellsworth Kelly, or Shirley Jaffe. Others, who did not meet this international success, nevertheless left personal and much-admired works that time, which also does its work, would reinstate. Such is the case of Oscar Chelimsky whose life at the time he came to Paris in search of a new horizon is described below.

### **New York Where it All Began, Paris Where it All Happened**

Oscar Chelimsky was born in New York on January 5, 1923. He came from a family, from Poland on his father's side and Russia on his mother's. His father, Maximilian, was a buyer for a women's clothing store and his mother, Bertha—born Gold—was a seamstress. Maximilian and Bertha had four children, three boys and one girl: Oscar, Samuel, Joseph, and Grace. Oscar is the one who, at the age of eight, was attracted to drawing and painting. From his childhood on, he had an innate artistic disposition that would never disappear. In parallel to his studies at Brooklyn College, he took courses at the Brooklyn Museum and at the Pratt Institute of Art where he studied composition.<sup>1</sup> Then at the age of fifteen, he enrolled in the WPA Federal Art Project, where he became interested in nude drawing. Then the Cooper Union was the art school that gave him the opportunity to diversify his artistic production and to seriously start painting. Above all, he had renowned teachers. Each in their own style and with their own words, Sidney Delevante, Byron Thomas and Morris Kantor, would show him that

there are an infinite number of possible paths in the field of creation.

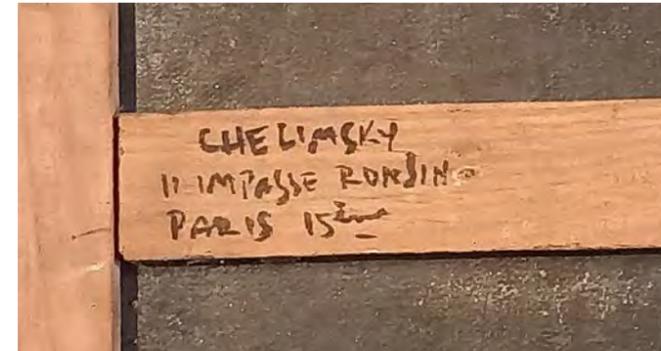
In 1942, in Florida, he met a young woman by the name of Eleanor Fine. She would be the woman of his life. She had a gift for the piano but was not sure it was enough to make it into a career. The competition would be tough. Eleanor was sixteen, and Oscar nineteen. In 1943, while he was doing his military service in Virginia, they wrote many letters to each other and met every time he was on leave. Then in 1945, at the end of the Second World War, tragedy struck the family: Joseph Chelimsky, Oscar's next older brother, died in Japan. He was thirty years old. That same year, Oscar enrolled in the famous Atelier 17 in New York, where he worked on engraving with Stanley William Hayter. As chance would have it, he would meet up with his teacher a little later in Paris and in the South of France. The following year, on February 13, 1946, Oscar and Eleanor got married in New York, shortly before the painter obtained his Bachelor of Arts degree.

He then received a scholarship from the American government to finance his studies in fine arts through the G.I. Bill, before setting up his easel at the Art Students League where he studied with Harry Sternberg and Will Barnet. Oscar Chelimsky's apprenticeship was slow, determined, and methodical. The artist was the opposite of a self-taught painter. He wanted to study with the "masters" to perfect his knowledge, before forging his own path. In 1947-1948, still in New York, Hans Hofmann, in his Hans Hofmann School of Fine Arts, was a new link in this long chain of learning. Hofmann, a representative of lyrical abstraction, was a sought-after teacher. In his art school, Chelimsky suddenly "grew up."

He may not have realized it right away, but a few years later, his painting would reveal the depth of this influence. Joan Mitchell, at the same time at Hofmann's, before also going to Paris, was among the many artists indebted to their mentor. However, in 1948, Oscar Chelimsky felt that he had reached the end of a cycle. It was time for him to discover other things, to discover other perspectives. For Eleanor and him, the great adventure of their lives would begin aboard a liner that took them to Paris. They did not know yet that they would live there for twenty years, and that it would change their life.

### The Artists at Impasse Ronsin

Oscar Chelimsky's integration into his host country was facilitated by his knowledge of French, which he had studied for five years in New York. He was able to speak and write it almost perfectly. After a period in Fontainebleau, Oscar and Eleanor lived in Paris in various locations. On the back of some paintings, we note addresses such as 75, rue de Vaugirard, or 9, impasse de l'Enfant-Jésus. In 1962, the couple moved to 43, rue du Château-des-Rentiers and Oscar had his studio at 37, boulevard Saint-Jacques. But, most importantly, Oscar and Eleanor would have an address made famous by many tenants, including a most famous one. This address, located in the 15<sup>th</sup> arrondissement, is the impasse Ronsin. Here, the master of the place was Constantin Brancusi (1876-1957). One did not always dare to interrupt him: the sculptor was then at the height of his fame. Even though he had five studios, he lived with a certain simplicity. Brancusi avoided journalists, but was kind to young artists, which was lucky for



the young American! And many years later, Oscar would recall this period in a text entitled "*Some Memories about Brancusi*."<sup>2</sup>

Chelimsky lived and worked at No. 11, then at No. 12 in the Ronsin alley. One of his compatriots, also a painter, lived here. His name was Reginald Pollack (1924-2001). He was almost the same age as Oscar and the two men became friends. In another style, Pollack was also to write his impressions of Brancusi. Having known such an artist so closely would mark the two painters for life. This would make them enter, in this way too, into the history of art. In an essay on the American artists of the impasse Ronsin, Elisa Capdevila compares Chelimsky and Pollack. She describes their connection to the sculptor:<sup>3</sup>

The young Americans especially appreciate Brancusi's personality. They both emphasize the spontaneous, somewhat whimsical character of the master with whom they spend time, a wonderful host, who did not hesitate, for an evening party, to prepare a bowl of homemade punch and to make paper lanterns, which would transform the alley into a joyful and convivial place.

In Paris, Oscar and Eleanor's life revolved around the arts. What could be more natural for a painter and a musician? The couple frequented the Opera and concert halls. French singers, from Germaine Montero to Jacques Brel, moved them, and they would often go applaud them in cabarets or other venues on the *Grands Boulevards*. They were familiar with the language of jazz. Going to the clubs of Saint-Germain-des-Prés was a given. They waited eagerly for performances by Louis Armstrong, Miles Davis, or Billie Holiday. They saw and admired the latest films by Carné and Renoir in the Latin Quarter movie theaters. And then there was literature. Oscar read a lot. The books of Balzac, Proust, Hemingway, were always close by. Oscar also liked to write. He kept a journal. Finally, visits to the Louvre, as well as to the great museums of the city, were always on the agenda. Oscar Chelimsky immersed himself in the cultural and intellectual life of Paris. He appreciated French art. A gallery owner also helped him to meet great artists. In her journals, Eleanor Chelimsky evoked these encounters, and noted:<sup>4</sup>

A little later, with the help of art dealer Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, whom Chelimsky went to visit, '*en pèlerinage*,' in his gallery, rue d'Astorg, he became acquainted with Georges Braque, Fernand Léger and Jacques Villon, as well as Franz Kupka, who lived and worked next door to Villon.

Then, during the 1950-1953 period, Chelimsky began to frequent a number of different galleries and became friends with many French painters and sculptors: for example, Gérard Schneider, Pierre Soulages,

and André Marfaing, and especially, Etienne Hajdu, Vieira da Silva, Roger Bissière and his son, Louttre, Zao Wou-Ki, Costa Coulentianos, and Arpad Szenes, along with Jean Bazaine, Wilfrid Moser, Louis Nallard, Marcel Fiorini, Nicholas de Staël, Jean Bertholle and others. He also became very close with his next-door neighbor at the cité d'artistes in the Impasse Ronsin, Constantin Brancusi, whom he saw nearly every day, and who offered him a monthly stipend when he thought that Chelimsky's funds might be running low. Other Ecole de Paris friends included Orlando Pelayo, Antoni Clavé and a large Spanish contingent, along with Pierre Alechinsky, Pierre Corneille, and Karel Appel of the Dutch Cobra Group.

The presence of all these artists, coming from various horizons, demonstrates that Paris, in the 1950s, was still the center of the artistic world. This also explains Chelimsky's art collection, developed through exchanges with his painter and sculptor friends.

The Chelimskys were to have two children, born in Paris: Thomas, in 1956, and Catherine in 1960. Life would change. The couple would feel more cramped in their home, but that didn't matter because, after each birth, their happiness would grow.

