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Alexandre Iacovleff : "Exotic Academicism" in Europe and America, (1914-1938)

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ALEXANDRE IACOVLEFF: "EXOTIC ACADEMICISM" IN EUROPE AND AMERICA
(1914-1938)

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty
of the Louisiana State University
and Agricultural Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

in

The School of Art

By
Kara Blanken
B.A., The College of Charleston, 2011
August 2013

To my parents, John and Rosemary Blanken. Without your support, encouragement, and sacrifice, my thesis would not exist. This belongs to you and me.

To the memory of Alexandre Iacovleff: may your art live on.

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Where to begin?

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ABSTRACT

Art historians often refer to the interwar period of the early twentieth century as *le retour à l'ordre*. The twenty-one years from 1918 to 1939 represent a return to sober academicism, order, and classicism in art following the destruction and uncertainty caused by the First World War. This mentality of artistic “stability,” combined with the Western fascination for exotic cultures of Africa and Asia, formed the hallmarks of the Art Déco style.

Alexandre Iacovleff was a Russian artist who embodied the international artistic spirit of Art Déco from 1914 until his death in 1938. His paintings and drawings, rendered in a style that can be described as “exotic academicism,” were a reflection of a marriage between the contrasting principles of classicism and Orientalism. Most known for his African and Chinese portraits, Iacovleff rendered the unfamiliar and exotic “Other” in a Western academic style, while revealing the essence of the human spirit that defied idealization. These portraits were completed throughout the duration of his position as official artist of the African and trans-Asiatic Citroën expeditions. They reflected the Western obsession with all things exotic, and stand as testaments of the eclecticism of Art Déco.

What makes Iacovleff an ideal representative of Art Déco painting is his international status. As a Russian “traveling artist” who lived in China, Africa, Paris, Capri, and the United States, he retained an academic yet diverse stylistic vocabulary that granted international relevance to his work. His relevance, in turn, serves to legitimize the versatility of the Art Déco style during the 1920s and 1930s.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

I first encountered the work of Alexandre Jacovleff through a course on African art. Perhaps I should clarify a few things from the beginning, however. This class was not entirely about African art in its purest sense. Investigations of the material were rarely conducted from an “indigenous” perspective. Rather, it featured mostly sub-Saharan cultural practices, traditions, and objects interpreted through a Western, colonial lens. This observance of occidental influence brings me to the French, and how their interest in “primitive” art led to the re-discovery of Jacovleff, one of the most famous artists living in France during the interwar period.

The French, due to their colonial-era endeavors, have acquired a fascination for the exoticism of African culture. Since the days of the Revolution, French artists have been lending visual homage to the foreign cultures that lured the intelligentsia south into the “heart of darkness.”¹ During the first four decades of the twentieth century, a period to which some art historians refer as the pinnacle of the French avant-garde, artists and members of the cultural elite avidly collected African masks and other ritualistic artifacts by way of Parisian flea markets. The desire to document exotic social practices of African and Oceanic cultures, combined with the French tendency to

¹ The “heart of darkness” makes reference to Joseph Conrad’s 1899 novel of the same title. The *Croisières Citroën*, conducted under the auspices of the Citroën Motor Company, and the Dakar-Djibouti expedition, led by Marcel Griaule and Michel Leiris, are two French colonial expeditions with significance in a twentieth-century context. Removed from the romanticism of the nineteenth century, these two expeditions represent the ethnographic endeavors and a new colonial vision during the interwar period.

obsessively classify objects, paved the way for the creation of ethnographic museums in Paris during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.

Following a long, political battle with origins in the early 1990s, the Musée du Quai Branly opened on 20 June 2006 in Paris. The institution is, among other things, a product of the married passions of two Jacques: Jacques Chirac, the former president and prime minister of France, and Jacques Kerchache, a dealer, collector, and enthusiast of *arts premiers*.² Their goal was to found a museum that would display and preserve artworks from cultures in Africa, the Americas, and Oceania that have long been neglected and unappreciated. The artifacts in the Musée du Quai Branly originate in part from the collections of the Musée de l'Homme and the Musée des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie. Private collections and objects bought at auction comprise the other part of the collection.

Only a few days prior to the museum's opening, the Vérité sale of African art took place at the Hôtel Drouot in Paris. This record-breaking sale was estimated to fetch between fifteen and twenty million dollars. It far exceeded expectations, bringing in \$55,440,000. All 514 lots were sold, eight of which surpassed the one million dollar mark. The Vérité sale defined the contemporary market for African art. It stands as a primary example of how the market for "primitive" and exotic art has expanded along with our globalized,

² Sally Price, *Paris Primitive: Jacques Chirac's Museum on the Quai Branly* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 45. Price refers to the term *arts premiers* at numerous junctures throughout her book. Chirac, Kerchache, and their supporters championed the term as a culturally sensitive replacement for the oft-considered politically incorrect "primitive art," which refers to art originating from Africa, the Americas, Oceania, or from any other non-European culture that has been the victim of Western colonization.

postcolonial society... or does it? Was the Vérité sale reflective of a global market development or, rather, a reflection of the interests of a niched group of collectors? The identities of the majority of buyers at the sale have remained undisclosed. Considering the long-standing Parisian interest in African art, however, it is not unreasonable to assume that many of the lots were sold to French collectors and institutions.³ In fact, the market for *arts premiers* and any type of related art has historically been confined to a narrow circle of French intellectuals and collectors.

The term *franco-française* is an adjective used to describe a subject that is only of French concern, or that is only understood in France. This type of subject does not attract a great deal of attention from anywhere outside of the country. Up until the past few years, the majority of the African art market had been centered in Paris. Our increasingly globalized society, the Musée du Quai Branly, and the international Art Déco revival have changed the status quo in recent years.⁴ Nevertheless, the French still play a dominant role in the world of *arts premiers*. What has remained largely constant is the market and interest for European art created in response or reference to the West's colonial occupation of exotic lands between the two world wars.

The market for European academic art created between 1918 and 1939 retains a *histoire franco-française*, limited to a small group of French (mainly

³ The market for African art has expanded in recent years to include Belgian buyers, with Brussels becoming another hotbed for *arts premiers*, due to Belgium's historical colonial occupation of various areas of central Africa.

⁴ As previously mentioned, Brussels, the capital of Belgium, has become a dynamic competitor in the market for "primitive" and exotic art created by non-Western, especially African, cultures. The United States has also joined the competition, although the game remains largely centered on the Western European continent.

Parisian) intellectuals, art historians, collectors, and dealers. The work of Alexandre Iacovleff falls into this narrow segment in the market, and those who study his paintings and drawings form an even more concentrated and niched group of scholars and collectors. The Musée des Années 30 in the Parisian suburb of Boulogne-Billancourt is largely responsible for the collection, exhibition, and preservation of Iacovleff's work in France. Founded in 1939 by Dr. Albert Besançon, the museum currently specializes in the fine, decorative, and industrial arts of the 1930s and devotes itself to the Art Déco aesthetics of exoticism and Orientalism. The breadth of its collection was largely augmented in a period of expansion during the mid-1990s, and it now contains a number of African and Oceanic works previously housed in the Musée des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie. In fact, the museum's expansion is largely, if indirectly, indebted to Jacques Chirac and Jacques Kerchache, whose efforts to create the Musée du Quai Branly originated in the 1990s.

The Musée des Années 30 is not the only institution contributing to the Art Déco revival, however. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York City held a landmark exhibition entitled *Chaos and Classicism: Art in France, Italy, and Germany, 1918-1936* from October 2010 to January 2011. Curated by Kenneth Silver, professor of modern art at New York University, the show stands as a twenty-first-century homage to the *retour à l'ordre* of the Art Déco movement. Silver reveals the motives behind the "classical upheaval" of the interwar period, which transpired on an international level, in an interview regarding the opening of his exhibition:

A fascinating phenomenon comes to the fore after the First World War, which is a movement against pre-war experimentalism on the part of the avant-garde; so that in Paris there was a powerful anti-Cubist direction, in Italy there is a powerful anti-Futurist movement, and in Germany Expressionism has now been pushed aside in favor of *Neue Sachlichkeit*, or what is called the “New Objectivity.” Their desire is not to turn their back on the present, but to find a way to integrate the past of art, the traditions of art, with modern expression.⁵

The political climate at the end of the second decade of the twentieth century was shaky, and society sought stability. Out of the ashes of the First World War rose what French critics referred to as *le retour à l'ordre*, or the “return to order.”⁶ When it seemed as though society had to start from scratch in the wake of the war, it was a natural step for many artists to return to classical models of centuries past. Many adopted a figurative style of art embraced by the upper classes, backed away from the risky *avant-garde*, and removed themselves from the fear of the uncertain future.

During the interwar period, an “orderly” artistic style emerged from the shadow of the *avant-garde*, based in tradition and the Western (and especially Parisian) taste for exoticism and Orientalism. This appetite would culminate in the Art Déco style of the 1920s and 1930s, fed by the imperialistic ambitions of the major European superpowers. Their forays in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries into far-flung colonies led to a resurgence of an interest in the exotic and foreign cultures of the lands they occupied. This interest in the Orient and the “Other” would evolve into an obsession, trickling down into the artistic and intellectual circles of Paris, as well as to other

⁵ Kenneth Silver in an interview from *Chaos and Classicism: Art in France, Italy, and Germany, 1918-1936*, produced by The Guggenheim Museum and Studio Mercury, New York, 2010.

metropolitan centers in Britain, Germany, and Russia. The social unrest in Eastern Europe leading up to the war led influential figures from the aristocracy and cultural elite to immigrate to Paris, bringing with them their own social and artistic practices. Henceforth, the preoccupation with all things exotic proliferated due to this cultural exchange between the West and the East.

The resurgence of the African art market and the Art Déco revival have led to a renewed interest in Alexandre Iacovleff, due to the academic yet exotic style of his work. In the preface of an exhibition catalogue published in 2004, Caroline Haardt de la Baume discusses the origin of the Iacovleff collection at the Musée des Années 30. The museum acquired its first Iacovleff in 1992. Since then, seventeen of his works have made their way into the collection.⁷ In the same publication, Haardt also admits that appreciation for the artist had waned since the mid-1940s. Presently, his work remains largely unrecognized and disregarded by the general public, although many French Art Déco and interwar specialists consider him to be among the best artists of his generation.⁸

The story of Alexandre Iacovleff and how he came to find himself in Paris between the two world wars is common, yet untypical. Academically trained in St. Petersburg during the first and second decades of the twentieth century, Iacovleff epitomized an academic style of painting that contrasted with

⁷ Caroline Haardt de la Baume, *Alexandre Iacovleff: Itinérances* (Boulogne-Billancourt: Musée des Années 30, Somogy, 2004), p. ii.

⁸ Ibid.

contemporary movements within the Russian *avant-garde*.⁹ The Bolshevik leaders of the October Revolution of 1917 initially employed Constructivism in order to spread leftist propaganda throughout the country. Because the “white” aristocracy supported academic art, the “red” revolutionaries shunned and despised it, and all those who worked in this style soon feared for their lives. Seeking refuge, a large portion of the Russian social and cultural elite migrated to Paris and its wealthy suburbs. Iacovleff’s style of drawing, modeled after the Old Masters, classified him as an artist of the “school of St. Petersburg” in 1920s Paris.¹⁰

Iacovleff, like many other artists of the St. Petersburg school, was involved with the Ballets Russes, mainly as a set designer and portrait painter. The Russian ballet company under the direction of Sergei Diaghilev was made up of and supported by exiles from the Russian aristocracy and was especially popular in the elite Parisian intellectual and artistic circles. From 1909-1929, the Ballets Russes was a catalyst of the *avant-garde* that melded modern and traditional styles, creating a hotbed for eclecticism, exoticism, and Orientalist culture. Through the spectacle of its productions, the ballet company epitomized the Western interpretation of the eastern “Other.” Iacovleff’s taste

⁹ These famously included Suprematism and Constructivism. Founded by Kasimir Malevich c. 1915 and influenced by Futurism, Cubism, and *Der Blaue Reiter*, Suprematism was a painting style that utilized abstract form to evoke spirituality and feeling. Constructivism, although it also employed abstract form, ideologically opposed Suprematism due to its focus on materialism. Constructivism concerned itself with functionality and the use of abstract material and sculpture for utilitarian purposes.

¹⁰ Blandine Chevanne, “Les années d’apprentissage,” *Alexandre Iacovleff: Itinérances*, ed. Caroline Haardt de La Baume (Boulogne-Billancourt: Musée des Années 30, 2004), p. 41. This group was a part of the larger École de Paris, or the group of non-French artists working in Paris during the inter-war period. Most of these artists were of Russian or Eastern European descent.

for the exotic, which was born from trips to China and Japan early in his academic career, was further cultivated during his years with the Ballets Russes.

Famous for his portraits of members of the Chinese and Japanese theatre and French cultural icons, Iacovleff was invited to be the official artist on André Citroën's motor car expeditions: *Le Croisière Noire* ("The Black Cruise," 1924-1925, crossing the Sahara) and *Le Croisière Jaune* ("The Yellow Cruise," 1931-1932, traversing Asia). Upon his return to Paris from his travels, exhibitions of Iacovleff's work produced abroad were organized in high-profile galleries around the city. These enjoyed great success and usually sold out.¹¹

Iacovleff, while epitomizing the modern French obsession with exotic cultures through his African and Eastern portraits, earned even greater notoriety for painting eminent figures of the French social and intellectual elite. His sitters were fellow artists, writers, and performers, including famous actresses and dancers of the Ballets Russes. He also painted portraits of his patrons and members of their families. These "society-portraits" made his work highly sought-after, providing him with a great deal of financial success and security in between his journeys across the world as well as after his return to Paris in 1932.¹²

¹¹ Francine du Plessix-Gray, "Alexandre Iacovleff: Une Vie," *Alexandre Iacovleff: Itinérances*, ed. Caroline Haardt de La Baume (Boulogne-Billancourt: Musée des Années 30, 2004), p. 28. Gray cites a sold-out exhibition held in 1926 at the Galerie Charpentier, featuring large-format oil paintings from drawings done in Africa. She also mentions the success of an exhibition held in 1926 at the Louvre, which featured "spoils" brought back from the African journey as well as paintings by Iacovleff.

¹² *Ibid.*, 26.

As it turns out, Paris was not the only place where Iacovleff was admired. In the United States, his work appealed to leaders of academic art institutions, museums, dealers, and galleries who advocated for the doctrines of order and classicism in contemporary art production. Records of exhibitions of his work, beginning as early as 1922, confirm the appeal of Iacovleff in America.¹³

This thesis serves to expand to the world's narrow knowledge of Iacovleff's life in America. His relationship with American art institutions, dealers, and collectors, as well as his American work, are my contribution to scholarship devoted to this artist. In 1934, he was invited to take up a post as the Director of the Department of Painting and Drawing at the school of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Eager for a new adventure after his return from Asia, Iacovleff accepted the position. His work was admired in New England upon his arrival, and his fame quickly spread throughout the country during the late 1930s. He spent three years in Boston before leaving the Museum School in 1937, returning to Paris. His sudden and untimely death from cancer in 1938 came as a shock to all who knew him, inciting grief within the artistic community.

As mentioned previously, there is limited modern scholarship devoted to Alexandre Iacovleff, and even less to his American sojourn. Only three books have been published on his work, all within the last decade, under the auspices

¹³ The reader should consult the exhibition catalogue for *Paintings, Watercolors, and Drawings by Alexandre Euguenievitch Iacovleff* (Detroit, Michigan: Detroit Institute of Arts, 1922). Because this exhibition was held rather early in his career, it featured works mostly taken from Iacovleff's Chinese and Japanese sojourns under the auspices of the Imperial Academy in St. Petersburg. The author of the catalogue first encountered the artist's work in 1919 at the Russian Consulate in Paris in the context of planning an international exhibition of paintings for the Carnegie Institute.

of the Musée des Années 30 in the Parisian suburb of Boulogne-Billancourt. All publications were edited or written by Caroline Haardt de la Baume, the granddaughter of Georges-Marie Haardt, the Director General of the Citroën expeditions. Written in French, they are essential to the understanding of Iacovleff's place within the modernist art historical canon, and they provide insightful analysis of his life and work. However, there is an area of his career that has yet to make its way into scholarly publications: Iacovleff's time as a professor in the United States, the perception of his work there, and his relationship with American collectors, dealers, and art institutions.

French scholarship reflects a degree of partiality regarding Iacovleff's success. I believe this is because during the last eight years of his career, the artist seems to have undergone a stylistic transition, gradually abandoning academicism and looking towards expressionism. Within the broader spectrum of Iacovleff's work, the "looser" paintings seem to be less popular, with the argument that they lack in quality and precision relative to the earlier part of his oeuvre. Therefore, this work of "lesser quality" is associated with Iacovleff's time in the United States and the influence of American artists. I, however, have discovered an alternative path for his stylistic transition through primary research in the archives of the art institutions to which the artist was connected. The reality of the situation seems to be that Iacovleff began to experiment stylistically long before he relocated to the United States. In fact, there are traces of an aesthetic transition as early as 1927.

Iacovleff's time in America was extremely influential in forming a reverence and admiration, as well as a thriving market, for his work. His American and French supporters were in fact connected during the 1930s, and this link runs much deeper than what European scholars currently believe. Through extensive research at the archives of the Vose Galleries in Boston, the Harvard Art Archives, and the Archives of American Art through the Smithsonian Institution, I have uncovered original correspondence between Iacovleff himself, his students, museum directors, collectors, and dealers that supports the above assertion. Further, I have also found exhibition, inventory, and invoice records from the above parties, as well as newspaper articles that serve to broaden our knowledge of Iacovleff's American endeavor.

The subsequent chapters of this thesis will provide intermittent analysis of Iacovleff's style with respect to his place in the modernist tradition of Orientalism, as well as the *retour à l'ordre* of the inter-war period. It will begin by giving an overview of Alexandre Iacovleff's artistic career, from his years as a student in St. Petersburg until his return to Paris in 1932 from the Yellow Cruise. It will then propose theories as to how his American period came to fruition, explaining the nature of his relationship to the Museum School and Harvard University. Further, there will be an interpretation of Iacovleff's relationship between his dealers and collectors. A social profile of his patrons will be established, culminating in a discussion on the artist's elite status, the degree of his financial success, and an analysis of his decision to return to Paris in 1937. Following this will be a discussion of the caliber of, as well as the

support for, the American exhibitions held both before and after Iacovleff's death. This thesis will conclude with a call for a re-evaluation of the artist's relationship to America, elevating it to a status that is only now being recognized, due in part to the revival in the interest of the Art Déco movement during recent years.

CHAPTER 2: EARLY YEARS

Alexandre Iacovleff: A Student of Many Travels

Alexandre Iacovleff resists comparison. Upon his arrival in Paris in 1920, he refused to conform to stylistic trends that the avant-garde adopted before the war. Instead, his aesthetic embodied a fusion of tradition and modern innovation that set him apart from his contemporaries. The intellectual environment in which he was raised played an instrumental role in his success.

On June 25, 1887, Alexandre Iacovleff was born in St. Petersburg, Russia. From an early age, he was immersed in an atmosphere that cultivated his thirst for knowledge. His father was a respected naval officer, and his mother was the first Russian woman to earn a doctorate in mathematics.¹⁴ His parents bestowed a sense of pride and achievement upon their children due to these impressive accomplishments. Iacovleff's older brother would become an architect and engineer who flew some of the earliest planes in Russia, and his sister would grow up to be a famous opera singer.¹⁵ As a young boy, Iacovleff showed a propensity for drawing. His astounding talent led to his acceptance into the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg in 1905. He was eighteen years old. Modeled after the curriculum of the French Academy of Painting and Drawing, this Russian school taught traditional Western concepts of artistic production. Academicism was a defining element of the new "classical" style, which was popular throughout Europe, especially with the

¹⁴ du Plessix-Gray, "Alexandre Iacovleff: Une Vie," *Alexandre Iacovleff: Itinérances*, 23.

¹⁵ Ibid. The artist's sister and mother would migrate to Paris not long after him during the Russian Revolution because of their upper-class status. Iacovleff would come to bear the burden of supporting these two women financially, despite his sister's celebrity status.

aristocratic classes. Iacovleff was a student at the Imperial Academy until 1917, the year of the Russian Revolution. He studied under master Dimitri Kardovsky, the famous painter, illustrator, and stage designer whose work followed the illustrative traditions of the nineteenth century. Although the master briefly studied Impressionism and other styles associated with the early avant-garde, he preferred traditional forms of representation and was an admirer of John Ruskin, William Morris, and Aubrey Beardsley.¹⁶

The teachings of Kardovsky made an impression on Iacovleff, which contributed to his involvement with the *Mir Iskusstva* (World of Art) movement during his formative years at the Academy. This group inspired cultural renewal in Russian artistic and poetic circles by advocating for a union between visual art, theatre, music, and dance.¹⁷ The influence of *Mir Iskusstva* fostered the artist's penchant for the theatre, which remained with him for the entirety of his career.

Iacovleff was not alone in his devotion to these artistic and cultural movements. His good friend and studio mate, Vassili Choukhaïeff, also adopted a style that reflected the influence of Kardovsky and *Mir Iskusstva* during his years as a student. The two artists worked closely together during their apprenticeships at the Imperial Academy, sharing strong aesthetic and stylistic

¹⁶ Edward Kasinec and Robert Davis, "Russian Book Arts on the Eve of World War One: The New York Public Library Collections," *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts*, Vol. 14 (Autumn, 1989), p. 94-96.

¹⁷ du-Plessix-Gray, "Alexandre Iacovleff: Un Vie," *Alexandre Iacovleff: Itinérances*, 24; Anna Winestein, "Quiet Revolutionaries: The 'Mir Iskusstva' Movement and Russian Design," *The Journal of Design History*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (Winter 2008), p. 315.

similarities. They remained in close contact until Iacovleff's death in 1938.¹⁸ Under Kardovsky, they acquired traditional knowledge of anatomy and composition, and their technical education revolved significantly around tempera painting and accurate draftsmanship. Iacovleff's love for the classical medium of tempera led him to work in the Kiplik studio in 1910, where he studied fresco painting.¹⁹ The early examination of these techniques proved to be influential in later years; he gained notoriety in Paris for his beautiful wall murals that adorned the residences of aristocrats and Russian *émigrés*, as well as restaurants and music halls. While studying in St. Petersburg, Iacovleff contributed to several artistic and literary journals between 1909 and 1914. Through this work, he became connected with the famous artist, art critic, and designer of the Ballets Russes, Alexander Benois.²⁰

Iacovleff's success at the Imperial Academy was rewarded with two travel grants he received from its administration. The first, bestowed upon the artist and Vassili Choukhaïeff from 1913 to 1915, led the two comrades to various areas of Italy, Spain, and Majorca. Iacovleff was greatly influenced by the Italian Renaissance art of the Quattrocento. He particularly admired the work of artists from the northern region of the peninsula. The sculptural elements in the paintings of Andrea Mantegna and Piero della Francesca continued to inspire and influence his life's work.²¹ Iacovleff adopted their taste

¹⁸ Blandine Chevanne, "Les Années d'apprentissage," *Alexandre Iacovleff: Itinérances*, 41. Both artists remained in close contact with their master throughout their lives, as well.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid, 42.

for archaic models, as well as imitated their iconic religiosity apparent in the layouts and backgrounds of his early portraits. His figure drawings came to project monumentality, a stylistic hallmark of these Italian “primitives.” The famous double self-portrait that Iacovleff and Choukhaïeff jointly painted in Capri in 1913 illustrates the two artists’ indebtedness to the early Italian Renaissance.²²



Fig. 1. *Double Self-Portrait*, oil on canvas, 1914.

²² Ibid., 41. This double self-portrait shows the artists in the guises of Harlequin and Pierrot. It therefore not only shows influence of the Renaissance, but an early appreciation for the theatre and the stage as well.



Fig. 2. *Portrait of Roberto Montenegro*, watercolor and sanguine on paper, 1915.

The *Portrait of Roberto Montenegro*, painted in Majorca in 1915, reflects the influence of early Northern Italian painting on the young artist.²³ As a whole, the works completed during his two-year stay in Europe are considered to be a reaction against Impressionism, as they are traditional research studies of absolute form, anatomy, and composition based on Renaissance ideals derived from classical models.²⁴

²³ Ibid., 42.

²⁴ Ibid.

In 1915, Iacovleff was forced to return to Russia due to the outbreak of World War I. Upon fulfilling his military obligations, the artist received his second grant from the Academy in 1917. This time, it would send him to the Far East, where he would spend almost two years in China, Mongolia, and Japan. The beginning of the Russian Revolution saw the young artist already crossing Mongolia on horseback, leaving the turmoil of his native country behind. Little did he know that he was never to return.²⁵ This first Asiatic sojourn was what ultimately led to the artist's love for exotic and Oriental subjects. Iacovleff adopted a Chinese "chop mark" as his signature, phonetically representing his name ("Ya-Ko-Lo-Fu").²⁶ In a letter from this two-year period sent from Beijing, Iacovleff described his surroundings with awe and fascination upon his arrival in China:

I am poised on the wall near the massive tower Cheng Men and gaze down on the city. To the North, where the Manchu section spreads out in the cool mystery of still indistinct colors, the purple walls and the golden roofs of the palaces emerge. Innumerable delicate fumes rise slowly, penetrated and subdivided by rays of light. They are the breath of life which awakens at the touch of dawn. The sun calls forth sounds, eager to fill these vague forms with dynamic vibrations, recaptured from the shadows. Tones imperceptible a moment ago, take turns with one another and then harmonize. Now I hear the tinkling of the strolling coiffeur's copper plates; the double bladed knife of the grinder cuts the quiet air in two with its strident notes; the porter's cry seems like the rhythmic lamentation, and all these sounds group themselves and interlace in the strengthening rays of the yellow and blue dawn. They assume tangible form and tell us the prodigious legend of life, with which is contrasted the bleak silence, the legend of death, the end of the imperial city, the forbidden city.²⁷

²⁵ Joseph Gropper, *Alexandre Iacovleff (1887-1938)* (Cambridge, MA: Gropper Art Gallery, 1972), p. 2.

²⁶ Mark A. Schaffer, *Alexandre Iacovleff: Paintings and Drawings* (New York: A La Vieille Russie, Didier Aaron, Inc., 1993), p. 4.

²⁷ From a letter quoted in Martin Birnbaum, *Iacovleff and Other Artists* (New York: Paul A. Struck, 1946), pp. 7-8.

Iacovleff's work in the Far East reflected a desire to document everything about the people and places he encountered, expressing realistic simplicity and sensitivity toward the foreign culture in which he was immersed. He studied aspects of everyday life in the city, and soon found life in the East to be even more appealing than he imagined. At first, Iacovleff avoided what seemed exotic and unusual, initially seeking to discover the nature of urban life and to uncover the internal rhythm of the city.²⁸ He realized after a short time that the amount of money he received from the Academy was not a sufficient income, and he immersed himself in Chinese society, selling some of his paintings and drawings. His Slavic charm proved to be advantageous during his travels throughout Mongolia during the summer of 1918. Despite a language barrier, members of both the aristocratic and lower classes agreed to pose for him, providing him with a variety of subjects and portrait types.²⁹

In Beijing, Iacovleff devoted himself almost entirely to the study of Chinese theatre.³⁰ This shift comes as no surprise, considering the artist's early involvement with *Mir Iskusstva* and the ballet theatre of Diaghilev. His portraits of Chinese actors are early examples of the artist's efforts to portray humanity and the essence of each personality with honesty and empathy.

²⁸ Caroline Haardt de La Baume, *Alexandre Iacovleff: L'Artiste Voyageur* (Paris: Flammarion, 2000), p. 13.

