

## **Emilie Charmy**

By Patrick Seale,

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I first met Emilie Charmy in Paris in the spring of 1956, more than half a century ago. She was in her late seventies and I in my brash early twenties. She had put an advertisement in a newspaper to say that she had a small flat to let and, as I had recently arrived and was looking for somewhere to live, we agreed to meet outside the National Assembly, across the bridge from the Place de la Concorde, and from there strolled to her apartment at 54 rue de Bourgogne, which had been her haven since 1912. My first glimpse was of a small, delicately-built woman, wrapped from head to foot in furs, who looked up at me with a quizzical rather melancholic expression from beneath her hat.

She climbed a broad staircase at a surprisingly brisk pace and threw open a front-door on the fifth floor, whereupon I at once found myself in her private world of rooms hung in different shades of rich velvet, of draperies, oriental carpets and rococo opaline vases, and of pictures everywhere, crowded on the walls and stacked six deep along the floor, a world of femininity, refinement and life-long artistic work, which I found altogether irresistible.

On either side of the front-door were two spacious, well-lit rooms: one was her drawing room, in which a grand-piano held pride of place, the other her studio from which, if one craned one's neck, one could see the golden dome of Les Invalides, which she immediately invited me to admire. Corridors ran off to the right and left. One led to her private quarters (I had a glimpse of a pink boudoir and of black silk sheets), the other to a room (also hung in dark red velvet) which she proposed to rent to me. A door opened off it onto a tiny balcony, just big enough to hold a small metal table at which two people, at a squeeze, might dine. Further down the corridor were an old-fashioned kitchen and an equally antiquated bathroom. I took the apartment on the spot, and so began my three-year relationship with Madame Charmy.

It was not long before I discovered that she was – or had been in the early years of the twentieth century, and between the two world wars -- an artist of highly acclaimed talent, fully on a par with such contemporaries as Manguin, Marquet, Dufy, Van Dongen, Derain, Vlaminck, Valadon and the many others who, together with such giants as Picasso and Matisse, had made Paris the world capital of modern art. Yet, art histories of the period, written after the Second World War, have largely omitted her name. How had this master, I wondered, come to be overlooked? As with everyone, Charmy's life was shaped by the choices she made and by the men and women

with whom she associated. The curve of her career had soared upwards in the early decades of the century only to get side-tracked by social success in the 1920s and 1930s, and then by the great disturbance of the Second World War.

### **The woman I knew**

How to describe the woman I then got to know? Although she had wonderfully expressive dark eyes, Charmy had never been beautiful; but she was immensely seductive, even in old age. Among her many gifts was the gift of charming others. Every muscle of her carefully-tended face breathed sensitivity and good manners. She was in her declining years when I met her, but she had by no means given up work. Sometimes, walking past her studio on my way to the front door, I would catch a glimpse of her at her easel. But, then, there was another sociable, almost coquettish side to her. She would sometimes invite me into her studio for a cup of coffee, or into her drawing room to hear her friend Rumpapas, a soulful Greek, play Chopin on the grand-piano. From her son Edmond Bouche who had a room next to mine at 54 rue de Bourgogne, and who was himself a painter, poet - under the name of Jean Marnat - and a maker of hand-carved frames. I was to learn more about my remarkable landlady. She used to say, he told me, that when she painted, she felt it was someone else who was doing it. She painted as if someone else were holding her hand; as if she did not quite know what she was doing. The paradox of Emilie Charmy's character was that her great and mysterious painterly talents were encased in the shell of a Parisian *bourgeoise*, concerned until the end of her life with fine gentlemen, the *beau monde*, chic clothes and also, it must be said, with money.

In the three years I lived in her apartment, and with the help of Edmond, I came to understand how she spent her days. She would rise early, take a small breakfast, light or revive the fire in her Godin stove, talk to her cats - she always had one or two - and then take a bath, very often a cold one. Sometimes she would start work at once in her studio, or else she would study herself in the mirror to see how she looked. I believe she found her body very beautiful, even in old age. Then she would slip on a kimono and see if she could do some work, changing the light in her studio. If she felt it was going well, she would work until noon or one o'clock, before having another coffee and perhaps a fruit. Then she either had a siesta or she would get dressed, so as to be at a gallery opening at four. Her days were mainly spent in this way.

Her life in the rue de Bourgogne was frugal, but at the same time luxurious. If she were unable to get down to work in the morning, she would spend the whole day getting ready for the afternoon. The study of a dress, just how it hung, the choice of shoes to go with it, all this required two or three hours. It was something to which she gave great care. She used to dress up even when she was not going out.

She may truly have missed a vocation in not being involved with dress designing. One of her great friends between the wars was a designer who, with a grand establishment on the Champs-Élysées, traded under the name of 'Jenny', and was then very much in vogue. Jenny admired Charmy's ability to drape fabric over a female body in an original way, and used to urge her to join her fashion house, in one capacity or another. In her studio, where she kept boxes of fabric samples, Charmy used to create such works of art, for her own satisfaction. Would this pink go with that green? She used to ponder these matters and, when Jenny came to see her, they would get engrossed in what was almost a technical conversation.

One of Jenny's early coups, immediately after the First World War, was to predict that there would be a great demand for black by the army of war widows. So she bought up as much black crêpe de chine as she could find. Rich, sumptuous blacks that hung well and were relieved, here and there, by other colours, became the basis of her style, allowing her to make dresses that were both sober and luxurious. Jenny survived the Second World War and used to invited Charmy and Edmond to visit her at Nice, where she had settled in retirement.

