

GUY DE MONTLAUR (1918-1977)
PORTRAIT OF COURAGE



BIOGRAPHY

Guy de Montlaur (1918-1977) was a French painter and a resistance fighter in World War II. He landed in Normandy on D-Day, June 6th, 1944, with the 1er Bataillon de Fusiliers Marins Commandos (BFMC), also known as "Commando Kieffer", participated in the Battle of Normandy through the summer of 1944, and landed again in Holland as part of "Operation Infatuate" on November 1st, 1944.

Montlaur's paintings were influenced by great classical artists such as Paolo Ucello, Ingres, Delacroix, and later Kandinsky. One can define four styles characteristic of the evolution of Montlaur's work: cubism immediately post-war, geometric abstraction beginning in 1949, abstract expressionism from 1955, and finally lyrical abstraction from around 1960. This was the period when he attained new heights in his art and technique. His work was often mystical, sometimes religious, and was marked by the terrible memories of his wartime experiences.

Origins and Training

Guy de Montlaur was born on September 9th, 1918 in Biarritz, in a Languedoc family which can be traced back to the 11th century. The Château de Montlaur (11th Century) is situated 20 km north east of Montpellier in the south of France. Guy de Montlaur also had Italian heritage from his Villardi ancestors who were allies of the Visconti and Baroncelli. They settled in Provence at the end of the 13th Century. He had Brazilian ancestors on his mother's side who came from São Paulo and Salvador da Bahia.

He started to paint at a young age. Between 1936 and 1938 while a student in literature and philosophy at the Sorbonne he studied at Emmanuel Fougerat's studio and then at the Académie Julian. He worked with Jean Souverbie and accompanied him to the World's Fair of 1937 at the Palais de Chaillot, in Paris.

In 1937, he met a young American woman also studying art, Adelaide Piper Oates. They married six years later. In 1938, just after the Munich Agreement, he left for Eastern France to do his military service.

The Soldier

Guy de Montlaur was thus at the front at the onset of the war on September 3rd, 1939. He was with the 3e Régiment de Hussards based at Sarreguemines, Lorraine, regrouped in the 15e Groupe de Reconnaissance de Corps d'Armée, and took part from the start of the war in numerous raids in Saarland, Germany. His unit became part of the Corps Francs from October 17th, 1939, under the command of Capitaine de Castries, future commander at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. In June 1940, Montlaur was fighting the invasion in a losing battle and ended up in Limoges, in the center of France,

<https://montlaur.net/en/>
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guy_de_Montlaur
https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guy_de_Montlaur

two days after the armistice was concluded by Maréchal Pétain and Adolf Hitler. In 1942, after crossing Spain then led by General Franco, he arrived in Lisbon, Portugal where he worked for MI6, the British Secret Intelligence Service, for three months.

He joined the Free French in London in October 1942. At his request, he was assimilated into the 1er BFMC of the Forces Navales Françaises Libres (FNFL). On June 6th, 1944 he landed in Normandy at Sword Beach with the 177 French members of Commando Kieffer, integrated into the 4th Commando of the 1st Special Service Brigade of Brigadier General Lord Lovat.

Guy de Montlaur's actions on D-Day are memorialized in Cornelius Ryan's book *The Longest Day*, as well as in Darryl Zanuck's 1962 movie, where his role is acted by Georges Rivière.

Guy Vourc'h, who was troop commander at the D-Day landings made the following comments in his eulogy for Guy de Montlaur on August 13th, 1977 at the cemetery of Ranville, Normandy:

"I saw him when he arrived early in 1943. I offered him the opportunity to join the Commando unit, which was the modern equivalent of the cavalry, a reconnaissance arm also designed to undertake daring raids. From that time onward, we were always together. First as group leaders, then as section leaders, training together with Commandant Kieffer, Lofi, Hattu, Chausse, Bégot, and Wallerand, we built up together an instrument of attack, which had the honor of being chosen as first to land, here, on our native land of France. When all the officers of my company were wounded, it was Guy de Montlaur who took over in command. Later, at Flushing and Walcheren, wounded as he was near me, he refused to be evacuated. His courage was close to insolence; he was not just fighting but humiliating the enemy: by the age of 25 he had received seven citations for valor in battle ("Croix de Guerre") and the French "Légion d'Honneur."

On November 1st, 1944, he took part in the Allied landings at Flushing on the island of Walcheren in Holland and suffered facial wounds when his barge was hit by a German shell. The operation was an attack on an enemy force ten times greater in numbers than that of the Allies, and it was a total success. It opened the Scheldt River to the Allied troops and allowed them access to the port of Antwerp as well as northern Germany, opening the road to Berlin and leading to the end of the war.

The Artist

After the war, Guy de Montlaur and his wife Adelaide spent two years in the United States. He studied at the Art Students League of New York and painted feverishly.

Cubism

Montlaur's paintings faithfully followed the cubist rules of the group "Golden Section" (Gleizes, Metzinger, Gris, Léger, and Duchamp). He was inspired by the principles laid out by his friend Gino Severini in his book *Du Cubisme au Classicisme*, where colors are determined in a quasi-mathematical formula.

Montlaur was prolific during this period, when he demonstrated rigor as well as accuracy with his eye and hand. Montlaur and his family returned to France in 1948 and settled in Nice until 1953. He spent his time between Nice and Paris where he met his friends, members of the dynamic group Réalités Nouvelles (Atlan, Poliakoff, Schneider, Chapoval, and Soulages). Montlaur's first solo exhibition was in March 1949 at the Galerie Lucienne-Léonce Rosenberg. The Museum of Modern Art of the City of Paris bought one of his works at this exhibition: *Les fruits* (1949).

Geometric Abstraction

In 1949, the Galerie René Drouin published the translation of Vassily Kandinsky's *Du Spirituel dans l'art et dans la peinture en particulier (Über das Geistige in der Kunst)*. Kandinsky's paintings and ideas became models for Montlaur. In October 1949, at the 16th Salon des Surindépendants, Montlaur showed his first abstract painting: *La Baie des Anges* (1949).

In a letter to Montlaur dated January 6th, 1950 Gino Severini wrote: "I am sure that this period of abstraction is useful to you. But always leave the door open."

Montlaur had a second show at the Salon des Surindépendants, but finding that their style did not correspond to his, he moved to Réalités Nouvelles where his work was exhibited until 1958 alongside that of Atlan, Chapoval, Soulages, Schneider, Kupka, Vasarely, Herbin, Nell Blaine, Ellsworth Kelly, Jacques Duthoo, and Nicolas Poliakoff, among others.

Montlaur exhibited his work at the Galerie Colette Allendy in 1951 and 1954. This gallery was founded by the widow of Dr. René Allendy who had written the preface to Severini's book *Du Cubisme au Classicisme*. According to art critic Michel Ragon, "all viable new work is exhibited by Madame Colette Allendy." Indeed, she also exhibited work by Hartung, Soulages, Mathieu, Stahly, Wols, Corneille, Bryen, Doucet, Schneider, and del Marle. Art critic Roger van Gindertael wrote:

"We see a young man like Guy de Montlaur wanting to escape from the lack of strength of formalism, whose syntax had achieved a dangerous level of perfection and let loose on this order the power of disruptive but beneficial expressions, because they open doors for other rhythms and arrangements."
(Galerie Colette Allendy)

Expressionist Abstraction

In 1953, Montlaur and his family moved to Fontainebleau, about 35 miles from Paris. His painting became more geometric and more linear. It moved away from Kandinsky and Severini and lost its allegiance to the neo-constructivism of Réalités Nouvelles. Montlaur exchanged the paintbrush for the knife and palette. He broke away from form and contours. His paintings took on a fantastical, dreamlike, disconcerting aspect. One sees the intimate relationship with his favorite poets: Baudelaire, Verlaine, Nerval (the title of his painting, *Divertissement pour une nuit de janvier*, 1955, refers to Nerval's death on January 26th, 1855). Paul Valéry and especially Guillaume Apollinaire accompanied him during his war years: he had *Alcools* in his rucksack when he landed on D-Day. The book had traces of sea water on it. His lucidity and intransigence meant he wanted to expose the truth at any price, alone against everyone if necessary.