²⁹ Ibid., 13-14.

³⁰ du Plessix-Grey, "Alexandre Iacovleff: Une Vie," *Alexandre Iacovleff: Itinérances*, 24.



Fig. 3. *Portrait of a Chinese Man*, sanguine and fusain on paper, 1918.



Fig. 4. *Portrait of a Chinese Woman*, sanguine and fusain on paper, 1918



Fig. 5. *Head of a Chinese*, oil on canvas, 1918.

These are frank studies of the human condition, and they set the tone for his academic portrait style practiced throughout the majority of his career. Rendered in neutral colors of chalk and tempera instead of ink, these works reflect the artist's deliberate rejection of the techniques and stylistic characteristics of the Chinese masters. Instead, Iacovleff's portraits remain faithful to the technical concepts he learned from Kardovski at the Academy. Reflecting a Westerner's sincere efforts to understand the Eastern "Other," these portraits portray the artist's subjects in a European classical style of representation, steeped in the established traditions of the Italian Renaissance, which were so influential to Iacovleff's work during his years of academic training. The sculptural qualities and compositions of his portraits and scenes of the Chinese theatre reflect affinities with Andrea Mantegna in particular.

In the manner of a true realist, Iacovleff neither overtly idealizes nor demeans his subjects. Instead, he attempts to capture the essence of their humanity. In 1918, the artist organized an exhibition of his recent work in Shanghai, which was widely praised. Chinese art critics admitted to being amazed at his work, and maintained that Iacovleff was the first European to understand and portray the characteristics of their race so acutely.³¹ In the context of a subsequent exhibition of work from this Asiatic sojourn, one of the artist's admirers defined Iacovleff's early oeuvre as "an Oriental *Comedie Humaine*, which he has analyzed and synthetically spread before us."³²

³¹ Haardt de La Baume, *Alexandre Iacovleff: L'Artiste Voyageur*, 18.

³² *Paintings, Watercolors, and Drawings by Alexandre Evguenievitch Iacovleff* (Detroit, MI: Detroit Institute of Arts, 1922), p. 4.

The Russian's interest in theatrical subjects carried over into his work from Japan, where he spent the last six months of his trip. Here he studied aspects of *kabuki* theatre, under the influence of which he produced portraits of various actors and character types.



Fig. 6. Japanese Kabuki Actors, 1919, from *Le Théâtre Japonais (kabuki)*, pl. 10.



Fig. 7. Japanese Kabuki Actors, 1919, from *Le Théâtre Japonais (kabuki)*, pl. 20.

These studies seem to reflect the expressive qualities of the Japanese theatre tradition as compared to the more sober Chinese character types. In addition to theatrical subjects, Iacovleff also concentrated on aspects of island life in Japan. Living amongst fishermen and pearl divers on Oshima Island off the southeastern region of Japan, Iacovleff incorporated elements and daily practices of their coastal lifestyles in his work.

The Word of Art: Iacovleff and Literature

As usually happens, all good things must come to an end. Such was the case for Iacovleff and his studies in the Far East. The term of the grant he

received from the Imperial Academy ended in 1919. Because of his alliance with aristocratic circles in Russia, Iacovleff soon discovered that he could not return home safely to St. Petersburg. Craving adventure and the promise of artistic stimulation that came with it, Iacovleff decided to leave Asia and go to Paris. This decision to settle in the French capital aligned the artist with the larger group of Russian intellectuals who fled their country to escape imminent doom following the Bolshevik Revolution.

When one door closes, another one usually opens. Such was the case for Iacovleff and his new life in Paris. His status as a Russian intellectual allowed for his rapid integration into the community of *émigrés* and the elevation of his status within the artistic elite of the city. Because Parisians were fascinated by exotic Russian culture during the 1920s, largely due to the influence of the Ballets Russes, Iacovleff found himself in the right place at the right time.

In April of 1920, only a year after Iacovleff's arrival in Paris, 170 of his Chinese, Mongolian, and Japanese works were exhibited at the Galerie Barbazanges located on the rue Faubourg Saint-Honoré.³³ This exhibition featured large tempera paintings composed in Paris but based on detailed sketches that the artist kept along his travels. Gouaches and pastel drawings composed during this recent Asian sojourn were also shown. Reactions to the artist's work overflowed with praise, and a great many of the paintings and drawings sold. One of his admirers, Muriel Ciolkowska, wrote the following statement regarding the exhibition:

³³ Blandine Chevanne, "Les Années d'apprentissage," *Alexandre Iacovleff: Itinérances*, p. 44.

The display was the most complete and emphatic reaction against all the latest pictorial creeds, fads, and fanaticisms possible to imagine. First and foremost, it was pictorial, a capital sin according to the teachings of the day-before-yesterday modernists. Second, it was, and with hardly less guilt, 'finished.' The canvas was covered; beauty of workmanship, far from being disdained, served draftsmanship such as had not been practiced since Ingres. Without any attempt at neo-Orientalism, with no endeavor to imitate or evoke Eastern art forms, the pictures, chiefly painted in distemper or carried out on white paper in black and red crayons, represented Chinese scenes and people: the spectators at the play, actors and dancers, faces hallucinatingly disguised or the sad, wrinkled features of the peasantry and poor, the life of the streets and of the country, figures and landscapes. Purity in execution, the uncompromising character of the masterly drawing, the clean intensity of the vivid colors, the absence of light and shadow opposition and of everything illusory or accidental, brought the fifteenth century masters of Italy, Germany, and Flanders to mind at once. No concession of the slightest order was made to chance, no claim made on any faculty save that of sheer accomplishment.³⁴

Among Iacovleff's admirers was Lucien Vogel, the esteemed editor and director of the *Gazette du Bon Ton*, and later, of *Vu*, the news magazine of innovative pictures.³⁵ Vogel was so intrigued by Iacovleff's work that he published the first album of selected works reproduced from this initial exhibition in 1922, entitled *Les Dessins et Peintres d'Extrême-Orient d'Alexandre*

³⁴ Muriel Ciolkowska, "Iacovleff: Civilized Painter," *International Studio*, (November, 1922), pp. 159-160. The passage above has been translated from the original source. All subsequent passages and quotations, unless noted otherwise, have been translated by the author of this thesis. Ciolkowska's sentiments express her disdain for the avant-garde. In his usage of the term "day-before-yesterday," she seems to be poking fun at the modernist obsession with the future that has been previously discussed. In comparing Iacovleff's work to that of Ingres, the critic elevates the artist's status to one of a master of realism and draftsmanship rarely seen in his time. In juxtaposing the Chinese work of this exhibition with the concept of "neo-Orientalism," Ciolkowska emphasizes the indebtedness of Iacovleff's drawings to the style of fifteenth century European artists, as opposed to an Eastern style of representation. This quote places Iacovleff's work within the scope of the "Return to Order" during the inter-war period in Europe.

³⁵ Emmanuel Bréon, "Portraits du 'Grand' et du 'Petit' Monde," *Alexandre Iacovleff: Itinérances*, p. 80.

Iacovleff.³⁶ Victor Goloubev, another member of the group of Russian *émigrés* exiled to Paris, wrote the introduction that accompanied the reproductions. Goloubev was a member of the aristocracy, and as such, was ruined by the Revolution. An eclectic and carefree traveler at the turn of the century, he was forced to sell his collection just before his escape to Paris. This unfortunate turn of events led him to cultivate his passion for Asia. Eventually becoming an archaeologist, he wrote numerous studies devoted to ancient Vietnam and Angkor.³⁷ Vogel's album focused on the extraordinary detail Iacovleff employed in the representations of the people he encountered in China. The artist carefully portrayed male and female costumes worn by the Chinese and Japanese, highlighting different fabrics as well as exploring all of the small jobs they did.³⁸ As Goloubev so eloquently stated in the introduction, "Through the individual, Iacovleff reaches the plastic principle of race, an eternally immutable principle; he enters into the ancestral soul of China; an intuitive observer of the absolute, he creates an ideal humanity of the yellow race."³⁹

In that same year, the editor Maurice de Brunhoff published another album of reproductions of the artist's work, entitled *Le Théâtre Chinois: Peintures, Sanguines, et Croquis d'Alexandre Iacovleff*, which was translated into

³⁶ Lucien Vogel, *Les Dessins et Peintures d'Extrême-Orient d'Alexandre Iacovleff* (Paris: Editions Lucien Vogel, 1922). This album included fifty color plates and Goloubev's introductory text. The artist's good friend, Vassili Choukhaïeff, illustrated the frontispice, with a portrait of Iacovleff.

³⁷ Anne Doridou-Heim, "Iacovleff à livre ouvert," *Alexandre Iacovleff: Itinérances*, 117.

³⁸ Chevanne, "Les années d'apprentissage," *Alexandre Iacovleff: Itinérances*, 43.

³⁹ L. Vogel, *Les Dessins et Peintures d'Extrême-Orient d'Alexandre Iacovleff*, 1922. The referenced text was translated from Goloubev's introduction to the album. The French passage reads as follows: "À travers l'individu, Iacovleff atteint le principe plastique de la race, principe immuable éternel; il pénètre dans l'âme ancestrale de la Chine; observateur intuitif de l'absolu, il crée une humanité idéale de race jaune."

English.⁴⁰ The selected works in this album were dedicated to the narrower subject of Chinese theatre within Iacovleff's oeuvre. The publisher devoted special attention to the artist's studies of masks and costumes used by Chinese actors. The introductory text discusses the origins of Chinese theatre and the developments of its traditions from ancient origins to the present day. It explains the theatre's role in society along with the importance of music, dance, makeup, superstitions, and taboos.⁴¹ Iacovleff himself wrote the entire preface of the album, and his writing was revealed to the public for the first time since his student years in St. Petersburg. He found an elegance and consciousness in Chinese theatre, and cites these qualities as reasons for his attraction to the art form. In the passage, he praises "... the limited resources available to the actor which naturally led to a simplification and extreme intensification of his art."⁴² He was particularly fascinated by the painted masks, which hide any personal attributes or characteristics of the actor. Iacovleff was permitted to discover the secrets of the lodges, where he observed the skillful process of makeup application. Adopting both an aesthetic and an ethnographic approach during

⁴⁰ Maurice de Brunhoff, *Le Théâtre Chinois: Peintres, Sanguines, et Croquis d'Alexandre Iacovleff*, trans. James A. Graham (London: John Lane, 1922). This album featured a text written by Tchou-Kia-Kien, a Chinese scholar who settled in Paris. Maurice de Brunhoff, the publisher of this album, was connected to the Ballets Russes, which probably explains how and why he became connected with Iacovleff and his work.

⁴¹ Doridou-Heim, "Iacovleff à livre ouvert," *Alexandre Iacovleff: Itinérances*, 118.

⁴² M. de Brunhoff, *Le Théâtre Chinois: Peintres, Sanguines, et Croquis d'Alexandre Iacovleff*, 1922. The referenced quote in the text above was translated from the preface of this album, written by Alexandre Iacovleff himself. The passage reads as follows: "...les moyens restreints don't dispose l'acteur qui l'ont naturellement amené à une simplification et intensification extreme de son art."

his study of the Chinese theatre, Iacovleff discovered that very little had changed since the writings of Confucius.⁴³

Making A Mark: Mural Painting and the Dramatic Arts

Iacovleff's love for the dramatic arts carried over into his life as an *émigré* in Paris. His prior association with Sergei Diaghilev and *Mir Iskusstva* granted him access into the world of Parisian theatre and dance. The artist's involvement with the Ballets Russes and Parisian theatre was integrated with mural and wall painting.

His involvement with the Kiplik studio set the stage for his initial exposure to fresco painting and wall decoration under his master Kardovsky at the Imperial Academy in St. Petersburg. Iacovleff and Choukhaïeff shared the same studio, and due to the mutual workspace, the two friends completed their first fresco paintings together. Apprenticeship with Kardovsky and their involvement with *Mir Iskusstva* facilitated a connection to the stage director and producer Vsevolod Meyerhold, who is known as one of the greatest advocates of Symbolism in theatre. He was one of the first figures in Russian theatre to synthesize classical traditions with modern innovations.⁴⁴ In 1910, Meyerhold began using the pseudonym Dr. Dappertutto, in reference to one of his favorite fairytales, *The Love for Three Oranges*.⁴⁵ Many of the plays he produced under

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Dassia N. Posner, "A Theatrical Zigzag: Doctor Dappertutto, Columbine's Veil, and the Grotesque," in *Slavic and East European Performance*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (Fall 2009), p. 51.

⁴⁵ Ibid., and Michèle Lefrançois, "'Le peintre et l'arlequin' ou Iacovleff et le spectacle," *Alexandre Iacovleff, Itinérances*, 123. According to Posner, Meyerhold's assumption of the name Dr. Dappertutto was also related to his decision to open a theatre-cabaret called "The House of Interludes" in St. Petersburg in 1910.

this name were centered on experiments with the characters of the *commedia dell'arte*.⁴⁶ In 1912, “Dr. Dappertutto” commissioned Iacovleff and Choukhaïeff to design a set for his famous play series, *The House of Interludes*, which also featured the work of many other *Mir Iskusstva* artists.⁴⁷

Meyerhold’s commission did not signify the end of the two students’ collaboration. In fact, it opened doors that led to more opportunities. In the realm of mural and fresco painting, Iacovleff and Choukhaïeff were perhaps most famous for painting *The Twelve Muses* panel on the ceiling of the Hôtel Firsanov. Many of the other panels featured pastiches of classic Italian architecture, and characters of the *commedia dell'arte*.⁴⁸ Members of the cultural aristocracy frequented the hotel, and their observance and admiration of Iacovleff’s designs led the young artist to gain popularity within the larger world of Russian theatre in St. Petersburg and Moscow, and he was commissioned to paint frescoes of Le Bivouac actors in 1915.⁴⁹

Wealthy private clients soon began to recognize Iacovleff’s talent for fresco painting through his work in connection with the theatre. For these patrons, Iacovleff remained loyal to themes inherent in the Russian folkloric

⁴⁶ John Rudlin, *Commedia dell'Arte: An Actor's Handbook* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 173-176 and Donald McManus, *No Kidding!: Clown as Protagonist in Twentieth-Century Theatre* (Newark, DE: Delaware University Press, 2003), pp. 46-49. Both of these authors cite the characters of the Harlequin and Pierrot as being the most popular with Meyerhold and the productions he staged under the pseudonym of Dr. Dappertutto. I believe that this early exposure to the *Commedia dell'Arte* led Iacovleff and Choukhaïeff to portray themselves in the guises of the Harlequin and Pierrot in their double self-portrait from 1914.

⁴⁷ Posner, “A Theatrical Zigzag,” 52.

⁴⁸ Michèle Lefrançois, “‘Si ses murs nous étaient contés’ ou Iacovleff et le décor mural,” *Alexandre Iacovleff: Itinérances*, 105.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

tradition, choosing to illustrate scenes from the tales of Pushkin and the nostalgic Kievan past.⁵⁰



Fig. 8. Concert hall of a private hôtel, photograph from an issue of *The Studio*, July-December 1927.



Fig. 9. Fireplace in the concert hall of a private hôtel, photograph from an issue of *The Studio*, July-December 1927.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 106.



Fig. 10. "The Tales of Pushkin," private hôtel in Russia, photograph from *The Studio*, July-December 1927.



Fig. 11. "The Tales of Pushkin," alternate scene, private hôtel in Russia, photograph extracted from an issue of *The Studio*, July-December 1927.

In the wake of the Russian Revolution, many of these wealthy private clients were exiled to areas just outside of Paris. Exiles included members of the imperial family, who moved to Boulogne-Billancourt, gathering around the Grand Duke Paul. When Iacovleff later relocated to Paris, he found himself frequenting this colony of aristocratic *émigrés*, with whom he had previously been associated.

Iacovleff was introduced into influential social circles in France, and it was not uncommon for him to stay at the homes of the wealthy patrons that he decorated. These decorations were often part of rooms dedicated to theatre and music, which clearly served the artist's taste for spectacle.⁵¹ Perhaps the most notable client of Iacovleff was Felix Yusupov, the famous assassin of Rasputin, who was part of the imperial family exiled to France. Having settled in Boulogne-Billancourt in 1921, Yusupov lived in a mansion flanked by two pavilions near the Grand Duke Paul. The aristocrat invited his friends from the art world to participate in "Saturdays of Boulogne," events at his home that involved activities related to the dramatic arts. Famous members of the Parisian artistic community, such as Jean Cocteau, Serge Lifar, the children of Tolstoy, and Boni de Castellane frequented Yusupov's palace of exile. In 1922, Yusupov asked Iacovleff to decorate a garage that was converted into a small theatre.⁵² The artist painted the ceiling in a *trompe l'oeil* style, and allegorical

⁵¹ Lefrançois, "Le peintre et l'arlequin' ou Iacovleff et le spectacle," *Alexandre Iacovleff: Itinérances*, 125.

⁵² Lefrançois, "Si ses murs nous étaient contés' ou Iacovleff et le décor mural," *Alexandre Iacovleff: Itinérances*, 106.

figures of the fine arts ran along the walls.⁵³ The muse of dance appeared in the guise of Anna Pavlova, the beautiful and famous dancer and actress of the Ballets Russes, who would become a dear friend of both the artist and the patron.

However, it was in less aristocratic places that Iacovleff gained notoriety from his wall paintings. The artist, possessing the stereotypical resourcefulness of an Eastern European, struck a deal with the owner of the popular restaurant La Biche on the rue des Martyrs in Montmartre. In 1923, Iacovleff decorated the upper dining room of the restaurant with fresco paintings. Through this commission, he gained respect and popularity not only in Paris, but also across the Atlantic in America.⁵⁴ Malvina Hoffman, an American sculptor who would become a great friend of Iacovleff's, described the nature of this commission in the introductory text of a memorial exhibition of the artist's work held in New York in 1939:

To earn his daily bread he had contracted with the patron of the restaurant "La Biche" on the rue des Martyrs in Montmartre, to decorate in fresco the walls of his upper dining room with an allegorical procession. A chariot, drawn by white bulls with gilded horns, and a bevy of lovely maidens and youths carrying exotic fruits and flowers. In the entrance lobby and kitchen, and along the stairway walls were portraits of the Chef and patron in sanguine crayons. There were designs of gigantic platters of bright red lobsters, vegetables and fruits, luring the visitor up to the dining room.

Three meals a day and two guests a week I think constituted the conditions of this meal ticket and two years time in which to complete the decorations. As the work progressed, Iacovleff's reputation began to

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Martin Birnbaum: *Iacovleff and Other Artists* (New York: Paul A. Struck, 1946), 3. Birnbaum, who would become the artist's dealer a few years later, notes in his book partially dedicated to the memory of Iacovleff that it was at the suggestion of famous American artist John Singer Sargent that he investigate the restaurant La Biche in Paris to see the incredible work of this artist. Through these means, the relationship between the artist and dealer was born.

assume great proportions, crowds began to make reservations for tables facing the grand Décor. “La Biche” was put on the map as the place to lunch or dine and see a fantastic set of paintings.⁵⁵

Unfortunately, La Biche no longer exists. However, reproductions of the murals were featured in a major art journal shortly after they were painted in 1923.⁵⁶ Because Iacovleff conceived these paintings without the aid of models, only with his imagination, his work is compared to Michelangelo and the paintings on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.⁵⁷ Together with the frescoes, the carved wooden decoration of the restaurant revolved around subjects popular during the eighteenth century. The composition extended over seven panels, with the general motif of a festival celebrating the triumph of rustic French cuisine rendered with earthy humor.⁵⁸

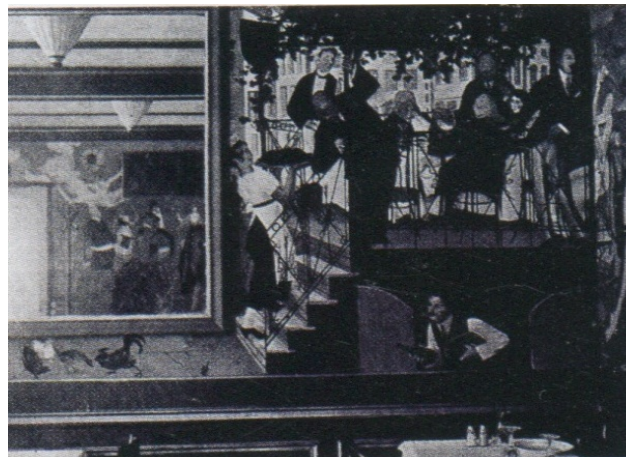


Fig. 12. Restaurant La Biche (no longer extant), 1923.

⁵⁵ Malvina Hoffman (et. al.), *Memorial Exhibition of the Work of Alexandre Iacovleff, April 11-April 29, 1939* (New York: Grand Central Art Galleries, Inc., 1939), p. 5.

⁵⁶ M. Ciolkowska, “Iacovleff’s Pictorial Ballad: Mural Paintings in ‘A La Biche’,” *International Studio* (May 1923), pp. 160-161.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Lefrançois, “‘Si ses murs nous étaient contés’ ou Iacovleff et le décor mural,” *Alexandre Iacovleff: Itinérances*, 106.



Fig. 13. Alternate view.



Fig. 14. Alternate view.

Documents describing the iconography remain accessible. A procession of Bacchus made up the largest part of the composition, and Lucullus followed close behind him in his chariot. The front walls featured the pleasures of the countryside: hunting, and fishing. The side panels showed the good king Henry IV and a procession of women. The panels at the rear of the room presented a landscape of vineyards, and a boy painted in *trompe l'oeil* emerged from a cellar

to fill the glasses of happy diners with fine wines.⁵⁹ Contemporary actors, historians, the religious, and the mythological were shown celebrating the joys of gluttony. The style was reminiscent of the miniature paintings of “Golden Age” Dutch and Flemish masters, which were widely popular in France during the eighteenth century. Also apparent, however, was the influence of Russian folkloric art, slightly mixed with a Cubist influence.⁶⁰

Iacovleff, a man of the world, did not limit his wall decoration to Paris and Russia. Displaying a love for Italy since his days as a student, he found joy in the Mediterranean and had a studio in Capri, a place where he would return at numerous occasions throughout his life. Having also made a name for himself there, Iacovleff was commissioned to adorn the private walls of aristocrats residing nearby. In 1921, Princess Maria Ruspoli de Gramont acquired a fourteenth-century castle, commonly known to as Château Vigoleno. Iacovleff was asked to decorate the castle’s *theatrino*.⁶¹ He adorned the walls with a pastiche of Rococo *chinoiserie*, illustrating the follies and exotic fashions of the *commedia dell’arte*.⁶²

⁵⁹ Ibid., 107.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Lefrançois, “‘Le peintre et l’arlequin’ ou Iacovleff et le spectacle,” *Alexandre Iacovleff: Itinérances*, 126.

⁶² Lefrançois, “‘Si ses murs nous étaient contées’ ou Iacovleff et le décor mural,” *Alexandre Iacovleff: Itinérances*, 107.



Fig. 15. Harlequin Scene from the *Theatrino* of the Château de Vigoleno.

All of the imagery stems from the theatre. For instance, a harlequin performs a comedy for ladies and musicians dressed in the costume of the era. A woman holds the masks of comedy and tragedy in her hands, and animals mime and imitate gesturing actors. As a tribute to his years in the Orient, Iacovleff painted a Chinese man personifying the theatrical traditions of the Far East.⁶³ At Château Vigoleno, the artist displayed his technical skill by using *trompe l'oeil* effects to enlarge the room of small dimensions, and showcased his knowledge of architectural motifs of the Quattrocento.⁶⁴

⁶³ Lefrançois, "Le peintre et l'arlequin' ou Iacovleff et le spectacle," *Alexandre Iacovleff: Itinérances*, 126.

⁶⁴ Ibid.



**Fig. 16. Two Masks,
from the *Theatrino* of
the Château de
Vigoleno**



**Fig. 17. Musicians from the *Theatrino* of
the Château de Vigoleno.**

For a house in Brussels owned by one of his patrons, a certain Monsieur Bautier, Iacovleff showed his versatility. Unlike the intellectually loaded style he employed for aristocrats and the restaurant La Biche in Paris, the artist modeled Monsieur Bautier's wall frescoes after the poetic moods of Nicholas

Poussin or Claude Lorrain, completely changing his style.⁶⁵ The panels evoke the contrasting moods of the evening night and the light of day, where dark shadows are juxtaposed with light sweetness. Mythological subjects are placed within imaginary serene landscapes of ideal beauty and Edenic pastoral scenes. Evoking the nostalgia of the Golden Age, these murals represent Iacovleff's devotion to the academic and neoclassical styles, steeped in reminiscences of the antique.⁶⁶



Fig. 18. *Les Heures du Jour*, wall fresco, private residence of Monsieur Bautier, Brussels



Fig. 19. *Les Heures du Jour*, alternate view.



Fig. 20. *Les Heures du Jour*, alternate view.

⁶⁵ Lefrançois, "Si ses murs étaient contées' ou Iacovleff et le décor mural," *Alexandre Iacovleff: Itinérances*, 107.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

Portraits of Parisian High Society

Back in Paris, Iacovleff's popularity, evolving mainly from his paintings at La Biche, opened the door for his career as a portrait painter for the upper classes and the artistic and intellectual elite. Because of his acquaintance with Sergei Diaghilev, Iacovleff was asked to paint portraits of members of the Ballets Russes, as well as designing sets for its productions.⁶⁷ During the 1920s, the Ballet's aesthetic was split into two competing styles. On one side of the spectrum, subjects of exotic Russian folklore were represented in a colorful and festive figurative style of naturalism, reminiscent of the aesthetics of Grigorieff and Soudeikine. On the other side of the spectrum, a geometric stylization, influenced by avant-garde movements such as Cubism, gave way to the bold patterns adopted by Picasso and other "modern" designers.⁶⁸ Iacovleff's portraits, although somewhat influenced by the latter, generally fall into the former category.

His portraits of the dancers and actresses of the Ballets Russes identify the sitters as part of their dramatic world. He painted his wife, Bella Chenchewa (popularly referred to as "Kazarova"), against a background of theatre scenery. His portrait of Maria Petrovna Bakst, the wife of the famous artist and designer Léon Bakst, is dressed like a boy, following the trend of androgyny during 1920s Paris.

⁶⁷ Emmanuel Bréon, "Portraits du 'Grand' et du 'Petit' Monde," *Alexandre Iacovleff: Itinérances*, 79.

⁶⁸ Lefrançais, "'Le peintre et l'arlequin' ou Iacovleff et le spectacle," *Alexandre Iacovleff: Itinérances*, 123.

Iacovleff also painted the wife of his dear friend Choukhaïeff. Donned in a black-and-white checked dress and assuming a frontal pose, Madame Choukhaïeff captures the innocence of a young wife. A curtain in the background to the far right of the composition alludes to her involvement in the theatre.⁶⁹



Fig. 21. *Portrait of Mme. Choukhaïeff*, oil on canvas, 1921.

⁶⁹ Bréon, "Portraits du 'Grand' et du 'Petit' Monde," *Alexandre Iacovleff: Itinérances*, 79.

Perhaps the most famous of these dancer-portraits is the one of Anna Pavlova, the celebrated dancer and actress of the Ballets Russes. Iacovleff captures her serious expression and elaborate Spanish costume, and takes the opportunity to show his skill in representing the detail of fabric and material through superb draftsmanship.