Charmy sometimes asked me to accompany her to gallery openings. In a sense, she undertook my art education. I remember going with her to a vernissage at Katia Granoff's gallery on the Quai de Conti. Before she was swept up in the social whirl around us, which she so evidently enjoyed, she would murmur to me some disparaging remark about the owner, a plump, florid Russian woman with a bustling manner, who had been a prominent feature of the Paris art scene ever since she opened her first gallery in the mid-1920s. Granoff had been the mistress of Charmy's husband, the painter George Bouche, which may have accounted, beneath the seeming affability with which the two women greeted each other, for a certain sharp-tongued bravado on Charmy's part. In 1955, a year before I met her, Charmy had herself shown her work at Katia Granoff's gallery. It was to be one of her last exhibitions.

Yet, while she sometimes had a mischievous glint in her eye, she was the very opposite of effusive. One had to work hard to win her attention, let alone her approval. She had a keen awareness of her own worth and a certain unforgiving contempt for lesser mortals, even at times the hint of a sneer. She had very pronounced likes and dislikes, but they had largely to be guessed at. She might utter a word or two, only to let the sentence trail off into silence. I learned to decipher the meaning of a curled lip or a sudden cackle of sarcastic laughter. No doubt, she had been pursued and loved – and envied, even hated -- throughout her life precisely because she had always retained a core of defensive, and sometimes haughty, privacy, rarely giving herself fully to anyone.

Charmy, I discovered, did not care to talk about her painting or hold forth, as many artists like to do, about what she was trying to achieve. She seldom expressed views on art in any sustained form. She liked some painters' work, Albert Marquet, for example, and some of Henri Matisse.

But the truth was that the sort of painting she liked was her own. She might approve of parts of other people's works: 'That bit of sky is rather well done...' But that was about it. She was not one for conceptualization or analysis, and appeared to have no systematic views about the various schools of art which had so absorbed her contemporaries in the early decades of the century. Edmond told me that even if one of her buyers wanted her to explain what she was after in a painting, she could not, or would not, respond. Explanations, she felt, were out of place. She was the very opposite of her contemporary Fernand Leger (1881-1955), for example, who was an intellectual rather than a painter. His art was a vehicle for certain ideas, and he would work out a highly detailed construction before putting brush to canvas. He was an architect in form and colour, one reason why he was vastly influential as a precursor of modern design. Charmy, in contrast, painted as naturally as if she were breathing. She was a spontaneous lyricist, interested in portraying emotions. This was the message of her nudes, her flowers and her self-portraits. Just as with fine wine, it was not easy to say why her work was good; it just was. Her works spoke for themselves. She would probably have agreed with Toulouse-Lautrec's remark (although she might not have used his salty language) that, '*La peinture, c'est comme la m...., ça se sent, ça ne s'explique pas.*'

Some years after she died, in 1974 at the age of 97, I was lucky enough to purchase a number of her paintings from Edmond. Remarkable for the daring texture of the brushwork, the rich impasto, and the decorative surface effects of the paintings, they are among my most precious possessions. I own some extraordinary nudes: bold, violent, provocative images of female defiance. Charmy's nudes are not submissive. They do not aim to attract men or assuage male desires. They seem intent on affirming female sexual needs. In *Grand nu* (1912) the model is perched on the side of a bed, with a hint of a drape under her thigh. The head is small and almost distant. The feet, which do not quite reach the floor, are clad in white, ankle-high booties, as if further to highlight the nakedness of the body. The central focus is the luxuriant pubis and the red nipples of two round breasts. *Femme tenant son sein* (1919) is an unsentimental study of naked womanhood emerging, in shades of pale yellow and flesh pink, from a dark, almost menacing, background. The model may have been Bianchini – or 'Bianc' as Charmy liked to call her -- a bit-part actress of whom she was fond. The head is tilted back, the eyes distant. Cupped in her right hand, her left breast is slightly raised, as if she were caressing it or perhaps admiring it in a mirror. Men do not seem to figure in these women's imaginings. They are no sisters of Manet's Olympia (although Charmy was very struck by the brazen-eyed *fille de joie* when, as an ambitious young painter in her early twenties, she first saw the picture on a visit to the *Exposition Internationale* in Paris in 1900.)

## Charmy's early years

I was to learn that Charmy's grand-parents, and her great-uncle Jean-Baptiste Bedel, left Alsace after the German occupation of 1870 and settled in Saint-Etienne, then a grimy French industrial and coal-mining town, south-west of Lyon. They found a piece of open land, built a shack, brought in horses, started trading in metals and eventually built a forge which, in a landscape of chimneys and mine-shafts, grew into the Bedel steel works at la Bérardière, Saint-Etienne. It was there that Charmy was born on 2 April 1878. She was spared some of the rigours of this harsh life because, as was common in those days, she was farmed out at once to a wet nurse at St Priest-en-Jarez, a village on a hill above Saint-Etienne – something Charmy would do later with her son. On one painful occasion, her nurse scalded her back with a jug of boiling water, an accident she was to remember all her life. Yet, there were compensations. The nurse owned a small garden, no bigger than a room, full of flowers and shrubs, where Charmy, aged two or three, made the miraculous discovery of beauty. She was later to claim that the revelation she experienced in that patch of garden was to inspire her artistic quest.