His friend, literary critic and director of the French intellectual journal *Esprit*, Albert Béguin, wrote him in a letter dated 1957: "Now you show your true violent nature."

In May 1956, Guy de Montlaur finally moved back to Paris with his family.

Lyrical Abstraction

Montlaur's facial wounds sustained at the time of the Walcheren landings were extremely painful and prevented him from sleeping. Surgeons were not able to remove the multiple fragments of tungsten that were lodged in his eye. Montlaur attempted to transcend his physical and emotional pain by increasing his creative activity. His painting became mystical (*La chute de l'ange*, 1960) and expressed an intimate inner spiritual battle.

In 1961, Montlaur returned to serving in the French Navy, first with the Bataillon de Joinville, then in 1963 at the Service Historique de la Marine, in Paris. He devoted all his energy to his work, to the detriment of his art. For nine years, he painted at night, on week-ends, and during family summer vacations in Brittany. Paradoxically, these short moments of tranquility saw an explosion in his productivity.

His painting became more and more obscure to outsiders, but he always left clues. It is by painting that he attempted to overcome despair, but the paintings themselves are desperate. He wrote about his painting *Voici venir l'automne*, 1961:

"Only a touch of dark rose madder could warm up such a landscape of metal. The sharp blue of a pale clear sky; the steely hue of streams and roads; the trees chiseled by the hard frost: all this requires a bloody corpse. Let a hand with sharp claws tear from my chest this heart,

red and hot, and throw it in the winter woods: now my picture is composed. It is right as it should be. It is to winter that my heart belongs."

(Guy de Montlaur, *Petits écrits de nuit*)

A tragic episode affected Montlaur greatly in the summer of 1966. The vehicle in which he was a passenger, was involved in a traffic accident with a young boy riding a moped on a country road. Montlaur comforted the boy in his agony. The accident brought back to the fore all the unbearable experiences of the war. His paintings during August 1966 express his misery (*Du sang sur la route*, *Cauchemar d'une nuit d'été*, *A la mémoire de ma tante qui est morte en décembre 1944 au camp de Ravensbrück*).

Montlaur declared Paolo Ucello and Vassily Kandinsky to be his masters. This is how he described himself in 1971 at his show, at the Galerie des Editions Rolf Lutz in Paris:

"He looks at the world with a somewhat skeptical eye because he knows that the utility of things doesn't matter much. What really matters is the mysterious manner in which forms and colors organize themselves inescapably. Nothing is motionless in what he sees. He never stops marveling at what is being born under his hand. The only thing he knows is that he is the medium between the mystery which envelops him and this new painting he would not have dreamed of previously."

(Guy de Montlaur, *Petits écrits de nuit*)

Pierre Vintéjoux wrote in the daily newspaper *Le Figaro* at the time of the Galerie Rolf Lutz exhibit:

"Over the course of recent paintings, the lyrical verve, often unbridled by the past, has attained rigor without lessening the liberty of expression that is dear to Montlaur. A new vigor constrains the fluid graphic work and it is helped by the contrasts of the colors that are carefully ordered, with a sort of humor, dark, but always enlivening."

Robert Vrinat added in *Nouveaux Jours de Paris*:

"The Galerie Editions Rolf Lutz, 15bis Quai Voltaire, is presenting the recent work of Montlaur, which is rarely seen. Thus, each exhibit shows a distinct step in his artistic journey. He remains faithful to his original nature but moves forward in the search for expression that is both lyrical and technical and which requires above all faith in the subject matter, the song of colors, the movement of the forms created by the gesture and touch. What remains

is a quality of structure and of life without which nothing could be said of the essence of his deep meditation. Silvagni, who wrote the preface to the exhibit brochure, advises us that his painting is born from a meditation on death, and also of the revolt of man. In the execution of the work, in parallel to the development of each painting, appears in the spirit of the painter, a psychic equivalent, a state of mind which dictates to him the title of the work (*La lutte de Jacob avec l'ange, La mort du poète, Ô mon amour, Reminescere, etc.*). Large movements contrasted with red and white etched with black (for example) constitute a searing explosion within a rhythm of composition without weakness. With this in mind, and with this talent, abstraction is no longer a part or aspect of the painting, but it rather encompasses it entirely with its special qualities and enchantment."

Last Years

In 1974, Guy and Adelaide purchased a property near Lisieux, Normandy, to get closer to the region that had so affected Montlaur since 1944. He spent his last years between Paris and Normandy and dedicated himself entirely to his painting.

"I want to shout: 'Just look! Look at this mystery! It pierces the eyes!' And nobody sees it. Nobody but me. People see colors, shadows, lights, forms. They see (but what do I know what they really see?) the canvas, the stretcher nails. And I don't understand why they can't guess at all the distress here, right in front of them, as it was during the war: the noise, death, love, betrayal; the lies, and the fear. And still more that I cannot say, but I know how to do it. Yes, I say: I know how to do it."

(Guy de Montlaur, *Petits écrits de nuit*)

Guy de Montlaur died on August 10th, 1977 in Garches, near Paris. He is buried with his wife Adelaide, at the Ranville cemetery in Normandy. He lies near his comrades, including Commando Kieffer Chaplain René de Naurois, Righteous Among the Nations, who celebrated their wedding on August 21st, 1943 in London.