Among the studios and living spaces that Chelimsky knew in Paris, the Impasse Ronsin stands apart. It is indeed there, at this legendary address, that he lived the "artist's life" to which he had aspired for a long time, and for which he had crossed the Atlantic. The energy of the place, his encounters with other painters and sculptors, his

friendship with Brancusi, the works he created, especially his first abstract works, anchored Chelimsky forever in the memory of the Impasse. For a hundred years, this artists' colony welcomed as many academic painters as avant-garde artists. Among the latter, in addition to Brancusi, Eva Aeppli, Max Ernst, François-Xavier Lalanne, Jean Tinguely, Niki de Saint Phalle, and others, marked the life at "Ronsin." Without forgetting American artists, such as Oscar Chelimsky, Reginald Pollack, and Larry Rivers. Today, 150 rue de Vaugirard, close to the Pasteur subway station, the buildings of the alley have been almost "swallowed" by the Necker hospital.

Chelimsky returned to the United States in January 1970. A few weeks later, the soul of the Impasse Ronsin disappeared, as the studios were beginning to be destroyed one by one. The American artist did not witness this disaster. Brancusi and his Endless Column could not have tolerated this demolition either. All that remained for the last survivors was a spectacle of desolation, and a few yellowing photographs.

### Periods of an Oeuvre

Once on French soil, and with so much already learned in New York, you would have thought that at the age of twenty-seven Oscar Chelimsky was done with his apprenticeship. However, this was not the case. Always with this desire to study, the artist could not resist the temptation of the Académie de la Grande Chaumière. He wanted to take classes there and soak up an artistic education "à la française." There, he named his first teacher "Master Othon Friesz."<sup>5</sup> In the last months of his life, Friesz, a former Fauvist, showed

the young artist the importance of color and the subtle relationships between tones.

Then, with Fernand Léger, Chelimsky mostly learned about the sense of rhythm and the composition of volumes. Fernand Léger appreciated Oscar Chelimsky. The master got along well with his student, but also with Eleanor, to whom he offered a lithograph. In her recollections, Eleanor quoted Oscar evoking Léger, and emphasizing "the quality of his friendship, his reverence for all things human, his powerful presence and his subtle mind." She also told an anecdote about the painter in relation to Louis Carré, his gallery owner, "with whom he apparently had the same ambivalent relationship that so many artists have with their dealers." One day Fernand Léger showed Oscar an object and said:

"You see this pen, Chelimsky? It belongs to Carré, it's his favorite pen. I stole it one day, he knows I have it, I bring it out and use it every time he comes to the studio, but he can't say anything about it. What revenge, what delicious revenge."

This is how art dealers have to submit to their painters; they depend on them to make a living.

Having just arrived in Paris, Eleanor continued her piano studies. After having studied with Harold Bauer and Vittorio Giannini in New York, she had the opportunity in France to study with Robert Casadesus<sup>6</sup> and Armand Ferté. Under her maiden name, Eleanor Fine, she gave successful piano recitals in Paris and in the provinces.<sup>7</sup>

When he arrived in France, Chelimsky was a figurative painter. In Paris, his first paintings were of bathers, still lifes and portraits. Matisse, Picasso



and Braque were his sources of inspiration. The danger would be to follow them for too long, especially Braque, whom Chelimsky saw regularly. After seeing a large painting in Chelimsky's studio representing bathers, Brancusi let Chelimsky know that he was not on the right path. It was a failure.<sup>8</sup> The sculptor was right. Chelimsky was steeped in art. Wasn't it really his handicap? Too much accumulated knowledge, about American and French art, ended up being a burden. It prevented him from moving forward and it thwarted his creativity.

At the beginning of 1951, he painted a work that he considered a turning point, *The Red Painting*.<sup>9</sup> Presented immediately at the *Galerie des Beaux-Arts* in Paris, then at the May Salon, it was appreciated by artists such as Nicolas de Staël, Sam Francis, Jean Bazaine, and Hans Hartung.

At the beginning of March 1951, in notes that he entitled "Project,"<sup>10</sup> Chelimsky wrote:

Now, I would like to continue my research into the compositions of French masterpieces and their evolution from Poussin to Cézanne, with an emphasis on the works of Poussin, David, Delacroix, Corot, Manet, and Cézanne.

It is my wish to seek the spirit behind these works by studying them and to integrate these principles of composition into my own paintings by pushing their limits as far as possible.

I will study at the Louvre, at the Musée Condé, in Chantilly, and at the same time I will take a course at the Ecole du Louvre, etc.

Shouldn't he, on the contrary, leave all this behind to make his own voice heard? On March 26 of that year, he wrote to the art critic Pierre Descargues, who was then resting at Jean Giono's house:

I am working a lot right now, but I am destroying a lot of what I am doing. Spring makes me stir like a dead man come alive, and the change creates a sensation that is both conducive to painting and too extreme. I hope the sun is shining in Manosque and that everything will get better for you soon.

He was in a state of internal effervescence. So many questions! What could be more natural considering his recent leap into the unknown? At the beginning of 1950, he was a figurative painter. At the end of this same year, he had become an abstract painter. The difference is immense. He would never go back. And even if influences would still be noticed, he traced his own signs. Chelimsky now painted like Chelimsky.

Whether they create during five or fifty years, artists produce a body of work that evolves. This is translated into periods, more or less happy or fruitful. They situate the artist's production in time. As a good theorist, Chelimsky classified his work. He wanted to name his successive phases himself. They are not always easy to describe or to date. They sometimes overlap. Only he fully feels what he is doing, and when he is doing it. He divides his art into several parts:<sup>11</sup> Hard signs; Spontaneous signs; Geometrics; Galloping Signs (Thin and Thick); Extra Thick (or Paintings on broken surface); Big Open Form; Ibie series, and Miscellaneous.<sup>12</sup> With Hard Signs, he gives graphic and structured compositions; Spontaneous Signs tends towards a contained, controlled lyricism; Geometrics produces paintings with more rigid constructions, but also colder, with black and white, steel blue; Galloping Signs are, in warm tones, lively and dynamic works sometimes with thick stripes; the works in the Extra Thick series, often in black, ochre, orange and green tones, use thick layering of deep impastos, like relief paintings; in Big Open Form, black and spherical masses coil up, leaving behind them free and mysterious traces, as if they had come from prehistoric caves; the paintings in the Ibie series are often large format, earth tones, with black lines that instill rhythm to the organic material.

For Chelimsky, the gesture prevails. You must let yourself be guided by it. The colors show that he has successfully integrated the words of Hoffman and Othon Friesz. But, in the 1950s and 1960s, the artists' works are also in dialogue. If you think of Kline or Soulages, of Vieira da Silva or Dumitresco,<sup>13</sup> of Riopelle or Michaux, and of others, it is only natural, at a time when artists

remade the world in cafés, would visit each other's studios, gather during openings. They exchange, but also observe and influence each other, more or less consciously. And then you sense that Chelimsky loved experiments. As an artist, he is never satisfied or tired of inventing signs that trace new writings on canvas or paper. In his work as a painter, where lyricism prevails, the gesture confronts the mind.

Beyond doubts and explorations, Chelimsky made his way into the art of his time. His work as a draftsman, often in Indian ink, is also of great interest. A few self-portraits show the precision of the line. In other works, abstract ones, his sensitivity shines out. He uses all types of media, even working on musical scores or papers with Braille texts. As in a jazz improvisation, he adds his own "music," free and inspired.

Black or colored signs. On paper, on panel, or on canvas. Brushed or trowelled. Fiery or rigorous. In the secrecy of his studios, these signs were the artist's companions. Chelimsky created them to compose an oeuvre in which he wanted to blend spontaneous gestures and moderation, lyricism and classicism. Such was the style he wanted to create. That was the sole focus of his mind.

### **A Patch of America near Notre-Dame: Galerie 8**

During the time Oscar Chelimsky spent in France, the two years during which he participated in the wild adventure that was Galerie 8<sup>14</sup> are particularly important.

Opposite the church of Saint-Julien-le-Pauvre, near Saint-Séverin, and a short distance away from Notre-Dame, the American artists who opened a gallery at 8, rue Saint-Julien-le-Pauvre

in 1950 may have been blessed by the god of the Christians, but they also included a number of Jewish artists. Chelimsky showed his work there, and he was also instrumental in supporting his friends, artists like himself. This is how the New York-born painter summarized this period of his life:<sup>15</sup>

In June 1950, I helped launch Galerie 8. It was created so that young Paris-based artists (more or less known) would have a place where they could exhibit their work at the lowest possible cost. The gallery is non-commercial and displays the works of artists of all nationalities. I was elected chairman of this gallery in December 1950.

The list of these "young Paris-based artists" who were connected with this gallery reveals that almost all of them were from the United States. Most of them had benefited from the G.I. Bill, and found themselves there, together, near the Seine and the Île de la Cité. For them, the whole experience seemed a little unreal.