Fig. 22. *Portrait of Anna Pavlova in Spanish Costume, sanguine on board, 1922.*

Iacovleff also had a penchant for group portraits, since he was interested in those around him who supported his work. In 1912, he painted the *Group of Pupils at the Academy of St. Petersburg*.⁷⁰ As the artist gained notoriety and settled into his life in France, he avoided monotony by taking trips along with

⁷⁰ Ibid., 80.

fellow artists to the French island of Port-Cros on the Côte d'Azur. Between the two world wars, the island was a popular place of retreat for artistic and literary figures such as André Malraux, André Gide, and Paul Valéry. While in Port-Cros, in 1921, Iacovleff painted a monumental group portrait of himself amongst fellow artists, including Choukhaïeff and Malvina Hoffman, entitled *A Reunion at Port Cros*. He presented his “camarades d’atelier” assembled high above a rocky coastal town with an old fortress and a green hillside in the background.⁷¹ Emmanuel Bréon draws parallels between this painting and the archaic perspectives employed by the masters of the Italian Renaissance.⁷²



Fig. 23. *Group of Pupils at the Academy of St. Petersburg*, oil on canvas, 1912.

⁷¹ Joseph Gropper, *Alexandre Iacovleff, 1887-1938* (Cambridge, MA: Gropper Art Gallery, 1972), p. 3. Unfortunately, at the time this thesis was written, no color reproduction of this painting existed. The introduction of Gropper’s exhibition catalogue emphasizes the importance of this painting with respect to Iacovleff’s popularity in America. The painting had been exhibited at a second one-man show of his work from Port-Cros at the Galerie Barbazanges in 1922. Having embarked to Paris on a scouting trip for the Carnegie International, the director of the Art Institute of Chicago discovered Iacovleff’s work at this exhibition. Later that year, Iacovleff’s first exhibition took place in America. In 1924, Edgar Kaufmann, founder of the well-known department store based in Pittsburgh, purchased the painting.

⁷² Bréon, “Portraits du ‘Grand’ et du ‘Petit’ Monde,” *Alexandre Iacovleff: Itinérances*, 80. Bréon cites Giovanni Bellini’s *A Song in the Garden* as an example of the archaic perspective to which he refers.



Fig. 24. *A Reunion at Port-Cros*, oil on canvas, 1921.

Lucien Vogel, previously discussed in the context of his role as publisher of a travel album devoted to Iacovleff's work in the Far East, was also a part of the group of artists and literary figures working alongside the painter at Port-Cros. A friendship developed between the two men, and Vogel posed for a series of portraits during their time spent in the Mediterranean. Done in sanguine, these portraits show the collective characteristics of Vogel's personality, depicting a range of emotions from seriousness to humor.⁷³

⁷³ Ibid.



Fig. 25. Portrait of Lucien Vogel in a Hat, Port-Cros, sanguine and pastel on paper, 1921.



Fig. 26. Portrait of Lucien Vogel, Port-Cros, sanguine on paper, 1921.

After he left Port-Cros in 1922, Iacovleff met several royal figures and wealthy socialites in Paris. In an exhibition catalogue released by the Musée des Années 30 and edited by Caroline Haardt de La Baume, his great-niece recalls: “Like most Russians of this environment, he had a penchant for snobbery and loved hobnobbing with the French aristocracy... and he seemed to revel in the many portraits he did of eminent personalities of society.”⁷⁴ He painted the portraits of individuals such as Henry de Rothschild, the Duchesse de Gramont, and Louis de Bourbon. The artist recorded multiple portraits of Florence Conrad, who became one of his greatest patrons as well as a great friend. A

⁷⁴ du Plessix-Grey, “Alexandre Iacovleff: Une Vie,” *Alexandre Iacovleff: Itinérances*, 25. She goes on to say that the financial comfort brought about by Iacovleff’s growing popularity allowed him to bring his sister and mother, who were still wrapped up in the dangerous environment of Russia, to Paris. Together, they would live in a three-room apartment in the sixteenth arrondissement.

Francophile and a heroine of two world wars, three commissioned portraits rendered her in the Art Déco style, recalling the paintings of Robert Poughéon or Bernard Boutet de Monvel.⁷⁵ Her portraits, which were also influenced by the Nabis, portray her seated with a meditative attitude wearing a gray dress and pearls, in a red dress at Sou-Chow (the Chinese Venice), and on horseback in a wooded background.⁷⁶



Fig. 27. *Portrait of Florence Conrad Sitting*, oil on canvas, 1929.

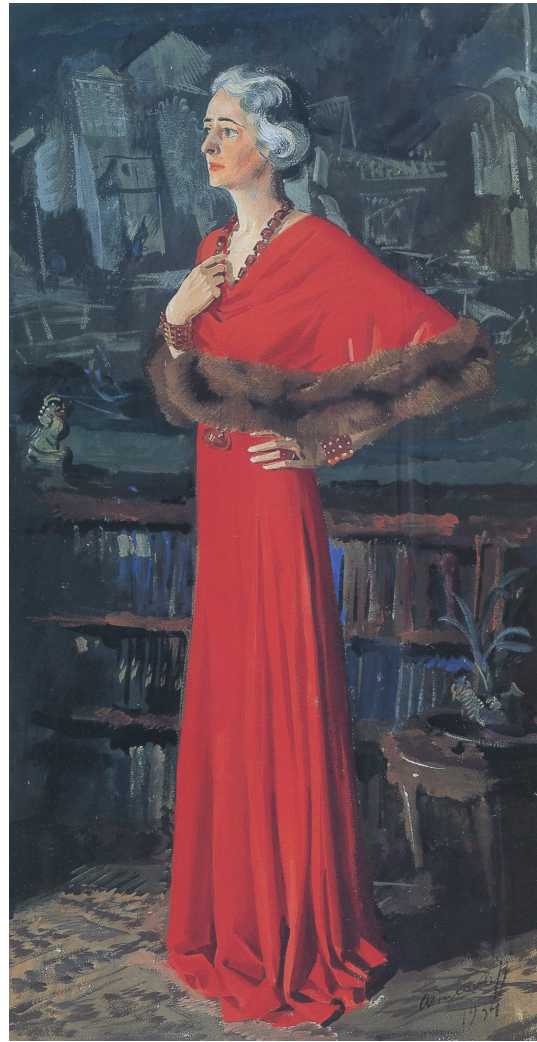


Fig. 28. *Portrait of Florence Conrad in Front of Sou-Chow*, oil on canvas, 1934.

⁷⁵ Bréon, "Portraits du 'Grand' et du 'Petit' Monde," *Alexandre Iacovleff: Itinérances*, 80.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*



Fig. 29. *Portrait of Florence Conrad on Horseback*, oil on canvas, 1934.

Iacovleff's growing celebrity and his link to elite Parisian society led to invitations to notorious dinner parties hosted by the rich and famous. In 1923, the artist's participation at one such event would change the course of his life, when André Citroën invited him to the dinner table at Maxim's.⁷⁷ Citroën, the Parisian industrialist who founded an automobile company at the end of World War I, sponsored motor expeditions to Africa and the Far East during the mid-1920s and early-1930s. Georges-Marie Haardt, Citroën's associate, right-hand man, and director-general of the expeditions, first encountered Iacovleff in the context of his exhibition in 1920 and publications of the artist's Asian work in

⁷⁷ Ariane Audouin-Dubreuil, "Missions Citroën 1923-1933," *Alexandre Iacovleff: Itinérances*, 154.

1922. He realized the incredible talent of this Russian painter and draftsman, and invited Iacovleff to be the official artist of the Citroën Expedition to Central Africa, which became popularly known as the *Croisière Noire*. His role was to document the peoples of Africa with an intimacy and sympathy to a degree that would transcend photography. The appointment would greatly contribute to Iacovleff's subsequent fame and defined his career as an artist.

CHAPTER 3: LE CROISIÈRE NOIRE

Africa, Humanism, and *Le Croisière Noire* (1924-1925)

Georges-Marie Haardt and Louis Audouin-Dubreuil led the Citroën expedition in Africa, the *Croisière Noire*. It involved the work of many influential French cultural figures. Iacovleff, the official painter of the expedition, teamed up with film director Léon Poirier, cameraman and photographer Georges Specht, and taxidermist Professor Bergonier. Their mission was to gather visual ethnographic documentation of everyday objects and social practices for the National Museum of Natural History and the Geographical Society of France.⁷⁸

Iacovleff's desire to capture personalities of the upper echelon of society carried over into his African sojourn. From the expedition's initial arrival in a number of North African villages, the artist never failed to portray chiefs or leaders who maintained their position at the top of the hierarchical pyramid. The Citroën expedition was launched from Colomb-Béchar and traveled through the desert of Tanezrouft to the oasis of Tessalit. In less than a month, the group of motorcars successfully crossed the Sahara, finally arriving at the vast Niger River in November of 1924.⁷⁹

It was at the Niger River, near Niamey in the country of the "Black Sultans," where Iacovleff found his sitters of the "black aristocracy." The sultans of Maradi, Zinder and Tessaoua received the expedition as it arrived in their

⁷⁸ Audouin-Dubreuil, "Missions Citroën 1923-1933," *Alexandre Iacovleff: Itinérances*, 155.

⁷⁹ Haardt de la Baume, *Alexandre Iacovleff: L'Artiste Voyageur*, 31.

respective territories.⁸⁰ From a Western point of view, Iacovleff's portraits of Barma-Mata, the Sultan of Zinder (Figure 41), and the chief Manzinga (Figure 38) became iconic images, displaying a simultaneous reverence and a sense of the exotic "Other." This "Otherness," however, should not be viewed in a pejorative context, as compared to traditional Orientalist pictures of the Neoclassical and Romantic eras.⁸¹ On the contrary, what Western viewers experience when looking at these leaders' portraits is a sense of fascination and admiration for the "Other." There is a penetrating sensitivity in portraying the humanity of those who posed for the artist.

The large canvas *Members of the Citroën Expedition to Central Africa* (Figure 31) adds to our understanding of how Iacovleff saw himself and his fellow explorers in relation to the ethnic groups they encountered. For the purpose of this work, the artist managed to compose a retrospective group portrait of his fellow comrades in colonial uniform, with the "safari style" helmets, boots, shorts, and belted jackets that are so representative of the European colonial period of the 1930s.⁸² Emmanuel Bréon eloquently summarizes the achievements of this composition:

There is a friendship apparent in this work, but also a certain irony to this assembly of "white pygmies" together in an unusual way in the middle of the bush, also surrounding their heads. The only one who seems to have true nobility is the young Baba Touré in traditional costume, carrying a bowl of fruit. He is the key of this poetic picture, and

⁸⁰ Ibid., 34.

⁸¹ In the neoclassical tradition, Ingres's *Odalisque* (1814) comes to mind, as well as Delacroix's *Women of Algiers* (1834) in the Romantic tradition. It is difficult to discern whether the pejorative sense comes from the Western act of exoticizing the Other, or whether it comes from the fact that the subjects are females, intended to be possessed by a male's gaze.

⁸² Bréon, "Portraits du 'Grand' et du 'Petit' Monde," *Alexandre Iacovleff: Itinérances*, 81.

the dramatic Mameluke Roustan asking right in the middle of the marshals of the empire.⁸³

Clearly out of place, the European explorers seem to epitomize the exotic “Other,” at least from the point of view of the indigenous African. Awkward and unnatural-looking in this environment, Iacovleff and his companions, although smiling with excitement and curiosity, do not fit gracefully into the scene. Instead, the African figures are the ones who belong in it. Reflecting the dignity and grace of a people within their natural environment, Baba Touré and Mameluke Roustan unintentionally eclipse the white explorers while simultaneously revealing their shared humanity.



Fig. 30. *Members of the Citroën Expedition to Central Africa*, oil on canvas, 1925.

Portraying these individuals in a simple and dignified manner was Iacovleff’s preferred mode of representation. In many ways, the artist’s most

⁸³ Ibid.

successful portraits were those of the average African. Rare for his time, Iacovleff saw the relationship between himself and his model as an exchange between equals. For him, they were not anonymous ethnic subjects. Emphasis on their particular identities was always an implicit objective of the portrait process. At the bottom of many of the compositions, the artist included their names.⁸⁴

Individual identity manifested itself in Iacovleff's paintings of the peoples of the Belgian Congo. In January of 1925, the expedition traversed the southern portion of the Sahara desert and stopped at Fort-Archambault near Bangui, the capital of Ubangi-Shari.⁸⁵ In honor of the mission's arrival, lavish entertainment was organized. Races and battles of Olympic proportions featured young and beautiful females of the Daboa tribe. One girl in particular, Sara, won the competitions. Naturally, she inspired Iacovleff to paint her full-length portrait⁸⁶.

Iacovleff portrays her in the foreground with a slender and elegant grace among other beauties lingering in the background. The "S-curve" formed by the elongated *contrapposto* is slightly reminiscent of the exaggerated Mannerist compositions of the late sixteenth century. The artist's portrait of this young Daboa girl named Sara inspired the work of other artists upon Iacovleff's return to Europe. Malvina Hoffman, an American sculptor and student of Rodin who became a good friend of Iacovleff's, sculpted a series of roughly one hundred

⁸⁴ Ibid., 82.

⁸⁵ Haardt de La Baume, *Alexandre Iacovleff: L'Artiste Voyageur*, 46.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

statues that represented the races of humankind. An exhibition featuring this body of work was presented at the Ethnographic Museum of the Trocadéro Palace in the early 1930s.⁸⁷ The show included a bronze sculpture that almost directly imitates Iacovleff's portrait.

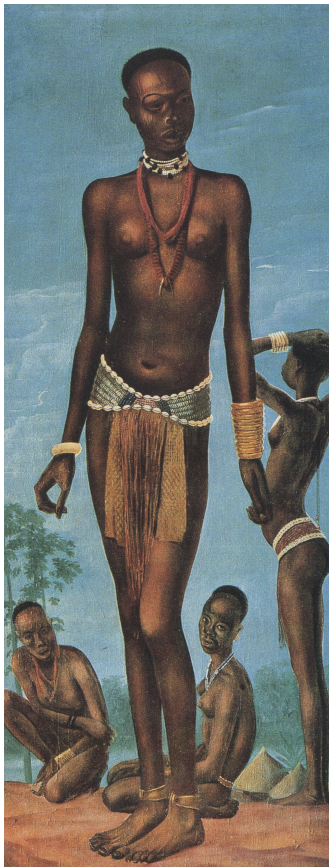


Fig. 31. *Daboa, A Young Girl Sara (Fort-Archambault)*, oil on canvas, 1925.

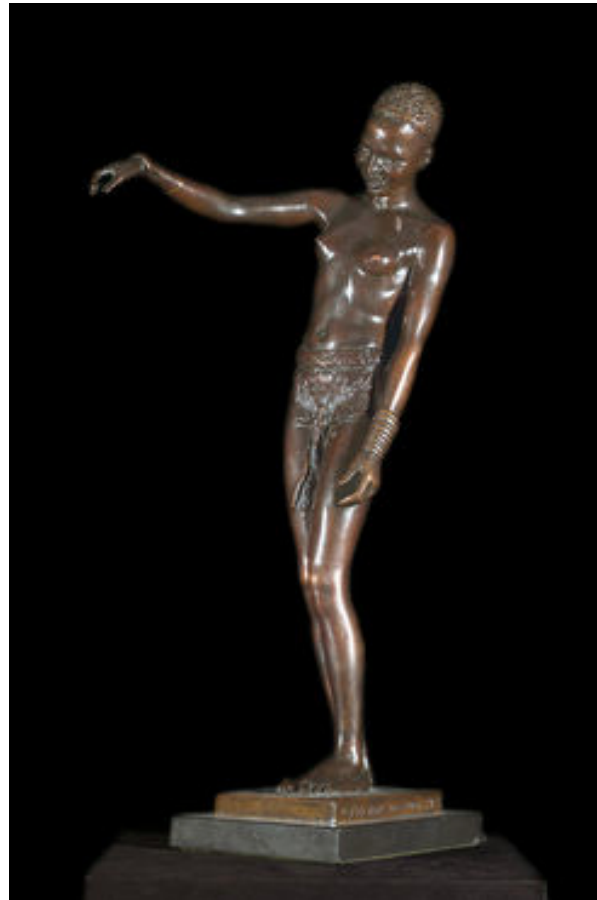
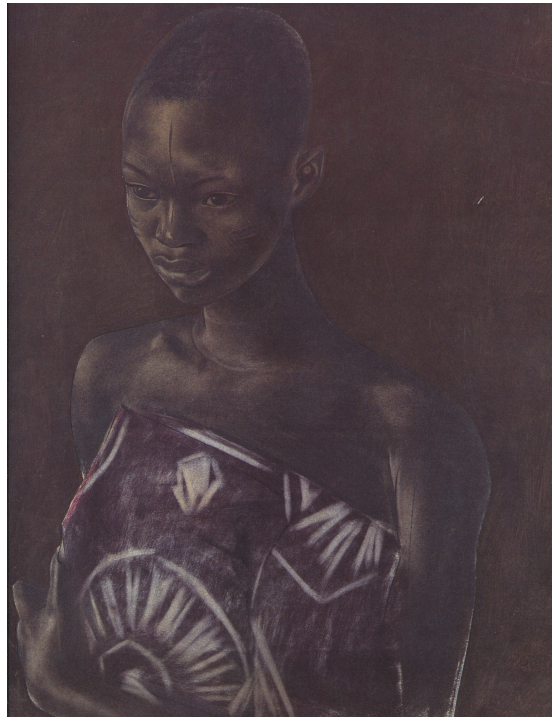


Fig. 32. Malvina Hoffman, *Daboa*, bronze, 1930.

In Stanleyville, the capital of the Belgian Congo buried in the rainforest, Iacovleff and his team encountered a family of Pygmies, an ethnicity with ancient roots. The explorers were fascinated by their culture of sorcery and

⁸⁷ Ibid.

superstition, which had been known to incite fear in the nearby Bantu tribe for years. Despite this ominous reputation, the artist befriended them and studied their anatomical features, noting in particular what he referred to as their child-like proportions and sturdy limbs.⁸⁸ Due to the mission's extended stay in this area, Iacovleff was able to complete a series of works that were subsequently put on exhibition in Stanleyville by the European settlement there.⁸⁹ Two memorable portraits stand out from the exhibition: *African Girl, Stanleyville* features a chalk and charcoal portrait of a young Pygmy.



**Fig. 33. *African Girl, Stanleyville*,
pastel and gouache on paper, 1925.**

Her beautiful dark skin is juxtaposed against a dark background, and her form almost blends into the surrounding space. Despite the darkness of the

⁸⁸ Ibid., 62.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 64.

composition, radiance and light exude from her body. Her pose, reminiscent of those seen in Byzantine icons, gives her a modest degree of religiosity. Iacovleff depicted her in deep contemplative reverie, giving her a mysterious quality, further emphasized by her averted gaze that lures the viewer into her realm. Without idealizing the figure Iacovleff reveals her humanity, leading us to identify and empathize with her, rather than to exoticize and label her as the “Other.” In the same way, Iacovleff portrays the humanity of *Chief Wagenia*. Although donned in what should seem an exotic costume to Westerners, the chief assumes a contemplative state of reverie, which Iacovleff portrayed so that we might focus on the universal human qualities shared between his subject and ourselves. This act of mutual identification helps to diminish the boundary between “us” and the “Other.”



Fig. 34. *Chief Wagenia*, pastel and gouache on paper, 1925.

Of all the tribes that the Citroën mission encountered, the Mangbetu held a special place for members of the expedition.⁹⁰ This was due to their ancient appeal, the unusual customs they practiced, and the extraordinary beauty of their women. Georges-Marie Haardt and Louis Audouin-Dubreuil, reflecting upon the expedition in 1927, expressed the following sentiments regarding the Mangbetu:

We believe, with Iacovleff, that there is definitely a Mangbetu art... Among the peoples we have seen, the Mangbetu occupy a special place. They seem to bear the stamp of ancient civilizations whose collapse left time to close in on them as the sepulchral stones were closed on the mummies of the pharaohs. Returned to light by modern exploration, as well as the excavations of the treasures of the Valley of the Kings, the Mangbetu do not have the harshness of new beings, but the decadent charm of old silhouettes.⁹¹

Iacovleff took particular interest in their elongated skulls and would devote many portrait studies to this Mangbetu custom. *Nobosudru*, the favorite of the king Touba, eventually became an iconic image associated with the *Croisière Noire* along with two others: one depicting *Orou*, another royal favorite, and one of *Chief Manzinga*.⁹² In all of these figures, especially *Nobosudru*, Iacovleff discovered echoes of Egyptian sculptures, with the almond-shaped eyes, distinctive profiles, and fixed expressions.⁹³ In eloquently capturing the Mangbetu's shared nature through an austere and contemplative

⁹⁰ Ibid., 68.

⁹¹ Georges-Marie Haardt and Louis Audouin-Dubreuil, *La Croisière Noire* (Paris: Éditions Plon, 1927), pp. 200-201. This book was also published in English by Cosmopolitan Book Corporation in New York, also in 1927.

⁹² Ibid., 68-73.

⁹³ Alexandre Iacovleff, *Dessins et Peintures d'Afrique, Croquis et notes de voyage* (Paris: Éditions Lucien Vogel, 1927).

facial expression, Iacovleff partly erased the exotic classification that Europeans placed upon the Mangbetu. The artist made the characteristics that would have typically disturbed some viewers less intimidating and foreign, due to his honest depiction of the human condition. In Iacovleff's portraits of Africans, race and the people themselves are not idealized; rather, what is idealized is the grander concept of a common humanity in every sitter.



Fig. 35. Nobosudru, the Favorite of King Touba, 1925.



Fig. 36. Ouru, the Mangbetu, illustration extracted from *Dessins et peintures d'Afrique*, plate 35.

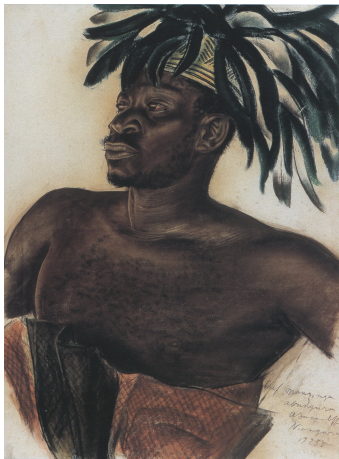


Fig. 37. The Chief Manzinga, mixed media on paper, 1925.

The African Oeuvre: Public Reception in the West

Iacovleff returned to Paris in 1925, and brought with him one hundred paintings, about four hundred drawings, and fifteen sketchbooks- records of a year's work in Africa.⁹⁴ Many of these works would be featured in an exhibition at the Galerie de Jean Charpentier, which opened on May 7, 1926. Iacovleff's African oeuvre was representative of a tremendous accomplishment. Most of the artists who previously traveled to Africa, such as Delacroix, did not make it past the Maghreb. Iacovleff, on the other hand, returned to Europe with a vast collection of unpublished documentation that provided a look into the lives of previously unknown civilizations, ethnicities, and tribes spread across the continent. This work is what comprised the Charpentier exhibition in 1926, the first one since the artist's return to the French capital.⁹⁵

For this exhibition, Iacovleff took advantage of the opportunity to clarify his relationship and association with ethnographic art. He wished to separate himself from the past generations of artist-explorers who were active in the European colonies before the First World War:

Putting myself through the route to Africa, I did not aim at documentation; I wanted to advance a little closer to the solution to a problem of an artist, that I would engage in another phase of my development, as I used the notation of human specimens, of the décor of the desert, to multiply what I knew, what I learned in other places as in my studio. [...] I do not want to speak ill of ethnography itself. In terms of scientific education, it has an undeniable price. However, without condemning, I think, for the artist, it offers too many opportunities for easiness and fun. As well, traveling, I kept myself guarded. I always discerned the themes that were offered. I avoided what I was told by a

⁹⁴ Audouin-Dubreuil, "Missions Citroën 1923-1933," *Alexandre Iacovleff: Itinérances*, 157.

⁹⁵ Caroline Haardt de La Baume, "Alexandre Iacovleff et Georges-Marie Haardt, une passion commune pour l'Afrique," *Alexandre Iacovleff: Itinérances*, 187.

long education, always careful not to enslave myself to detail and... surplus.⁹⁶

The Galerie Jean Charpentier was located on the rue Faubourg Saint-Honoré. Although narrow and superficially nondescript, this was (and remains) one of the most fashionable streets in the world due to the presence of major couture houses in Paris. This street has been the home of mansions, high-fashion stores, and exclusive, luxurious establishments since the eighteenth century. Considering the Galerie Charpentier's fashionable positioning, this location for Iacovleff's first African exhibition in 1926 was perfectly fitting. The gallery was never empty, and the exhibition received unanimous public and critical praise. Every painting was sold. Iacovleff's mastery was acknowledged and tribute was paid to the originality of his gaze upon Africa.⁹⁷ Arsène Alexandre, a critic for the magazine *Le Figaro*, summarized the popular talk: "No human eye has yet reflected this new nature... Iacovleff reported a harvest of truly amazing documents, drawings, and paintings. The word has exaggerated nothing."⁹⁸

The praise did not stop there. Robert-Rey, in a review for *L'Europe Nouvelle*, observed a relationship between Iacovleff, David, and Ingres. Furthermore, he related Iacovleff's work to the tradition of great designers who accompanied the expeditions of the nineteenth century. "Mr. Iacovleff has used his habit of experimenting with meticulous care. He draws wonderfully from

⁹⁶ Pascal Forthuny, "Alexandre Iacovleff en Afrique," *L'Art et les Artistes* (No. 65, mars 1926), pp. 186-188.

⁹⁷ Haardt de La Baume, *Alexandre Iacovleff: L'Artiste Voyageur*, 84; Haardt de La Baume, "Alexandre Iacovleff et Georges-Marie Haardt, une passion commune pour l'Afrique," *Alexandre Iacovleff: Itinérances*, 187.

⁹⁸ Arsène Alexandre, "LA vie artistique," *Le Figaro*, 7 May 1926.

nature, he is clever beyond anything you can imagine. [...] Parented by Davidians and Ingristes, Mr. Iacovleff is a very direct successor of the designers who accompanied Louis-Philippe on his southern expeditions.”⁹⁹

In October of 1926, a monumental exhibition was organized at the Louvre. This blockbuster show commemorated the two-year anniversary of the departure of Citroën’s Central-African mission. It was a hallmark event that illustrated the European fascination with African culture. All aspects of the exhibition, from the layout to the decoration, were meant to condense the African experience, transporting the viewer to the land of the exotic unknown. The entrance was composed of a set of twenty steps, clad in yellow and ochre cloth. Machetes were carved into a monumental arch covered in geometric patterns in black, white, and red.¹⁰⁰ Iacovleff’s work was exhibited in rooms dedicated to “negro art,” which contained hides of magnificent animals killed in the hunts, one of the true “caterpillar” automobiles, and various other treasured objects. Photographs were exhibited that were taken during the expedition, along with the documentary film by Léon Poirier.¹⁰¹

This exhibition enjoyed just as much critical acclaim as the first one at the Galerie Charpentier. The show was so popular that the director of the Louvre extended its duration until February of 1927.¹⁰² A columnist in *L’Illustration* magazine commended Iacovleff for his new way of representing

⁹⁹ Robert-Rey, “L’exposition Iacovleff,” review in *L’Europe Nouvelle*, 22 May, 1926.

¹⁰⁰ Audouin-Dubreuil, “Missions Citroën 1923-1933,” *Alexandre Iacovleff: Itinérances*, 93.

¹⁰¹ Haardt de la Baume, *Alexandre Iacovleff: L’Artiste Voyageur*, 88.