Adelaide and Guy de Montlaur, Denham, England, 1943

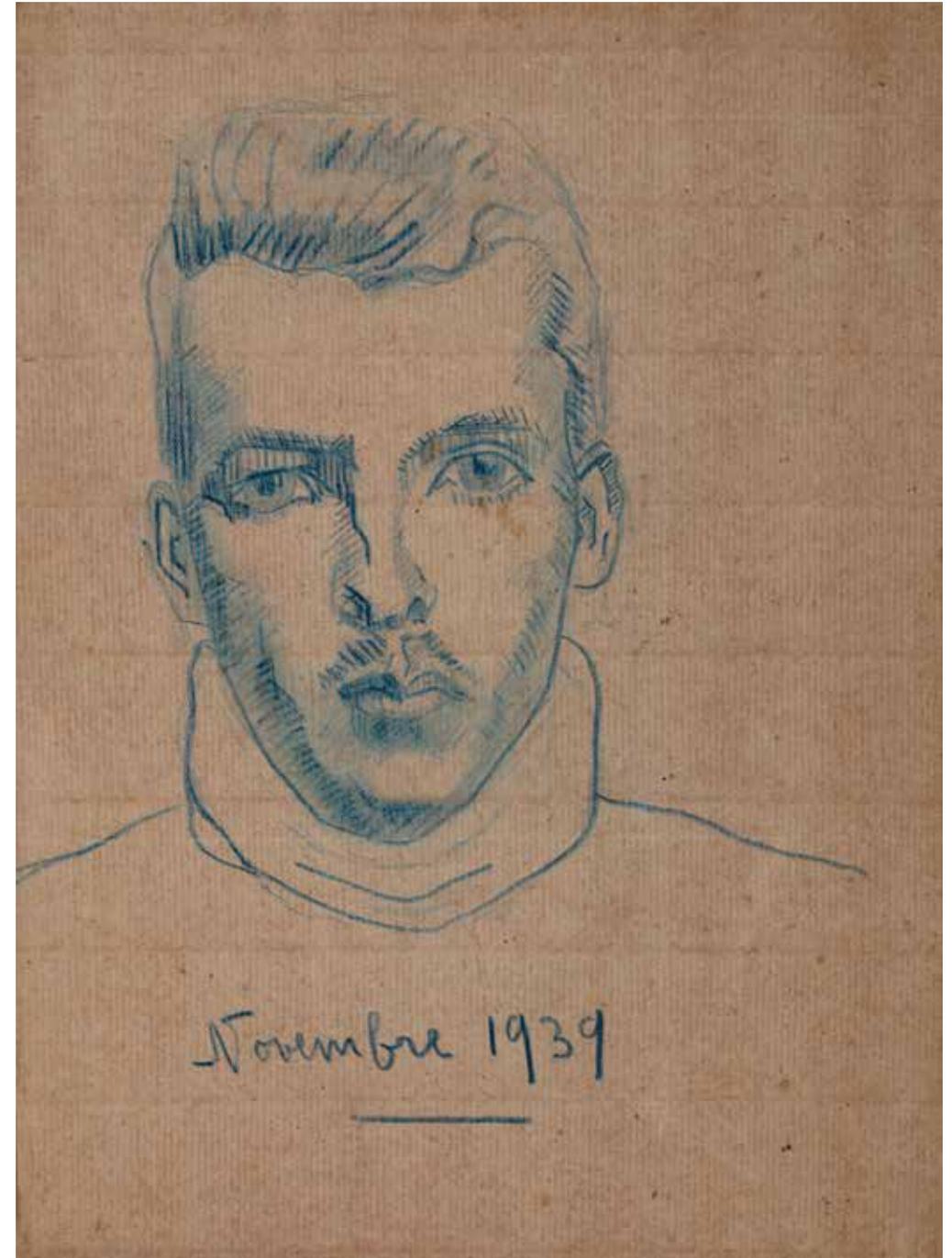


Guy de Montlaur, La Thibaudière, Anjou, France, 1946

Autoportrait
Self-Portrait

24 X 18 cm
Pencil on paper
Sarreguemines, France, 1939

Montlaur Family Collection





Adelaide
65.5 X 55.5 cm
Oil on canvas
Ridgefield, CT, USA, 1948
Montlaur Family Collection



Indian Summer
54 X 65 cm
Oil on canvas
Ridgefield, CT, USA, 1949 / Paris, France, 1968
Sloan Family Collection



La Baie des Anges

65 X 100 cm
Oil on canvas
Nice, France, 1950

Montlaur Family Collection



Composition Plage

Composition Beach

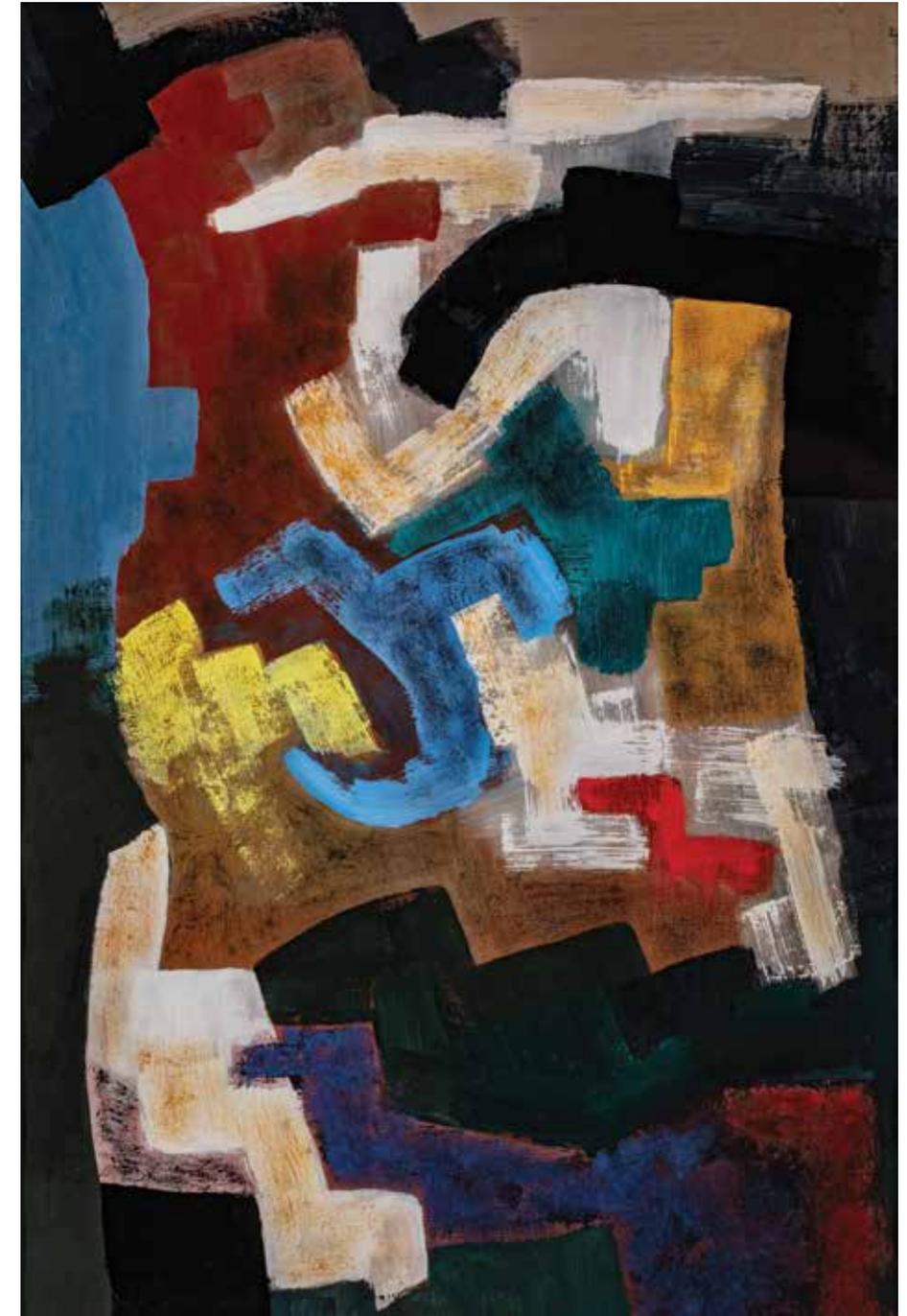
65 X 100 cm
Oil on canvas
Nice, France, 1951

Montlaur Family Collection



Pegasus before landing
81 X 65 cm
Oil on canvas
Fontainebleau, France, 1956

Mémorial Pégasus, France



**Enfin Paris!
Paris, finally!**
48 X 32 cm
Gouache on paper
Paris, France, 1956

Montlaur Family Collection



Feu
Fire
92 X 65 cm
Oil on canvas
Paris, France, 1957

Montclair Family Collection



Brise marine sur les Antilles
Sea breeze in the Caribbean
38 X 61 cm
Oil on canvas
Paris, France, 1962