The front of the gallery was made up of large glass windows and a chipped wall on which an "8" could barely be distinguished. In another image, a freshly painted "8" appears, this one clearly legible. In some photographs, artists can be seen fully engaged in a discussion in front of the gallery. In others, they hold a painting in their hands. While collaborative work was never part of this project—art can only be individual—the general philosophy behind the gallery was that of a collective. They all adhered to this principle. If Chelimsky was elected "Chairman," it was only because he knew how to help his friends. In other

images, artworks take over the rue Saint-Julien-le-Pauvre. The short Parisian street, along the square René-Viviani, is invaded. It's impossible to go through. The street belongs to the artists. In several rows, they stand close to one another, next to their works. On some photographs, the towers of Notre-Dame can be seen in the background, unmistakably revealing where the scene is taking place. Chelimsky appears here and there. Here, he is posing in front of his still lifes—again—but these are the last ones, promised! In 1950, a decisive year for him, Chelimsky switched to abstraction. In the photos, the weather is beautiful. We see mostly men, wearing jackets. As for Chelimsky, seen holding a cigarette, glasses on the tip of his nose, square jaw, brush cut, wearing a shirt, with or without a tie. Some are plaid shirts. In France, they are called “American” shirts. A few years later, he would wear stylish custom-made jackets. Chelimsky always played along with photographers, as with Lisa Larsen, Bob Adelman, Gene Fenn and Marc Vaux. A study by Micol Borgogno, entitled *Oscar Chelimsky, an Open-minded Artist Captured by Marc Vaux*, discusses the American painter when he lived in Paris, but also examines the connection between Chelimsky and Marc Vaux, who made portraits of the artist and photographed many of his works.<sup>16</sup>

The first opening of this 5<sup>th</sup> arrondissement gallery took place on Friday, June 2, 1950, starting at 5 p.m. The exhibition ran until the 15<sup>th</sup> of the same month. The artists featured were Haywood Rivers, Oscar Chelimsky, John Anderson, Burt Hasen, Norman Rubington, Jonah Kinigstein, Hugh Weiss, Herbert Katzman, Reginald Pollack, Eaves, Patterson, Sidney Geist, and Shinkichi Tajiri. Other painters would later be connected to

Galerie 8. All were born between 1920 and 1925. Among the most famous were Sam Francis and Jules Olitski. At that time, they were on an equal footing with their compatriots. This changed later.

In 2002, Studio 18 Gallery, in New York, paid tribute to this era and to the gallery, which had become something of a legend. A catalog, entitled *Galerie Huit, American Artists in Paris 1950-1952*, bears witness to this brief adventure. It introduces the protagonists, provides biographical information, and lists twenty-one artists who presented their work on rue Saint-Julien-le-Pauvre, including only one woman, the sculptor Marianna Pineda. This list, however, is incomplete. Other artists who participated in group exhibitions include Sam Francis, Simon Hantaï, and Joe Downing, among others.

The fate of this gallery was short-lived. In art or literature, collectives rarely last long. After two years, it had become clear that the momentum of the early days had waned. Everyone wanted to regain their freedom. Many of these young American artists had been noticed by other kinds of galleries, commercially oriented, that wanted to exhibit their works. This was to everyone's advantage. But for Chelimsky, this had been a time when he experienced a kind of double effervescence: the excitement created by the exchanges with his friends, painters and sculptors of his generation, and by the sudden evolution of his work.

On March 21, 1951, the art critic Pierre Descargues wrote to Oscar Chelimsky. He was interested in the painter's work, as well as his commitment to others, and congratulated him with the following words:<sup>17</sup>

I am also aware of your role in introducing young foreign painters who come to Paris seeking a spirit of freedom unlike any other in the world. The energy you put into this non-commercial enterprise that is Galerie 8 is that of someone who truly loves the spirit of Paris and all my colleagues on the lookout for new talents are indebted to you for many discoveries.

This testimony highlights Chelimsky's close ties with Galerie 8.

### Solo and Group Exhibits

How did Chelimsky do it? Almost as soon as he arrived in France, he found a way to have his paintings shown. And these showings will only increase until 1965, in countless solo and group exhibits.

In Paris, the artist used Salons, which were numerous at the time, to present his work. Whether it was in the *Salon de Mai*, the *Salon d'Octobre* or the *Salon d'Automne*, the *Salon des Réalités Nouvelles*, the *Salon des Jeunes Peintres*, the *Salon des Surindépendants*, or *Comparaisons*, the artist seized every opportunity to display their work for the general public, from amateurs to experts. These gatherings were widely disseminated. Posters publicizing these events covered store windows and advertising columns. Journalists and critics would come in droves. When you are an artist, you need to be able to meet these numerous “colleagues” in order to explain your art; making yourself known is essential—even if you cannot always make an impact. Direct interactions also facilitate the link between a face and a work, to be



the better remembered. This is the artist's ultimate goal. Chelimsky was too authentic a painter to be a simple comet that passes and fades away. Thanks to these connections, the demand for his work rises for numerous exhibitions. Chelimsky gradually became included in what was then called the "Young School of Paris," or more way to appear on invitation cards and posters, as well as mentions in books or catalogs. All of this contributes to the staying power of a work.

Already in 1948, he showed some of his paintings at the *Salon des Surindépendants* and at the *Salon des moins de trente ans* (for artists under the age of 30). Just a year later, he had a solo exhibit at the Galerie Breteau. Located at 70, rue Bonaparte, and directed by René and Denise Breteau, this gallery presented works by up-and-coming artists such as Karskaya, Goetz, Gilioli, Vasarely, and Jorn. These gallery owners were in tune with their time and had an "good eye." They were the first to hone in on Oscar Chelimsky. This was an auspicious beginning. The opening, which took place on April 19, 1949, was surely a happy moment for the twenty-five-year-old painter, who presented—perhaps symbolically—twenty-five paintings, from *Nappe orange* to *Femme couchée*.

June 1950 was a special month with the inauguration of Galerie 8. At the end of the year, from December 5 to 30, most of the Americans exhibited in Paris were to be found on the walls of the Hacker Gallery, in New York. The works of Oscar Chelimsky, Reginald Pollack, Shinkichi Tajiri, Jules Olitski, Hugh Weiss, among others, were shown in both venues. Then, still at Galerie 8, an exhibit entitled "Abstraction 51" would feature twelve painters, including Chelimsky and Sam Francis. He was in the highest company.<sup>18</sup>

Alice B. Toklas, who never missed an opening at the gallery, was in attendance.

In the 1950s and 1960s, another gallery—Galerie Jeanne Bucher—brought Oscar Chelimsky genuine recognition and placed him into the limelight at the forefront of the French art scene. Founded in 1925 by Jeanne Bucher (1872-1946), the gallery still today bears the name of its creator. Among the artists promoted by Jeanne Bucher were Vieira da Silva and Nicolas de Staël, setting a rather high bar. Chelimsky's first exhibit in this gallery, located at 9 ter, boulevard du Montparnasse,<sup>19</sup> took place in 1953. The space was directed by Jean-François Jaeger (1923-2021), husband of Jeanne Bucher's granddaughter, who would build further on the considerable work already accomplished until then. For this "premiere," Chelimsky exhibited alongside Marcel Fiorini, who presented intaglio prints. Such was the gallerist's appreciation for the art of his painter friend from New York that he exhibited it regularly: four personal exhibits were held in

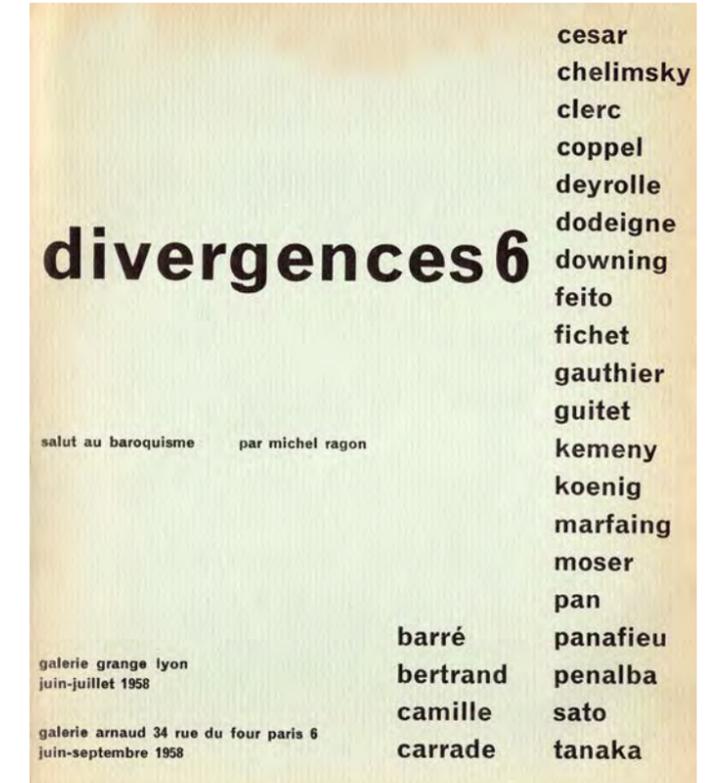


the following years—in 1956, 1959, 1962, 1968—and the artist participated in nine group exhibitions until 1979.