¹⁰² Ibid.

the “Other,” and verbally juxtaposed his works with iconic examples from the history of Western art:

The races of Africa now have their painter, who is a great painter. Negro art in all its forms is fashionable, and it is no doubt that he has brought elements of renewal to our modern taste. But the painting of M. Iacovleff does not at all precede a researched adaptation of Negro art. The artist has attempted to identify the essential features of various human specimens that he met. He, at the same time, expanded our classical conception of beauty. Without establishing a parallel between the Venus de Milo and the Black Venus, the Apollo Belvedere and the black warrior of the tropics, we cannot remain indifferent to the particular aesthetic of these faces, these bodies of bronze or ebony.¹⁰³

The success generated by the exhibitions of *La Croisière Noire* came as a slight surprise to Iacovleff. Upon his initial return to Paris, the artist communicated to his close friend Pascal Forthuny that he was afraid his work would be seen as pure ethnographic illustration.¹⁰⁴ The sale of *all* of his work, however, eradicated this doubt and uncertainty. In his African drawings and paintings, Iacovleff demonstrated a sense of consistency and homogeneity. Since his years in China and Japan, the artist communicated a search for absolute beauty in the human form through his portraits. This search culminated in his African work, in which Iacovleff synthesized the extraordinariness of the continent through simplicity of design and truth of form.

This homogeneity is seen in the consistent manner in which Iacovleff depicts figures placed on different levels of the social hierarchy. In fact, the artist erases these boundaries. There is no break between portraits of Nigerian

¹⁰³ Bréon, “Portraits du ‘Grand’ et du ‘Petit’ Monde,” *Alexandre Iacovleff: Itinérances*, 82.

¹⁰⁴ Haardt de La Baume, “Alexandre Iacovleff et Georges-Marie Haardt, une passion commune pour l’Afrique,” *Alexandre Iacovleff: Itinérances*, 188.

sultans and those of sorcerers in the rainforest. Although each has a different social role, the same tender humanity is displayed in all of them.¹⁰⁵

“Going African”: Iacovleff’s Exhibitions and the Exotic Fashion of Art Déco

After *La Croisière Noire* and the exhibitions associated with its discoveries, Parisian visual culture rapidly adopted the “African” style. Hairstyles and fashion design emulated “primitive” and tribal aesthetics, and these African design elements were integrated into the Art Déco movement.¹⁰⁶ Almost fifty years after the exhibitions at the Galerie Charpentier and the Louvre, Joseph Gropper commented on the popularity of Iacovleff’s exhibitions in 1972. He described the African fashion fad that overtook Paris in the 1920s, and the roots it had in the Louvre exhibition:

An interesting sidelight of this successful African exhibition was the epidemic of contemporary designs which appeared in the late 1920s, inspired by the exotic subject matter in Iacovleff’s drawings. Parisian designers were quick to seize upon these new ideas... the world of fashion “went African”; the vogue spread to interior decoration; even circus entrepreneurs began importing some of the natives to Europe and America.¹⁰⁷

Iacovleff’s own work from this period reflected Art Déco. One painting in particular, *Molénde, la Mangbetu*, successfully illustrates the fusion of African and European visual aesthetics. The painting was adapted from a sketch made during his time in Africa with the Mangbetu, and Iacovleff utilized geometric elements and tribal patterning to emphasize the “Africanness” of his model and the exotic setting. The juxtaposition of geometric forms against the “Mannerist”

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Schaffer, *Alexandre Iacovleff: Paintings and Drawings*, 7.

¹⁰⁷ Gropper, *Alexandre Iacovleff (1887-1938)*, 4.

curve of the model's body reveals the stylistic duality apparent in this painting. In keeping with the aesthetic of the Art Déco style, Iacovleff employs an academic exoticism tempered by a Cubist influence. As early as 1926, critics were already recognizing this marriage of stylistic concepts in the artist's work. Jean Galloti, a writer for *Vogue* magazine, demonstrates how paintings such as this were received at the time:

As for the portrait of a woman in Upper Ouellé, Belgian Congo, it gives us the full sense of a masterpiece... Ms. Moldendé presents her pretty face and a dress that is perfect for fashion, since it stops at the knees, and also starts only below the belt... She is in the manner of Josephine Baker, but with more purity, poise, and dignity. This is a black Venus, who has something of Diana... The pleasing design, very thorough, sought elegance in the lines of the contours of the bare, dark, and shiny skin, which stands out against a matte background painting in tempera, reproducing the wall adorned with square and beautiful geometric lines in white, black, and sienna.¹⁰⁸



Fig. 38. *Molendé the Mangbetu*, illustration extracted from *Dessins et peintures d'Afrique*, plate 36.

¹⁰⁸ Jean Galloti, (title unknown), *Vogue*, 1 May 1926.

Pierre Trévières, a contemporary critic, further expands upon the role of the *Croisière Noire* exhibitions, along with the Exposition of Decorative Arts in 1925, in establishing a connection between an “*art brut*” style and realistic works of modern artists. Upon visiting the exhibition at the Louvre, he highlighted overarching themes:

We know the undeniable influence exerted on the current development of original modern art by manifestations of primitive peoples. The precepts and the realizations of negro art were found in its supporters, followers, and fanatic apostles. The exhibition of the Black Cruise therefore presented this view of primordial interest.¹⁰⁹

The modern art to which Trévières referred was produced by members of the Parisian cultural avant-garde. Picasso and Braque started this trend in visual art when they rummaged through Parisian flea markets before the war in search of African masks possessing geometric patterns that would influence their Cubist style.¹¹⁰ The esteem in which jazz music and performances of Josephine Baker were held in Paris helped to popularize black culture. In the world of theatre, African sculptures inspired costume and set designs of productions during this time. The craze for “Africanized” exoticism also extended the Parisian decorative arts scene. Iacovleff’s work, in addition to the “negro art” presented at the Louvre exhibition, influenced the styles of artists involved in fashion and furniture design, such as Raoul Dufy, Jacques-Émile Ruhlmann, and Georges Lepape. Their own interpretations of these African

¹⁰⁹ Pierre Trévières, (title unknown), *Vogue*, 1 May 1926.

¹¹⁰ For more information on the Parisian avant-garde’s taste for the aesthetics of African masks, the reader is advised to consult William Rubin, “*Primitivism*” in *20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, Vols. 1 and 2 (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984.)

aesthetics were manifest in the geometry, simplicity, and plasticity of their designs, which came to epitomize the Art Déco movement.¹¹¹

Prime examples of Iacovleff's work in conjunction with the decorative art that embodied the Art Déco aesthetic were in the rooms of the private apartment of Georges-Marie Haardt. The director-general of the Citroën expeditions first came across Iacovleff's work through one of Lucien Vogel's travel albums featuring reproductions from the Asian sojourn. It was at Haardt's suggestion that Iacovleff became the official artist of the *Croisière Noire*. Always traveling in the same vehicle with the expedition leader, Iacovleff would form a friendship with him that lasted until Haardt's sudden death at the end of the *Croisière Jaune*.

One of Iacovleff's first admirers and collectors, Haardt showcased the artist's paintings, drawings, and sketches along with artifacts he acquired from his expedition through Central Africa. Located on the rue de Rivoli, the same street as the Louvre, Haardt's apartment was situated among fine shops and luxurious hotels for the wealthy class in Paris. Due to his intimate knowledge of Iacovleff's work, Haardt commissioned Jacques-Émile Ruhlmann, the famous furniture designer, to construct furniture, lighting, and recesses suitable for each technique that Iacovleff used.¹¹² Many of the artist's tempera paintings were framed in Macassar ebony, in keeping with the exotic African aesthetic. The furniture accompanying these works of art was also carved out of the same

¹¹¹ Haardt de La Baume, *Alexandre Iacovleff: L'Artiste Voyageur*, 89-90.

¹¹² Haardt de La Baume, "Alexandre Iacovleff et Georges-Marie Haardt, une passion commune d'Afrique," *Alexandre Iacovleff: Itinérances*, 191.

precious woods, indigenous to the wild regions of the continent. Ruhlmann also enhanced each work of art with chandeliers made of alabaster and iron in a typical Art Déco style, and brought individual focus to each work through the advantageous use of recessed space.¹¹³

An interesting aspect of the design aesthetic of Haardt's apartment is that the placement of certain portraits corresponded with the purpose of their respective rooms. Public figures, such as *Barma-Mata, the Sultan of Zinder*, and *The Sultan of Birao, Gadim Abouhella*, were hung in the reception room and sitting room. Portraits of figures from encounters with Africans of lower social standing and portraits of women were relegated to private rooms, such as the restroom and bedroom.¹¹⁴

Haardt's apartment came to be a reflection of the memories of Africa, as lived by two brave men who embarked upon a landmark expedition at the height of the colonial era. A living museum, featuring the harmonious integration of fine and decorative art on the rue de Rivoli, it created an integration of two aesthetic principles: exotic academicism and modern essentialism. This juxtaposition epitomized the eclecticism that manifested itself in the Art Déco movement of the 1920s and 1930s.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.



Fig. 39. Reception room of the Haardt apartment, 1927.



Fig. 40. Barma-Mata, Sultan of Zinder, illustration extracted from *Dessins et peintures d'Afrique*, plate 11.



Fig. 41. Sitting room of the Haardt apartment, 1927.



Fig. 42. *Aim Gabo, Marabout, Sultan of Birao*, mixed media on paper, 1925.



Fig. 43. Bedroom of Haardt apartment, 1927.



Fig. 44. *Indigenous Passage at Fort-Archambault*, oil and gouache on canvas, 1924.

A Transition: The Appeal of the Mediterranean

Back in Paris from his African sojourn, Iacovleff devoted himself to studio work. He spent much of his time transposing sketches he made on his Asian and African journeys into large-scale tempera paintings. During the latter half of the 1920s, the artist earned even greater notoriety by painting the portraits of eminent personalities of Parisian society.¹¹⁵ Increased celebrity provided financial security for Iacovleff, and because of this, he was able to buy a three-room apartment on the avenue Foch in the sixteenth arrondissement.¹¹⁶ The sixteenth arrondissement, located on the right bank of the River Seine, is defined by the presence of embassies and prestigious museums, schools, and ornate nineteenth-century buildings traditionally inhabited by members of the French high society and intellectuals. Furthermore, the avenue Foch was and remains today the home of Paris's wealthy foreign residents. Iacovleff's residence in this exclusive neighborhood of the city signifies that during the time between the *Croisière Noire* and the *Croisière Jaune*, he was extremely successful.

This new financial security also enabled Iacovleff to travel on vacations to Port-Cros, Capri, Corsica, Greece, and other Mediterranean islands. His trips to Port-Cros in the early 1920s have already been discussed in the context of his relationship with artists and literary figures during the first half of the decade. Iacovleff's most treasured destination, however, was Capri in Italy. Much like Port-Cros in the French Midi, Capri became a popular resort for European

¹¹⁵ du Plessix-Grey, "Alexandre Iacovleff: Un Vie," *Alexandre Iacovleff: Itinérances*, 28.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

artists, writers, and other members of the Parisian intellectual elite, as well as for Americans. The artist was so connected to the place that he bought a studio there, using the island as a retreat. He continued to visit in the summers up until his death in 1938. The Mediterranean environment, with its warm weather and bright colors, would eventually inspire Iacovleff to paint in a more colorful and expressionistic style. This new manner of painting gradually evolved into an almost complete departure from the neoclassicism of his early years. In addition, the artist was inspired by the work completed by John Singer Sargent on the same island years earlier.¹¹⁷ This stylistic transition was gradually integrated into Iacovleff's work during *La Croisière Jaune*, from 1931-1932, and made an impact on his American work of 1934-1937.

Although Iacovleff took advantage of periods of solitude and devotion to his work while he was living in Capri, he and his comrades from the *Croisière Noire* began to grow restless at the dawn of 1927. Eager for the chance at another adventure, Iacovleff wrote in his diary: "This issue can be read in the eyes of my traveling companions, having become accustomed to the nomadic life... The exhibitions, movies, and books that were behind our restless spirits soared again, looking for new adventures."¹¹⁸ As it turns out, Iacovleff and his fellow artists were not the only ones yearning for a thrill. During this time, André Citroën was also craving new excitement. He began to consider building automobile factories in China and wished to finance a new expedition, which

¹¹⁷ A discussion of Sargent's influence upon Iacovleff's artistic development will appear in the last chapter of this thesis.

¹¹⁸Forthuny, "Alexandre Iacovleff en Afrique," *L'Art et les Artistes*, 188.

would be more historic, monumental, and dangerous than the last. The industrialist wanted to employ the same artists who performed so well in Africa. In February of 1927, Audouin-Dubreuil played the role of messenger. On the seventh of that month, he wrote in his journal: "I write the way of the ruins, the road of conquest, that of the Great Wall of China, that of Marco Polo... Tomorrow, I go to Capri."¹¹⁹ These words foreshadowed the end of Iacovleff's retirement after his African sojourn. Wishing for adventure and longing for the China he once knew, Iacovleff would join his friends in embarking on an epic journey across the Asian continent by way of the ancient Silk Road, making history in their wake.

¹¹⁹ Audouin-Dubreuil, "Missions Citroën 1923-1933," *Alexandre Iacovleff: Itinérances*, 157.

CHAPTER 4: LE CROISIÈRE JAUNE

Preparation for the *Croisière Jaune*

In 1927, when Louis Audouin-Dubreuil brought Iacovleff out of retirement in Capri, the planning for the *Croisière Jaune* began immediately. From the beginning, the artist asserted his important role in this expedition: Iacovleff's hand would trace the first route of the journey on a large map of Asia in 1927.¹²⁰ Planning for this epic trek across the Asian continent would take four years to complete. Everyone involved was ecstatic at the prospect of retracing the route of the ancient Silk Road. The goal of the expedition was to open a road for commerce, and to facilitate human and cultural exchanges between the Occident and the Orient.¹²¹

Many institutions lent their support to this trans-Asiatic mission. Citroën employed veterans from the *Croisière Noire* to carry out the most important roles: Georges-Marie Haardt would be appointed director-general, Louis Audouin-Debreuil would be his right-hand man, and Alexandre Iacovleff would be the official artist. New faces, however, also joined the team. Joseph Hackin, the curator of the Musée Guimet, was appointed the archaeologist of the expedition. Teilhard de Chardin was in charge of paleontological and geological studies, and the writer Georges Le Fèvre was appointed the official historian.¹²² In 1935, Le Fèvre would write a book, originally published by the Société Anonyme André Citorën in Paris, which recounted in great detail the events of

¹²⁰ Audouin-Dubreuil, "Missions Citroën 1923-1933," *Alexandre Iacovleff: Itinérances*, 157.

¹²¹ Haardt de La Baume, *Alexandre Iacovleff: L'Artiste Voyageur*, 94.

¹²² Ibid., 95-97.

the *Croisière Jaune*.¹²³ Also accompanying the group was Maynard Owens Williams, a reporter for the National Geographic Society, and the filmmaker André Sauvage.¹²⁴

During these years of preparation, and throughout the mission itself, Iacovleff became very close to Joseph Hackin and Teilhard de Chardin. Because the artist was responsible for selecting the material the archaeologist and geologist would examine, the three men worked and studied in close association from 1927 until the end of the expedition in 1932. On visits to England, the men acquired maps of the countries of Central Asia from the National Geographic Society. They also obtained valuable information from the Trocadéro Museum and the Natural History Museum in Paris.¹²⁵ From 1927 to 1931, Iacovleff became a sort of archaeology student. Under the guidance of Joseph Hackin, the artist frequented the Musée Guimet, located in the sixteenth arrondissement of Paris, which had one of the largest collections of Asian art in the West. Here, he studied sculpture and anthropological artifacts along with René Grousset, the historian and orientalist who would be responsible for managing the museum in Hackin's absence.¹²⁶

Originally, the expedition was scheduled to depart from Beirut in 1931, and to travel through Syria, Iraq, and Persia. To bypass the Pamir

¹²³ Georges Le Fèvre, *An Eastern Odyssey: The Third Expedition of Haardt and Audouin-Dubreuil*, trans. Major-General Sir E. D. Swinton (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1935). This book was dedicated to the memory of Georges-Marie Haardt, who unexpectedly passed away in Beijing at the end of *La Croisière Jaune*. A preface written by André Citroën accompanies the text, as well as an introduction by Audouin-Dubreuil.

¹²⁴ Haardt de la Baume, *Alexandre Iacovleff: L'Artiste Voyageur*, 97.

¹²⁵ Audouin-Dubreuil, "Missions Citroën 1923-1933," *Alexandre Iacovleff: Itinérances*, 158.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

mountain range, which crossed Afghanistan, and to avoid the then-dreaded North-West India (now Pakistan), it planned to move north towards Persia and enter the Soviet Union in the south of Samarkand.¹²⁷ From here, it would break through northwest China through Sinkiang Province in order to pick up the old Silk Road to Beijing.¹²⁸ This original plan, however, was radically changed just three months prior to the scheduled departure. The group's visa to Russia was terminated in November of 1930 due to the new isolationist policies of Joseph Stalin. Henceforth, the mission was forced to navigate around the huge country. The alternative route proved to be more dangerous and complex than expected.¹²⁹

Initially planned to only last six months, the expedition encountered obstacles along its journey and lasted an entire year. The travelers were divided into two groups. The first group, referred to as *Pamir*, departed from Beirut and moved toward the Himalayas through Persia and Afghanistan. Georges-Marie Haardt was at the helm of this first group, accompanied by Alexandre Iacovleff and Audouin-Dubreuil. The second group, led by the brilliant explorer and naval captain Victor Point in the company of Teilhard de Chardin, departed west from Beijing.¹³⁰ The two groups were to meet in the eastern Pamir, and by way of the Gobi Desert they were to travel together back to Beijing and Indochina.¹³¹

¹²⁷ du Plessix-Grey, "Alexandre Iacovleff: Un Vie," *Alexandre Iacovleff: Itinérances*, 29-30.

¹²⁸ Ibid. 30.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Haardt de La Baume, *Alexandre Iacovleff: L'Artiste Voyageur*, 97.

¹³¹ Ibid.

The *Croisière Jaune* presented Iacovleff with challenges that he had never faced before in his travels. The iconoclastic Muslim communities in the Near East prohibited visual human representation.¹³² Furthermore, portraying feminine traits traditionally hidden behind a veil was forbidden in Islamic culture. Because of these constraints, the only female models we encounter in Iacovleff's work from the *Croisière Jaune* are of Chinese and Central Asian descent.¹³³ Technical problems plagued the artist as well. Harsh climates often spoiled the physical condition of his materials. Due to this inconvenience, it was often necessary for the artist to paint his subjects in haste.

Throughout his Asiatic journey, Iacovleff remained true to his custom of depicting members of both the upper and lower social spectrum. The artist portrayed sitters of the upper echelon in an academic style during his tour of the Persian Empire, which was characteristic of his previous oeuvre. Sitters of the popular classes, by contrast, were typically depicted within the context of a group or activity reflecting a social custom, and they were represented in a new, "expressionistic" style that had gradually emerged since the days just prior to Iacovleff's departure on the *Croisière Jaune*. Toward the end of the expedition, however, while in China and other areas of the Far East, this sketchy, loose expressionism became increasingly apparent. Iacovleff began to apply color and large brushstrokes in a manner that recalled Impressionism, almost replacing his academic style. In China, whether depicting sitters of title and

¹³² du Plessix-Grey, "Alexandre Iacovleff, Un Vie," *Alexandre Iacovleff: Itinérances*, 30-31.

¹³³ Ibid., 31.

wealth or those of average status, the artist began to close the stylistic gap that reflected social class.

The Persian Sojourn: The Debate Between Academicism and Expressionism

Iacovleff's journey through Syria and Aghanistan began this story of stylistic evolution. The expedition departed from Beirut on April 4, 1931, and entered the city of Palmyra a week later. The classical atmosphere of this majestic setting may well have inspired the artist. Although outwardly defined by mosques and other hallmarks of Islamic culture, the city's Hellenistic past was still apparent in the porticoes and colonnades of the ancient architecture.¹³⁴ From here, the mission moved on to cross the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Finally, they reached Baghdad, where they stayed for three days. Iacovleff observed and documented the daily life of the city, where he recorded the lives of caliphs and lowly water carriers.¹³⁵ Once in Afghanistan, the artist was able to spend more time on detailed portraits of his subjects.

In Baghdad and Kashmir, Iacovleff portrayed his "privileged" subjects with a sense of dignity and strength that reflected their social position. Two paintings in particular that embody this aspect of the artist's work are *Ghulam Mohamed, Kashmir* and *Bagdad, Le Chef du tribute*. The sculptural faces display superb draftsmanship and reveal Iacovleff's strong desire to capture the personality and humanity of his sitters. Although the artist has included aspects of his sitters' traditional costumes, the beautiful faces lure the observer into their unfocused gazes and establish a relationship between the model and

¹³⁴ Haardt de la Baume, *Alexandre Iacovleff: l'Artiste Voyageur*, 99.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

the viewer. The traditional headpieces and costumes henceforth become afterthoughts. Exoticism and Orientalism in these portraits become secondary. What the viewer notices first are the sitters' high and regal social positions, which foster a desire to identify with the objects of the viewer's own gaze. These works recall the portrait sketches of Ingres in the neoclassical stylistic tradition. The exactness of line and the restrained use of color likewise classify these portraits as neoclassical. Neutral in tone, they reflect the sobriety that is typical of portraits belonging to this stylistic movement.



Fig. 45. *Ghulam Mohamed, Kashmir*, mixed media on paper, 1931.



Fig. 46. *Bagdad, Le Chef du tribute*, sanguine and black crayon on paper, 1931.

Astonishingly, however, Iacovleff also began to work in a looser style at the beginning of the mission's journey in 1931. Brushstrokes become more visible, and his palette gradually becomes more vibrant. This style was usually employed to depict average members of society and their everyday customs.

“Group portraits” such as *Persian Gymnasts in Zour-Khané* and *Afghan Dancers at Mokour* are radical departures from the conservative and academic style the artist employed for portraits of the social elite. Precision and exactness of line and restrained use of color have been abandoned.



Fig. 47. *Persian Gymnasts in Zour-Khané*, oil on canvas, 1932.



Replacing these classical characteristics are compositions that reflect the movement, pa
Fig. 48. *Afghan Dancers at Mokour*, oil on canvas, 1931.

represented are using heavy iron arches and wooden shields to perfect their techniques. Tambourines and vocals punctuate their athletic games, which have apparently not changed since the time of Xerxes.¹³⁶ In the decision to depict this scene in an expressionistic style, Iacovleff succeeds in communicating the dynamic nature of the event to the viewer.



Fig. 49. Film still of a Mokour warrior dance, 1931.

A similar accomplishment is apparent in *Afghan Dancers at Mokour*. As the expedition followed the ancient path of the Silk Road, it stopped in Mokour, where it was received by a lavish reception offered by the governor. Warrior-dancers performed a traditional ritualistic dance.¹³⁷ In this painting, Iacovleff captures the sense of urgency in the dancers' movements, and the passionate dedication implied by their gestures. Their clothes and their hair billow with the wind and the intensity of their movements. A comparison of this painting to

¹³⁶ Ibid., 99.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 108.

a film still documenting this portion of the reception reveals how Iacovleff wished to provide us with a pictorial snapshot of his interpretation of the monumental occasion. Illustrating it in an expressionistic manner, the artist not only translated dynamic motion into a visual composition, but also communicated the feelings of awe and excitement that he himself must have felt when witnessing the event.

Individual portraits of people he encountered in Persia display an increased use of brilliant color and a simplification of form. The extraordinary sense of detail and precision apparent in both the earlier African portraits and the “elite” portraits of the Near East is diminished, replaced by a “sketchier” style. Iacovleff’s *Turkoman Horseman at Hérat* accurately embodies this stylistic transition. The sitter’s curious hairstyle is emphasized by broad brushstrokes, and his costume is illustrated in vibrant pinks and reds. The unfinished quality, slightly apparent in Iacovleff’s academic works of the same period, is taken to another level here, where the horseman’s hand, rifle, and other accouterments are reduced to sketches. The portrait seems to create the opposite effect of his classical portraits. Here, the sitter’s costume attracts initial attention, rather than the humanity communicated through his gaze. The subject, instead of relating to the viewer, becomes anonymous. Anonymity is reinforced in the absence in the title of a specific name to identify the sitter. Because of this inversion, exotic and Orientalist sentiments take the spotlight, instead of retreating to a position of secondary interest.



Fig. 50. *Turkoman Horseman at Hérat*, sanguine and pastel on paper, 1931.

Central Asia: The “Nomadic” Transition

Compared to what the near future would hold, the *Croisière Jaune* had encountered relatively few hardships in Persia. The crossing of the Himalayas challenged the mission on multiple occasions. The ascent of the mountains

through the “Collar of Bourzil,” the subsequent descent into the village of Astor, and their stay in the Indus Valley were events that provided them with nearly insurmountable physical difficulties.¹³⁸ Because of these obstacles and inclement weather conditions, Iacovleff found it very difficult to work. He would only discover solace again after the Pamir group’s arrival in Kochbel, which marked the beginning of their journey through Central Asia.

The group arrived in this nomadic haven through Misgar at the end of August 1931. Iacovleff eloquently summarized the transitory nature of this region:

The first contact with human environments in the new West Asia was deeply disconcerting. Crossroads of three continents, it is an area of old and constant migration. Centuries have disagreed and reformed ethnic races who bear the mark of a millennia of penetrations. Old customs were combined. Islam affixed this seal. Western influence is now level in this humanity by the uniformity of dress and her neutralized commercial spirit. It takes time, a constant observation and patient accumulation of a significant anthropological sampling to understand and discern deep racial differences that are not released at first sight.¹³⁹

Iacovleff’s depictions of the Kyrgyz nomads further embodied his stylistic transition from academicism to expressionism. In *A Kyrgyz Family in Their Yurt, at Kochbel*, we encounter the same loose brushwork of the Persian pictures of gymnasts and dancers from Tehran and Mokour. Now, however, the artist has taken his expressionistic style to another level. The color in this composition is even more vibrant than in the previous works. Oranges and blues are juxtaposed against purples and greens. Iacovleff pays attention to the

¹³⁸ Ibid., 114-121.

¹³⁹ Alexandre Iacovleff, *Dessins et Peintures d’Asie, Croquis de route et notes de voyage* (Paris: Éditions Lucien Vogel, 1934).

textured patterns of the nomads' traditional costumes, as well as to the patterns created by the materials used to construct the family's yurt, and how they relate to the textiles the nomads wear.



Fig. 51. *A Kyrgyz Family in Their Yurt (Tent)*, Kochbel, oil on canvas, 1931.

In Kochbel, a woman agreed to sit in a portrait session for the first time since the Pamir group departed from Beirut. *A Kyrgyz Woman and Her Soubachi Hat* portrays a woman wearing a traditional high white Soubachi turban. Decorated with shells, pearl buttons, and tiny silver bells, these hats were draped in capes decorated with braids, coral, and silver.¹⁴⁰ In this portrait, as in the *Turkoman Horseman at Hérat*, Iacovleff seems to have been more concerned with rendering the sitter's fantastic costume through the use of dramatic color than with communicating her humanity and personality to the viewer.

¹⁴⁰ Haardt de La Baume, *Alexandre Iacovleff: l'Artiste Voyageur*, 124.



Fig. 52. *A Kyrgyz Woman and Her Soubachi Hat*, sanguine and pastel on paper, 1931.

The Mousetrap at Sinkiang

During their travels through Central Asia, the Pamir group received word that the Chinese group, led by Victor Point, had been held prisoner for three months by the Marshall of the Sinkiang Province, M. King. The Pamir group immediately set out to rescue their comrades, but soon found itself in a

similar trap. Marshall King opposed the Chinese authorities and refused to honor or recognize any passport authorized by the official Chinese government.¹⁴¹ While King permitted the two groups to reunite, he detained both of them at Sinkiang for weeks.