Sloan Family Collection



Petite peinture de nuit
Small night painting

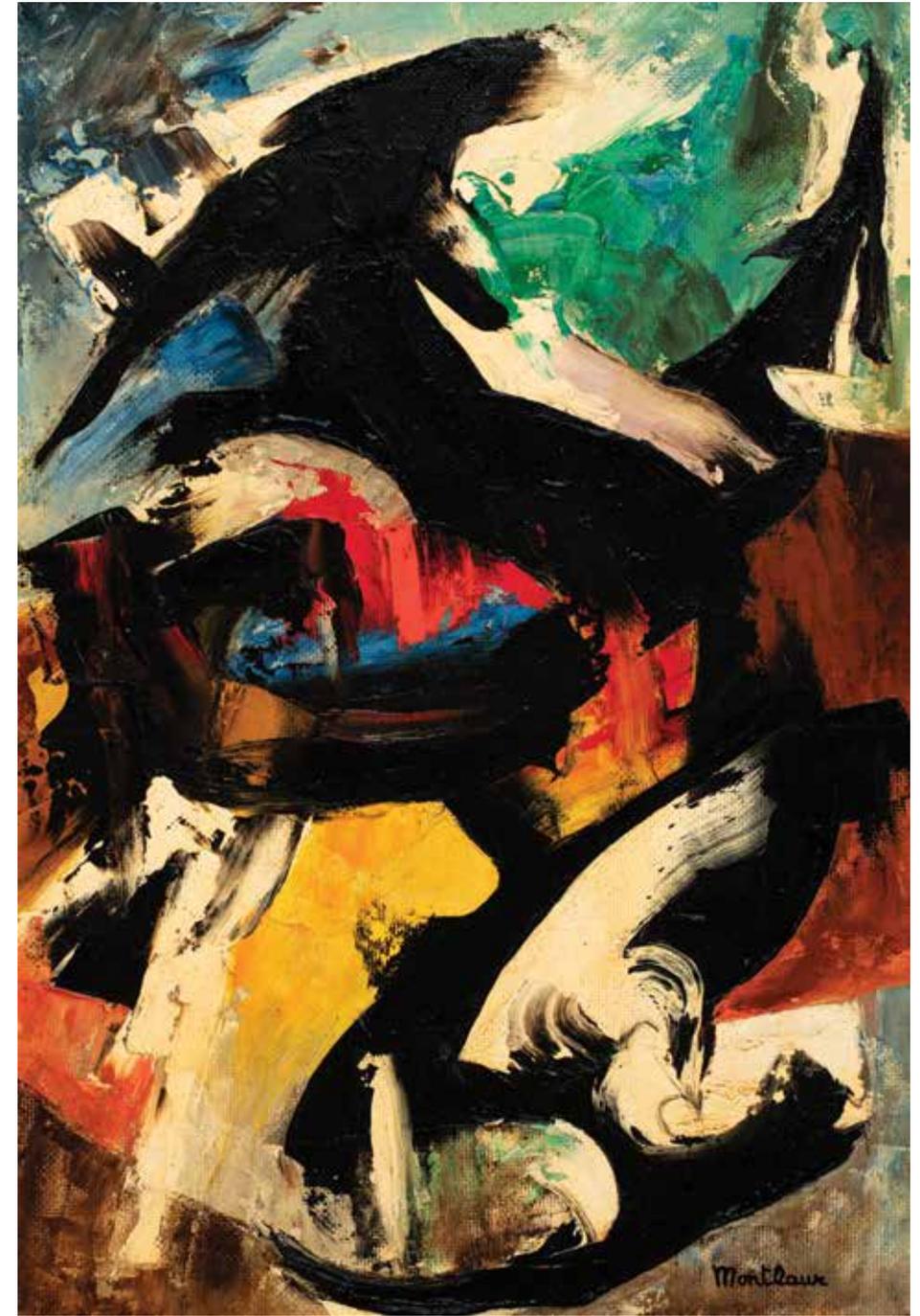
32 X 49 cm
Oil on paper, masonite
Paris, France, 1963

Montlaur Family Collection

Voilà comme je suis
Here's how I am

55 X 38 cm
Oil on masonite
Dinard, France, 1964

Sloan Family Collection

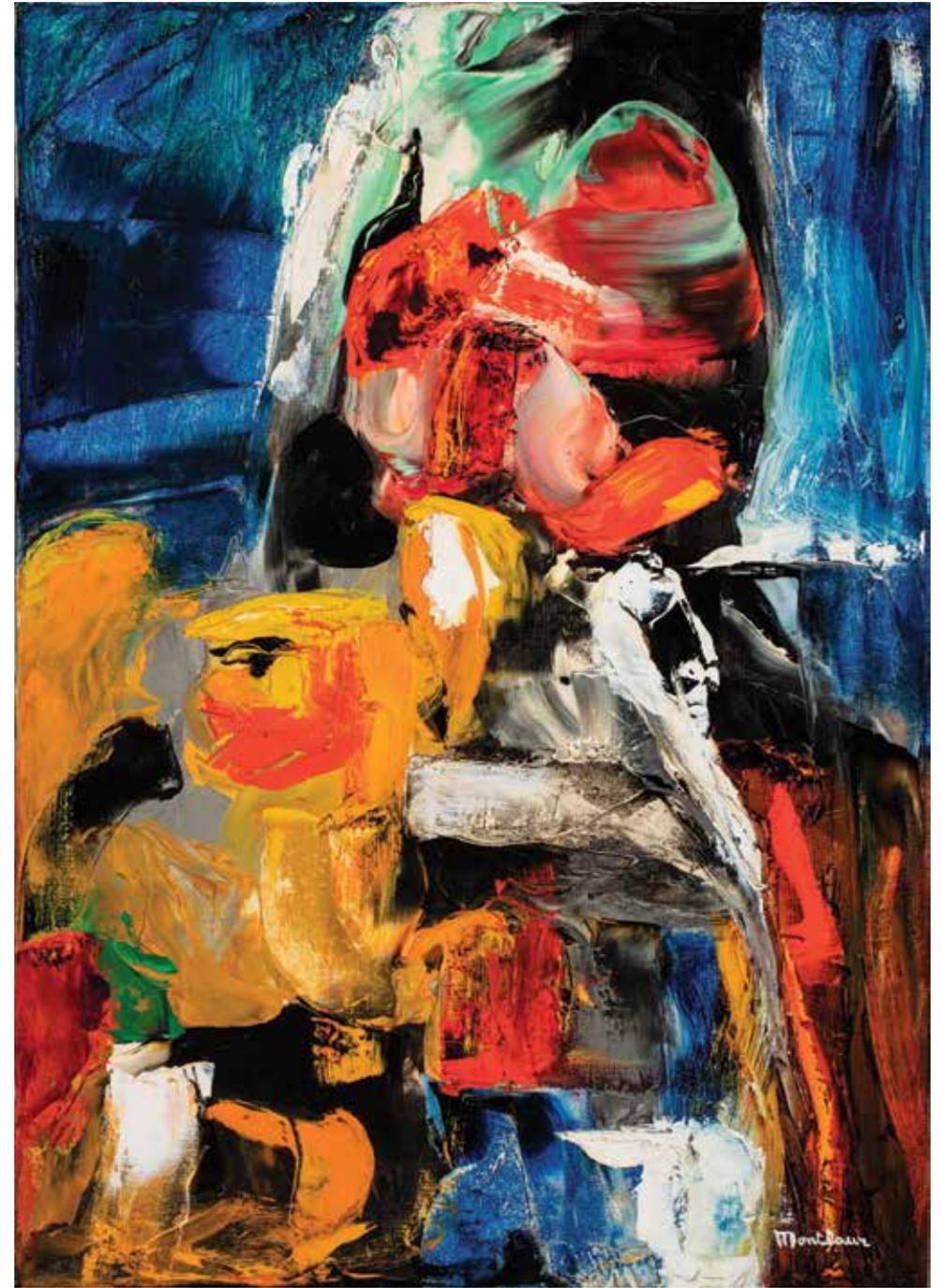




A la mémoire de ma tante qui est morte en décembre 1944 au camp de Ravensbrück
In memory of my aunt who died in December 1944 at the Ravensbrück camp