Importantly, Chelimsky exhibited *The Red Painting*<sup>20</sup> at Galerie Jeanne Bucher. This work could not have been more symbolic for the artist, showing interlacing colorful signs that coil up and create a complex yet harmonious labyrinth. A plain and deep red—almost vermilion—catches the eye. The observer wonders: "is the background?". The artist used the interplay of background and surface to entice the viewer more deeply. In her biography, Eleanor quoted Oscar, who, reflecting on this painting made in January 1951, and exhibited in 1953 at Galerie Jeanne Bucher, said, "That's where de Staël saw the painting, and that's where I first met him."<sup>21</sup> Shortly thereafter, Nicolas de Staël painted *Red Tree* (private collection), and Sam Francis, who had also seen *The Red Painting*, painted *Big Red*, now at MoMA, New York. Although the paintings by Nicolas de Staël and Sam Francis are different, Chelimsky thought that, whether consciously or unconsciously, the two painters, who were interested in this work, might have been inspired by it to express in their own way an artistic vision where the intense red devours the surface.

In 1962, in "his" gallery, Oscar Chelimsky presented *The Big Open Form*, a series on which he worked for many years, and which he considered to be a milestone in his career. He even numbered most of the paintings in this series. About this work, the painter explained: "For me, open form is about how two surfaces in a painting meet each other, how they slide into each other, or how they slice and divide the space between them."

If you had to associate Chelimsky with only



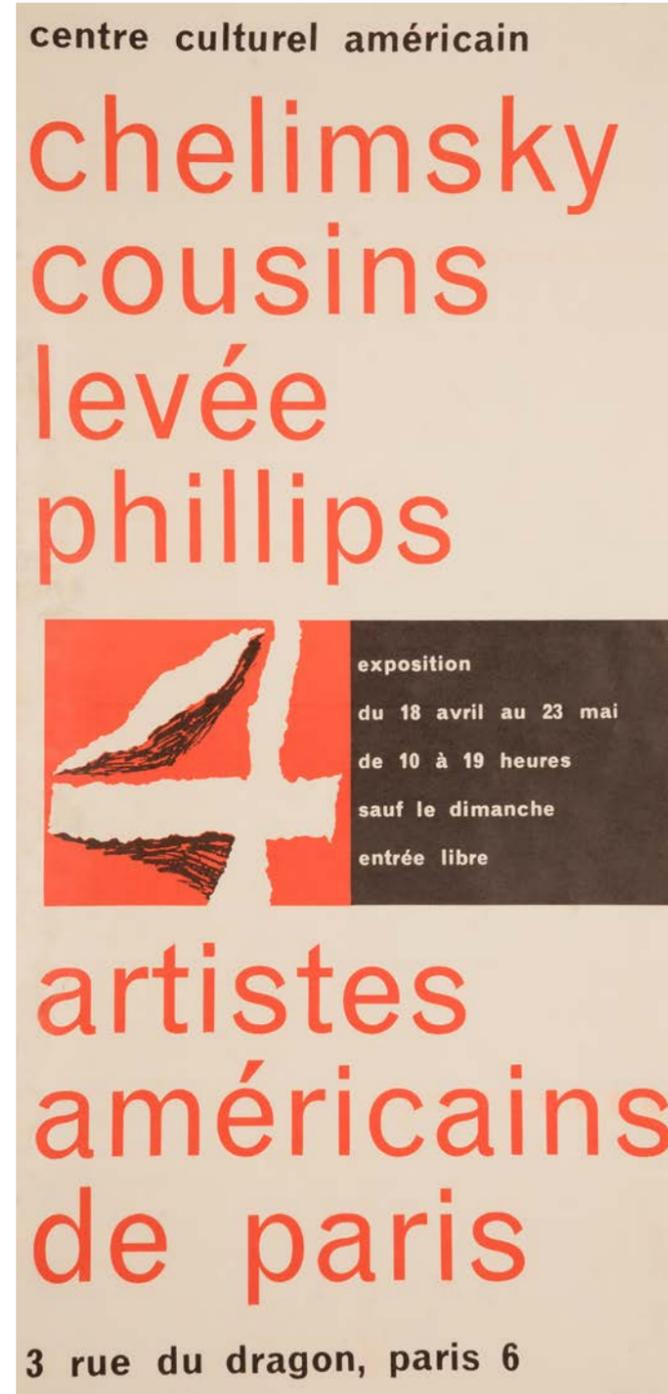
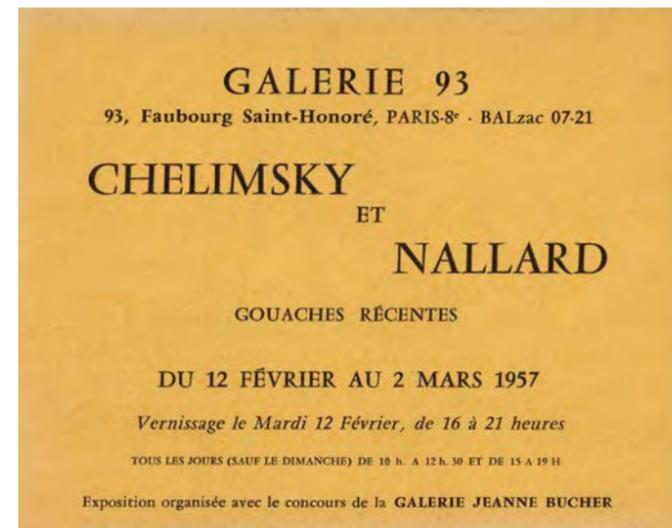
one place, Galerie Jeanne Bucher would first come to mind.

In 1951, Jean-Robert Arnaud opened the Galerie Arnaud, at 34, rue du Four. Arnaud, who was also in tune with the art of his time, quickly became one of the most brilliant gallerists of his generation. For instance, he had the idea to organize, several years in a row, a group exhibition entitled *Divergences* which, over the years, presented artists such as Huguette Arthur Bertrand, Anna-Eva Bergman, Jeanne Coppel, Natalia Dumitresco, Alexandre Istrati, Hans Hartung, Paul Jenkins, Pierre Soulages, Martin Barré, Pierre Fichet, and many more. In 1958, Oscar Chelimsky was invited to the sixth iteration

of the event. Two years earlier, he had already been invited by Jean-Robert Arnaud to participate in an exhibition entitled *American Abstract Painters of Paris*. Although Chelimsky was not represented by Galerie Arnaud, the artist still had the opportunity to display his work there, twice, and in the best conditions possible.

Galerie 93 and Galerie Charpentier also exhibited Chelimsky's work, including for exhibitions dedicated to the *Ecole de Paris*. The term "School of Paris" was used loosely over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to refer to different groups. The painter is now associated with this school.

Alongside his fellow artists from across the Atlantic, Chelimsky also presented his work at the American Embassy, the American Cultural Center, and the American Center. These places provided numerous opportunities to promote their country's artistic production. And a great number of the many American artists who lived in Paris at the time were seeking—and receiving—their support.



In his memoirs, Thomas Chelimsky mentioned the relationships between his father and some of his compatriots, such as sculptor Harold Cousins, painter Haywood Rivers, and writer James Baldwin. He also pointed out that, generally speaking, a greater distance seemed to separate painters from one another:<sup>22</sup>

I find it interesting that his two closest friends, Etienne Hajdu and Harold Cousins, were both sculptors. I'm not sure, but it seems to me that artists in the same field compete so intensely that it's hard for them to become too close, even if they share the same worldview, the same participation in the world, and the same role. [...] Some of their artist friends would later attribute their divorce to this competitive spirit, like Bill and Helen Hayter.

This was an apt remark; as in any microcosm, artistic rivalry is a reality. It might even be one of the reasons behind the short-lived fate of Galerie 8. Painters see themselves as unique - which they are- but also a little superior to their peers. This is why, when a painter confronts his point of view about art with that of a sculptor, the tension is not the same.

Outside the capital, Chelimsky took part in the Third Painting Biennial of Menton in 1955. Henri Matisse signed the poster for this event taking place in the Riviera. His work was then exhibited in various museums—sometimes as a French artist, as in Grenoble in 1956, but most often as an American painter, as in Rouen in 1960, or in Toulouse in 1966. His most prestigious exhibition was at the *Théâtre-Maison de la Culture de Caen* (directed by Jo Tréhard), from December



*Chelimsky*, sculpture by Harold Cousins

11, 1965, to January 5, 1966, and was entitled *Dubuffet, Tobey, Chelimsky, Bissière, Da Silva*. It would have been interesting to see Chelimsky's works next to those of these four different but renowned artists.