Although the steel works were family-owned, Charmy's father, Pierre Marius Barret, was evidently unsuited for this sort of work. Charmy remembered his white, well-shaped hands and his well-trimmed beard. He acquired a liver complaint, took to his bed in great pain, and became addicted to morphine. As Emilie grew up, she was confronted for several years with the awful spectacle of a dying father. Her mother, too, died when she was still in her teens. Her younger brother, Joseph, had died earlier still of a burst appendix at the age of twelve. In the smoky, sooty, labouring environment of Saint-Etienne, marked then by strict boundaries between bosses and workers, between the rich and the poor -- even if they were members of the same family -- she came to acquire a respect for financial success, for men who had done well. It became an attitude, which was to stay with her to the end of her life.

Emilie, an orphan, was thrown into the company of her elder brother Jean, ten years her senior. She won a teacher's certificate and the offer of a post in a nearby village school. She learned to play the piano and, having a nice contralto voice, was even offered an engagement singing in New Orleans. But Jean, a highly protective brother, would not allow her to take up either proposition. He may have guessed that painting, at which she was already showing some talent, was more likely to give her a living. Her tough upbringing undoubtedly contributed to making Charmy independent and solitary -- and it gave her an urge to flee to more agreeable surroundings.

It was said that a great-uncle --- or some such relative -- had been a bishop with the name of Barret de Charmy. At any rate, whereas her elder brother Jean took their father's name of Barret,

Emilie, as if wanting to make a clean break with her childhood, took the name of Charmy. Sometime before the turn of the century, no doubt in 1898, Jean and Emilie left Saint-Etienne for the provincial capital, Lyon. There, they were introduced to Jacques Martin, a well-known local painter. He was the acknowledged leader of the Lyon School of painting, and was also a violinist and a man of the world. Charmy knew nothing of what young painters were doing in Paris at the time, whereas he was an aesthete, a cultivated person who knew Paris, as well as a great deal about art. He showed her that there were things to hang on walls that were not calendars or cheap engravings. When he saw the canvases she had painted at Saint-Etienne at the age of sixteen or seventeen, which featured chimneys and other views done in a very modern manner, he instantly recognized her promise. He started to give her guidance and advice, and invited her to work in his studio.

Martin was also a chemist, employed by a firm in Lyon that manufactured gelatine from the carcasses of horses. To reach his studio, Charmy had to walk through a courtyard piled high with stinking dead beasts -- a scene worthy of Goya. At dinners at his house, there were often long conversations about art and science. These were the years of Charmy's apprenticeship, the nearest she ever got to any formal art training. She and Martin soon became fast friends. She was by then a feminine and alluring twenty-year-old, most eager to learn. Martin painted her several times.<sup>1</sup> She herself started painting arrangements of flowers and fruit, but also taking as her models day-workers, seamstresses and the like. Jacques Martin persuaded her to send some of her canvases for sale in Paris.

Once her works found buyers, she and Jean decided to leave Lyon in 1903 for the capital, then an immensely exciting destination for a budding artist. They began by renting a house in St-Cloud, a few kilometres outside the city, and eventually a studio for Charmy in the Place Clichy, to which she would go every day in a horse-drawn bus. She soon began to exhibit at the *Salon des Artistes indépendants* -- set up by impatient young modernists rebelling against the crass genre painting of the *Académie des Beaux Arts*, and against the newly-formed state-sponsored *Salon d'Automne*, then in the grip of an aged and conventional jury. There was no jury at *Les Indépendants*, nor were there rewards, save for what one could make from sales. According to the art critic Gustave Coquiot (whose book, *Les Indépendants*, surveyed the years 1884-1920<sup>ii</sup>), Charmy exhibited there every year from 1903 to 1914, with the sole exception of 1910. She was, from the very start, part of the Parisian avant-garde, leaping instinctively ahead of Jacques Martin, her first teacher.

Coquiot, a full-blooded, mustachioed bon vivant, whom Picasso painted at the Folies in 1901, in full evening dress against a backdrop of naked dancers, was an early champion of the young modernists. He had a sharp eye and lively pen, and was one of Charmy's admirers. '*Louons tout de suite en Mlle Charmy*, he wrote, *une femme peintre qui fait des poids, qui a de la puissance, de*

*l'accent, du mordant; qui vous en impose par un sacré tempérament de brasseur de pâte; qui vous en remue, à la pelle, des limons de couleur; qui, enfin, comme ces geindres dans les fêtes foraines, tourne et retourne, telle de la guimauve, des coulées de ton!*

*Et cela est fait avec une virtuosité certaine... On doit tout attendre d'une telle hardiesse, alors que tant de peintres, musclés, s'en tiennent à de minuscules toiles pour cadeaux de fête.*

*Mlle Charmy est une coloriste, c'est indéniable. Elle abuse du blanc, que maudissait M. Ingres; mais elle sait aussi placer un rose, comme un ruban, sur un fond gris ou vert de colline, balayé d'une seule coulée de brosse.*

*Mlle Charmy enfin nous dégoûte de la miniature. De combien de femmes peintres pourrait-on dire autant ?*