61 X 38 cm
Oil on masonite
Dinard, France, 1966

Jean de Montlaur Collection



Avant l'horreur
Before the horror

65 X 46 cm
Oil on canvas
Paris, France, 1966

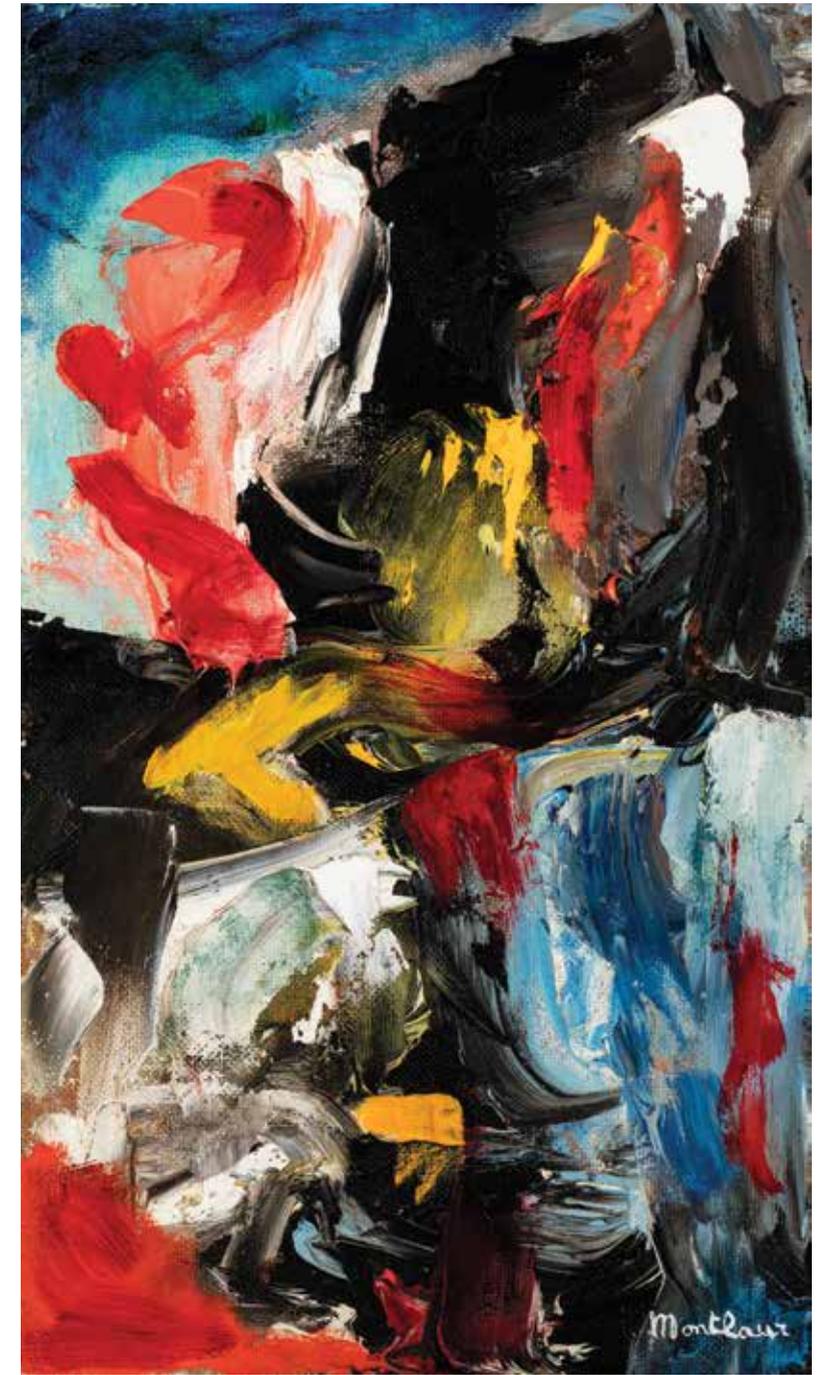
Montlaur Family Collection



Cauchemar d'une nuit d'été
Midsummer nightmare

46 X 55 cm
Oil on masonite
Dinard, France, 1966

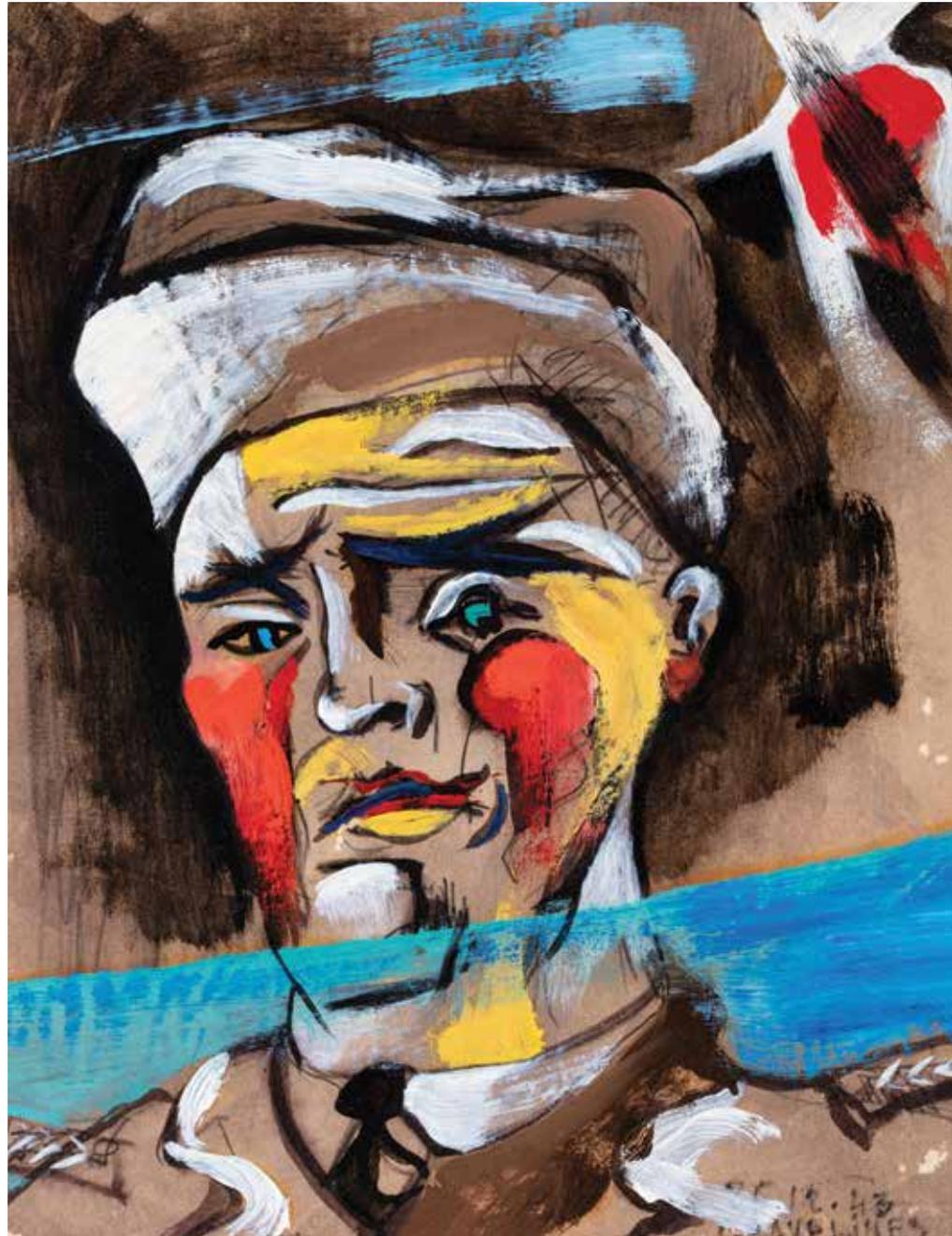
Montlaur Family Collection



C'est comme celui qui peint
après avoir vu un ami
This is like he who paints after
having seen a friend