Oscar Chelimsky also had the opportunity to show his work abroad. In 1955, at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, he was one of the *Five Americans in Europe*, along with Alcopley, Paul Fontaine, John Levee, and Bill Parker. In 1957, he came home to participate in a group exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in New York.

Finally, another milestone in his career was the solo exhibition at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels in 1958, with an exhibition brochure written by Jacques Dupin titled *Chelimsky by Dupin*, his first bibliographical reference.

#### **From Jacques Dupin to Michel Seuphor: Chelimsky as seen by art critics**

Harsh or soft, critic comments always accompany exhibitions. Artists must submit to it or at least accept it. Chelimsky did not escape this rule. His work was judged by critics, often in a positive way, sometimes with certain reservations or questions.

Every era has its art writers, journalists or critics who observe styles, identify trends, support a movement and follow their "protégés." Some "pure" critics, like Pierre Descargues and Jean-Jacques Lévêque, famous in their time, or writer-poets, more universally known, like Jacques Dupin and Michel Seuphor, commented on Chelimsky's work.

In 1951, Pierre Descargues wrote to the artist

personally to express his appreciation: "I would also like to tell you on this occasion how much I value your painting. At the *Salon des Jeunes Peintres* as well as in various Parisian galleries, the art press has plainly stated that you occupy one of the first places in the movement of the new generations."<sup>23</sup> For Chelimsky, these lines from the co-founder of the *Salon des Jeunes Peintres* must have been very encouraging.

In 1953, Georges Boudaille appreciated Chelimsky's authenticity, and noted, "His approach is entirely new in so many ways and the new experiments that materialize in each work testify to his effective artistic inspiration and temperament." Three years later, Boudaille saw his first impressions confirmed, "Chelimsky belongs to this group of American painters in Paris of which he is proving to be one of its most gifted members." And, he added, "Chelimsky brings life to his most recent paintings through color alone in its raw state. Far from giving way to fortuitous but uncertain effects, the thickly layered, tormented surface of his works shows him searching for new rhythms, for an internal organization unique to each of his paintings."<sup>24</sup>

In the art review *Cimaise*, founded by Jean-Robert Arnaud, Herta Wescher wrote in April 1954, "By giving free rein to spontaneous forms, Chelimsky never releases the control that lends a gracious power to his vocabulary." Two years later, she seemed even more charmed by the artist's latest work: "Chelimsky's painting has improved markedly since the color material moved from casein to oil. His universal theme, which could be defined as the revolt of the elements, has undergone a foundational transformation as a result." This "revolt of the elements" is an inspired

choice of words.

Also in April 1956, in the Brussels magazine *Les Beaux-Arts*, the painter and art critic Roger van Gindertael observed, "A young American painter from Paris, Chelimsky always displays this exuberant, almost explosive vitality and even a lavish generosity, with the propensity for risk-taking and the free expansion of the self that they entail, which we have recognized up to now as being the original marks of this type of American art. The transition from tempera to oil painting makes this surrendering to spontaneous expression even more noticeable." Two years later, the same critic speaks of an "eminently dynamic painting," specifying that Chelimsky "is not afraid to sometimes make use of plethoric impasto since he left behind the matte finish of casein paint in favor of the fatter oil which was also the occasion for him to intensify his use of color."<sup>25</sup>

In 1959, Michel Courtois stated that "Chelimsky has substance and breath,"<sup>26</sup> while Denys Chevalier noted, "increasingly now, each work by this young American painter constitutes a true entity from which no component part is dissociable."<sup>27</sup>

In February 1962, issue 18 of the art magazine *XX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, featured an impressive table of contents. Many distinguished writers came together to discuss art in the most expressive language. Jean Tardieu wrote about "Giacometti and solitude," Jean Grenier authored a text on Joseph Sima, another on Jean Messagier, Eugène Ionesco analyzed Gérard Schneider, Jean Cassou considered Philippe Hosiasson as well as "Robert Delaunay's Early Works," while Raymond Queneau examined the work of Enrico Baj. Other artists were described by art critics, such as Chelimsky

by Michel Conil Lacoste, who began his article describing a visit to Chelimsky's studio: "At the tail-end of the Impasse Ronsin, an unreal, picturesque enclave in the banality of the Vaugirard quartier, above a dilapidated gymnasium and under this humble roof, Chelimsky pursues his rigorous and fervent pictorial experiment." This is a turning point. Further on, the critic saw in Chelimsky's work a kind of "interrupted exercises," specifying that "it is a perpetual questioning, an evolution barely punctuated by mutations," before concluding that "he has always been obsessed by a dualism, the conflict between form and freedom."

Jean-Jacques Lévêque, in November 1962, is interested in the question of Chelimsky's "style," wondering if the artist has been able to find one—that is a big question. He states, "It is Chelimsky's wager: to rediscover naturalness and to achieve a style (the sole pleasure of the gaze) which is already the cloth of classicism."<sup>28</sup>

A few years earlier, in 1958, the painter was honored with a solo exhibition at the *Palais des Beaux-Arts* in Brussels. The text of the brochure written by the poet Jacques Dupin was probably the most beautiful tribute he ever received. For Dupin, "Chelimsky expresses the lyricism of human time. The autonomous and concrete universe of his painting is also a universe in expansion, with neither borders nor central point, which opens further with each new step to reveal a burst of new visions." And he also states that "Chelimsky's great compositions fill us with an irresistible sense of abundance and freedom." This is a slightly longer version of the text the poet had written in 1956 for the book entitled "Sixteen painters of the Young School of Paris".<sup>29</sup>

It is finally Michel Seuphor - dear "Orpheus"<sup>30</sup>

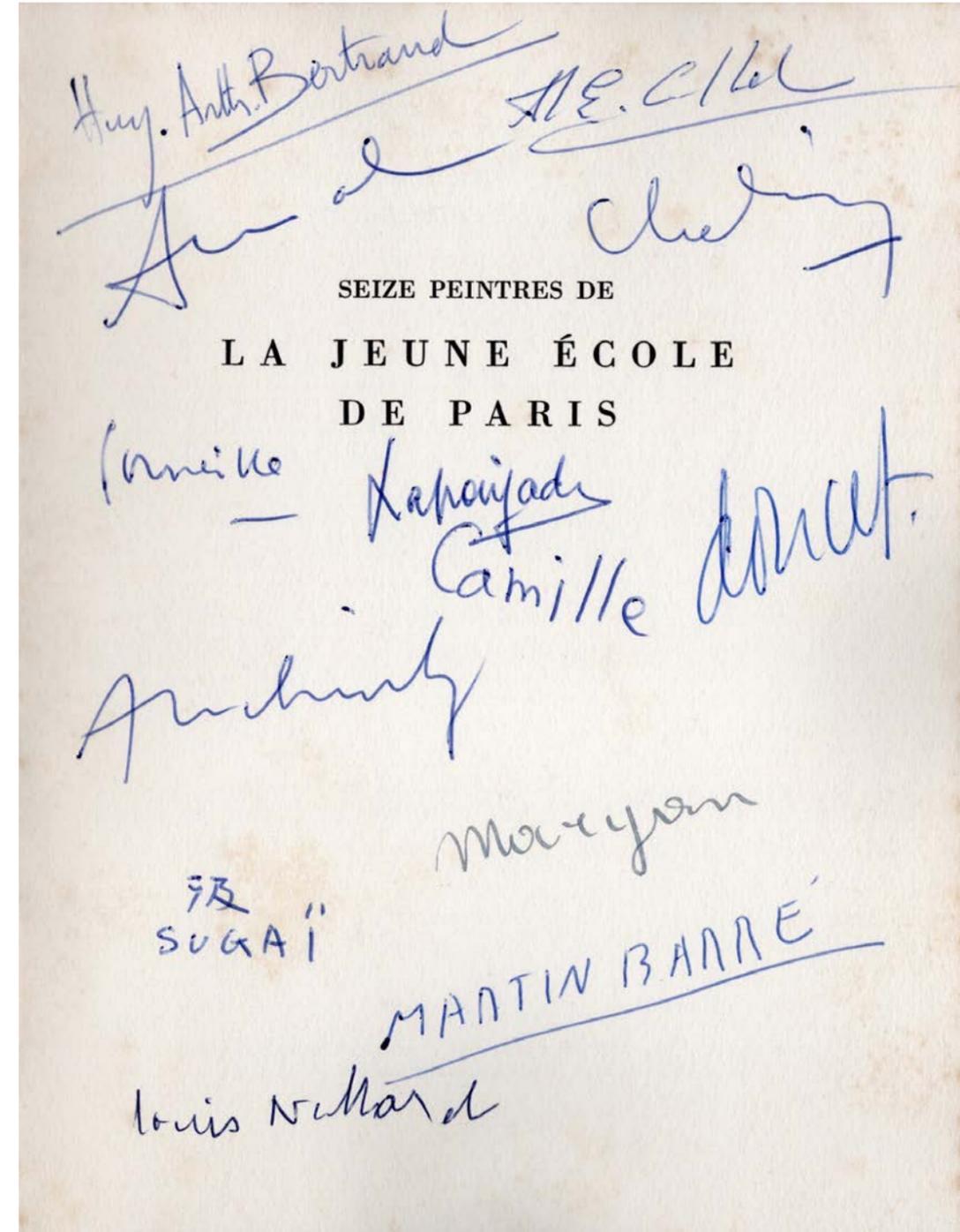
- who, perhaps in the most sensitive way, was able to extract the substance of this art.<sup>31</sup> "Chelimsky's painting is a kind of warm, buoyant calligraphy. His colors seem to float on the canvas without wanting to seep into it. A very soft breath brings life to this abstract vegetation and ties everything together without disturbing anything." The poet spoke well.