Fig. 53. *Princess Nirgidma de Tourhout*, mixed media on paper, 1931.

During his detention at Sinkiang, Iacovleff had plenty of work. Here, he further developed his loose, sketchy style. The portrait that best illustrates this stylistic evolution is that of *Princesse Nirgidma de Tourhout*. Upon their initial meeting, she fascinated Iacovleff and his fellow Europeans. Her job as a manager of stores in the rue de la Paix during a stay in Paris enabled her to

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 126.

become fluent in French, English, and Russian.¹⁴² The Mongolian princess, a descendant of the Palta dynasty, fell in love with Victor Point. She wished to return to Paris with the mission.¹⁴³ Evident in her portrait is Iacovleff's attempt to render her in an expressionistic manner. She is garbed in her traditional royal costume, and once again textiles, materials, and patterns are of primary interest to the artist. The viewer's eye is guided to the face of the princess only after focusing on the intense blue of the fabric. The vertical lines in the central area of the costume enable this journey to take place. After focusing on Nirgidma's face, the eye is drawn up to the elaborate crown. This last focal point reinforces the royal status of the sitter.

While trapped in Sinkiang, the artist also painted portraits of other influential figures, such as the Minister of Public Instruction, Mr. Li, and Marshall King himself. As it turns out, it was the Princess Nirgidma and the diplomatic skills of Alexandre Iacovleff that finally helped the expedition to escape Sinkiang. On November 29, the group received official clearance and was allowed to depart.¹⁴⁴

The Gobi Desert: A New Portrait of His Comrades

It took the expedition nearly a month to cross the Gobi Desert. Here the men encountered more hardship due to freezing temperatures of thirty-three degrees below zero.¹⁴⁵ On his journey through the bitter cold terrain, Iacovleff created yet another group portrait of his comrades. This portrait of the

¹⁴² Ibid., 130.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 136.

explorers of the *Croisière Jaune* (*A Bivouac Fire in the Gobi Desert*) differs dramatically from the one portraying the men of the *Croisière Noire* (Figure 31). The latter, completed in 1924, reflects the linearity of Iacovleff's academic style. Its composition is reminiscent of a history painting, featuring multiple figures in neutral and muted colors. The artist, in reference to Velázquez in his masterpiece *Las Meninas*, includes himself in the painting. He gazes out into the eyes of the viewer like a true Renaissance man.



Fig. 54. *La Croisière Jaune* (*A Bivouac Fire in the Gobi Desert*), oil on canvas, 1931.

In the portrait of the group from the Gobi Desert, however, Iacovleff leaves himself out of the composition. He presents us with a much more intimate scene. Gathered closely around a fire to stay warm, the explorers

allow the viewer to interpret their conversation through the exchange of gestures and facial expressions. There is a touch of Baroque tenebrism, and the artist utilizes contrasts between light and dark as an opportunity to use vibrant yellows and deep blues. Although he has individualized the faces of every figure, Iacovleff nonetheless employs the same heavy brushstroke that he used throughout his Asian sojourn thus far. He takes advantage of the material of the fur coats to establish a “fuzzy” atmosphere, suitable for his newfound expressionistic style.

Beijing and Its Parameters: A Stylistic Culmination

The mission’s retreat from the Gobi Desert occurred at the dawn of 1932. As the group approached Beijing, it sought comfort in the Christian monastic communities of Liang Chou, Ning Hsia, and Chen Kung San.¹⁴⁶ By February 12, the expedition had reached the gates of Beijing. Fifteen days of celebration and welcome ensued. Deprived of social activity for so long, however, Iacovleff expressed his uneasiness upon their arrival:

Triumphal receptions. They at first gave us the illusion that the task has been completed, and the appearance of security and prizes gained by much effort. Why is the joy of our success altered by an indefinable melancholy? Is it contact with found civilization? Had we reached the goal and cleared our awareness of success? Uncertainties...¹⁴⁷

It was during Iacovleff’s visits to the Mongolian monasteries and his time in Beijing that the new, expressionistic style reached a point of culmination. This is seen in *An Old Mongol*. Here again, the exotic costume of the subject is of

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Iacovleff, *Dessins et Peintures d’Asie*. 1934.

prime importance, secondary to the focus on the subject's humanity. Sweeping brushstrokes and simplification of form remain, characteristic of the artist's new style. Vibrant and complementary colors of blue, orange, and yellow are juxtaposed throughout the composition. An interest in depicting the qualities of different materials is evident, as well as an interest in depicting contrasting patterns.



Fig. 55. *An Old Mongol*, mixed media on paper, 1932.

The arrival at Beijing also signaled the need for planning the route back to France. A separate departure in two groups was to traverse Indochina,

Burma, and Siam.¹⁴⁸ Iacovleff left with the first group on March 12 from Haipkong. The artist recalls a meeting he had with Georges-Marie Haardt before his departure:

One evening, when we went down by the sea, and soon after to Indochina, Haardt came into my cab. He decided to rest a few days in Hong Kong to rid himself of the flu, and he did not leave from Beijing. He would benefit from there to get the next boat to join us in Hanoi. We walked into the mist and the siren launched at regular intervals its dreary call...¹⁴⁹

This meeting was the last between Iacovleff and Georges-Marie Haardt.

The director of the Citroën expeditions died of pneumonia in Hong Kong on March 16, 1932, at forty-eight years of age. The death of Haardt signaled the premature end of the *Croisière Jaune*, and Iacovleff made the unexpected trek by boat back to France, alongside the body of his dear friend.

The Return to Paris: Iacovleff and Public Success

Despite this tragic end to the journey, the members of the *Croisière Jaune* were greeted with much enthusiasm, not unlike the welcome expressed upon their return from Africa in 1925. Immediately upon his arrival in Europe, the artist retreated to his studio on the avenue Junot, analyzing notes and sketches he made throughout the journey. In June of 1932, a few months after the mission's return to Paris, a huge retrospective of the Citroën expeditions from 1922 to 1932 was organized at the Palais des Expositions Citroën in Europe Square.¹⁵⁰ This exhibition was dedicated to the memory of Georges-Marie Haardt. A large amount of space was devoted to the discoveries of the *Croisière*

¹⁴⁸ Haardt de La Baume, *Alexandre Iacovleff: l'Artiste Voyageur*, 142.

¹⁴⁹ Iacovleff, *Dessins et Peintures d'Asie*, 1934.

¹⁵⁰ Haardt de La Baume, *Alexandre Iacovleff: l'Artiste Voyageur*, 149.

Jaune, with a focus on photojournalism and archaeological and geological discoveries. An entire room was devoted to the ethnographic studies of Alexandre Iacovleff.¹⁵¹ In admiring the quality of these Asian works, Martin Birnbaum states:

There is a logical coherence about them. Not commonplace cleverness but masterly assurance and infallible precision characterize them. Some contemporary artists, who must have felt humiliated and discouraged by such bewildering uncanny ability, referred to Iacovleff rather disdainfully as a man who possessed merely a photographic eye, but no camera ever seized a character so profoundly and with such communicative power.¹⁵²

At the end of the exhibition, Iacovleff retired to his studio in Capri. In a letter to his friend Joseph Hackin, he described his whereabouts: "I spent six weeks in Capri where I worked extensively redoing the whole trip and early forms of sketches that will help me this winter for pictures and panels of larger size."¹⁵³ In Capri, the artist was preparing for an exhibition of his work from the *Croisière Jaune* at the Hôtel Jean Charpentier during the months of May and June of 1933. More than one hundred paintings and two hundred-fifty drawings were included in the show. The work was organized into three parts: landscape panoramas in large format, ethnographic documentation, and scenes of everyday life.¹⁵⁴ Iacovleff also dedicated this exhibition to the memory of Georges-Marie Haardt, and Louis Audouin-Dubreuil commended the artist's efforts in the preface of the exhibition catalogue.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Birnbaum, *Iacovleff and Other Artists*, 10.

¹⁵³ Letter from Alexandre Iacovleff to Joseph Hackin, dated 29 August 1932, Archives of the Guimet Museum.

¹⁵⁴ Haardt de La Baume, *Alexandre Iacovleff: l'Artiste Voyageur*, 150.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

Iacovleff's success also translated into the publishing world. In 1932, Serge Elisseeff wrote and published *Le Théâtre japonais (Kabuki)*, an art travel book decorated with reproductions of works that Iacovleff composed during his first trip to the Far East in 1919. Lucien Vogel, a long-time friend of the artist, published *Dessins et peintures d'Asie* in 1934. This volume featured road sketches and travel notes, as well as fifty reproduction plates of his works.¹⁵⁶

The grief that struck the artist at the death of his dear friend Georges-Marie Haardt placed a large black cloud over the success that Iacovleff achieved upon his triumphant return to Paris in 1932. In letters written to his friend and fellow explorer Joseph Hackin, he confessed to being overwhelmed by melancholy. He spent much of his time in solitude, devoting himself entirely to his work. Yearning for a new adventure and eager to leave the city that contained so many memories of his disappeared friend, Iacovleff accepted an offer to go across the Atlantic in 1934; indeed, it was an offer he could not refuse.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 151.

CHAPTER 5: THE AMERICAN SOJOURN

It was a great pleasure to me to receive your kind letter. I quite agree with you that your proposition represents a very interesting opportunity for me to go to America, see the life, the country, and, I hope, to do some work. It represents also a possibility to be useful to a group of people, who have chosen the artistic career. So I decided to give an affirmation answered in case I receive an official offer from the School of Fine Arts in Boston. I thank you so much for the appreciations of my pedagogical qualities, which I hope to be able to justify. Please remember me to Mrs. Forbes. I would be very glad to see you and your family in Boston.¹⁵⁷

Edward Forbes and An Invitation to America

The excerpt quoted above is from a series of letters between Alexandre Iacovleff and Edward W. Forbes. On January 17, 1934, Forbes contacted the artist out of the blue. Forbes began his letter to Iacovleff with an acknowledgement of their enjoyable but infrequent contact through the years: “It is many years since I have had the pleasure of seeing you, but I often think of how much Mrs. Forbes and I enjoyed working with you in the winter of 1922 and the pleasure we have had in seeing you occasionally since then.”¹⁵⁸ He made Iacovleff aware of an opportunity at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. The Museum School, in looking to fill a position for a new professor in the fall of 1934, was seeking the best artist in the world for the job. When the staff of the school asked who would be the best man they could possibly get, they were told that “they would be very fortunate if they could

¹⁵⁷ Letter from Alexandre Iacovleff to Edward W. Forbes, n.d., Harvard Art Museums Archives, Edward Waldo Forbes Papers (1867-2005), HC2 Box 47 Folder 1151: Iacovleff, Alexandre [1924-1939]. The letter was written from Iacovleff’s studio at 11 Avenue Junot in Paris. Although it is not dated, based on the dates of related correspondence, I believe it was written at some point between 17 January and 28 February 1934.

¹⁵⁸ Letter from Edward W. Forbes to Alexandre Iacovleff, 17 January 1934, Harvard Art Museums Archives, Edward Waldo Forbes Papers (1867-2005), HC2 Box 47 Folder 1151: Iacovleff, Alexandre [1924-1939].

persuade you [Iacovleff] to come.”¹⁵⁹ Forbes believed that the opportunity to come to America to teach drawing for one year would appeal to the artist. Furthermore, a substantial monetary benefit was attached: “...the School would be willing to offer you five thousand dollars for teaching two days a week from October until June. That would give you an opportunity to paint portraits or anything else you wanted to paint in the remainder of your time.”¹⁶⁰

It took a few weeks for things to develop. On February 20, 1934, Forbes wrote the artist again upon receiving his response. It seems as if Forbes acted as a “middle man” between the artist and William James, the Chairman of the Administrative Council of the Museum School. Forbes alerted Iacovleff that upon the Committee’s authorization, James sent a formal invitation to Paris.¹⁶¹ The rest is history. For our purposes here, it is necessary to cite some biographical information regarding the life of Edward Forbes, which will explain his connection to the Museum School in Boston as well as his later affiliation with the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard.

In view of Forbes’s privileged family background, it comes as no surprise that Iacovleff would have known him in Paris prior to the friendship that developed while the artist lived in Boston. Forbes was born on Naushon Island in Massachusetts, southwest of Cape Cod. He was the son of William Hathaway

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid. The amount of \$5,000 in 1934 would translate to \$84,623 in today’s world. This was quite an offer, and remains as a testament to the degree by which Iacovleff was revered and coveted by academic art institutions in America.

¹⁶¹ Letter from Edward W. Forbes to Alexandre Iacovleff, 20 February 1934, Harvard Art Museums Archives, Edward Waldo Forbes Papers (1867-2005), HC2 Box 47 Folder 1151: Iacovleff, Alexandre [1924-1939]. In this letter, Forbes cites James as his dear friend, “a charming gentleman... the son of the well-known philosopher William James.”

Forbes, the founder and first president of the American Bell Telephone Company. His mother was Edith Emerson Forbes, daughter of the famed poet Ralph Waldo Emerson.¹⁶² As was expected of a young member of the privileged American social class, Forbes attended Harvard University and graduated in 1895 with an A. B. degree. From a young age, he acquired a background in classics. A few years later, in 1898, he traveled Europe and began his extensive study of art and art history.¹⁶³ He showed particular interest in Italian “primitive” paintings and began to buy his first Italian works from this European period. Both Forbes and the young Iacovleff shared an interest in paintings of the Quattrocento.

A few years after his return from his European study, in 1903, Forbes was appointed a Trustee of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.¹⁶⁴ This position established his connection with the Museum School. As it turns out, Forbes gave Iacovleff an entrée to the greater arts community of Boston and America at large. In 1904, Forbes became a trustee of the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard. By 1909, he became the Director of the Museum.¹⁶⁵ Although he continued to teach during his tenure as Director of the Fogg, his main accomplishments were the improvement of the physical spaces of the museum and augmenting its endowment and its essential operation, while dramatically expanding its collections.¹⁶⁶ Many of these accomplishments were inextricably linked to the

¹⁶² Harvard Art Museums Archives, The Edward Waldo Forbes Papers (1867-2005): A Guide, HC2.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

dedication of Paul J. Sachs, who was appointed to the position of Assistant Director of the museum in 1915. Together, the two men sponsored archaeological expeditions to China, Iraq, Afghanistan, Egypt, and Turkey during the 1920s and 1930s, resulting in numerous exhibitions of Asian art.

Forbes's support of Eastern archaeological expeditions reflects the American appetite for the exotic during the Art Déco period of the inter-war era. Although the exact circumstances of their initial encounter are uncertain, it is safe to assume that Iacovleff and Forbes were connected through their mutual love of exotic and Oriental cultures. Frequenting elite Parisian social circles would also have facilitated their connection.

Iacovleff as a Professor: His Time at the Museum School

Few sources provide information about Iacovleff's teaching style and his tenure at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Martin Birnbaum's *Jacovleff and Other Artists* (1946) is the only published source that provides testimonial of Iacovleff as a professor.¹⁶⁷ Birnbaum begins his discussion of Iacovleff in Boston by citing the alleged reason behind the artist's acceptance of the Museum School's offer: to achieve modest economic freedom. Because he supported his mother and his sister, as well as other members of his family, he needed a position with a constant income.¹⁶⁸ After his arrival, "everyone connected with that institution soon recognized that a dynamic, arresting personality, a constructive critic, and an inspiring teacher was now in charge.

¹⁶⁷ Martin Birnbaum was one of the artist's dealers, and became a great friend to him throughout the years. A more detailed examination of their relationship will be further examined later in this chapter.

¹⁶⁸ Birnbaum, *Jacovleff and Other Artists*, 14.

He became absorbed in his work and the acumen of his utterances invested the slightest subject with a kind of enchantment.”¹⁶⁹



Fig. 56. Alexandre Iacovleff teaching, School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, c. 1934-1937.

Above all else, Iacovleff nurtured artistic creativity in his students. He told Birnbaum that as a teacher, his main concern was how to discipline his students without completely destroying their “primitive instincts,” while simultaneously providing the means for the flourishing of their creative urges.¹⁷⁰ Although Iacovleff was an impeccable draftsman, he warned his students against placing too much emphasis on manual training, which was only good when applied in the name of the creative needs of the artist.¹⁷¹ Knowledge of media and technique was important to him, and he had a passion

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 15.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

for construction and fine craftsmanship. In fact, he showed disdain for the shoddy workmanship of his contemporaries who enjoyed their lives on a pretentious pedestal.¹⁷² However, he also encouraged his pupils to use their traditional training to achieve artistic freedom. Birnbaum recalls an experience from one of Iacovleff's lectures:

In the course of one of his lectures, Iacovleff said, "I hate fanaticism, but I myself am a fanatic on the subject of toleration." He explained his theories in rather halting English which was amplified by brilliant actual demonstrations. Iacovleff scoffed at dry academic standards but when he swiftly painted an académie from the nude model before the school's faculty to explain his personal approach and technique, the result was dateless, worthy of an old master at his best. It became an unfinished figure impregnated with a vague melancholy which only life distills. Small wonder that admirers compared him to Holbein and Ingres.¹⁷³

In addition to Birnbaum's recollections, I have uncovered some unpublished reminiscences of Iacovleff as a professor. One testimonial in particular reflects an immense admiration Iacovleff enjoyed with students. In one of her letters from 1971, Edna Hibel recalled:

Along with many others, I adored him and he not only was my great inspiration from age 17 to 20, but his advice and enthusiasm have influenced me through all these years. It was certainly great luck for a young artist to be in the orbit of such a man (he was a God-man to me) so you can imagine how it felt when he called me a "wonder-child," but didn't let me swell with too much pride, and added that with such facility. I could get lazy; not to let my great God-man down, did I work: doing anything and everything that was difficult, but always with his encouragement. He made the Museum School a gay, lively, exciting working [environment]. I don't ever remember him walking alone, and even on his days when he gave each student a critique, there were at least ten to twenty people right with him: always William James, guests, students. His walk was fast and springy and most everyone had to run to keep up with him.... His demonstrations were fantastic. I once saw him draw a nude, full size, standing right next to the model (so that all of the

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 16.

students could see him draw it as if looked from their perspectives). A great feat. If I sound like an adoring over-enthusiastic school girl, it is because I am. When I think of that beautiful man, I become again the very impressionable, lucky, loving-every-minute Edna Hibel.¹⁷⁴

Some of Iacovleff's demonstration sketches still survive, seven of which are currently housed in Tate Britain's prints and drawings collection. The descriptions above of Iacovleff's methods resonate in these renderings of a female nude. Talent like that of an "Old Master" certainly emanates from the thorough yet somehow "unfinished" compositions. The sculptural quality combined with adept shading reflect the artist's tendency toward an academic style, while the slight irregularities in the forms demonstrate his new modern outlook.

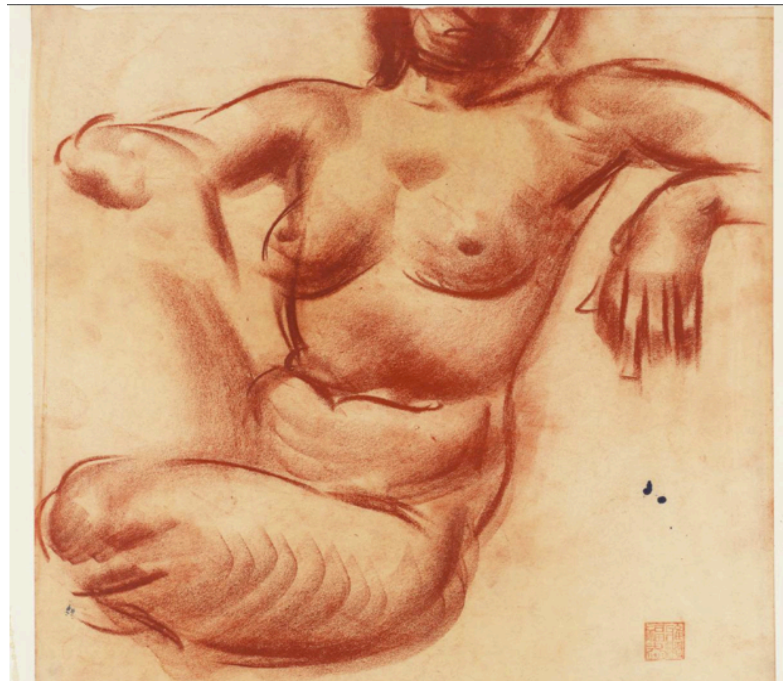


Fig. 57. *Female Torso*, from *Seven Drawings of the Female Model*, chalk on paper, c. 1933-38.

¹⁷⁴ Letter from Edna Hibel to Joseph Gropper, 7 November 1971, Joseph Gropper Papers-Gropper Art Galleries, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, microfilm reels 1021-1022. An additional letter, written to Hibel from another one of Iacovleff's students a few months prior, recalls Iacovleff's proud admiration for Hibel.



Fig. 58. *An Arm and a Hand*, from *Seven Drawings*, chalk on paper, c. 1933-38.



Fig. 59. *Recumbent Model*, from *Seven Drawings*, chalk on paper, c. 1933-38.



Fig. 60. *Crouching Model from the Front*, from *Seven Drawings*, chalk on paper, c. 1933-38.

The Early American Market and Martin Birnbaum

The small community of Iacovleff scholars has traditionally assumed that the Russian's first encounter with Americans evolved from his invitation to teach at the Museum School in Boston. This comes as no surprise due to the overwhelming portion of correspondence, inventory records, and account books that remain unpublished. With the assistance of the staff at the Harvard Art Archives, the Archives of American Art at the Smithsonian Institution, and the Vose Galleries of Boston, a substantial portion of these documents has been unearthed, and along with them, valuable information regarding Iacovleff's American sojourn.

Iacovleff's relationship with American dealers and collectors began as far back as 1919, around the time of the artist's arrival in Paris, following his two-year journey through China and Japan. Robert B. Harshe, who in 1921 would become the executive director of the Art Institute of Chicago, encountered Iacovleff's Chinese work at the Russian Consulate in Paris. He sought the work featured in the Russian Exhibition in the Venice International of 1914.¹⁷⁵ The Asian works had just arrived at the Embassy from China, and officials at the Consulate spoke of them admiringly. Harshe shared the same sentiments of these men, and had high hopes of showing the artist's work at the Carnegie International exhibition of 1920. Unfortunately, Carnegie's taste was too

¹⁷⁵ Robert B. Harshe, *Paintings, Watercolors, and Drawings by Alexandre Evguenievitch Iacovleff* (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 1922), p. 1. Harshe was looking for this work because he wanted to feature it in an International Exhibition of paintings for the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh. He traveled to eight different European countries in search of work for this landmark exhibition.

conservative for the new and profound manner in which Iacovleff portrayed the humanity of the Chinese actors and members of the lower classes, despite being rendered in an academic style.¹⁷⁶

Harshe finally arrived at the chance to exhibit Iacovleff's work in America three years later at an exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1922.¹⁷⁷ One of the main patrons of the show, Abram Poole, provided support and admiration for Iacovleff that proved to be highly instrumental in the artist's American career, his popularity with American collectors, and the stylistic changes he experienced later in his life.¹⁷⁸ The success of the exhibition was measured in its travels across the eastern portion of the country to urban centers such as Chicago, Detroit, New York, and Boston.¹⁷⁹ It is perhaps in the context of this exhibition when Edward Waldo Forbes worked in association with Iacovleff in Paris in 1922, as has been mentioned at the beginning of this chapter.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 1-2.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 2. Harshe mentions the name of Abram Poole in the context of this exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago, but reveals little other information about this man, other than the fact that he saw these Chinese works in Paris in 1919 as well, and responded very enthusiastically to them.

¹⁷⁸ Abram Poole, an American painter who was mainly active in Chicago, was married to poet, playwright, and novelist Mercedes de Acosta, who was famed for her lesbian sexual identification. Although the couple divorced in 1935, Poole had connections to prominent families in the American intellectual community through his marriage to his wife. Mercedes's sister Maria married landscape architect A. Robeson Sargent, the son of Charles Sprague Sargent, who became the first director of Harvard University's Arnold Arboretum. Mercedes's sister Rita was known to be a great beauty, and the image of her face was reproduced by many prominent American artists including the sculptor Malvina Hoffman and painter John Singer Sargent, among others. Iacovleff's relationship with Malvina Hoffman has been discussed in previous chapters of this thesis. Iacovleff's relationship and connection to Sargent proved to be instrumental in influencing the former's stylistic transition during the last eight years of his life. For more information regarding Abram Poole and Mercedes de Acosta, the reader is advised to consult Robert A Schanke, *That Furious Lesbian: The Story of Mercedes de Acosta* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003), pp. 35-170.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 7.

Only a short time later, Iacovleff met his first American dealer, Martin Birnbaum, in Paris.¹⁸⁰ Birnbaum functioned as an instrumental link between the artist's American and French collectors. Admiration of his talent is evoked in the dealer's book *Jacovleff and Other Artists*, printed in 1946 in a limited edition of 2,000 copies. It continues to hold a place as the only book published in English partly devoted to the artist. In it, Birnbaum begins his discussion of Iacovleff with an explanation of the means by which he first encountered his work: through the American painter John Singer Sargent. The details of this initial encounter with Iacovleff are displayed below:

It was at John Sargent's suggestion that I first went to the restaurant La Biche on the Rue des Martyrs in Paris, not merely to feast on incomparable *canard aux petits pois*, but to see the wall decorations and drawings on which the distinguished American painter lavished almost extravagant praise. These works were by Alexandre Jacovleff, one of the many Russian *émigrés* who were then enriching the cultural life of France, and they revealed the hand of an exceptionally endowed master. With the help of Dunoyer de Segonzac, one of Jacovleff's admirers, I lost no time in finding the elusive Russian's studio on the summit of a hill overlooking Paris near the Moulin de la Galette, and when his singularly elegant form came bounding toward me through a garden gateway, I felt instantly that his was a unique individuality... We mounted the four flights to a studio littered with drawings and paintings. Almost all of the latter were in cool tempera, for Jacovleff had already grown to dislike shiny, sticky oil paint. Many of the heads of Chinese and Africans were drawn larger than life and his style was clearly related to that of other Russians of my acquaintance - Gregorieff, Sorin, Soudbinin - and

¹⁸⁰ The Martin Birnbaum Papers, archived on a series of microfilm reels by the Archives of American Art of the Smithsonian Institution, reveal a substantial amount of information regarding Birnbaum's dealings. He bought, sold, and circulated the work of such esteemed French artists as Jacques-Louis David, Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, Eugène Delacroix, and Pierre-Joseph Prud'hon, among others. He also dealt in the work of American artists including Winslow Homer, John Singer Sargent, and James Abbott McNeill Whistler. Birnbaum, dividing his time between the United States and Paris, played an instrumental role in the development of the market for American and French art alike.

especially Vasilli Choukhaïeff, his *camarade d'atelier*, with whom he decorated a Moscow concert hall and held a joint exhibition.¹⁸¹

The exact year of the encounter between Iacovleff and Birnbaum is unclear from this passage. Although La Biche no longer exists, photographic documentation of Iacovleff's murals were reproduced in an issue of *L'Art et L'Artistes* (Figures 12-14). We know from the year of its publication that the restaurant remained in Montmartre at least up until 1923. Birnbaum's reference to portraits of both Chinese and Africans, however, leads me to believe that the dealer had not met the artist until at least 1925, after Iacovleff returned to Paris from the *Croisière Noire*.¹⁸²

Fortunately, evidence of Iacovleff's relationship with Birnbaum is not limited to *Jacovleff and Other Artists*. The draftsman continued to occupy Birnbaum's thoughts in the context of letters exchanged from 1930 to 1943 with one of his most avid and coveted clients, Grenville L. Winthrop (b. 1864- d. 1943).¹⁸³ These letters reveal that Iacovleff maintained a close relationship with his dealer, who seems to have conducted frequent studio visits to select

¹⁸¹ Birnbaum, *Jacovleff and Other Artists*, 3. Birnbaum's mention in this account of Dunoyer de Segonzac functions as evidence of the Nabis' influence in Iacovleff's work from the late 1920s and early 1930s, with particular respect to his portraits of Parisian socialites and elite Francophiles such as Florence Conrad. As a member of the Nabis group, Dunoyer de Segonzac and Iacovleff must have exchanged ideas and influence.