55 X 38 cm
Oil on masonite
Paris, France, 1966

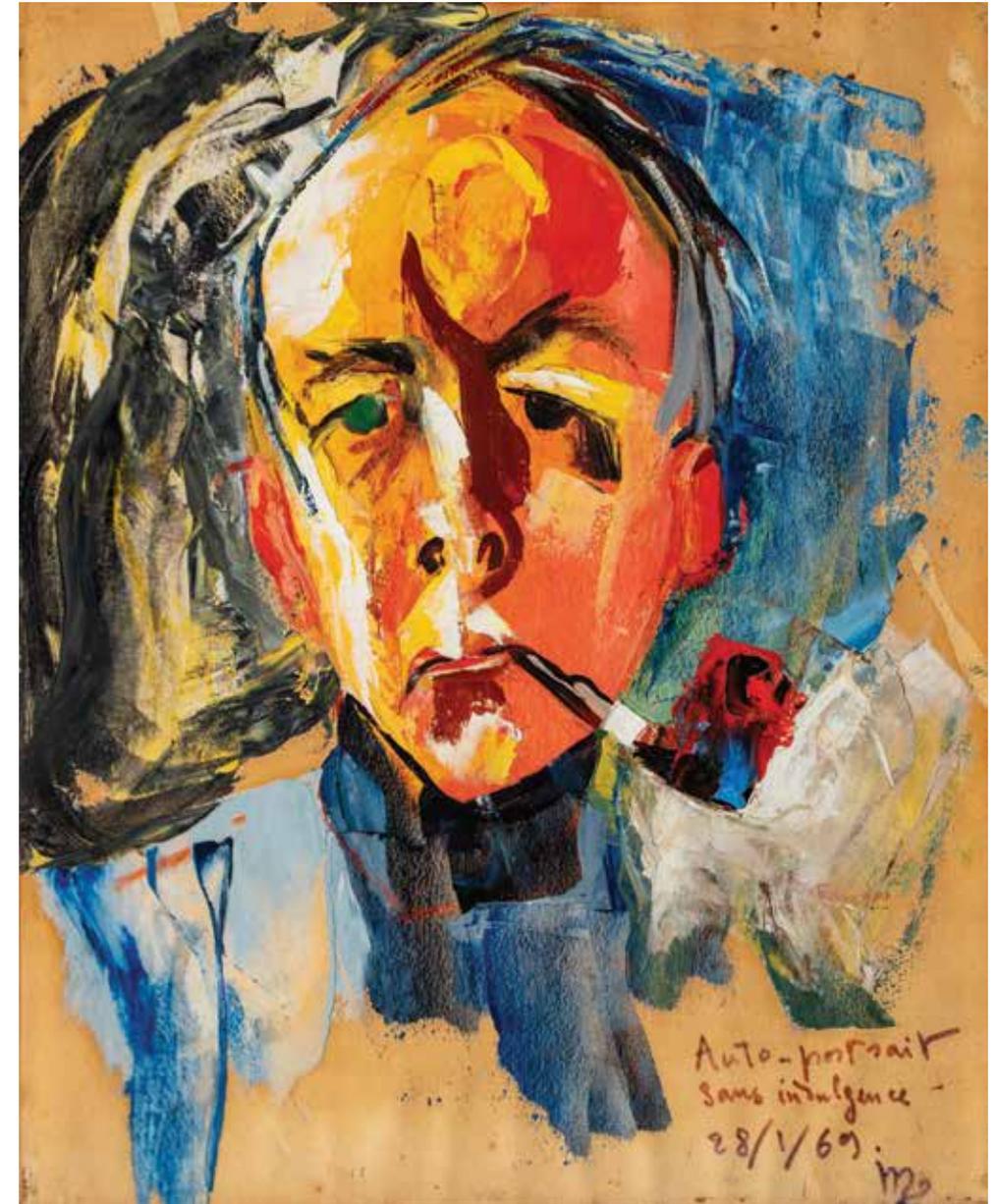
Montlaur Family Collection



**Portrait de mon ami Pierre
Wallerand**
**Portrait of my friend Pierre
Wallerand**

19 X 25 cm
Gouache on paper
Paris, France, 1968

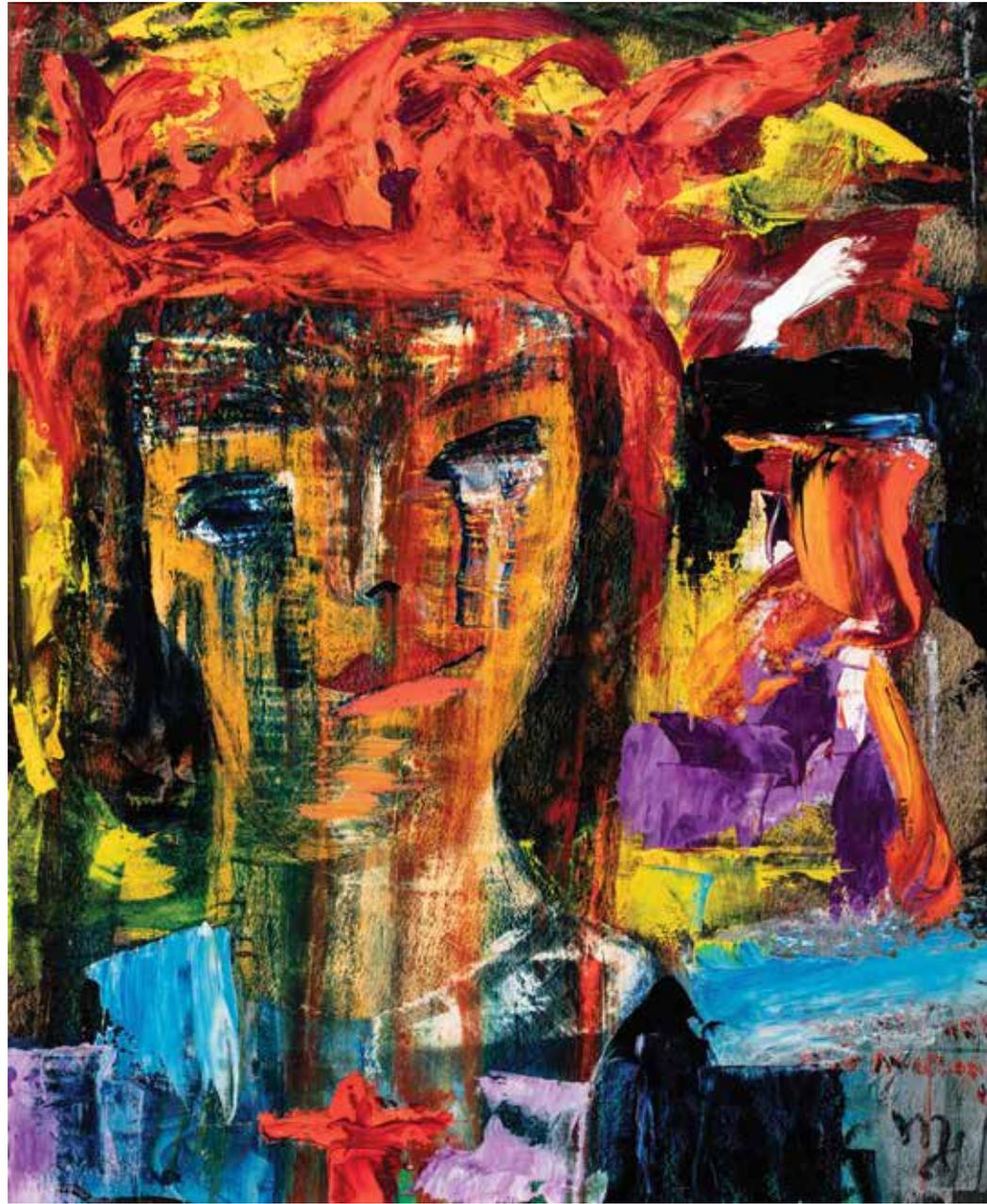
Mémorial Caen-Normandie, France



Autoportrait sans indulgence
Self-portrait without pity

36 X 29 cm
Oil on paper, canvas
Paris, France, 1969

Montlaur Family Collection