In the 1950s and early 1960s, Chelimsky's work had the attention of Parisian critics. However, the painter did not have an unconditional supporter, who would have accompanied and commented on his work over a long period of time. Perhaps his constant explorations confused observers looking for greater constancy or unity. Dupin and Seuphor, with their discerning eyes, were nevertheless able to find a way into this oeuvre whose secrets were closely guarded.

#### A House in Ardèche, in Saint-Maurice-d'Ibie

As the true Parisians they had become, Oscar and Eleanor found it increasingly difficult to spend their vacations in Paris. They dreamed of a house in the countryside, where the sun shone if possible, in the South of France. And their wish was about to come true.

At the time, a single road, coming from Villeneuve-de-Berg, could reach Saint-Maurice-d'Ibie.<sup>32</sup> When you arrive in the village, what you first see has remained the same. Saint-Maurice-d'Ibie is one of the world's faraway places, hidden, isolated, and secluded.<sup>33</sup> It is accessed through a winding road with rocks on each side, with wooded hills, low stone walls that hold back the earth for sloping fields and isolated farms. You can also see vineyards, a few almond trees, stone



bridges over shallow rivers. This is the Bas-Vivarais region. The climate is Mediterranean. The village, which you discover a little by surprise, could be sad. It is not. A large meadow, bordered by a lane of sycamore trees, colors the horizon in green, and people can gather there. It looks festive. There is also, on a lovely square, a church some parts of which date back to the 11th century. Nearby a statue of the Virgin keeps watch. This is important for the Chelimskys who converted to Catholicism in Paris in 1963. The village also has its town hall with its tricolor flag, old houses hugging each other along the streets or narrow pebbled *calades*, while others sit on the edge of the village, like little hamlets. In one of these, Le Barbu district, Eleanor and Oscar bought a stone house in 1954, which dates back to the end of the 17th century. The house had no garden, but at the entrance there was a courtyard planted with a mulberry tree, and two entry doors. Chelimsky immediately imagined the layout of the premises: one door would give access to the house, the other part, an old silkworm farm, would be his studio.

Eleanor Chelimsky wrote down a few memories about this period of her life:<sup>34</sup>

I remember, as if it were yesterday, my first glimpse of Saint-Maurice-d'Ibie. It was in 1953.<sup>35</sup> As we drove around the small hill, from which you can still see the whole village, we stopped the car, my husband turned to me, we both felt love at first sight, and the decision was made on the spot: this was the place where we wanted to spend our summers in France from then on.

How could anyone resist such a call?

The Chelimskys were not the only ones to settle in Saint-Maurice-d'Ibie. The art writer and poet Jacques Dupin, and his wife, Christine, would stay in an old silkworm farm, with very high ceilings, a place impossible to heat in winter. The farm was in Les Salelles, a hamlet located five kilometers from the village.

At the edge of the village, lived the sculptor Etienne Hajdu and his wife Luce, also an artist under her maiden name Luce Ferry.<sup>36</sup> In his memories, Thomas recounts:<sup>37</sup>

The Hajdus felt so close to my parents that they chose our very same village for their own summer home around 1954. The Ardèche would become a haven for artists in France from everywhere around the world. Its glorious light displayed their works with a clarity never seen before and its deep peace and quiet allowed them to work and reflect in ways that larger cities like Paris simply did not afford. Every summer we would spend many hours with the Hajdus. We ate dinner together at their house, at our house, or had a picnic by the Ibie or Ardèche rivers.

Dupin wrote about Chelimsky and Hajdu. Chelimsky showed his work, like Hajdu, at Jeanne Bucher's gallery. The trio was united. They all fled Paris in the summer to Saint-Maurice-d'Ibie. Their paradise was there.

On the vacation photos, you can see smiles. The outfits are bright and light. Oscar was the happiest of men when he held his children in his arms. They went swimming at the Pont d'Arc. The scenery was magnificent. Hajdu taught Thomas



Luce Hajdu and Catherine Chelimsky, Pont d'Arc, 1964

how to swim. His wife played with Catherine near the river Ardèche. Beautiful summers, in short. Eleanor would write, "Thomas (born in 1956), and Catherine (born in 1960), spent there an extraordinary time of freedom where they explored many corners of the Ibie, while picking and eating rather huge quantities of figs, raspberries, and blackberries." The two little Parisians would keep

forever the flavor of these fruits in their mouth. Long afterwards, Catherine would still say, "Saint-Maurice is a unique spot that still holds a warm place in my heart."

As for Oscar Chelimsky, Christine Dupin remembers him as "an unobtrusive, shy man, who spoke little, but interacted pleasantly, and who liked to work quietly in his studio."

There is no real vacation for a painter like Chelimsky. Art occupied all his thoughts. In Saint-Maurice-d'Ibie, the artist had a studio that is not very wide but long, with high ceilings and indirect light coming from high windows. The artist could create work of very large size. He would not hesitate to do so, in particular his series entitled "Ibie," named for the river that flowed nearby.

Oscar and Eleanor had other friends in the area, artists, of course. About twenty kilometers from Saint-Maurice-d'Ibie, you can find Alba - later known as Alba-la-Romaine. The ancient capital of the Celtic Helveii was home to a number of artists such as Stanley William Hayter, Oscar's friend and former teacher, who had taught him engraving in New York. What memories! Hayter lived in Alba with his wife, Helen Phillips, with whom Chelimsky exhibited.<sup>38</sup> She was a sculptor, printmaker and drawing artist. Another couple, whom Oscar knew well, also lived in Alba. They were Americans: the painter Theodore Appleby and his wife, the painter and sculptor Hope Manchester. Chelimsky also exhibited with Appleby.<sup>39</sup> In the summer of 1961, in Alba, a group exhibition brought together Chelimsky, Hayter, Phillips, Appleby, and Manchester, among others. The opening was said to be quite joyful.<sup>40</sup>

A little further on from Alba, thirty kilometers from Saint-Maurice-d'Ibie, Oscar had another

friend, who was in the studio next to his in “Ronsin,” Reginald Pollack. With his wife, the painter Hanna Ben-Dov, they would stay in Labeaume, a village in the Ardèche region where many artists also gathered. In the Vivarais, for these painters and sculptors who exchanged and hosted each other, isolation was quite relative. The Chelimskys probably discovered the Ardèche in 1953 when they visited the Hayters in Alba or the Pollacks in Labeaume - perhaps even both. A book, compiled by Dominique Buis, brought together the painters who were born in the Ardèche, as well as those who were seduced for a season by the beauty of the place and the affordable houses. In this large work, the artists of Alba, those of Labeaume, and also Chelimsky, were not forgotten.<sup>41</sup>

Among Eleanor’s memories of Saint-Maurice-d’Ibie, one was more memorable than the others. It has to do with Nicolas de Staël:

I recall a dinner, the summer of 1955, that was unlike any other. It was a few months after the inexplicable suicide of Nicolas de Staël, a painter known and loved by all of us, and whose death caused us much grief. We were discussing everything - his shifts in style between abstraction and realism, his love life, his reverence for certain French painters (e.g., Georges Braque and Fernand Léger), his kindness to a few young artists – except his death. Then suddenly, Helen Hayter said, “My God, Nicolas had every right to be tired of life.” And Etienne Hajdu replied, fists on the table, his eyes tearing up, ‘No, no! It is stupid! If only I had been there, I could have prevented him from jumping.’ Of all the dinners among artists in Saint-Maurice, it is

the atmosphere of this one that has stayed with me the most, because of its emotion, its tenderness, its total lack of nastiness.