### **The relationship with Berthe Weill**

In 1905, Charmy's work at the *Salon des Indépendants* attracted the attention of Berthe Weill (1865-1951), a small, plain, short-sighted woman with a passion for art and antiques, who in 1897 had opened a tiny shop at 25, rue Victor Massé, in the 9<sup>th</sup> arrondissement of Paris. By 1901, it had become the 'Galérie B. Weill', one of the very first in Paris to show the work of Picasso and other young avant-garde painters, hanging their canvasses with clothes pegs on wires strung across the room. In October 1905, Berthe Weill had again been one of the first dealers to show the riotously-coloured work of painters such as Derain, Vlaminck, Manguin and Matisse whom the critic Louis Vauxelles had dubbed the denizens of 'la cage aux fauves' (the cage of wild beasts) when they exhibited at the *Salon d'Automne* that year. In 1917, Berthe Weill moved to more spacious premises at 50, rue Taitbout, and then, in 1920, to 46, rue Lafitte, a street near the Hotel Drouot auctions rooms, where several other dealers had opened shop, including the great Ambroise Vollard at number 6, the smart end of the street closer to the boulevards.

Berthe Weill's meeting with Charmy in 1905 was the beginning of an *amitié amoureuse* – clearly a passion on the part of the older woman – which was to last nearly half a century until Weill's death in 1951. 'Mais oui, j'aime les jolies femmes,' Berthe Weill was to exclaim in her volume of memoirs, 'mais surtout intelligentes, vivantes, un tantinet drôlichonnes et... élégantes... oui, je les aime, les admire comme un joli bibelot qu'on a plaisir à voir, à palper; quel mal y a-t-il à cela ? j'aime à m'entourer de jeunesse, et, en un mot, de tout ce qui rend la vie supportable.

*J'ai trouvé tout cela en Charmy, et pour ces raisons, je l'aime... loin de m'en cacher, je m'en honore, au contraire...'*

Always on the brink of bankruptcy, Weill lived from hand to mouth. She was a woman of strong and independent temperament. Ignoring all commercial considerations, she would only show the work of painters she liked herself. She was one of the first to sense that a revolution was

taking place in French art. Unfortunately, she did not have the resources to put her painters under contract, or to purchase their entire output, as richer and better-established dealers, like Vollard, Durand-Ruel, Kahnweiler or Bernheim-Jeune, were able to do. Several of her artists moved on to dealers who could promote their works and send them for exhibition abroad. Picasso, for example, left Weill in 1901. Vollard bought up Derain's entire studio in 1905, and Vlaminck's the following year. He also bought large numbers of works by Manguin and Camoin. He put Charmy's friend, Jean Puy, under contract from 1906 to 1926. Vollard liked to buy in bulk, boldly building up his stock. Suzanne Valadon and Marie Laurencin also moved to more powerful dealers, but Charmy remained faithful to Berthe Weill. It was one reason, among many, why she did not in those years become internationally known.

### **Camoin, Cézanne and Matisse**

By 1905-6, Charmy had developed a freely-painted, brightly-coloured style, very much like that of the Fauves, several of whom she got to know, no doubt through Berthe Weill's gallery. One of them was Charles Camoin, a sensitive, anxiety-ridden young Marseillais, who was to be her lover, on and off, for the next five years. Camoin had been a student at Gustave Moreau's studio in the late 1890s, where he struck up a life-long friendship with Marquet and Matisse. When he was sent to do his military service at Aix-en-Provence, he decided, greatly daring, to call on Paul Cézanne, who had withdrawn to his native city to escape harsh Parisian critics and angry squabbles with his Impressionist friends. Camoin became Cézanne's disciple, taking to heart his dictum (in a letter to him of 22 February 1903) that *'Tout est, en art surtout, théorie développée au contact de la nature.'*

Cézanne had taken part in the first 'Impressionist' exhibition of 1874, when a number of artists, having had their work rejected by the official Salon, hung their canvasses in the studio of the photographer Nadar, boulevard des Capucines – only to face the ridicule of the public. Claude Monet's *Impression, soleil levant* was thought to be particularly comic. The satirical periodical, *Le Charivari*, titled its mocking review *'Impressionnistes'* -- and the name stuck. Dispirited by the hostile criticism and by his breach with Emile Zola (whose portrait of a failed painter in his novel *L'Oeuvre* was rumoured to be modeled on him), Cézanne dropped out of sight for the next twenty years. He remained largely unknown until Ambroise Vollard, having bought 150 of his canvases, put on a great retrospective of his work in 1895, and became his sole dealer. Vollard rescued Cézanne from obscurity, while laying the foundation for his own personal fortune.

More than fifty of Cézanne's paintings and watercolours were then shown at each of the *Salons d'Automne* of 1904, 1905, 1906 and, after his death in October 1906, at the 1907 *Salon* as well. He was to have a profound influence on the painters of Charmy's generation, most particularly



on the Cubists. No young artist of the period could fail to be influenced by him. In their many meetings and letters, Camoin and Matisse often debated what lessons to draw from Cézanne's late works. Living with Camoin, sharing with him her studio in the Place Clichy, Charmy could not escape Cézanne's influence too. I like to think that her *Femme tenant son sein*, for example, owes something to Cézanne's many Bathers of 1898-1900.