¹⁸² Seeing as how the exhibition at the Hôtel Jean Charpentier did not take place until 1926, it is more likely that the two men met at some point during this year, when Iacovleff was preparing the work in large format that was featured in this show.

¹⁸³ Winthrop was a wealthy American lawyer and banker, but his true passion resided in collecting art. Upon his death in 1943, Winthrop donated a large portion of his collection of the Fogg Museum at Harvard. Among the items in this collection were Iacovleff's paintings and drawings that the collector bought from Birnbaum, along with important works by Delacroix, Ingres, and the British Pre-Raphaelites, as well as world-renowned watercolors by Sargent. As far as I currently know, there is no way to be certain that Winthrop left all of his Iacovleff works to the museum, or just a small portion of them. It is entirely possible that some of them may still be in his family's collection. Others may have been sold on the secondary market for a profit.

work for collectors. In one of the letters that Birnbaum sent to Winthrop, the popularity of the artist's work in France is clearly illustrated:

... I am making my final choice of Jacovleff today. There is little left, because Citroën the automobile man snaps up everything. However, they are large drawings and I have his best landscape drawing and figures of every period. Moreover he will let me change any I secure now, for drawings he may make in Tunis before he starts on his two-year tour of Asia for Citroën. The importance of your collection has, of course, been explained to him...¹⁸⁴

It is safe to assume here that André Citroën avidly sought to buy Iacovleff's work upon the closure of the *Croisière Noire*, and that many of these paintings and drawings likely remain in the private collection of Citroën's estate. Birnbaum worked hard to cultivate the potential sale referenced above, and only one month later, sent Winthrop another letter, describing the manner in which he secured four large Iacovleff drawings for his client's collection. The importance of the artist's work was explained to the collector:

After sending off my letter I saw Jacovleff and secured:

1. Landscape (French Midi) Port Cros
2. The Century Old Woman. The only drawing he retained from his Oriental album.
3. The Neapolitan (Girl's Head, 1928)
4. The Chinese Workman...

The first four are intended for you and cost me 16000 francs or 17,600 francs net to you... I shall hold these drawings until I have other items to make a shipment. They are, alas, very large, but remarkable, and I will add one more drawing if he brings back anything very fine from Tunis in May; hoping that this will meet with your approval. I hope you will "experiment" with Jacovleff, Gill, Segonzac, Sterne, and a few other talented contemporaries, and I may add that Jacovleff though still young is already represented in all modern museums in Europe. I secured a fine group of his paintings in tempera for Mr. Clark and secured the

¹⁸⁴ Letter from Martin Birnbaum to Grenville L. Winthrop, dated 2 January 1930, from the Harvard Art Museums Archives, The Grenville L. Winthrop Papers (1864-1943), SC21 Box 7 Folder 190: Jacovleff, A. [Russian] [1930-1933].

drawings, as a result at very moderate prices... 17,600 francs- \$691.90 for the four.¹⁸⁵



Fig. 61. *Landscape, Port Cros, French Midi*, mixed media on paper, 1920.



Fig. 62. *The Century Old Woman*, mixed media on paper, 1919.



Fig. 63. *Head of a Neapolitan Girl*, chalk and pastel on paper, 1928.

¹⁸⁵ Letter from Martin Birnbaum to Grenville L. Winthrop, dated 1 February 1930, Harvard Art Museums Archives, Grenville L. Winthrop Papers (1864-1943), SC 21 Box 7 Folder 190: Jacovleff, A. [Russian] [1930-1933]. I have tried to no avail to uncover more information about the identity of said "Mr. Clark." Discovering how much this collector paid for his tempera paintings by Jacovleff would certainly pave the way for a much larger degree of knowledge regarding the contemporary market for Jacovleff's work in America.

These last few sentences are of particular importance. Birnbaum implies that he obtained the drawings for a very reasonable price. The amount of 17,600 francs, or \$691.90, translates to roughly \$9,618.90 in today's world.¹⁸⁶ It would have been considered quite a high value in 1930, especially for drawings and works on paper. If a series of Iacovleff's drawings was sold at this "very moderate price" during the artist's own lifetime, one must consider what the average cost for a group of his drawings would have been during the 1920s and 1930s. Analyzing these values provides us with insight into the financial aspect of the artist's life. They are testaments to the amount of revenue Iacovleff was generating through the sale of his work. In order to support the women of his family, own an apartment in the Sixteenth Arrondissement as well as own his own studios in Paris and Capri, and to take multiple summer vacations to Mediterranean, he must have received a large income.

A few months later, Birnbaum was again in touch with Winthrop. The letter makes reference to Iacovleff's brief trip in 1930 to Tunis just before his departure on Citroën's *Croisière Jaune*:

... My next visit was to Iacovleff. He brought back some important paintings from North Africa and a few drawings. He did not want to let me have any, because he wishes to show them, but I finally succeeded in acquiring the two I wanted, one for you, and one for myself. Yours is a full length Tunisian in a blue embroidered jacket and a study of his back, at the side (3,300 francs). Like all his drawings, it is large (18 x 25 in) otherwise I would be tempted to acquire more of them. Your examples

¹⁸⁶ It must be acknowledged that this is not an exact calculation. Although I arrived at the sum of \$9,400.17 by means of a computer-generated inflation calculator, the actual number likely translates to an even higher number. All subsequent calculations contain margins of error of this type.

cover all periods and types, including his best landscape and a rare Chinese drawing.¹⁸⁷



Fig. 64. *A Citizen of Tunis in a Blue Velvet Jacket*, chalk and pastel on paper, 1930.

Again, Winthrop paid a relatively substantial amount of money for a drawing, especially when the price is compared to that of a painting of a contemporary artist of the time. An amount of \$132.00 would be the equivalent of \$1,835.08 in today's age, which was not an inexpensive purchase for Depression era American collectors during the early 1930s.

Although there must have been further communication between Birnbaum and Winthrop regarding Iacovleff between 1931 and 1932, none of it seems to have survived. The reason for this absence is, in large part, due to the fact that during this year-long period, the artist was traversing the Asian

¹⁸⁷ Letter from Martin Birnbaum to Grenville L. Winthrop, dated 18 April 1930, Harvard Art Museums Archives, Grenville L. Winthrop Papers (1864-1943), SC21 Box 7 Folder 190: Iacovleff, A. [Russian] [1930-1933].

continent with the *Croisière Jaune*, and was not available to provide Birnbaum with recent work for his collectors. It is not until 1933 that we find the next letter exchanged between the two men. It concerns an important drawing of a Japanese actor:

Allow me to thank you for your check in payment for the Alexandre Iacovleff pastel drawing of a Japanese actor in a Warrior Dance. Pursuant to your kind permission, I shall have the drawing on my wall at this apartment until you give me further instructions, when I shall deliver the said drawing to your residence.¹⁸⁸



Fig. 65. *The Actor Ichimura Uzaemon as a Samurai*, sanguine and chalk on paper, 1933.

The Grenville Winthrop papers show that there was an entry in his account book between pages 62 and 63: “Nov. 16 Drawing by Iacovleff” and

¹⁸⁸ Letter from Martin Birnbaum to Grenville L. Winthrop, dated 20 November 1933, Harvard Art Museums Archives, Grenville L. Winthrop Papers (1864-1943), SC21 Box 7 Folder 190: Iacovleff, A. [Russian] [1930-1933]. This important drawing would later be featured as No. 50 in the Memorial Exhibition of Paintings and Drawings by Alexandre Iacovleff at the Grand Central Art Galleries, New York, in April of 1939. Later, it was deciphered from the inscription on the lower right corner of the drawing that Iacovleff must have known this actor personally, because the artist has made the viewer aware of his subject’s name, Ichimura Uzaemon.

“Nov. 17, 1933 Drawing by Iacovleff \$330.”¹⁸⁹ Today, Winthrop’s \$330.00 would have the same buying power as \$5,893.44. If we compare the price of this drawing to the price Winthrop paid for the four drawings in 1930, we realize that the collector paid more than half this price for this one drawing of a Japanese actor.

After 1933, Winthrop was still interested in Iacovleff’s work, and the former continued to correspond with Martin Birnbaum. Once the artist settled in Boston, Birnbaum conversed with other prominent figures regarding his work. In 1936, Birnbaum held dinner parties for Iacovleff with guest lists boasting prominent social figures such as Miss Mabel Choate, a world traveler with a passion for Asia and Orientalism, and Miss Anne Morgan, the American philanthropist and art patron.¹⁹⁰ Iacovleff only spent a short time in Boston,

¹⁸⁹ Ibid. The account book entries are included on the same page as the excerpt from the letter between Birnbaum and Winthrop of this particular portion of the Grenville L. Winthrop papers.

¹⁹⁰ Letter from Martin Birnbaum to Grenville L. Winthrop, 26 April 1936, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Martin Birnbaum Papers, microfilm reel 108. Unfortunately, the record of this letter is incomplete, and it leaves out a portion of a conversation regarding Iacovleff. However, it is necessary to briefly note the social importance of these two women. Miss Mabel Choate was the daughter of Joseph Hodges Choate, the lawyer and diplomat who gathered public support against the corruption of the infamous Boss Tweed ring and the Tammany Hall scandal. Because of Choate’s involvement in social reform movements as well as his founding role in the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the American Museum of Natural History, his family was prominent in the social circles of Boston and New York City. Mabel Choate became known as an avid preservationist, horticulturalist, and collector of antiquities who traveled to areas of Asia along with the Garden Club of America during the 1920s and 1930s. She was most famous for her patronage of landscape architect Fletcher Steele, whose style featured a juxtaposition of modern design elements inspired by *avant-garde* sculptors against traditional aesthetics of Chinese gardens. Fletcher’s stylistic juxtapositions are parallel to those of Iacovleff, which embody aesthetics of the Art Déco movement. For more information on Mabel Choate, the reader is advised to consult the following two publications: Theron G. Strong, *Joseph H. Choate, New Englander, New Yorker, Lawyer Ambassador* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Co., 1917) and Robin S. Karson, *Fletcher Steele, Landscape Architect: An Account of the Gardenmaker’s Life, 1885-1971* (New York: Abrams/Sagapress, 1989). Miss Anne Morgan was the daughter of John Piermont Morgan, the iconic banker, industrialist, and art collector of America’s Gilded Age. He, like Choate, was instrumental in the development of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. He passed his love for art onto his daughter Anne, who became a philanthropist

and from 1934-1937 he spent his life in the spotlight of the social elite. This was not unlike the life the artist enjoyed in Paris during the years between his international travels.¹⁹¹

The dinner parties yielded more clients for Birnbaum and more collectors for Iacovleff. Through conversations between Birnbaum and Winthrop in 1938, we get an idea of the kind of work the painter was producing near the end of his life, and how his supporters received it. Miss Mabel Choate, with the aid of Birnbaum, purchased “a strange *Theseus* and *Minotaur* from Iacovleff which is experimental but fascinating. I wanted to buy it myself, but a dentist’s bill prevented me. Some friends of hers bought the Japanese album which I once submitted to you...”¹⁹² The “experimental but fascinating” style in which Iacovleff rendered these paintings will be discussed at a later point in this chapter in relationship to the artist’s stylistic transition, which was probably influenced by the work of John Singer Sargent.

who was most famous for providing relief efforts in aid to France after both World Wars. She was a part of the French and American cultural elite during the 1920s and 1930s, and established close friendships with such theatrical figures as Cole Porter and Katherine Hepburn. For more information on the art patronage of JP Morgan and Anne Morgan, the reader is advised to consult the following two publications: Louis Auchincloss, *J.P. Morgan: The Financier as Collector* (New York: H. N. Abrams, 1990) and Paul S. Byard, *The Making of Morgan: from Charles McKim to Renzo Piano* (New York: Morgan Library and Museum: Distributed by W. W. Norton, 2008.)

¹⁹¹ Ibid. In the same letter, Birnbaum speaks of a life-sized portrait drawing that Iacovleff composed of the dealer playing the violin. Along with his profession as a dealer, Birnbaum was also a respected musician and violinist. Unfortunately, the letter breaks off in the middle of Birnbaum’s description of his portrait. Figure 57 depicts a later portrait of Birnbaum playing the violin, done two years later in 1938 just prior to the artist’s death.

¹⁹² Letter from Martin Birnbaum to Grenville L. Winthrop, dated 3 May 1938, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Martin Birnbaum Papers, microfilm reel 108. The Japanese album which Birnbaum referred to is most likely the travel album of Japanese actors published by Elisseeff.



**Fig. 66. *Theseus and Minotaur*,
watercolor on paper, 1938.**

Representation at Knoedler and Company

Although Iacovleff maintained a friendly and prosperous relationship with Martin Birnbaum, he felt the desire to obtain a more secure hold on the market when he arrived in America in 1934. Knoedler and Company became the artist's representative in New York. The firm was established in 1846 when the French dealers Goupil and Cie opened a branch in the United States. In 1852, Michael Knoedler moved to New York to manage the American branch of the gallery. Five years later, in 1857, he bought the business and was later joined by his sons. Not long after, Knoedler expanded his gallery to include

branches in London and Paris.¹⁹³ Historically, the gallery was noted as a leading dealer in Old Master Paintings. With the approach of the twentieth-century, however, Knoedler and Company increasingly became an advocate for contemporary art.¹⁹⁴ It boasted collectors from the class of American business tycoons such as Andrew Mellon, J. P. Morgan, Henry Clay Frick, John Jacob Astor, and William Rockefeller. The Louvre, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Tate Gallery also avidly sought to acquire work from Knoedler's inventory.¹⁹⁵

The origin of Iacovleff's relationship with Knoedler and Company is uncertain, as archival material on this subject is very difficult to obtain.¹⁹⁶ The earliest documentation of this topic appears as late as 1936, two years after Iacovleff moved from Paris to the United States. In February of that year, Knoedler held an exhibition of the Russian's work in its New York gallery on E. 57th Street. A catalogue has been preserved from the show, but unfortunately, it does not contain reproductions of the work. Edward Forbes wrote a short text that briefly outlines the major events of Iacovleff's career and praises him as

¹⁹³ Knoedler, Michael, *Archives Directory for the History of Collecting in America*, The Frick Collection, New York.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Soon after the closure of Knoedler and Company in 2011, the Getty Research Institute acquired the gallery's archive. The acquisition has achieved landmark status due to its inclusion of letters, telegrams, albums, sales books, stock and consignment books, card files on clients and art works, rare photographs, and rare books, which will soon be made available to the public. At the time this thesis was written, a vast trove of information was not yet accessible, as the Getty was still in the process of digitizing the archive. I am assuming that a good deal of archival information exists regarding Alexandre Iacovleff, but because of the lack of accessibility, I was not able to obtain any official records of correspondence between the artist and the gallery between 1934 and 1938. All information in this thesis about Knoedler has been extracted through other archival sources.

“one of the two greatest living draftsmen.”¹⁹⁷ From observing the catalogue’s layout, the exhibition seems to have been organized and separated into two categories, paintings and drawings. Only one or two of the paintings on display were created during Iacovleff’s first visit to China in 1918. Upon observance of the titles, the remaining 58 works seem to have been created in the years between 1929 and 1936. The majority of paintings featured in the show are representative of the artist’s loose stylistic transition that began at the end of the 1920s, which continued to develop until 1938. Many of them include still-lives and dynamic scenes from everyday life that were captured during the *Croisière Jaune* (1931-1932) and Iacovleff’s vacations to Capri.¹⁹⁸ One of the paintings has been reproduced in another publication, displayed below:



Fig. 67. *An Intimate Concert In Hue, Indochina*, oil on canvas, 1932, no. 13; illustration extracted from *Memorial Exhibition of the Work of Alexandre Iacovleff* (1939), p. 14.

¹⁹⁷ A. Iacovleff, *Paintings and Drawings* (New York: M. Knoedler and Company), February 10-29, 1936, pp. 2-4. John Singer Sargent was the author of this statement of praise, and Edward Forbes quoted him accordingly in the text.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 4-7.

A vast majority of the drawings were portraits of musicians, members of the Russian ballet, anonymous portraits rendered during the *Croisière Jaune*, nude studies, and portraits of African Americans from South Carolina.¹⁹⁹ Most of these drawings were rendered in Iacovleff's signature academic style. A limited number have been reproduced elsewhere, and they are included below:



Fig. 68. Madame Vô-Thuân, gouache on paper, 1932, no. 49; illustration extracted from Alexandre Iacovleff, *Paintings and Drawings* (1993), p. 41.

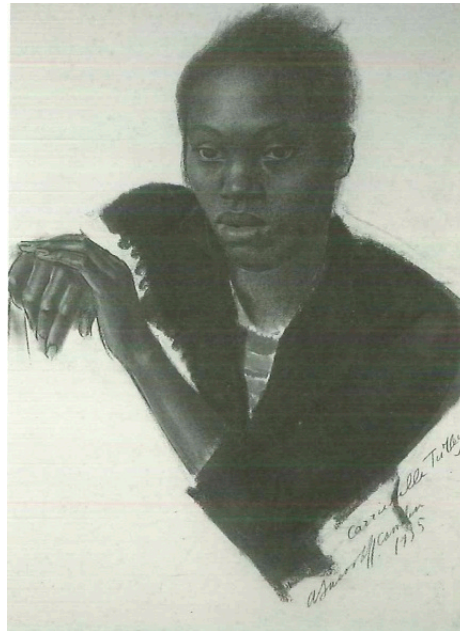


Fig. 69. Carrielle Tulley, black chalk on paper, 1935, no. 56; illustration extracted from Alexandre Iacovleff, *Paintings and Drawings* (1993), p. 43

Critics raved over Iacovleff's work at Knoedler's. Royal Cortissoz, the noted art critic, wrote a review of the exhibition that was featured in an April 1936 issue of the New York Herald Tribune:

This artist, who is only on the verge of forty, has already some of the qualities of a master. There will be lively interest in his powers of

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

characterization. He has been in China, in Persia, in Afghanistan, and other remote regions, and he portrays their types in a vitalized manner, leaving them intensely human, absolutely credible, for all their wild picturesqueness. But it is as the technical virtuoso that he particularly excels. There he somehow recalls the swift attack and the uncanny certitude of Sargent...they share the same authoritative grasp upon the thing seen, the same gusto of the painter who is a kind of happy, victorious craftsman. It would be impossible to beat for sheer skill in the handling of form the two nudes (Nos. 21 and 22), in which the academic tradition is raised to a higher power and technique takes on beauty. I speak of the academic tradition because there is a trace of it in Mr. Iacovleff's treatment of form, something of its classical integrity, something of its discipline. There is solid knowledge at the bottom of his work. But in essential feeling he is in no wise academic. The naturalness, the vividness, of his Oriental scenes abundantly proves that no dry convention comes between him and the object.²⁰⁰

Due to its large success, the exhibition held at Knoedler's in 1936 traveled to various cities across the United States. There is evidence that the Fogg Museum at Harvard University held a Iacovleff show modeled after Knoedler's. They may have also added a few paintings and drawings that were not displayed in New York.²⁰¹ The Gibbes Museum of Art in Charleston, South Carolina has preserved archives of information and correspondence regarding an exhibition that was held during April and May of 1936.²⁰² The catalogue used for the Charleston exhibition is almost identical to Knoedler's. The archival file at the Gibbes contains correspondence between Iacovleff, a certain Mrs. John Mead Howells, Robert Whitelaw, and John C. Cunningham. Whitelaw was the director at the Gibbes and Cunningham was the manager of Knoedler in

²⁰⁰ Royal Cortissoz, "Alexandre Iacovleff, Russian Draughtsman," exhibition review in *The New York Herald Tribune*, 13 February 1936.

²⁰¹ Letter from Edward W. Forbes to Alexandre Iacovleff, 20 March 1936, Harvard Art Archives, Edward Waldo Forbes Papers, 1867-2005, HC2 Box 47 Folder 1151: Iacovleff, Alexandre [1924-1939].

²⁰² Gibbes Museum of Art/Carolina Art Association Exhibition File #97, *A. Iacovleff: 1936 April 14-May 10*.

New York. The use of a familiar tone in exchanged letters suggests that the two men had been friends for years, although the circumstance of their initial acquaintance is unknown.²⁰³ Mrs. John Mead Howells was a wealthy socialite in Charleston, who collected Iacovleff's work. After seeing the exhibition in New York in February of 1936, she suggested that an exhibition be displayed in Charleston. Because of her initial involvement, she became the patroness and sponsor of the show at the Gibbes.²⁰⁴ An excerpt from a letter dated February 27 outlines the initial plans for the show:

I have talked over the suggestion of having Mr. Iacovleff's exhibition in part and he is pleased to give the matter favorable consideration. It is our combined thought that an exhibition of twenty-five pieces would be sufficiently comprehensive; say about seven Camden Negro sketches, seven Chinese and Indo-Chinese drawings in color, three or four sanguine portrait drawings, and six or seven oils. The time [April-May] is agreeable to him and I think you might have some pleasant results from the exhibition. Certainly no one has done the Camden Negro so well.²⁰⁵

The most valuable piece of information included in the Gibbes Museum's archival file is a copy of a marked-up exhibition catalogue. It provides us with the group of works that Cunningham and Iacovleff selected for the Charleston exhibition, along with a hand-written price beside each work of art. Nineteen paintings from Persia, East Asia, Tunis, and Capri were chosen. Nine drawings were also included: two portraits of European cultural figures, three

²⁰³ Letters exchanged between John C. Cunningham and Robert S. Whitelaw, dated from 24 February- 14 May 1936, Gibbes Museum of Art/Carolina Art Association Exhibition File #97, A. *Iacovleff: 1936 April 14-May 10.*

²⁰⁴ Letter from Mrs. John Mead Howells to Robert S. Whitelaw, n.d., Gibbes Museum of Art/Carolina Art Association Exhibition File #97.

²⁰⁵ Letter from John C. Cunningham to Robert Whitelaw, dated 27 February 1936, Gibbes Museum of Art/Carolina Art Association Exhibition File #97.

anonymous portraits from East Asia, one nude study, two portraits of African Americans from Camden, South Carolina, and one drawing owned by Mrs. Howells.²⁰⁶ The complete value extracted from this “price list” totals \$14,300, which would have had the same buying power as roughly \$239,650 today. This large sum attests to the high status Iacovleff’s work enjoyed in America.²⁰⁷

Continued correspondence between Iacovleff, the two directors, and Mrs. Howells reveals an exhibition that was positively received by the Charleston community. One letter, dated April 21, is of particular interest because it hints at a possible visit to Charleston on the part of the artist:

Everyone is enjoying the exhibition very much indeed and I cannot tell you how much I appreciate, first your suggestion that we have it, second your generosity in making it possible, and third your allowing us to use your name as patroness of the exhibition. Your large and delightful dinner for Mr. Iacovleff deserves a Carnegie medal for bravery but if you cannot obtain it, I hope that you do realize how much we all appreciate what you have done for the Carolina Art Association.²⁰⁸

Due to the success of Knoedler’s exhibition in Charleston, Iacovleff and Cunningham decided to hold another show at the Arts Center of Raleigh, North Carolina in the summer of 1936. When the exhibition closed in Charleston in May of that year, the works were shipped to Raleigh.²⁰⁹ Unfortunately, additional archival records regarding this particular Knoedler exhibition have yet to be discovered.

²⁰⁶ From a marked-up copy of a Knoedler catalogue entitled *A. Iacovleff*, Gibbes Museum of Art/Carolina Art Association Exhibition File #97.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Letter from Robert Whitelaw to Mrs. John Mead Howells, dated 21 April 1936, Gibbes Museum of Art/Carolina Art Association Exhibition File #97.

²⁰⁹ Letter from Jane Allan, secretary to Mr. Robert Whitelaw to Mrs. John Mead Howells, dated 14 May 1936, Gibbes Museum of Art/Carolina Art Association Exhibition File #97.

Commercial Enterprise in Boston: The Vose Galleries

M. Knoedler and Company was not the only gallery that represented Iacovleff in the United States. While living and working in Boston, the artist entrusted the sale of his work to Robert C. Vose and W. Charles Thompson at the Vose Gallery on Newbury Street. When Iacovleff arrived in Boston in 1934, the Vose Gallery had already established itself as one of America's most prestigious galleries. It was founded in the early 1840s by Joseph Vose, and its initial business ventures mainly included the sale of art supplies.²¹⁰ The account books showed no sales of paintings until about ten years later, when Joseph's son Seth took over the gallery in the early 1850s. Seth established the precedent of showing European (and mostly French) painters, which would continue to be an essential part of the gallery's programming for the next 150 years. He was responsible for the introduction of the French Barbizon paintings into the Boston art market, which was considered a radical move at the time and almost led him to financial ruin.²¹¹ He refused to falter, however, and during the 1860s, Seth Vose also came to handle local New England artists. He gained a reputation as a respected member of the art community by the end of

²¹⁰ Jack Post, "Story of the Vose Galleries," *Yankee Magazine*, September 1973.

²¹¹ Ibid. Seth's relationship with William Morris Hunt began through his support of the French Barbizon artists such as Corot, Daubigny, and Rousseau. Soon, the "radical" style caught on in Boston, and by the 1870s, there was a mad race in New England to purchase work by these artists. Noted art patrons began to entrust Seth to be their dealer. This development led to his connection with Martin Brimmer, one of the founders of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, and ultimately established the gallery's extended and intimate relationship with the Museum School from the 1870s to the present day.

the nineteenth century.²¹² Roughly twenty years later, in the 1880s, the market for French Barbizon paintings had grown exponentially. Vose found a great degree of success as the primary dealer of these pictures in America.

Seth's son, Robert C. Vose, took over the gallery in the 1890s, and would follow in his father's footsteps as "the greatest American art dealer of his era outside of New York City."²¹³ Robert was most noted for expanding the scope of the gallery's inventory to include, other than Barbizon paintings, works by Dutch, English, and American masters. He vested interest in spreading his reputation throughout America, and engaged in a substantial effort to take his exhibitions across the country. Because of these endeavors, Robert C. Vose established close relationships with almost every major American art museum.²¹⁴

Iacovleff's arrival in Boston was met with Vose's burgeoning and well-established success. His work most likely made its way into the gallery's inventory through employment at the Museum School, although specific reference to an original meeting was not found in the Vose archives. The Vose Gallery's dealings with William James, the Chairman of the school at the time, may have facilitated this connection.

Alexandre Iacovleff's business relationship with Vose Galleries must have begun a short time after his arrival in Boston, but documentation for the years between 1934 and 1936 is extremely scarce. The only record before

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

1937 of Iacovleff's involvement with Vose is an exhibition review from a late November 1936 issue of the *Boston Herald*. In it, Irma Whitney expresses her sheer amazement at the technical virtuosity made apparent in the artist's African and Asian portrait drawings. One can draw the conclusion from reading the review that mostly works from the Citroën expeditions were featured in the show, which was "the first Boston exhibition of his paintings."²¹⁵

An important letter from January of 1937 signifies the beginning of correspondence between the artist and the gallery, which breaks off in December of 1938. The parties involved include Robert C. Vose, his nephew (and manager of the gallery) W. Charles Thompson, William James, and Iacovleff's mother.