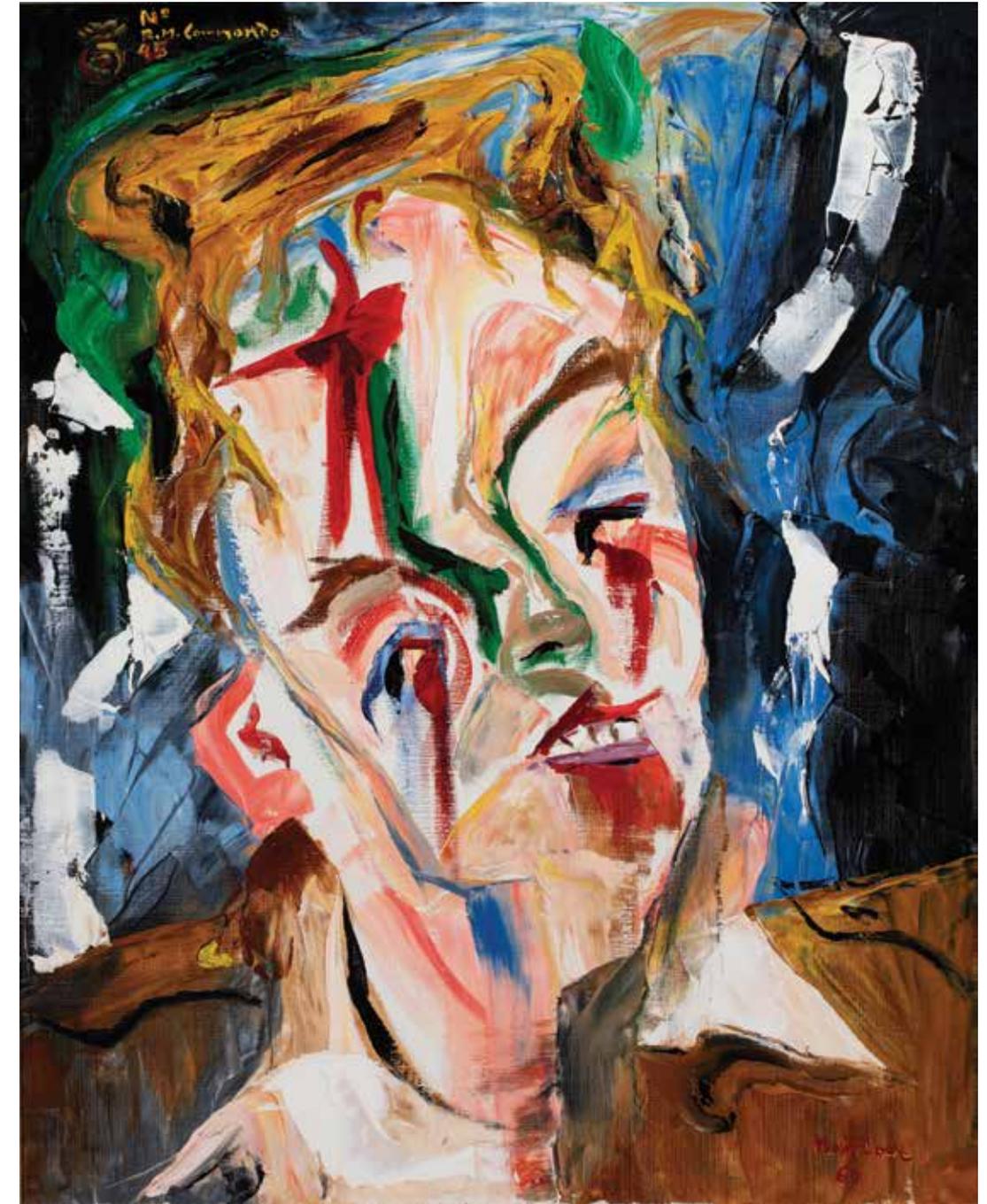


Defende nos in praelio

Defend us in battle

39 X 32 cm
Oil on paper, canvas
Paris, France, 1969

Michael de Montlaur Collection

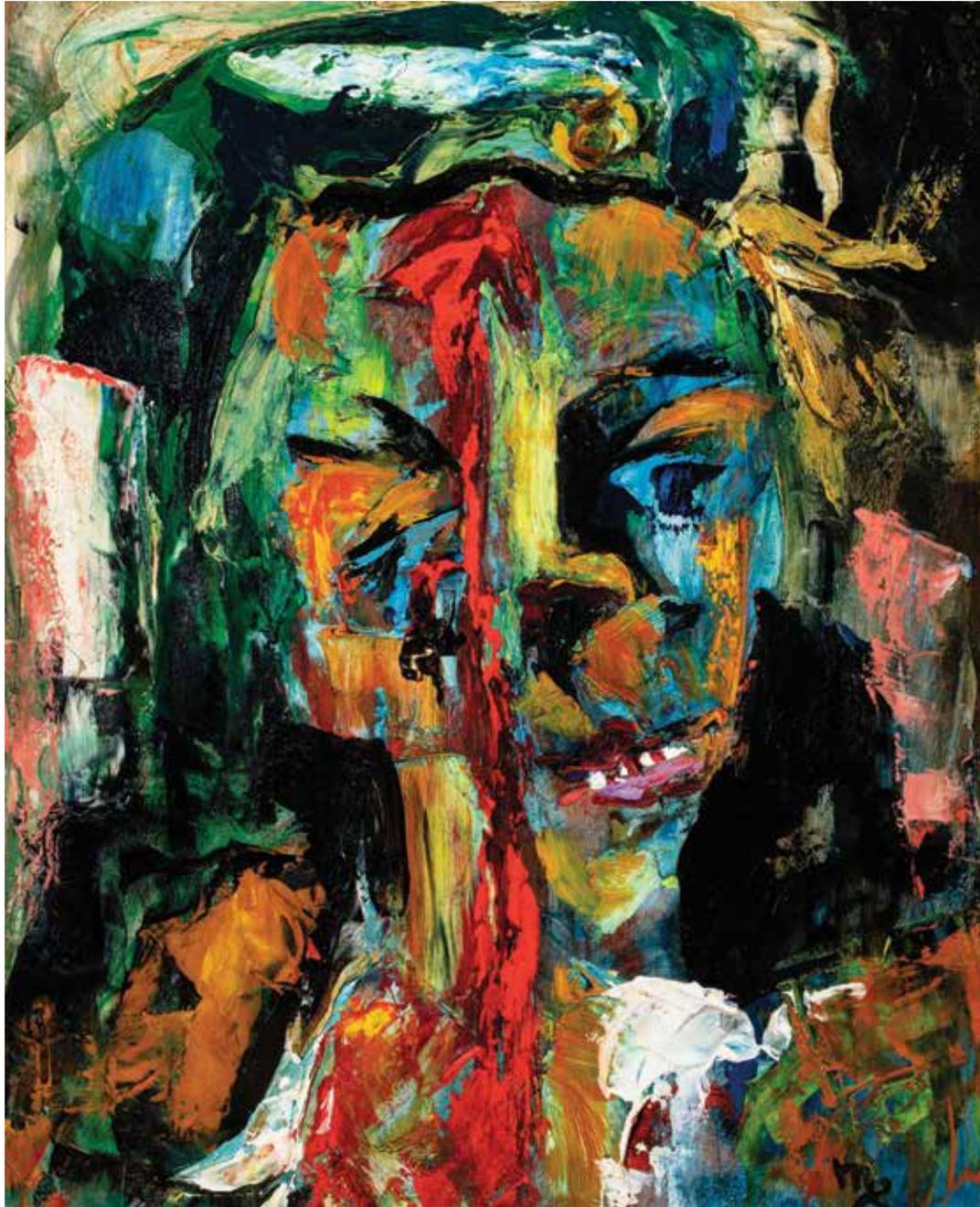


Il dort

He is sleeping

81 X 65 cm
Oil on canvas
Paris, France, 1969

Montlaur Family Collection



**Sur la route vers
Sallenelles, un ami**
**On the road near
Sallenelles, a friend**
37 X 30.5 cm
Oil on masonite
Paris, France, 1969