In Paris, before and after the First World War, Charmy's talents were becoming more widely recognized. Early in the century, she started exhibiting regularly, not only at Berthe Weill's gallery and the *Indépendants* and, but also at the *Salon d'Automne* and, at Lyon, at the *Salon des artistes*. She was ambitious, dedicated and hard-working, producing dozens of paintings of great quality. She was not tempted, however, to follow the Cubists in their explorations of sculptural forms and spatial ambiguities. This was too arid an enterprise for her. She was not one to lock herself up in her studio, in order 'to recompose nature according to the new theories', as her friend, the art critic Roland Dorgelès put it. Unlike Berthe Weill, who on cold days during the First World War when coal was scarce, would stay in bed reading Goethe and Ibsen, Charmy was not much of a reader, except for fashionable French novels. She rarely read anything to do with art. She felt she did not need to. Impatient with theory, she was more concerned to explore the astonishing beauty of flowers – her passionate life-long interest -- and the mysteries of female sexuality and female emotions, as expressed by women's bodies. Realism was her goal; never abstraction, and never sentimentality.

Camoin and Charmy very probably spent the summer of 1906 together in Corsica, where she produced some striking seascapes in the Fauve manner. There are repeated references to her in Camoin's correspondence with Matisse – they exchanged some sixty letters over the years – which suggested that Matisse and his wife, Amélie, must often have spent time with Camoin and Charmy, perhaps in excursions outside Paris. Charmy's *La femme au Lac* (1907) bears a striking resemblance to Matisse's *La Rive* (now at the Kunstmuseum, in Basle). It was evidently painted at the same spot, possibly on the same day.

Charmy's own work in the next decade seemed at times closer to that of the German Expressionists than to that of her French contemporaries. One might speculate that it had something to do with her Alsatian origins. Could she have seen their work? She might well have done so because, in the summer of 1911, Camoin hand-carried sixteen of his canvases to an exhibition at Ludwig Schames's gallery in Frankfurt, a show which also included works by their friends Marquet, Manguin, Van Dongen and Vlaminck. Schames regularly showed the works of the leading German Expressionists -- Kirchner, Nolde, Heckel, Schmidt-Rottluff, Pechstein -- all members of the avant-garde group known as *Die Brücke* (the Bridge), which they had formed in Dresden in 1905. Charmy may well have accompanied Camoin to Frankfurt that summer. In any

event, if she did not go herself, she would certainly have heard about the Expressionists from Camoin, and seen photographs of their work.

It cannot have been agreeable for Camoin to recognise that Charmy was a more original painter than himself. Their last years together, 1910-12, were stormy, with many partings and reconciliations. When Charmy finally broke with him in 1912, it provoked in him a prolonged crisis of confidence in his own worth as a painter. In a fit of depression, the poor man cut up and threw away dozens of his canvasses. An enterprising rubbish collector found them, managed to patch some of them together again, and sold them to a dealer in the Paris flea market at Saint-Ouen who, in turn, sold them on to galleries and collectors. Matisse had to console Camoin for Charmy's loss, urging him to be patient and not be too disgusted with life. Some months later, Camoin was persuaded to escort Matisse's wife Amélie to join the painter in Tangier, where he seems to have cheered up.

Charmy's name is sometimes linked to that of Suzanne Valadon (1865-1938), perhaps because they were both women painters in what was then still largely a man's world. Valadon had started life as a circus acrobat, but had had to give it up after a fall from a trapeze. She had had a child at sixteen, and had posed for Puvis de Chavanne. He recommended her to Renoir (who used her as a model in his *Danse à la campagne*), who in turn recommended her to Degas, who then passed her on to Toulouse-Lautrec. Although they knew each other well, and took part in group shows at Berthe Weill's, Charmy had little liking or sympathy for Valadon's erratic bohemianism, or for the disorderly life of her alcoholic son, Maurice Utrillo.

Charmy's modernist generation came of age as the Impressionist masters were fading from the scene. Cézanne's late work set daunting standards, but other great figures of the nineteenth century also survived into the twentieth and were very much part of the artistic scene, still managing to win reverent devotees. Edgar Degas lived until 1917; Pierre-Auguste Renoir until 1919; Claude Monet until 1926. Mary Cassatt, the 'American Impressionist' who also died in 1926, spent much of her working life in France. Like Charmy, she wanted nothing to do with Cubism but, with great consistency, depicted in her pictures the tender, almost erotic relationship of mothers with their young children, the latter usually portrayed naked. For Charmy, this was altogether too sentimental a theme.

### **George Bouche and Marnat**

Charmy finally left Camoin in 1912. She had by then taken up with another painter, George Bouche, four years older than herself, who had seen her paintings at the *Salon des Artistes indépendants*. Thinking that the canvases by 'E. Charmy' were the work of some talented young

man, Bouche resolved to call on him at 54 rue de Bougogne (the apartment which Charmy's brother Jean had rented for her in 1912, and which she herself was to purchase several years later.) Instead of a young man, Bouche was confronted, to his delight, by a graceful young woman in her early thirties. The attraction was mutual and immediate. He was something of a ladies' man, while she must have been anxious for a breath of fresh air after Camoin's unsettling attentions. Bouche whisked her off to Marnat, a remote cluster of farm buildings down a muddy track, which he had found in the mountains of Auvergne.