Thompson wrote the first letter, addressed to the artist at his studio in Paris:

Many thanks for your letter just received. It is a relief to hear that you are satisfied with the way I have handled your paintings for you and I hope that in the end the results will be mutually satisfactory. Owing to the difficulty in making a selection of your things to form a comprehensive exhibition, I decided to go in "all over" and make use of practically all of your pictures and in this way create a much more important show, giving a better impression than could be obtained by a smaller selection.²¹⁶

The exhibition was to be a traveling one-man show of Iacovleff's recent work. Modeled on an exhibition that Vose organized at the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh, its next appearance was to be at the new Dayton Art Institute in

²¹⁵ Irma Whitney, "Story of Iacovleff Is Story of His Works," *Boston Herald*, 22 November 1936.

²¹⁶ Letter from W. Charles Thompson to Alexandre Iacovleff, dated 15 January 1937, Archives of the Vose Galleries, 238 Newbury St., Boston, MA.

Dayton, Ohio.²¹⁷ From there, Thompson hoped to send the exhibition to the Cleveland Museum of Art, but made Iacovleff aware of an obstacle he encountered with the Cleveland itinerary. It had come to Thompson's attention that the Museum possessed a policy that prevented it from showcasing one-man exhibitions of the work of living artists. "This, to me, is a most stupid idea, but it seems to prevail in many institutions."²¹⁸ The gallery's frustrations with this common museum policy demonstrate the struggles that many dealers who showed contemporary artists experienced.

Another letter to the painter does not appear in the Vose Galleries Archives until almost four months later, at the end of May of 1937. Iacovleff was back in Boston at this point, and must have just completed his teaching obligations for the academic year. W. Charles Thompson brings up issues of business, in addition to expressing some concern over pricing conflicts:

I am enclosing herewith our cheque for \$600.00 being the final payment to date for all things which we have sold for you. I am also enclosing a list of all pictures which we have on consignment from you, and would like very much to have you call by appointment so that we could go over this list together, regarding prices. I was very sorry to hear that you had asked quite a little less for many of the pictures which were in our exhibition when they were in the exhibition at the museum, as this puts us in a very bad light with our clients, should any of them have happened to notice it. It is therefore, as much to your advantage as well as ours to have a distinct understanding as to the prices of your pictures both in your studio and at our gallery.²¹⁹

Thompson's emphasis on the "final payment" implies that Iacovleff received his money in installments. There is no indication of how much the

²¹⁷ Ibid. The Dayton Art Institute was founded in 1919.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ Letter from W. Charles Thompson to Alexandre Iacovleff, 20 May 1937, Archives of the Vose Galleries of Boston.

artist collected in entirety, but judging from the information available at this time, it is likely that Iacovleff was receiving a significant amount of funds from the sale of his paintings at Vose Galleries, in addition to the salary he was receiving from the Museum School.

Alexandre Iacovleff chose to leave Boston in 1937 and moved back to Paris shortly after a brief sojourn in Capri. Communication between the artist and his representatives in Boston did not cease, however. In August of 1937, he wrote to Mr. Vose himself from his studio in Capri, commending him for keeping his best interests at heart: "You know that I trust you in regard to your friendship and knowledge of my interests."²²⁰ Iacovleff also makes reference to a specific sale of a "negro" portrait done in South Carolina to a certain Mr. Bryan, who was somehow connected to Virginia Gerson, the sister-in-law of William Merritt Chase. Iacovleff seems to have been looking for Vose's approval in accepting Bryan's offer of \$300.00 for the portrait, and expressed his gratitude upon Vose's acceptance of a "very low commission."²²¹ He also mentions in this letter his intentions to go on a cruise to Greece in October of that year, and confides that he was to remain in Capri until that time.²²²

Vose was thrilled to receive the painter's letter from Capri and did not hesitate to evoke his excitement in his response:

Your good letter from Capri is at hand. Thank you for your further expression of confidence which we shall always do our best to deserve. I could not wait to hear from you in the matter of the sale of the negro

²²⁰ Letter from Alexandre Iacovleff to Robert C. Vose, dated August 1937, Archives of the Vose Galleries of Boston.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Ibid.

portrait sketch, and Mr. Bryan, Virginia's "leading citizen," is so important that I was sure you would want me to accept his offer of \$300, which I did shortly after writing you. I deposited the proceeds of that sale \$250, and the sale of a nude which we took from storage and sold through an agent, netting \$259.67, a total of \$509.67 to your account at the State Street Trust Co. branch on Mass. Avenue.²²³

In this same letter Vose reveals his desire to organize an exhibition of work completed abroad in 1938, and requests the receipt of letters, cards, and "fine heads and bust portraits."²²⁴ Obviously, Iacovleff was still benefitting monetarily from the sale of his paintings at the Vose Galleries, even after his permanent return to Europe. The revenue from the two drawings represented roughly ten percent of the annual salary he received from the Museum School. To obtain this income from the sale of only two drawings (especially recent ones) demonstrates how important American dealers and galleries were in cultivating a substantial market for his later works. S. Morton Vose, in a 1986 oral history interview now in the archives at the Smithsonian Institution, reveals the high demand for Iacovleff's work:

He was very much of a rage in Boston for portraits done in conté crayon, peoples' heads and so forth... He did the most wonderful life portraits of ethnic characters in Central Asia, Afghanistan and so forth, which I found fascinating. I remember him very well. He was an interesting man. Yes, at that time, he [sold fairly well]. Yes, indeed. I was delighted when I was able to buy, very recently, from an antique shop, only just a few years ago, two of those studies of Afghan characters which I had admired tremendously. When we had the exhibition I couldn't think of affording them.²²⁵

²²³ Letter from Robert C. Vose to Alexandre Iacovleff, dated 24 august, 1937, Archives of the Vose Galleries of Boston.

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ Oral history interview with S. Morton Vose, 1986 July 24, Tape 2, Side B, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

In December of 1937, business concerning the traveling exhibition was revisited. The artist sent Mr. Vose a check for \$300 (roughly \$4,800) to cover the expenses of the show.²²⁶ Vose acknowledged the receipt of the check and replied with details of the exhibition's schedule: pictures were to be shown in Pittsburgh at the Carnegie Institute in January of 1938, possibly until the middle of February, followed by viewings at the Dayton Art Institute in March of that same year.²²⁷ He hoped the exhibition would receive the benefits of the renewed interest in art in Dayton, and it is also apparent here that Vose had every intention of adding more stops to the "route" of the traveling show.²²⁸

But, in February of 1938, it became obvious that Iacovleff's work did not sell successfully in Pittsburgh, and W. Charles Thompson brought the following issues to light:

I have just cabled you as follows: "No sales Carnegie they complain too high prices suggest cut twenty-five percent on net prices." This morning we received a letter from Mr. O'Connor, assistant director of the Carnegie Institute which says: "We too are disappointed that none of the Iacovleff's were sold at Pittsburgh, but I can tell you very frankly that your prices are too high. Iacovleff may get those prices in Boston but I fear he won't any place else in the United States. We had a number of inquiries but I just couldn't pin people down to an offer because the prices scared them from making an offer. I think you should realize the situation; otherwise you are certainly going to be disappointed with sales as the paintings go around the country."²²⁹

In the manner of a frank realist, Thompson elected not to sugarcoat the current state of the American market and the art market crisis. All of the

²²⁶ Letter from Alexandre Iacovleff to Robert C. Vose, approximate date mid December of 1937, Archives of the Vose Galleries of Boston.

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Letter from W. Charles Thompson to Alexandre Iacovleff, dated 18 February 1938, Archives of the Vose Galleries of Boston.

galleries and dealers that participated in the traveling exhibition, including the Vose Galleries, found it “very difficult to move things.”²³⁰ Thompson, although recognizing that Iacovleff had the ultimate say in the pricing of his pictures, nonetheless suggested that it would be most advantageous to sell his work across the country in order to widen his renown. The only way to cultivate national sales was to considerably reduce the prices, especially on the larger tempera paintings, because of the expense incurred in handling them.²³¹ Thompson mentions at the end of the letter that the exhibition would travel to Minneapolis following Dayton. Whether or not it would make it to Cleveland was yet to be decided due to the question of the existence of facilities that could properly display the work.²³²

Fortunately, a copy of the exhibition catalogue for the show at the Carnegie Institute is preserved in the archives of the Vose Galleries. Entitled *Paintings, Watercolors, and Drawings by Alexandre Iacovleff*, it ran from January 6 to February 3, 1938.²³³ It was organized by medium, and a total of three galleries were occupied. It included a total of 105 works that had been created since 1930. Pictures from the *Croisière Jaune*, from his travels to Capri, Tunis, Mexico, Cuba, and Greece, as well as from his American sojourn, were featured in the exhibition. Over half of the paintings, watercolors, and drawings were

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Ibid.

²³³ *Paintings, Watercolors, and Drawings by Alexandre Iacovleff* (Pittsburgh, PA: Department of Fine Arts, Carnegie Institute, 1938).

completed between 1933 and 1937.²³⁴ It is unfortunate that the catalogue contains no reproductions of the works, but archival evidence presents the exhibition's aesthetic themes. Moreover, no dates are included after the titles, but they can be approximated due to our knowledge of when the artist was working in each respective location.

Some of the pictures featured had been included in previous exhibitions in Europe, and because of this circumstance, reproductions of a select few of them could be uncovered. These are mostly limited to the Persian and Chinese works from the *Croisière Jaune*, a work from his travels to Tunis in 1930, and works from Capri. Although many of the nude studies and portraits were rendered "academically," the looser, sketchier style that Iacovleff adopted within the last years of his career is embodied in many of the scenes from every day life.

Examples of portraits rendered in an academic style include *Chinese Mother and Child* (number 8) and *Negress* (number 10). These two works were shown in the first gallery of the exhibition, which was mostly devoted to academic drawings. These two works represent Iacovleff's classical style that he employed, most notably, during the *Croisière Noire* and during his initial Parisian years. They ultimately derive from the technique used throughout his years as a student, which was modeled after the Northern Italian painters of the early fifteenth century. In choosing to render "Orientalist" subjects academically, Iacovleff manifested his trademark style of "exotic academicism"

²³⁴ Ibid.

in these exemplary works, which embodies the mentality of the Art Déco movement.



Fig. 70. *A Chinese Mother and Child*, Beijing, sanguine on paper, 1932.



Fig. 71. *Negress*, chalk on paper, c. 1935, illustration extracted from *Jacovleff and Other Artists*, plate 3.

Two scenes from everyday life that illustrate Iacovleff's newly adopted looser, modern style are *The Sausage Maker, Tunis* (number 40) and *Negroes Dancing, South Carolina* (number 105). In these paintings, the artist takes advantage of his medium and begins to experiment with color. Relative to the neutral, sober hues in his academic drawings, Iacovleff expands his palette and utilizes brighter tones in these images. Although not displayed in the same exhibition galleries, the scene from Tunis and the scene from South Carolina demonstrate a general technical theme: Iacovleff typically drafted with neutral tones, but reserved a brighter palette for painting.



Fig. 72. *The Sausage Maker, Tunis*, oil on canvas, 1930.



Fig. 73. *Negroes Dancing, South Carolina*, watercolor on canvas, 1936.

Although the catalogue did not list any prices, Iacovleff's and Vose's correspondence unveiled the unpleasant truth that work failed to sell because of high prices.

In mid-February of 1938, there is evidence that the business relationship between the Vose Galleries and Iacovleff continued to function, despite the artist's relocation to Paris. He wrote to W. Charles Thompson and thanked him and the gallery for their efforts in caring for all of his things.²³⁵ The artist also admitted his uncertainty as to when his next visit to the States would be, citing the absorption into his work as the main reason. Iacovleff was eager to escape to Capri in May of 1938 and he labeled this Italian island as one of the few

²³⁵ Letter from Alexandre Iacovleff to W. Charles Thompson, dated February 1938, Archives of the Vose Galleries of Boston.

places where he found himself in a perfect mood for working.²³⁶ He also expressed his gratitude for the Vose Gallery's storage of his work, and enclosed payment for present and future storage in another letter to Thompson.²³⁷ The gallery also received express instructions from the painter for the usage of his Russian Ballet drawings, which Malvina Hoffman sent to Vose on his behalf after his return to Paris:

I wrote to her to send them to you and hope that you will be able to store them. You can exhibit them if you wish, but they are not for sale and I ask you not to photograph them to keep the exclusivity of their reproduction for an eventual publication of them in a special issue. I am, of course, perfectly confident in all your future arrangements for exhibitions and agree to cut down the prices as you asked me in your telegram.²³⁸

Iacovleff's compliance with the suggestion to lower prices in order to appeal to American collectors outside of Boston exemplifies faith in Vose's ability to handle the sale of his work with sound judgment. Here we already begin to observe evidence of the Vose Galleries acting as the sole agent of the artist's estate. Its possession of this title was of primary concern to a number of parties at the end of May 1938.

The affair encompassing the Russian Ballet drawings is a reflection of Vose Galleries' dual role with Knoedler and Company as promoters of Iacovleff's work in America, the former based in Boston and the latter based in New York City and London. A potential exhibition featuring portraits and scenes from the Russian Ballet was scheduled to open at Knoedler in London in June of 1938, to

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ Letter from Alexandre Iacovleff to W. Charles Thompson, dated 18 February 1938, Archives of the Vose Galleries of Boston.

²³⁸ Ibid.

coincide with the ballet season.²³⁹ Iacovleff selected works for publication, and was convinced that an album of ballet drawings would attract high-profile buyers.²⁴⁰ The character of most of the drawings considered for display and inclusion in the catalogue is unknown. They most likely remain in the private collections of the dancers' families in London, France, or Russia. However, a select few of them were reproduced due to their publication in American exhibition catalogues throughout the twentieth century. The two images below depict Russian ballet dancers rendered in Iacovleff's signature academic style. Although the drawings date to very late in the artist's career, when he increasingly experimented with "expressionism" and color, no hints of a stylistic transition are evident in these ballet portraits.



Fig. 74. *Portrait of Anna Pavlova*, red chalk on paper, c. 1929-1938.

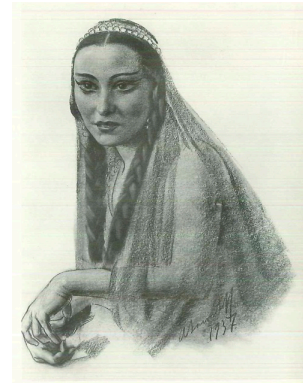


Fig. 75. *Eugenia Delarova in Prince Igor*, sanguine on paper, 1937.

Correspondence between the artist and the Vose Gallery between April and May of 1938 in regards to the Russian Ballet exhibition reveals that

²³⁹ Letter from Alexandre Iacovleff to W. Charles Thompson, dated April 1938, Archives of the Vose Galleries of Boston.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

Knoedler and Vose worked closely with one another in the planning stages of this show, and their relations were quite amicable.²⁴¹ In fact, in an interview recorded for the Smithsonian institution in 1986, the son of Robert C. Vose reveals the nature of relations with Knoedler in New York:

In New York, we had good relations with a number of galleries... Certainly, there was M. Knodler and Co. It was pronounced differently, we always called it "Nodler." Others use the German Knoedler pronunciation. It is still going, but a very different firm than it was when I knew it, and different owners entirely. It was a very, very fine firm. Their gallery, their building, was a beautiful place. The director there was Mr. Henschel [during the '30s], but there were a number of others- they had quite a large staff of people.²⁴²

Unfortunately, despite extensive planning for the ballet exhibition in London, there is no evidence that the show came to fruition. Iacovleff's Russian Ballet album was never published, which perhaps explains why few reproductions exist of his later drawings of dancers and stage scenes. Iacovleff's unexpected death in May of 1938 was the reason for the unfulfilled plans.

The Death of Iacovleff: Complications and Public Perception

On May 12, 1938, Iacovleff suddenly passed away due to complications from cancer of the stomach. Martin Birnbaum was one of the last people to see him before his death. In *Jacovleff and Other Artists*, following a description of the portrait the artist composed of him playing the violin in red and black chalk,

²⁴¹ Letters exchanged between Alexandre Iacovleff to W. Charles Thompson, April 1938-May 16, 1938, Archives of the Vose Galleries of Boston.

²⁴² Oral history interview with S. Morton Vose, 1986 July 24, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Birnbaum gives his readers an account of his last meeting with Iacovleff, who had become his good friend:

On the day I finished posing, we were listening to sonatas played by the Menuhin children at the Salle Pleyel, when Iacovleff complained of pains in his side, and he confided to me that he would go to a hospital in the morning, for a slight operation. The memory of the playing of those divine musicians, he said, would console him during his convalescence, and in a few short weeks we would be sporting together in the Bay of Capri, at the Piccola Marina. When the concert ended it was raining and a thick mist enveloped Paris. He drove away in his little runabout to his last studio on the Rue Campagne Première, and I never saw him alive again.²⁴³

A few weeks later, Grenville Winthrop sent a letter to Birnbaum, offering his sympathy for the loss of his friend. From this letter, we get a sense of the close friendship between the dealer and his artist, as well as the admiration Birnbaum had for Iacovleff:

Your letter came this morning telling me of the sad passing of Iacovleff. My deep sympathy goes out to you for the loss of a friend and to the world at large for the loss of a true artist. You speak glowingly of his character and you knew him long and well. Can there be anything more comforting to his sorrowing friends than the memory of their association with a nature so noble, so pure, and so gifted? Fortunately twice in passing causes sad memories to [recede] and happy ones to come to the fore. Otherwise, it seems to me, the accumulation of sadness would be unbearable.²⁴⁴

Up until this point, we receive no hint that Iacovleff experienced financial troubles. The places in which he lived in various parts of Europe and America, the salary he was receiving from the Museum School, and the sales of his paintings indicate that he was enjoying a relative amount of financial success and freedom. In the spring of 1939 however, we receive the first

²⁴³ Birnbaum, *Iacovleff and Other Artists*, 21.

²⁴⁴ Letter from Grenville L. Winthrop to Martin Birnbaum, dated 24 May 1938, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Martin Birnbaum Papers, microfilm reel 108.

indication of possible financial struggle. The production of work ceased abruptly a year earlier due to Iacovleff's premature and sudden death. Because the painter's salaried income served to support the women of his family, the discontinuation of these funds left them in a state of fiscal ruin. They were no longer in a position to maintain the extravagant lifestyle they were accustomed to living. American dealers and institutions played an instrumental role in the attempt to keep his family afloat.²⁴⁵

There was a heavily strategized effort to sell Iacovleff's drawings, paintings, and sketches to private collectors and museums in America. Evidence of this is partly illustrated in the Fogg Museum's appeals to collectors to purchase a portfolio of 53 copies of Pompeian frescoes:

I suppose you knew Alexandre Iacovleff, the Russian artist, who taught at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts for several years and who died in Paris recently, and I wonder whether you saw his delightful series of free copies of the Pompeian frescoes. William James is trying to sell some of Iacovleff's work to get money for his Mother in Paris who apparently has little other source of support except what she can make from the sale of her son's pictures. A special price of \$600 has been made to the Fogg Museum for a group of fifty-three of these paintings, which we feel is a low price. Unfortunately we need money to help us buy these, and I write to ask whether you would be one of a few people to subscribe \$100 or \$200 apiece towards this fund. The pictures are at the Fogg Museum in case you would like to come out to see them yourself.²⁴⁶

²⁴⁵ The Vose Galleries, Edward Forbes at the Fogg Museum, and Martin Birnbaum were the main figures in the effort to generate income for Mmes. Iacovleff, as well as the effort to operate the late artist's estate. Their roles will be further discussed throughout this chapter, and information supporting my argument has been derived from the Martin Birnbaum Papers, the Grenville L. Winthrop Papers, and documents from the archives of the Vose Galleries of Boston.

²⁴⁶ Letter from Edward W. Forbes sent to Mrs. Robert Lovett, Mrs. Richard P. Strong, and Miss Anne Morgan, Harvard Art Museum Archives, Edward Waldo Forbes Papers, 1867-2005, HC2 Box 4 Folder 85: Appeals for Iacovleff Paintings (Portfolio of 53 copies of Pompeian frescoes) [1939].

A letter written by Martin Birnbaum to Grenville Winthrop in the spring of 1939 also contributes to the effort to support Madame Jacovleff:

I have been visiting old Madame Jacovleff, who is now a pathetic figure. I may acquire a fine small animal drawing by her son for your group, but it will not exceed \$100. They are very fine, done at the [zoo] for a book by Mille, but some were not published, and these she has. I feel certain you would want one, otherwise I would not take this liberty.²⁴⁷



Fig. 76. *The Waterhole*, sanguine and chalk on paper, c. 1937-38.

Eight days later, Winthrop cabled his dealer, instructing him to buy the Jacovleff drawing, along with other work(s) by Chloe and Prud'hon.²⁴⁸

Birnbaum, however, encountered obstacles in doing business with the artist's elderly mother, and the delivery of Winthrop's animal drawing was delayed:

The Jacovleff has not yet been acquired, it is a little difficult to deal with the artist's aged mother, but as the drawing is not mounted, I shall bring it rolled and there will be no expense... I bought two Animal groups from Jacovleff's mother and have charged you with one. The choice will be left to you, after my arrival.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁷ Letter from Martin Birnbaum to Grenville L. Winthrop, dated 20 April 1939, Harvard Art Museums Archives, Grenville L. Winthrop Papers (1864-1943), SC21 Box 7 Folder 190: Jacovleff, A. [Russian] [1930-1933]. Birnbaum must have been living in Paris at the time of the letter in order to pay visits to the artist's mother.

²⁴⁸ Ibid. Receipt of the cablegram is dated to 28 April 1939.

²⁴⁹ Ibid. This subsequent letter is dated to 29 April 1939.

Birnbaum subsequently billed Winthrop for the drawing, which had not yet been delivered, for 3,750 francs, or roughly \$80.²⁵⁰ Although it was relatively low compared to other works the collector purchased, today's value exceeds \$1,300, which was not a small sum in 1939. The analysis of prices of this particular magnitude yields the conclusion that the market for Iacovleff's work both during his lifetime and immediately after his death was relatively expensive. The drawing cited above is documented as *The Waterhole*, and it was bequeathed in 1943 to Harvard's Fogg Museum as part of the larger Winthrop Collection. In *Jacovleff and Other Artists*, Birnbaum mentions the artist's practice of visiting the *Grande Chaumière* and the Zoological Gardens at Vincennes, where he made colorful sketches from life of the flora and fauna he encountered.²⁵¹ Although there is no definitive evidence, this particular artwork was likely a product of this series of animal drawings completed during the summers of the early 1930s.²⁵²

After 1939, the archival resources consulted for the purpose of this thesis do not tell much more of a story about Martin Birnbaum's involvement in promoting Iacovleff. Things pick back up again, however, in 1943, when he began to write his momentous book, released in 1946. Birnbaum contacted the

²⁵⁰ This bill is not dated.

²⁵¹ Birnbaum, *Jacovleff and Other Artists*, 18. The Zoological Gardens at Vincennes was located in the heart of the Bois de Vincennes, which is the largest public park in Paris, located on the eastern side of the city. The Zoo was erected between 1932 and 1934 after the Exposition Coloniale of 1931. It is a structure that epitomized cultural endeavors in Paris during the inter-war period and was largely popular from the 1930s until the 1980s. In hindsight, it reflected the trend of exoticism during the Art Déco movement.

²⁵² Since the zoo was created between 1932 and 1934, it is not easy to pinpoint the exact dates when Iacovleff would have completed these drawings. It is equally likely that he completed them either before his departure for Boston, or during his summer vacations in Europe after he accepted the position as a professor at the MFA in 1934.

artist William James, Jr., son of the famous philosopher by the same name, who was the Chairman of the Administrative Board of the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston during Iacovleff's tenure there.

Conversations between Birnbaum and James in June and July of 1943 reveal that the dealer requested information from the Chairman regarding a letter written to Madame Iacovleff (the sister of the artist), the fate of his work, and a book that he intended to write while a professor at the Museum School.²⁵³ In his first letter, James confided that both Iacovleff's French and American work were in the possession of the Vose Gallery in Boston.²⁵⁴ Of particular importance is the mention of "two auctions held of *less important* American pieces a year and a half ago- one in Boston, one in New York."²⁵⁵ At this time, a conclusion can be drawn regarding the approximate date of these auctions, based on the date of the letter: January of 1942.

James regretfully admitted that the results of the sales were disappointing and he advised Vose to store the work until interest was renewed.²⁵⁶ A multitude of events can serve as proof for this downturn in the market, the most general and obvious of which cites 1942 as the apex of World War II. Evidence of the art market's hiatus from growth during the war years has been established and confirmed by authorities on the subject. Another

²⁵³ Letters from William James to Martin Birnbaum, dated 16 June 1943 and 2 July 1943, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Martin Birnbaum Papers, microfilm reel 108.

²⁵⁴ Letter from William James to Martin Birnbaum, dated 16 June 1943. "Sasha" appears frequently in the letters of all those who were close to Iacovleff, and it is most definitely a name of endearment in every case.

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

explanation could simply be that by 1942, four years after Iacovleff's death, the interest in his work fizzled out due to the infrequency of exhibitions since 1939.²⁵⁷ The most probable answer, however, combines the aforementioned situations and is related to James's emphasis on the "less important American pieces." These particular works were likely rendered in Iacovleff's looser, painterly style that contrasted from the tight, academic manner typical of his earlier *oeuvre*. In a time of volatile prices and a downturn in the market, it was probably not a sound investment to purchase less "iconic" works by a recently deceased artist.

In the last portion of the first letter, James expressed his relief to Birnbaum that the French work completed during the last year of Iacovleff's life was sent over to Boston, despite the frustrations he encountered in his attempts to get in touch with Sandra Iacovleff.²⁵⁸ James sent his second letter only a few weeks later, and he relayed his excitement to Birnbaum regarding the contents of his new book and communicated a desire that something be written about the volume Iacovleff himself "contemplated on drawing" with James's assistance.²⁵⁹ Although the book never came to fruition due to the sudden event of his death, Birnbaum indeed honored the request.²⁶⁰

²⁵⁷ In 1939, there was a monumental memorial exhibition, mainly of Iacovleff's recent work, held at the Grand Central Art Galleries in New York City's Grand Central Station. This show will be spoken about at length further in this chapter. Scant records of subsequent exhibitions barely exist, at least to the extent of my knowledge.

²⁵⁸ Again, Sandra Iacovleff was Alexandre's sister. His elderly mother died shortly after her son.

²⁵⁹ Letter from William James to Martin Birnbaum, 2 July 1943.

²⁶⁰ See Birnbaum, *Iacovleff and Other Artists*, 14 for the mention of this eternally unfinished book.

A final look at Birnbaum's role in the promotion of Iacovleff's work hints at a generous nature. A letter written in February of 1946 by the Chairman of the University Trustees of the William Rockhill Nelson Trust in Kansas City, Missouri thanks Birnbaum for his donation of the previous year:

The Registrar's report for the last quarter of 1945 has just reached my desk, and on behalf of Mr. H. V. Jones, Mr. R. B. Caldwell and myself I wish to thank you for the lovely water color sketch entitled "Theseus and the Minotaur" by Alexandre Iacovleff valued at \$500.00 which you have recently given to our collection. As you probably know great collections are built more by gifts than by purchases and we feel that your gift will not only be a most valuable addition to our collection but at the same time it will stimulate others to do likewise. Therefore, it is doubly appreciated.²⁶¹

Theseus and the Minotaur (Figure 66) is among Iacovleff's late American work. Above all else, the value placed on this watercolor sketch coincides with Virginia Gerson's (the sister-in-law of William Merritt Chase) asking price upon the sale of *The Sisters*, a work in her collection. Together, the prices for these similar works add consistency to our knowledge of the market for late Iacovleff in America.