Summers often mark a life. From the 1950s on, there was no group of artists in Saint-Maurice-d’Ibie, as there was in Alba and Labeaume, but only a poet, a painter, a sculptor and his wife, a draughtswoman, who, for a time, lit up the place. They all remembered for a long time these shared moments, that they would not have wanted to live anywhere else. In the evening, the white wine of the Vincent house delighted their palate and animated the conversations. They talked about art, literature, and music. Eleanor never forgot these moments:

Usually, we would eat together, stay late into the night, and disturb the neighbors. It was there, during these simple and often spontaneous dinners, – I remember almost every dish–, that we would learn what the great artistic events of the next season in Paris would be.

These dinners went on late into the night. It was a time when you could regain some of your lightheartedness. There was no rush to go back to Paris, even if you had to work there, and to participate in the cultural life, which was in a way the artists’ *raison d’être*. You just savored the present moment, aware that it was that of happy days.

### **Chelimsky by Chelimsky**

After these long summer interludes, returning to their everyday life in Paris was a necessity for

Oscar and Eleanor. The painter always had an exhibition to prepare or a painting to finish for a salon while Eleanor would give recitals. As a concert pianist, she got to play Prokofiev in London, Liszt in Barcelona, Gershwin in Paris, or Scarlatti in Nancy.<sup>42</sup> While everything seemed fine on the surface, she was growing weary. In 1962, she left her career to work at the American Embassy in Paris. In 1967, the couple decided to move to Brussels. For the children, who were already bilingual, continuing their schooling in French was easy, but Thomas would miss the Alsatian School he used to attend. This is how he remembers the move to Belgium:

The address in Brussels was 72, boulevard Général Jacques and we lived near the Bois de la Cambre. The house had belonged to the owner of The Laughing Cow and at that time belonged to a Flemish woman named Mrs. Van Lierde. The house had four floors and a basement. It was a beautiful house with a pink marble entrance, a large backyard, and many rooms. There was even space for servants upstairs. Every night, at bedtime, we would listen to a quartet by Schubert or sometimes songs by Brassens, Aznavour or Brel. The sound would come up from a beautiful phonograph made of blonde wood on the first floor.

In Belgium, Oscar continued to paint and took short trips to France. Every week, from Wednesday to Friday, he would travel by train from the Boulevard Général Jacques in Brussels to the Boulevard Saint-Jacques in Paris, to the studio he had kept and where he still worked.

However, for some time now, exhibitions had become sparse. The painter was receiving less attention. Art was becoming more volatile, with one movement quickly replacing another. The interest his work had generated was waning. The couple then made a decision, which was just as radical as the one they had taken in 1948 but was to be its opposite: in January 1970, they decided to return to their native country. Oscar was forty-seven years old. After having spent part of his life in France, he now wanted to return to the United States. What does it feel like to reconnect with the land of your birth? Is it a feeling of well-being? Of failure? Perhaps both?

In the United States, the Chelimskys would live not in New York but in small towns. First, they moved to Silver Spring, Maryland, then to Fairfax, Virginia. For twenty years, Oscar taught art and anatomy, including at the Maryland College of Art and Design. He also continued to paint. Always those abstract forms that, through his free gestures, he sought to tame. *The Big Open Form* continued to engross him.

He also continued to show his work. In Washington, D.C., the Catholic University presented his work. The brochure for the event uses the painter’s own words, who liked to express himself about his work. This text, written in September 1970, could be entitled “Chelimsky by Chelimsky”:

A major preoccupation of mine, as a painter, has been to conciliate total liberty of expression and absolute form, which is to say, to reconcile irreconcilables. It is like the child’s game which consists of trying to get two lead beads into holes, representing the

eyes of a cat. As you juggle the small, glass-covered case, it is relatively easy to get a single bead into one of the holes (complete spontaneity, let us say) while the other bead (formal preoccupation) goes off in every which direction. It is in the play between these two that I have sought personal plastic expression.

The perennial problem of the artist is to find the exact spot for the cup which catches the creative sap. In the past, when things evolved slowly, this quest was facilitated by a stable tradition, and by the ceremony of apprenticeship to a master. Today's artist, confronted with an almost infinite diversity of valid, visual languages, is constrained to address the implications of all of them, contradictory as many of them may be. Just as the dreamworld of Klee could not have existed without the formal adventure of cubism, which preceded it, so the spontaneous gyrations of Pollock imply an awareness of the subconscious, which Dada-ists and surrealists exploited a generation earlier. My own aim is the synthesis of two poles: classicism and romanticism, Mondrian, and Kandinsky, Expressionism, and geometric formalism, Delacroix and Ingres—call it what you will.

Georges Braque said to me one day in his studio, "Behind the door is a group of paintings I can't show you. A few were started years ago. If I leave them there until the right moment, some of them will finish themselves. A work I may do next week might explain to

me the meaning of something I started and put away in frustration and despair many years ago."

Some paintings, he said, which had contented him at the end of the given work period did not hold up as time passed; others, which he had rejected and put aside in disgust, became, without the addition of a single stroke, the expression he was trying, so hesitantly, and unfruitfully to realize.

In a culture which is more involved with the traces of struggle than with monuments to victory, where the greatest moments of our heritage are simultaneous with its greatest tragedies, the meaning of a work of art is always put into question: for it to have a constant contemporaneous expression it must be capable of change.

There is always something to be learned from a painter's reflections about art, whether his own or that of others. At times, Chelimsky may have seemed a little lost, or to have gone astray, but he had not. He was determined to follow the path he had set for himself. Behind his questioning and doubts lay an unceasing desire for renewal.

Chelimsky used to say, "You never know where the exercise ends and where the work begins."<sup>43</sup> Art is a difficult thing, indeed.

In the United States, his work was praised by the press, which would always focus on his life as an artist, especially his former life in Paris, like an idealized period. In the *New Art Examiner* magazine, dated November 1982, an article discussed Chelimsky during what could be considered his "golden age." In this piece, entitled "Chelimsky: an American abstract expressionist in

Paris," journalist David M. Gariff makes reference to a 1966 exhibition—*USA Art Vivant*—that took place at the Musée des Augustins in Toulouse and was organized by the museum's curator Denis Milhau. In his article, Gariff quotes Milhau, who wrote a lengthy text for the catalog, in which he observes, among other things:

All the artists named here count among the number of those welcomed by their colleagues, in all countries, as equals, and more often still, as friendly guides. One need only recall the considerable role played by Toby, their dean, by Sam Francis, Paul Jenkins or Chelimsky, in the development and evolution of French abstract art and the so-called informal art, to measure not only the value of these artists, or the existence of an American school of painting, but also the influence upon and their inclusion in a genuinely universal movement of plastic creation.

This comment stresses Chelimsky's importance at the time. It also shows that influences came from multiple sources.

The Chelimskys' love affair with France never ended. When Eleanor and Oscar left Europe, they chose to keep their house in Saint-Maurice-d'Ibie, where they could continue to spend beautiful summers with their family. In his studio in Ardèche, Oscar stored works he had painted in Paris which he did not want to bring back to the United States. They remained there for decades. Although a thin layer of dust covered the paintings, some light dusting would restore them to their former glory.

In 1983, during one of his trips to France,

Chelimsky donated three paintings to the *Musée départemental de l'Oise* in Beauvais, now called the MUDO. All three paintings were from his *Big Open Form* series.<sup>44</sup>

Oscar Chelimsky spent the last years of his life in Cleveland, Ohio, where he died in 2010. He suffered from Parkinson's disease for five years - perhaps the most terrible affliction there is for a painter.

After her career as a pianist, and her work at the American Embassy, Eleanor went on to work for a branch of the federal government in the United States. It was an official, useful, and interesting job, but far removed from art. She died in 2022 in Richmond, Virginia.

In Ardèche, the house remained untouched. For a long time, so did the studio, with paintings on the floor, piled up. Although they resided in the United States, Thomas and his wife, Gisèle, decided to keep this piece of France. They couldn't live without it. Their children could go there, and even get married in the village church. After the ceremony, the large meadow was an ideal venue to celebrate with guests from Saint-Maurice-d'Ibie and from the United States and elsewhere.

It all happened here. Perhaps it will come to pass yet again. Here. The place that two travelers passing through, in a Panhard convertible, discovered a certain summer, in 1953. Far from the tumult of the world. Because at the end of the world...

Stéphane Rochette  
Galerie SR, Paris  
May 2023

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> On March 26, 1951, in a letter to René de Messine, the cultural attaché at the French embassy in the United States, Oscar Chelimsky mentions the art schools he attended as well as the teachers he had. We use here this biographical information (Chelimsky Family Archives).

<sup>2</sup> Chelimsky's text about Constantin Brancusi can be found on page 187.

<sup>3</sup> Elisa Capdevila, "Les Américains dans les cités d'artistes de Montparnasse (1945-1965): une nouvelle bohème? L'exemple des artistes américains à l'impasse Ronsin," *Circé*, n° 8, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> In April 2020, Eleanor Chelimsky wrote a text about Oscar Chelimsky, entitled *Biography*, which focused on her husband's art and their life in Paris (Chelimsky Family Archives).