Bouche had begun by studying art and architecture at Lyon, but when his mother went blind, he had had to take in hand a shop she owned, which sold decorative items, especially wallpapers. He began to travel to Spain as a salesman, thus starting life as a businessman rather than an artist. His family had property in the Ardèche, which was due to come to him. After a dispute with his brothers, it went to them. It was then that he found Marnat for himself instead. Influenced by Tolstoy, whose writings had a great impact in France at the time, Bouche looked after the local peasants, taught them to read and, in an open-necked shirt, straw hat and wooden clogs, sank with enormous satisfaction into the pleasantness of country life. He would bring in fine wine and good coffee from Paris, but on the whole their existence at Marnat was simple, even primitive. It was here that he entertained painters and other friends. The food was good, but at night it might rain on your mattress.

Charmy had no love for rural discomfort. She would have much preferred a hotel or a beautiful estate (although, liking solitude, she later came to appreciate the isolation of Marnat); nor did she particularly like Bouche's dark canvasses, in which figures and landscapes emerge dimly from thick, cloacal impasto. But this large, blond, powerful man was a person of real depth. And, although he had a hot temper, they evidently loved each other. According to Edmond, his father's grey-blue eyes turned white when he was angry, which occurred not infrequently. They soon set up house together. There was no question of marriage, however, as both wished to retain their independence.

Although she was anxious for recognition, Charmy does not seem to have troubled to send her canvases for exhibition abroad, except on rare occasions. One of these was the 1913 Armory Show in New York. Billed as the 'first exhibition of Modern Art in the United States,' it was held on Lexington Avenue in the Armory Building of the 69<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the U.S. National Guard. For the first time, the American public was able to see works by Cézanne, Gauguin and Van Gogh – all loaned by Vollard – as well as canvases by the Fauves, the Cubists and the German Expressionists. Among the eleven hundred works of art on display, canvases by Manguin, Marquet, Rouault, Braque, Marval and many others – including works by Charmy and her former lover Camoin-- were to be found in Gallery H, devoted to French painting and sculpture. The show drew a huge crowd -- as well as accusations of insanity, immorality and anarchy. As the

*New York Times* reported on 16 March 1913, many Americans thought the whole thing 'a mess of nonsense'. But the event was radically to challenge America's prevailing taste for sentimental realism.

By this time Charmy had quarreled with her brother Jean over what was left of their family inheritance. He had become an antique dealer. She detested the large religious statues with which he filled their apartment. She advised him to rent a shop on the Boulevard St Germain, near the Jardin des Plantes, which he soon did. They decided to go their separate ways. As a worldly homosexual, he had had some grand lovers, including it was said Marcel Proust. Charmy had no business knowing what he got up to, and, in any event, she had come to resent his authority over her. In due course, he left Paris for Avignon, where he established a prosperous antique business with a Spanish partner. For the rest of her life, the apartment in the Rue de Bourgogne was to be her private domain, a haven to which she could escape from her domineering brother, from her professional worries and emotional entanglements.

### **The First World War and the arrival of Edmond**

In 1915, George Bouche hurried off to war. Charmy, who had gone to work at Marnat, only heard that war had broken out when the church bells tolled in the nearby village and all the men were called up. In great alarm, she sent letters to Berthe Weill begging for news, and grew even more desperate when Weill's letters were delayed, or failed to reach her altogether. Bouche was wounded shortly afterwards, or was thrown from his horse, and had to be hospitalized. She visited him as he convalesced. Although it was not what she wanted, she became pregnant. Over the following months she devised clothes to conceal her condition and, on 21 November 1915, gave birth to a son, Edmond, at a delivery clinic in the rue D'Assas in Paris (where a young prostitute had given birth to Jean Genet four years earlier.) It was, as Charmy later told her son, 'the worst day of my life.'

To save her from embarrassment, Edmond was at once farmed out to a peasant woman, who kept a room for six children of uncertain legitimacy at Etampes, south of Paris. Five of them were to die there. Edmond later claimed to me, perhaps with a touch of exaggeration, that the woman used to fill his bottle with milk laced with wine, and then wash it out with water clouded with horse or sheep droppings.

In the first eighteen months of his life, as the First World War raged and German Zeppelins hovered menacingly over Paris, it was Berthe Weill, rather than Charmy, who visited Edmond at Etampes, spoiled him and brought him goodies to eat. In her unpublished 1917 diary (in the possession of Bernard Bouche, Charmy's grandson), Weill calls Edmond '*petit mignon*' and gushes over the emergence of his first milk teeth. On almost every page of the diary, she

expresses anguish and impatience at not receiving word from Charmy – whom she calls *l'oiseau*, 'the bird', always referring to her in the masculine – who was then living back at Marnat, alone and on meager rations. She was painting hard, as well as negotiating the purchase of the farm buildings on Bouche's behalf. It had previously been only rented. It was a wild, isolated place, and she kept a pistol by her in case of need.

Spending much of the war hidden away in the depths of the country did little for Charmy's career. Berthe Weill sent her modest sums from time to time, but was not able to do much more for her than that. In contrast, a dealer like Vollard was extremely active in the war years, showing and promoting his artists, lending their works to exhibitions of French art in Copenhagen, Oslo, Stockholm, Barcelona and Zurich – and selling them. Charmy would undoubtedly have benefitted from the support of a better-funded and less eccentric dealer. She certainly deserved it. In the years 1906 to 1920, she produced work of the greatest quality. For painterly skill and psychological penetration, her powerful portrait of Berthe Weill, for example can hold its own with Picasso's famous portrait of Gertrude Stein.