As far as the Vose Gallery is concerned, correspondence about the Russian Ballet drawings is the last that exists between Iacovleff, Robert C. Vose, and W. Charles Thompson in the archives of the Vose Galleries. The director's return from touring Iacovleff's paintings in the west was met with a cablegram

²⁶¹ Letter from the Chairman of the William Rockhill Nelson Trust, Kansas City, MO to Martin Birnbaum, dated 15 February 1946, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, The Martin Birnbaum Papers, microfilm reel 108. William Rockhill Nelson was the American newspaper magnate from the Midwest who donated his estate for the establishment of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Missouri. How or why Birnbaum possessed a connection to this museum in particular has yet to be discovered.

from Sophie Iacovleff, the artist's mother. He expressed his deepest sympathy at the loss of her son:

I have just returned from a very long western tour, and hear with the deepest regret of the death of our good friend and a most remarkable artist, Mr. Iacovleff. I beg to offer my deepest sympathy in your great loss. I believe that you are his mother. We all feel his passing as a personal loss, for we had the greatest admiration for him and for his art, and our relations were most pleasant, as I think was indicated by his making us his American agents, when he went abroad. As you doubtless know, we are making every effort to have his art known from coast to coast, and have given much time and a very wide correspondence with nearly all our American museums in regard to their exhibiting the group of 105 paintings and drawings by Mr. Iacovleff which we now have on tour in the west with a continuation of the schedule for the autumn.²⁶²

The fate of the traveling exhibition comes to light with Vose's words.

The exhibition to which he refers is the same as the one initially held at the Carnegie Institute in January of 1938. Having visited Pittsburgh, Dayton, Cleveland, and Minneapolis, among other urban metros, the show made its way to the western border of America as the year morphed into the autumn season. The fact that it was still on the road points to the likelihood that Vose, upon Iacovleff's approval, indeed lowered the prices of the work, enabling the exhibition to achieve success. Vose continued his letter with an attempt to convince Mme. Iacovleff of maintaining their position as the sole agents of his work in America:

You can see that it is most important that we have authority to continue as his American agents, such authority to be given us by the administrator of his estate, without which all the months of effort have been wasted. Furthermore, we would like immediately to make a Memorial Exhibition in his honor. Our gallery is by far the best in New England, and one of the best in the country, and we are much the oldest

²⁶² Letter from Robert C. Vose to Mme. Sophie Iacovleff, dated 25 May 1938, Archives of the Vose Galleries of Boston.

art house of American establishment, being now in our 98th year. In addition, I think the fact that we exhibit far more in the museums of the country than any other dealer (I have personally conducted five museum exhibitions since January 1st) is evidence of the confidence our art institutions have in us. It is also most necessary that we have authority from the administrator to continue offering Mr. Iacovleff's paintings for sale. If there is any interruption in this, our position as agents, it may mean the loss of sales to museums, and also immediately after the death of an artist, it is possible there may be people who wish to acquire his pictures, so I trust you will use every effort to get us this authority at the earliest moment.²⁶³

Due to Vose's business trip that coincided with Iacovleff's death, W.

Charles Thompson took it upon himself to write to Mme. Iacovleff first, communicating grief at the loss of the artist on behalf of his uncle and the rest of the staff at the Vose Galleries.²⁶⁴ Thompson also stressed the importance of the gallery's role as the sole agent in America, as well as emphasizing Iacovleff's esteem throughout Boston and the need for a Memorial Exhibition to be held in his honor at the Vose Galleries.²⁶⁵

There is no record of Mme. Iacovleff's response in the Vose Archives. However, information can be extrapolated from subsequent letters between William and Alexander James, Robert C. Vose, and W. Charles Thompson that alludes to the gallery's secure hold on their position of authority.

In July of 1938, Vose and Thompson were faced with the difficult task of appraising the Iacovleff pictures in their hands. The latter wrote a letter to Alexander James, describing the obstacles of this particular appraisal process:

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ Letter from W. Charles Thompson to Mme. Sophie Iacovleff, dated 21 May 1938, Archives of the Vose Galleries of Boston.

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

The question of appraising the Iacovleff pictures is not such an easy task as one would think. I have been in communication with Mr. Davidson and have consulted my uncle regarding this matter. Mr. Davidson tells me that it is necessary that the appraisal, which is to be sent in Paris, must be exactly the same as we would make to submit to the Massachusetts authorities. This being the case, it is very difficult to bring the values down to a level which we would like to. I have, however, gone over them many times, and am submitting herewith a list which I believe to be the most favorable to the estate and something that will "hold water" with the state and federal authorities here.²⁶⁶

Almost a month later, the appraisal was the topic of nearly every letter between W. Charles Thompson and William James until September of 1938. It was so important that Iacovleff's other dealers in France depended on the proper valuation of his works; the artist's Parisian dealer, Mr. Brockman, stood a chance for a rebate on his French taxes if the Vose Galleries assigned the correct values.²⁶⁷ Any amount of money that could be saved and given to the estate was necessary to support Mme. Iacovleff and the artist's sister after his death. As of August 15, the galleries' lawyer Davidson informed Vose and Thompson that after a long negotiation process, it was safe for them to carry on their business of selling Iacovleff's work as the estate's sole agent in America.²⁶⁸ The dealers requested William James's presence in order to come to a mutual understanding regarding the pricing of works. Their examination of market trends throughout exhibitions' travels taught them that it was in the estate's (and their own) best interests to pull the large tempera paintings from the

²⁶⁶ Letter from W. Charles Thompson to Alexander James, dated 18 July 1938, Archives of the Vose Galleries of Boston.

²⁶⁷ Letter from William James to W. Charles Thompson, dated 13 August 1938, Archives of the Vose Galleries of Boston.

²⁶⁸ Letter from W. Charles Thompson to William James, 15 August 1938, Archives of the Vose Galleries of Boston.

shows due to their overwhelming size and frequently “controversial” subject matter.²⁶⁹ Smaller paintings, chalk or pastel drawings, and watercolors seemed to be more popular because of their intimate size and their less intimidating prices. This philosophy was carried over into the Memorial Exhibitions at the Vose Galleries and Grand Central Art Galleries throughout the first half of 1939.

Landmark Exhibitions After Iacovleff’s Death

Immediately following Iacovleff’s death in 1938, there was a particularly large movement upon the part of his dealers, collectors, and friends to hold memorial exhibitions in the artist’s honor. Although we know these exhibitions were held from correspondence between influential parties, archival material such as exhibition catalogues, sales records, and invitations are scarce. The following pages of this thesis will discuss two landmark exhibitions of Iacovleff’s work held in America in 1939.

The Vose Galleries held the first memorial exhibition in January of 1939. A catalogue has been preserved in the gallery’s archives. It features a forward written by Edward Forbes, William James, and the president of the Museum School, G. H. Edgell. Eighty-one works were featured in this exhibition, and most of them were representative of work created during the *Croisière Jaune*, the three years he spent in America and Mexico, and his time in Paris, Capri, and other areas of Europe between 1937 and 1938.²⁷⁰ Although many of the works were either featured in the traveling Carnegie Exhibition or reminiscent of

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

²⁷⁰ *Memorial Exhibition of the Work of Alexandre Iacovleff, January 5 to January 21, 1939*, Archives of the Vose Galleries of Boston.

those works on display in this show, a considerable number of the paintings had not yet been introduced to the public. Prevailing themes and subjects included landscapes, still-lives, mythological scenes, portraits, and scenes of everyday life.²⁷¹ Most reproductions of the works featured in this exhibition are unavailable; however, the black-and-white reproductions below were accessible through other sources at the time this thesis was written.



Fig. 77. *El Picador, Mexico*, watercolor on paper, 1936; illustration extracted from *Jacovleff and Other Artists* (1946).

²⁷¹ Ibid.

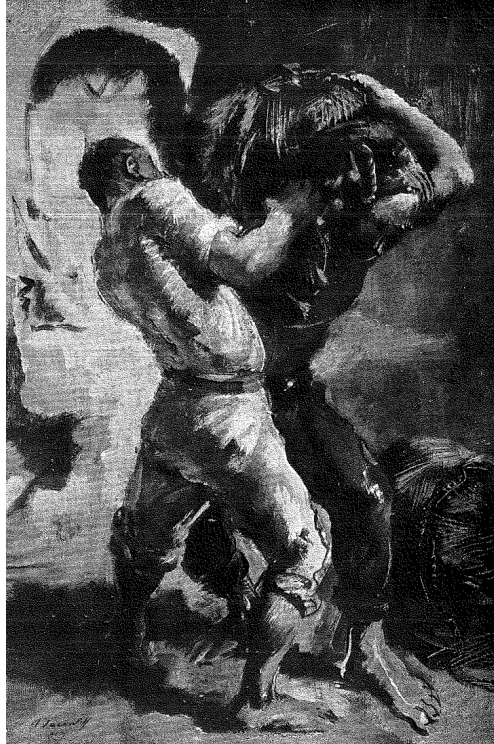


Fig. 78. *Capri Fishermen*, oil on canvas, c. 1937-1938.

The style and themes featured in the reproductions above are consistent with those featured in the traveling Carnegie Exhibition, and are representative of Iacovleff's stylistic exploration during the last years of his life. A looser, sketchier style is employed to render dynamic scenes of everyday life, which takes the place of the artist's signature academicism. According to correspondence preserved in the archives of the Vose Gallery, the exhibition seems to have been successful, as collectors were rushing to acquire works of the recently deceased artist due to their increased value.²⁷²

In accordance with the large number of sales, the exhibition was also well received by the public. William Germain Dooley, a critic for the *Boston*

²⁷² Various letters between Robert C. Vose, W. Charles Thompson, and William James, dated 1939, Archives of the Vose Galleries of Boston.

Evening Transcript, wrote the following in praise of the show, and compared Iacovleff to famous European artists of the day:

There are more than 80 paintings and drawings in the show and many periods of the artist's work are covered, from his two Georges Haardt expeditions across Africa and through Asia, the two sojourns at Capri, and his Mexican and Southern studies. It is especially unfortunate that his career was cut short for he had developed from the documentary portraits and drawings in the grand manner to deliberate experiments in form and color, borrowing here a bit of Picasso's monumental style, the high-keyed color and delicate gradations of Matisse, and absorbing other influences into a treatment that was on the verge of becoming highly personal.²⁷³

The memorial exhibition at Vose was so popular and in such high demand from the community that it was extended to run one week longer, until January 28 of 1939. An article written by Lawrence Dame in the *Boston Sunday Herald* praised Iacovleff's genius and introduced personal anecdotes from the artist's friends and colleagues.²⁷⁴ Dame's emphasis on the importance of the large-scale exotic works is, in hindsight, homage to the place Iacovleff's work holds in legitimizing Art Déco, and a testament to the hallmarks of this style.

Following the first memorial exhibition at Vose, there was a second exhibition held at the Grand Central Art Gallery in New York City in April of 1939. This was the most prolific and highly publicized show of Iacovleff's work to date. An astonishing 225 works were exhibited, gathered from the inventories of Vose in Boston and Knoedler in New York, as well as from the

²⁷³ William Germain Dooley, "Alexandre Iacovleff, Teacher and Virtuoso: His Amazing Talents and Versatile Interests Seen in Memorial Show," *Boston Evening Transcript*, January 1939.

²⁷⁴ Lawrence Dame, "Iacovleff Art Show Week Longer; Unique Genius Remembered Here," *The Boston Herald*, 15 January 1939.

collections of Iacovleff's patrons and friends.²⁷⁵ Sponsored by Miss Anne Morgan and other American, French, and Russian socialites, this memorial exhibition highlights the high profile collector base the artist accumulated throughout his life.²⁷⁶ The guest list boasted trustees of the Fogg Museum and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, notable and famous professors from Harvard and the Museum School, and the mayor of Boston, among other influential members of society.²⁷⁷ Moreover, the long list of sponsors emphasizes Iacovleff's international success, which in turn embodies his essential contribution to Art Déco painting.

Due to its large scale, the exhibition at Grand Central Art Galleries included works featuring both Iacovleff's academic and "looser" styles. Malvina Hoffman, a good friend and colleague of the artist, explains the origins of his stylistic transition in the eloquent introduction she wrote for the exhibition catalogue:

During these last years of his life he was restless and dissatisfied with his own work. He felt that as a painter he must search for new means of expression and a new scale of tonal values. He worked like a creature possessed- he felt his art growing and his horizon widening. He resigned from the Boston Museum School to devote all his time and strength to the development of his new vision and technique. In this present exhibition a large group of these recent paintings are included. It is difficult to believe that they are the work of the same artist who interpreted so realistically and vividly the characters and landscapes of the Oriental and African worlds. In this last period his spirit seemed to take wings and fly into the realm of fantasy and symbolic imagination.

²⁷⁵ Hoffman, et. al., *Memorial Exhibition of the Work of Alexandre Iacovleff (1887-1938)* (New York: Grand Central Art Galleries, Inc.), pp. 19-27.

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 15-17.

²⁷⁷ List of people to whom invitations to the Iacovleff Exhibition were sent, Harvard Art Museums Archives, Edward Waldo Forbes Papers, 1867-2005, HC2 Box 47 Folder 1152: Iacovleff Exhibition, Grand Central Art Galleries, N.Y. 11 April 1939 [1934, 1939].

The technique is freed from all academic restraint, the whole scale of color values has changed and there seems to be no limit to the scope of his fancy. It is indeed a tragedy to think of this great artist being cut off at the peak of all his creative powers. His last illness was of short duration, and we who knew and loved him like to remember that up to the very end his courage and faith seemed to carry his spirit along with the enthusiasm of eternal youth.²⁷⁸

Portraits of Russian ballet dancers, nude studies, and portrait studies are representative of his classic academicism. In assessing the work featured in this exhibition, one can draw the conclusion that in the last years of his life, Iacovleff usually reserved his classicizing style for drawings, especially portraits of members of the European and American cultural elite. Two works rendered in this style are featured below:



Fig. 79. *Riabouschinska*, sanguine on paper, 1936; extracted from *Memorial Exhibition of the Work of Alexandre Iacovleff*, no. 210.

²⁷⁸ Malvina Hoffman, in the introduction to *Memorial Exhibition of the Work of Alexandre Iacovleff (1887-1938)* New York: Grand Central Art Galleries, 11 April-29 April, 1939, p. 9.



Fig. 80. *Portrait of Martin Birnbaum*, red and black chalk on paper, 1938, no. 43; extracted from *Jacovleff and Other Artists* (1946).

Iacovleff's looser, expressionistic style developed roughly during the last ten years of his life was also represented in the exhibition. Many of these sketchy, more vibrant works were shown previously in the traveling Carnegie exhibition and the memorial show at the Vose Galleries only three months before in January of 1939. Examples of this type of work are included below. Here, Iacovleff takes advantage of color and the less restrictive qualities of paint to render the dynamism of landscapes and exotic scenes from everyday life. Iacovleff's "freedom of all academic restraint" is manifested in these paintings:

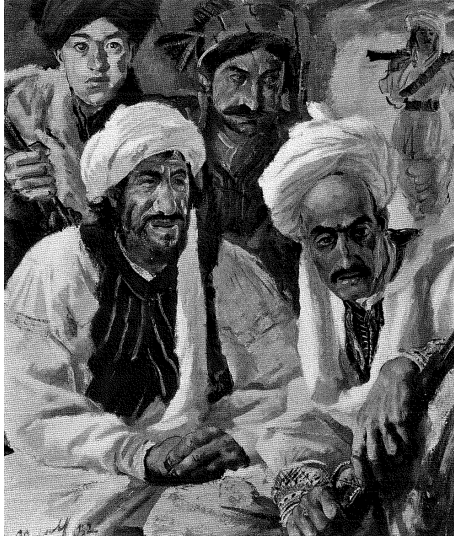


Fig. 81. *Afghans*, oil on canvas, 1932; extracted from *Memorial Exhibition of the Work of Alexandre Iacovleff*, no. 193.



Fig. 82. *Paysage Fantastique*, oil on canvas, 1932; extracted from *Memorial Exhibition of the Work of Alexandre Iacovleff*.

Also featured in this blockbuster memorial exhibition in New York were the Chinese and Japanese Theatre albums produced during the 1920s and early 1930s. The inclusion of these albums, along with works representative of every notable event in Iacovleff's, formed a true retrospective exhibition. It was

widely popular, and its contributors deemed it a large success. In a letter from Erwin S. Barrie, the director of the Grand Central Art Galleries, to Edward Forbes in April of 1939, Barrie expressed his satisfaction with the outcome of the memorial show: "The Iacovleff Exhibition has attracted a great number of visitors and has received most favorable publicity. Quite a few paintings were sold for the benefit of the estate."²⁷⁹

The positive attitude expressed above gradually diminished, however, with the upheaval caused by the Second World War, which in Europe, lasted until well after the Axis powers had been defeated. Although the war renewed prosperity for Americans, the art market remained volatile until the mid-1940s.²⁸⁰ Nonetheless, after Vose became the sole agents of Iacovleff's estate in America, there was also a drive to organize shows that featured works not previously included in the memorial exhibitions. Although catalogues of such events are difficult to come by, publicity archives remain accessible. For instance, there is record of an exhibition held in February of 1941 that was mostly comprised of portraits of distinguished individuals originally intended for the Russian Ballet exhibition at Knoedler's in London in June of 1938. The *Boston Post* featured a reproduction of a portrait of Tamara Toumanova, which was representative of the works included at the Vose Gallery.²⁸¹

²⁷⁹ Letter from Erwin S. Barrie to Edward W. Forbes, Harvard Art Museums Archives, Edward Waldo Forbes Papers, 1867-2005, HC2 Box 47 Folder 1152: Iacovleff Exhibition, Grand Central Art Galleries, N.Y. 11 April 1939 [1934-1939].

²⁸⁰ Oral history interview with S. Morton Vose, 1986 July 24, Tape 1 Side B, Archives of American Art, The Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

²⁸¹ "Dancer's Portrait," *The Boston Post*, 18 February 1941.

Documentation also exists in the Vose Galleries' archives of a general exhibition that featured recent work. The advertisement specifically emphasizes that the paintings and drawings on display were not previously shown in the memorial exhibitions, so that a certain air of exclusivity is maintained. Although no date is included, it is safe to assume on the basis of other archival information that the exhibition took place some time between the years of 1940 and 1943.²⁸²

Archival records also reveal that there was a significant effort on the part of Robert C. Vose to spread Iacovleff's reputation across the country. The dealer initially set out to do this in late 1937 and early 1938, but the death of the artist and the complications in securing the estate postponed his efforts. From roughly 1945 to 1950, Vose hosted various exhibitions at galleries and art institutions in California. A catalogue produced by the Maxwell Galleries in San Francisco features 59 works mainly taken from the artist's sojourns in Asia, Capri, and the United States. It seems to be modeled after the Memorial Exhibition of 1939 in New York, except it included a much larger number of the Russian Ballet drawings.²⁸³ In January and February of 1946, Iacovleff's work moved on to Los Angeles, where it was displayed at the Francis Taylor Galleries in the Beverly Hills Hotel. The exhibition included 56 works, and aside from roughly ten paintings and drawings, it featured most of the same ones from the

²⁸² Exhibition advertisement of in-approximate date, The Archives of the Vose Galleries of Boston, c. 1940-1943.

²⁸³ *Iacovleff*, Maxwell Galleries, San Francisco, CA, 1-30 October, year can only be approximated to 1945; Archives of the Vose Galleries of Boston.

show in San Francisco.²⁸⁴ This slight fluctuation can be explained by the sale of some pictures.

Two years later, back in Boston, the Vose Galleries received new inventory from Iacovleff's estate in Paris. Robert C. Vose was eager to exhibit these new paintings and drawings and hosted an exhibition of this newly acquired work in January 1948. The advertisement featured a drawing from Iacovleff's Asian sojourn under Citroën, dated 1932.²⁸⁵ One can conclude that the works on display were representative of the image highlighted on the announcement. It is also possible that the exhibition included work created in Capri and Paris during Iacovleff's last days, which had never been seen before in the United States.

The last documented exhibition of Iacovleff's work in the Vose archives took place during November and December of 1950. Lent by Robert C. Vose, the show was displayed at the Ballroom Gallery of The Publick House at the Treadaway Inn in Sturbridge, Massachusetts. The hotel location followed in the footsteps of the exhibition held at the Beverly Hills Hotel in Los Angeles just a few years earlier. In selecting hotels as venues for Iacovleff's work, Vose was perhaps attempting to appeal to the international collector base that the artist obtained throughout his career. Compared to the exhibitions in California, however, this one in the suburbs of Boston only included 22 paintings and drawings, making it the smallest known exhibition of Iacovleff's work in

²⁸⁴ *Iacovleff: Exhibition of Paintings*, Francis Taylor Galleries, Beverly Hills Hotel, Beverly Hills, CA, 24 January-28 February 1946, Archives of the Vose Galleries of Boston.

²⁸⁵ *Paintings and Drawings by the Late Alexandre Iacovleff*, R. C. Vose Galleries, 5-24 January 1948, Archives of the Vose Galleries of Boston.

America. Some of them were featured in past exhibitions, but a majority of them seem to be new works that had not yet been displayed in America.²⁸⁶

No remaining records of exhibitions after Iacovleff's death are accessible through the Vose archives. At some point in the second half of the twentieth-century, the gallery sold the artist's estate. The exact date of this sale has yet to be discovered. After 1950, Iacovleff fell into obscurity, largely due to the rise of Abstract Expressionism. Monumentality, classicism, eclecticism, and exoticism, all hallmark characteristics of the Art Déco era, were tossed aside and replaced with the "shock of the new" embodied in the Greenbergian abstract aesthetic.²⁸⁷

²⁸⁶ *Alexandre Iacovleff*, The Ballroom Gallery of the Publick House, Sturbridge, MA, 10 November-12 December 1950, Archives of the Vose Galleries of Boston.

²⁸⁷ The sentence above references Robert Hughes's book *The Shock of the New: The Hundred-Year History of Modern Art, Its Rise, Its Dazzling Achievement, Its Fall* (Random House: New York, 1991). Hughes makes an effort to communicate what was so appealing about the Abstract Expressionist movement that originated in New York during the post-World War II era. My usage of the term "Greenbergian aesthetic" refers to the aesthetic agenda of critic Clement Greenberg, an art critic who elevated the gestural and color field abstraction of Jackson Pollock and other members of the New York School to godly heights. He deemed any sort of representation irrelevant and unworthy of valuable art historical discussion, and is largely responsible for the under-appreciation that so many twentieth-century artists experience today, including Alexandre Iacovleff.

CONCLUSION

"It seems to me regrettable that he is very little heard of today. There is a little revival, I think, of interest in him, but not very much," noted S. Morton Vose in 1986.²⁸⁸ This statement, so simply put by the son of the famous Robert C. Vose, summarizes the interest in and market for Iacovleff's work from about 1950 until very recently.

Alexandre Iacovleff's narrow renown is "regrettable," indeed. His work embodies the spirit of Art Déco painting and the exotic and Orientalist aesthetic that was so popular during the 1920s and 1930s. His international popularity emphasizes the importance of his work, and serves to reinforce the breadth and legitimacy of "exotic academicism." The stylistic transition in his oeuvre that occurred roughly between 1929 and 1938 shows his attempt to adapt to modern, evolving trends advocated by his contemporaries. This thesis calls for a reevaluation of Iacovleff's contribution to the international Art Déco movement during the interwar period of the twentieth-century, with special interest in his relationship to American collectors, dealers, and institutions.

The reader should understand that my Iacovleff discussion is not yet complete. Two notable retrospective exhibitions of his work were held in America in 1972 and 1993 that reexamined his oeuvre and his contribution to the history of art. They also attempted to legitimize his reputation as one of the most important European Art Déco painters. In 1972, Joseph Gropper of the Gropper Art Galleries in Boston went to great lengths to hold a comprehensive

²⁸⁸ Oral history interview with S. Morton Vose, 1986 July 24, Tape 2 Side B, Archives of American Art, The Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

exhibition of Iacovleff's work. He began purchasing the artist's paintings and drawings whenever they came up for sale from 1970 to 1971. He also contacted collectors across the United States and France in order to acquire work for the show. After almost a year of planning, 50 works were exhibited at the Gropper Art Gallery. It is significant that many of the drawings came from the estate of Georges-Marie Haardt, the leader of the Citroën expeditions; these would never have been seen before in the United States. Mark A. Schaffer of *La Vieille Russie* in New York, like Joseph Gropper, acknowledged the little attention Iacovleff received since his Memorial Exhibition at Grand Central Art Galleries. In 1993, Schaffer held the first exhibition of the Russian's work in New York since 1939. In the catalogue of the exhibition, he makes it very clear that his intention is to contribute to a revival in popularity and appreciation for the virtually unknown artist.²⁸⁹ In the near future, I hope to supplement the contents of this thesis with in-depth analysis of these two landmark American exhibitions.

I also plan to continue my exploration into the Iacovleff collection of the Musée des Années 30 in Boulogne-Billancourt, which will include visits with the curatorial staff of the museum and research in its archives. The museum, as mentioned throughout this thesis, is largely responsible for the revival of interest in Iacovleff's work within the past twenty years. Their acquisition of Iacovleff's paintings and drawings, beginning in the early 1990s, has inspired recent exhibitions of his work in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

²⁸⁹ Schaffer, *Alexandre Iacovleff: Paintings and Drawings* (New York: La Vieille Russie, Didier Aaron, Inc., 1993), pp. 4-8.

Caroline Haardt de la Baume's beautiful exhibition catalogue, published under the auspices of the Musée des Années 30 and entitled *Alexandre Iacovleff: Itinérances*, was used extensively throughout this thesis as an art historically relevant source. In fact, in 2012, Haardt de la Baume's new publication, entitled *Alexandre Iacovleff: Les Croisières Citroën* (Fage), recently came available for sale. Unfortunately, I was unable to include any information from this book at the time this thesis was written. The augmented version will of course include new issues that Haardt de la Baume addresses, as well as primary research regarding recent Iacovleff exhibitions and the growing contemporary market for his work.

While on the topic of the contemporary market for Iacovleff, at this time I wish to provide readers with a "teaser," so to speak, of which an in-depth discussion will be provided in the supplement to this thesis. In very recent years, since 2009, Iacovleff's works have been selling for record prices at auction, between \$200,000 and \$1,145,000. Most of the work is from the artist's initial East Asian sojourn between 1917 and 1918, as well as from the *Croisière Jaune* and the Russian Ballet portrait series. The cause of this resurgence in the market will be explored in my dissertation, but phenomena such as the Art Déco revival and the rise of the Asian art market are suspects. Is this market change a reflection of a long-term Iacovleff revival? Or is it merely a "trendy", temporary renewal of interest?

There is only one way to find out...

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VITA

Kara Blanken was born in Scranton, Pennsylvania. In 2004, she and her family moved to Bluffton, South Carolina, known as the “Lowcountry” of the United States. Her passion for the arts and culture of the Art Déco movement was further cultivated while living in the South. In 2007, she began her undergraduate career at the College of Charleston in Charleston, South Carolina. She graduated from this institution in 2011 with a Bachelor of Art in Art History and a Bachelor of Art in Arts Management. Her experience in working for fine art galleries and museums in Charleston inspired her to continue her education in art history. She decided to write her master’s thesis in regards to an important but largely unknown artist whose work embodies both the academicism and exoticism of the Art Déco era. In August of 2013, Kara will graduate from Louisiana State University with a Master of Arts.