<sup>5</sup> Letter to René de Messine, 26 March 1951, *op. cit.*

<sup>6</sup> At the American Musical Center in Fontainebleau.

<sup>7</sup> Speaking about Eleanor Fine, Armand Ferté emphasized her "serious and very thorough musical studies under the direction of the renowned composer Vittorio Giannini," before adding "After obtaining in my class in the section for foreign students at the Conservatory her Diplôme Supérieur (the first one with a unanimous vote), she made a sensational debut in Paris. Her technique is dazzling, her style impeccable and her effect on the public irresistible. She also has even rarer qualities: sensitivity and charm."

<sup>8</sup> See the reproduction of this painting page 82.

<sup>9</sup> Chelimsky Family collection.

<sup>10</sup> This "project" was sent with his letter from March 26, 1951, to René de Messine.

<sup>11</sup> In a folder, Oscar Chelimsky noted the different periods of his art, with photographs of works for each of these periods. (Chelimsky Family Archives).

<sup>12</sup> At the end of the sixties, Chelimsky also painted a series titled "The Bright Open Form." In the same spirit as "The Big Open Form," the paintings, often acrylic paintings, were done with brighter colors.

<sup>13</sup> The artist Natalia Dumitresco and her husband, Alexandre Istrati, also had their workshop at Impasse Ronsin. Of Romanian origin, these friends of Brancusi later became his

beneficiaries. In the newspaper *Combat*, dated December 24, 1962, the journalist Claude Rivière analyzed the art of Dumitresco and Chelimsky. His article entitled "*Open pictorial structures*," began with: "For an artist, the first necessity is to know how to take risks and to put his painting in harmony with his spiritual development. This week, we will focus on Chelimsky and Dumitresco, who meet this requirement."

<sup>14</sup> In books or catalogs, the term "Galerie Huit" is sometimes used, but "Galerie 8" seems more appropriate. Indeed, the façade of the gallery included only the number 8, and the invitation cards for the exhibition openings mentioned "Galerie 8."

<sup>15</sup> Letter to René de Messine, 26 March 1951, *op. cit.*

<sup>16</sup> Micol Borgogno, *Oscar Chelimsky, an Open-minded Artist Captured by Marc Vaux*, Mémoire d'étude, Ecole du Louvre, 2021.

<sup>17</sup> Letter from Pierre Descargues to Oscar Chelimsky, Paris, 21 March 1951 (Chelimsky Family Archives).

<sup>18</sup> The daily newspaper *Combat*, dated January 23, 1951, reported on this exhibition, "The young American artists presented to us by Galerie 8 seem to be attracted above all by the art of Klee, Miro, and certain French non-figuratives, and are very far from geometric abstraction or flat painting. In Chelimsky's work, one also finds a taste and a rather generous sense of the material."

<sup>19</sup> In 1960, the gallery moved to 53, rue de Seine.

<sup>20</sup> See a reproduction of this painting page 95.

<sup>21</sup> Eleanor Chelimsky, *Biography*, *op. cit.*

<sup>22</sup> In 2006, Thomas Chelimsky began writing a memoir entitled "Charade," named after the Stanley Donen film starring Cary Grant and Audrey Hepburn, in which he played a child. He recalls the making of the film. More generally, he recalls his childhood in Paris and the artistic activity that revolved around his father.

<sup>23</sup> Letter from Pierre Descargues, *op. cit.*

<sup>24</sup> *Prisme des arts*, June 1956.

<sup>25</sup> *Les Beaux-Arts*, Bruxelles, 24 January 1958.

<sup>26</sup> *Cahiers du Musée de Poche*, Georges Fall éditeur, Paris, n° 3, December 1959.

<sup>27</sup> *France-Observateur*, 25 June 1959.

<sup>28</sup> *Aujourd'hui: art et architecture*, n° 39, November 1962.

<sup>29</sup> Hubert Juin, *Seize peintres de la Jeune Ecole de Paris*, "Le Musée de Poche" collection, Georges Fall éditeur, Paris, 1956. The sixteen painters featured in this book are: Pierre

Alechinsky, François Arnal, Gianni Bertini, Martin Barré, Huguette-Arthur Bertrand, Camille, Oscar Chelimsky, Corneille, Jacques Doucet, Roger-Edgar Gillet, Robert Lapoujade, John Levee, Maryan, Wilfrid Moser, Louis Nallard et Kumi Sugai. It should be noted that Camille was the sister of painter Jean-Michel Atlan. In 1958, a second volume was published in the same collection, entitled *La Jeune Ecole de Paris*. This book, written by Jean-Clarence Lambert, featured fifteen other artists: Karel Appel, Luigi Boille, Michel Carrade, Olivier Debré, Natalia Dumitresco, Don Fink, Claude Georges, James Guitet, Hundertwasser, René Laubiès, Jean Messagier, Bernard Quentin, Antoni Tàpies, Claude Viseux, Enrique Zañartu.

<sup>30</sup> His real name was Ferdinand Louis Berckelaers. Michel Seuphor (1901-1999), a writer, poet, and artist, chose this pseudonym as it was an anagram of Orpheus.

<sup>31</sup> Michel Seuphor, *Dictionnaire de la peinture abstraite*, Editions Fernand Hazan, Paris, 1957.

<sup>32</sup> Since then, another road has been built, which goes to Vallon-Pont-d'Arc.

<sup>33</sup> One should not confuse Saint-Maurice-d'Ibie and Saint-Maurice-d'Ardèche, two villages quite close to each other. Saint-Maurice-d'Ardèche was the home of American painter Roland Wehrheim (1910-2001), who had also met Fernand Léger at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière.

<sup>34</sup> Eleanor Chelimsky, "Souvenirs de Saint-Maurice-d'Ibie," 16 September 2013, in *La Feuille* (Bulletin municipal de Saint-Maurice-d'Ibie), n° 33, October 2013.

<sup>35</sup> At that time, the population of Saint-Maurice-d'Ibie was about 140.

<sup>36</sup> Luce Ferry (1921-2003), a painter and drawing artist, was born in Paris. She met Etienne Hajdu in 1948 at the Fernand Léger Studio in Montrouge and they married in 1951. Her drawings often feature vegetation, sometimes with mysterious, eerie dwellings. The Centre Pompidou in Paris, and the Musée Zervos in Vézelay hold some of her works. She illustrated Louise Labé's *Dedicatory Letter to Clémence de Bourges*, (Chez l'artiste, Imprimerie Union, 1988).

<sup>37</sup> Thomas Chelimsky, *Charade*, *op. cit.*

<sup>38</sup> From April 18 to May 23, 1958, the Centre culturel américain, 3, rue du Dragon, held an exhibition titled *Quatre artistes américains à Paris: Harold Cousins, Oscar Chelimsky, John Levee, Helen Phillips*. In 1960, a traveling exhibition entitled *American Artists in France* featured works by Oscar Chelimsky, Theodore Appleby, Anita de

Caro, Joe Downing, Don Fink, Shirley Jaffe, John-Franklin Koenig, John Levee, Kimber Smith, and Helen Phillips. The exhibition opened at the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Rouen (March 20 - April 20), before touring museums in Rennes, Nantes, Nancy, Saint-Etienne, Tours, Dijon and Grenoble.

<sup>39</sup> See previous note.

<sup>40</sup> André Lhote's appeal, entitled "Avis aux touristes" ("Note to tourists") and published on September 15, 1948 on page 4 of the newspaper *Combat*, led many artists from various countries to settle in Alba, particularly in the hamlet of La Roche. From April 1 to July 2, 2023, an exhibition taking place at Château de Vogüé gave an account of this "aventure." The catalog, titled *Artistes d'Alba-la-Romaine 1950-1955, une histoire singulière*, presented each of these painters, sculptors, and engravers who arrived in this corner of the Ardèche as "pioneers."

<sup>41</sup> See Dominique Buis, Marie-Jo Volle, Nathalie Garel, *Peindre l'Ardèche, peindre en Ardèche*, Editions Mémoire d'Ardèche et Temps Présent, 2022.

<sup>42</sup> After Eleanor's performance in Nancy, the following was published in *L'Est Républicain*, on April 29, 1953: "Ms. Fine brought Mediterranean poetry to Scarlatti, mischievous and casual, then suddenly misted with dreams. This is great art. But the most astonishing thing is not that Eleanor Fine plays Bach, Scarlatti, or Chopin so skillfully. It's that, she moves with disconcerting ease (apparently, at least) from one to the other, from Beethoven to Schumann, perfectly modulating her talent to such fundamentally different aesthetics."

<sup>43</sup> Michel Conil Lacoste, "Chelimsky," *XX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, n° 18, February 1962.

<sup>44</sup> See reproductions of these works on pages 144, 145 et 146.