Berthe Weill's passion for Charmy extended to her son, Edmond. During August 1917 she paid Edmond a visit. That may have been her last visit for several months. At any rate, Edmond was left on his own for a while, perhaps because Bouche (whom Weill clearly did not like and whose presence she resented) had rejoined Charmy at Marnat, or because the war had entered its last bloody phase, with life in Paris disrupted by the wail of nightly sirens and the terrifying bang of the shells fired by Germany's 'Big Berthas', its heavy mortar-like howitzers.

One day, when Edmond was about two years old, he tottered out of the communal dormitory at Etampes and down an outside stairway, flanked by rabbit hutches. Pausing perhaps to stroke a rabbit, he fell through the open slats of the stairs, and broke both his legs. The accident went unnoticed. It was only when his parents came to see him some months later that they saw that his legs were curved outwards, and his buttocks and arms greatly swollen. It was an acute case of rickets. A doctor recommended that Edmond be taken at once to Berck-sur-Mer in the Pas-de-Calais where, together with two or three other sick children, he was placed on a stretcher and rolled down onto the beach, for seawater to lap over his body. The iodine in the water was thought to have curative properties.

Edmond was not able to walk properly until the age of seven or eight. Charmy was not an attentive mother. She and George Bouche tolerated no disturbance to their lives. They lived more or less together, but by no means all the time. Bouche had numerous mistresses, scattered across Europe, who would turn up in Paris expecting to marry him. It did not seem to worry Charmy, as she had relationships of her own. They would have a laugh about it. She was certainly free with a lot of people, without necessarily contracting long-lasting liaisons. Although

she was protective of herself, if there were someone agreeable whom she found attractive, the sexual act in itself had no great importance. It was, in a sense, an artist's life.

Edmond stayed out of sight at Berck until the age of eleven. He only got to know his mother properly at the age of thirteen, when he was sent in 1928 as a boarder to the Lycée Lakanal in the Paris suburb of Sceaux, coming home at weekends and in the holidays. He was scarcely through the front door when, to his dismay, he was put up against a wall and was not allowed to move, to serve as a model for his mother or his father. Charmy's portrait of him in a sailor suit dates from this period. (1929) At both Berck and at Lycée Lakanal, he was known as Edmond Charmy.

### **Fame with the Comte de Jouvencel**

Charmy burst upon the Paris scene, to great critical acclaim, around 1919-1920, largely due to the financial backing and enthusiastic promotion of the Comte Etienne de Jouvencel. He had seen one of her nudes at a gallery and, as luck would have it, Charmy herself arrived when he was still admiring her picture. Introductions were made and he succumbed. From then on and for several years thereafter, he was to be her most loyal and devoted admirer. She was about thirty-nine – an elegant, witty and liberated modern woman with short hair and flowing clothes, as was the fashion after the war (1917) and he was perhaps a little younger. In the face of tough competition, she had already achieved a more than honourable place on the Paris art scene, but had not yet been acclaimed as a modern master. Jouvencel determined to put that right. He became totally absorbed in Charmy's painting and in Charmy herself. She became his mistress, or so her son Edmond was later to assure me.

Jouvencel was a highly respectable, rather conservative member of an ancient French family, who lived with his mother, whom he adored. But he also worshipped the arts, music as well as painting. He had once hired a concert hall in Paris for a private performance by an opera singer he admired. He put Charmy under a friendly contract for several years, in the sense that he freed her from financial pressures, acquiring in exchange an enlivening companion and an attic full of paintings. They had a great affection for each other, which lasted a very long time, even after he married. Right up to the end of her life, Jouvencel's name was often on Charmy's lips, murmured with reverence, as I can testify.

From the moment he entered her life, Charmy's career seemed to quicken. It was as if he breathed more worldly ambition into her. In June 1919, she had a big one-woman show at the Galerie Pesson, at 46 rue Laffitte (a gallery which Berthe Weill was to take over the following year) and that year she painted a fine portrait of Georges Rouault. In the summer of 1920, Rouault and his family joined Charmy and Bouche at Marnat for some weeks, each painting in a

corner of the garden. Then came a flurry of highly-publicised activities, beginning in January 1921 with Charmy's participation in a group show at the Galerie Bernheim. This was followed in February by Berthe Weill's one hundredth exhibition, held at her new gallery, in which Charmy's work was exhibited with that of Dufy, Friesz, Matisse, Camoin, Valadon and many others. The celebrated critic Gustave Coquiot was present at the opening – as, of course, was the Comte de Jouvenel.

Then took place in June 1921 one of the high-points of Charmy's career: a major exhibition of her works, under the one-word title *Toiles*, organized and financed by Jouvenel at the Galerie d'Oeuvres d'Art, 50 Faubourg Saint-Honoré. Four leading writers of the day -- Louis Léon-Martin, Henri Béraud, Roland Dorgelès and Pierre Mac Orlan -- sang her praises in a magnificent catalogue.