Montlaur Family Collection



Actus Tragicus
Tragic Act
92 X 60 cm
Oil on canvas
Paris, France, 1972

Montlaur Family Collection



**Hope + courage +
strength = relative
peace**

55 X 46 cm
Oil on paper, masonite
Paris, France, 1972

Montlaur Family Collection



**In memory of
midsummer 1944**

55 X 46 cm
Oil on canvas
Paris, France, 1972

Montlaur Family Collection



One June early morning

46 X 55 cm
Oil on paper, wood
Paris, France, 1972

Montlaur Family Collection



Souvenir normand

Memory from Normandy

46 X 55 cm
Oil on paper, wood
Paris, France, 1972

Montlaur Family Collection



Un voyage de l'archange Raphaël à Londres en 1943

Archangel Raphael's trip to London in 1943

46 X 55 cm

Oil on masonite

Paris, France, 1972

Montclair Family Collection



Arma virumque cano

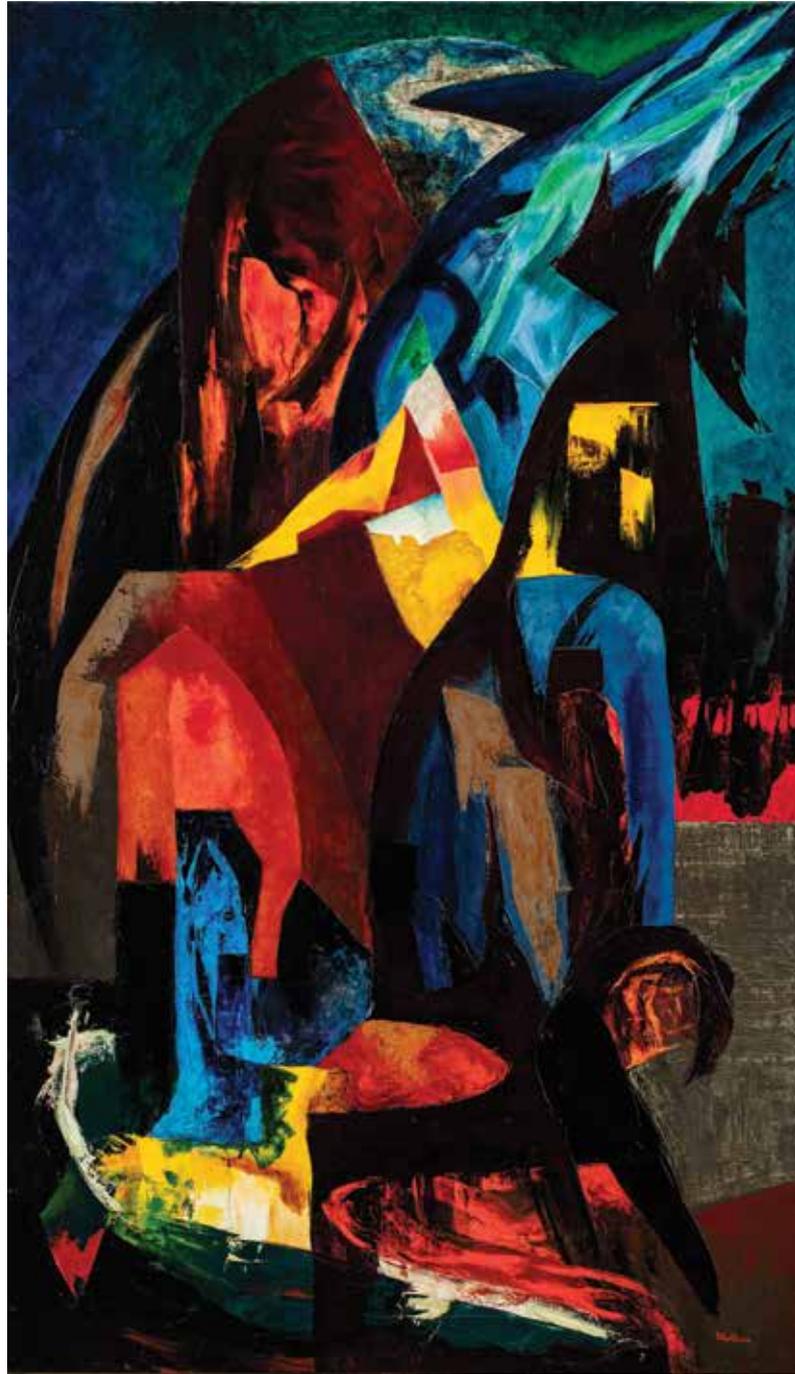
I sing of arms and the man

73 X 92 cm

Oil on canvas

Paris, France, 1975

Montclair Family Collection



La mort dans l'âme
With a heavy heart
195 X 114 cm
Oil on canvas
Paris, France, 1973

Montlaur Family Collection



Quae est ista...?
Who is She...?
195 X 114 cm
Oil on canvas
Paris, France, 1977

Montlaur Family Collection



Franval peut-être?
Franval perhaps?
46 X 55 cm
Oil on paper, masonite
Rothéneuf, France, 1974

Sloan Family Collection



Franval, St Mards-de-Fresne, France



Guy de Montlaur, Hôtel Negresco Gallery Exhibit, Nice, France, 1951

EXHIBITIONS

- 1937:** Salon des artistes français, Paris, France
- 1949:** Galerie Lucienne-Léonce Rosenberg, Paris, France
- 1949-1950:** Salon des Surindépendants, Paris, France
- 1951, 1954:** Galerie Colette Allendy, Paris, France
- 1951:** Art Club, Hôtel Negresco, Nice, France
- 1950-1958:** Salon des Réalités Nouvelles, Paris, France
- 1959:** Comité France-Amérique, Paris, France
- 1971:** Galerie Rolf Lutz, Paris, France
- 1993:** Montgomery Gallery, San Francisco, CA, USA
- 1994:** French Embassy, Washington, D.C., USA
- 2012:** Mémorial Pégasus and Ranville City Hall Library, Normandy, France
- 2012:** Château de La Thibaudière Orangerie, Anjou, France
- 2013-2014:** Château de Montlaur, Hérault, France
- 2014:** Mémorial Pégasus, Ranville, Normandy, France
- 2015:** Mémorial Pégasus, Ranville, Normandy, France
- 2015:** Perm State Art Gallery, Perm, Russia
- 2016:** Exhibition Hall of the Union of Artists of Russia, Chelyabinsk, Russia
- 2016:** Poklewski-Koziell House, Sverdlovsk Regional Museum, Yekaterinburg, Russia
- 2016:** Union of Exhibition Halls of Moscow, "Na Kashirke" Gallery, Moscow, Russia
- 2016:** The Institut Français in Russia, Moscow, Russia
- 2016:** "Soldier and Painter", "Exposed" Gallery, Shabolovka, Moscow, Russia (Boogie Gallery)
- 2017:** World Art Dubai 2017, Dubai World Trade Centre, Dubai (Boogie Gallery)
- 2017:** Restaurant Med', Tverskaya, Moscow, Russia (Boogie Gallery)
- 2017:** St Regis Hotel, Nikolskaya, Moscow, Russia (Boogie Gallery)
- 2017-2018:** Basel Art Fair, Miami, FL, USA (Boogie Gallery)
- 2018:** Wynwood Gallery, Miami, FL, USA (Boogie Gallery)
- 2018:** State Institute for Art Studies (SIAS), Moscow, Russia
- 2019:** National World War II Museum, New Orleans, USA
- 2019:** Institut d'études supérieures des arts (IESA) & Université de Paris 8 Vincennes-St Denis, Paris, France
- 2019:** Guy de Montlaur's studio, Franval, Normandy, France

Montclair