'Charmy', Dorgelès wrote, *'est un grand peintre libre; sans influences, sans procédé, elle se fait un royaume à part, où règnent les seuls caprices de sa sensibilité. Regardez ces jeunes seins allègres, délicatement peints, ces fleurs, à l'instant coupées, qui gardent encore la fraîcheur du jardin, ces visages fardés, dont un regard, un rien aux commissures des lèvres avoue seul la détresse; regardez ces harmonies de tons, tout cela n'est-il pas observé par des yeux féminins? Et pourtant les femmes ne nous ont pas habitués à cette puissance, à ce métier solide: Emilie Charmy, semble-t-il, voit en femme et peint en homme; elle a pris ici cette force, là cette grâce, et c'est ce qui fait d'elle ce peintre étrange et puissant qui séduit et retient.*

*'Ses tableaux sont comme ces beaux paysages dont on garde indéfiniment le souvenir...'*

The press was ecstatic. In New York, American Art News of July 16, 1921, reported that her exhibition was 'proving to be one of the great successes of the season ...Her work would lose nothing if placed beside the most beautiful Matisse or the most brilliant Van Dongen.' Louis Léon-Martin, in *La Vie* placed her, 'with two or three others at the head of the artists of our time.' It was Charmy's first big commercial success and the first time she won such lavish praise from the critics.

## **Charmy and Colette**

It was about this time that Charmy became acquainted with the writer Colette, five years her senior. They had much in common. Both were concerned with self-realization as women, and with living independent lives, while experiencing the pains and pleasures of adult relationships with men. Both were concerned with expressing female emotions, whether in writing or in paint. At the age of 20, Colette had married the critic Henri Gauthier-Villars, and had written the

*Claudine* series of novelettes under his name of 'Willy'. Tiring of his philandering, she divorced him in 1906, and then went on to perform as a dancer at the Moulin Rouge, where she caused a riot one night by baring a breast and miming a lesbian love-scene with 'Missy' (the Marquise de Belboeuf), with whom she had a six year liaison. In 1912, however, she made a highly respectable marriage to Henri de Jouvenel des Ursins, the well-born editor of *Le Matin*, a Paris daily which promoted her books and to which she was soon contributing a weekly short story. During the war, she converted Jouvenel's estate at Saint-Malo into a hospital for war wounded. Colette won a huge following in the 1920s for daring, sexually-explicit novels such as *La Vagabonde*, *Chéri* and *Le Blé en Herbe*, followed by dozens of others.

In late 1921, she agreed to write an introduction to another lavish exhibition of twenty paintings by Charmy, including a portrait of Colette herself – once again organized by the faithful Jouvenel – at the Galerie d'Art Ancien et Moderne in the rue François 1er. '*Les forces les plus impérieuses de son génie,*' Colette wrote, '*semblent conduire Charmy, ou la ramener, à ce but, à cet obstacle incomparable: une femme nue.*' The selection of her paintings, she added, was '*riche de nus, éclos dans les heures de frénésie féconde où Charmy n'est plus que la servante magistrale d'une chair féminine.*'

Colette divorced Jouvenel in 1925 (after an affair with his son), whereupon the unfortunate man was given the difficult job of French High-Commissioner in the Levant. Hailed as the greatest woman writer of her time, Colette died in 1954, aged 81, and was given a state funeral, the only woman ever to be so honoured.

In 1922, the indefatigable Jouvenel organized another major exhibition in the Faubourg Saint-Honoré, this time on the theme of *le nu féminin*. The celebrated critic, Louis Vauxelles (who had given the Fauves their name) wrote the preface to the catalogue. A large undulating nude by Charmy hung side-by-side with master works by Ingres, Delacroix, Cézanne, Corot, Courbet, Manet, Renoir, Matisse, Derain – twenty-five female figures in all.

### **Charmy and Elie-Joseph Bois**

It may have been because Colette had seemed to benefit greatly from publicity in the columns of Jouvenel's *Le Matin*, that Charmy, in turn, developed an attraction in the mid-1920s for the leading journalist of the day, Elie-Joseph Bois, editor-in-chief of *Le Petit Parisien*, which was then selling close to two million copies daily. Whereas the Comte de Jouvenel was a man of the old school, almost an eighteenth century character, Bois, who edited the paper from 1914 to the fall of France in 1940, was on intimate terms with all the leading politicians of the age. He was a man of international connections and interests, who was sometimes sent abroad on high-level diplomatic missions. He employed distinguished journalists and writers on his paper like Albert



Londres, André Béraud and André Salmon. He was married to Vlaminck's sister, a large Flemish woman who gave him a hard time, which was no doubt well-deserved since he was an incorrigible womanizer.

Charmy's intimate relationship with Bois lasted several years. They were the same age, both born in 1878. Sometimes he would call on her at the rue de Bourgogne before lunch and stay until evening. Staff from the newspaper would bring him copy to edit in Charmy's studio. She used to tell me how thrilling it was when his dark-green Hispano-Suiza drove into the courtyard of her building, and the smell of his cigar preceded him up the stairs. It was Bois who used his influence to secure the *Legion d'Honneur* for Charmy in 1926, and to win her commissions to paint portraits of politicians such as Edouard Daladier, leader of the Radical Party, and the socialist Aristide Briand, many times Prime Minister between 1909 and 1929. Charmy's portrait of Briand on his deathbed appeared on the front page of *Le Petit Parisien* on Saturday, July 2, 1932.

Courted and adulated, Charmy entered the world of the rich and famous, of the *beau monde*, with the predictable consequence of distancing her from artists of her own generation. To many of them, struggling in garrets, she must have seemed like a kept woman, pulling strings, exploiting her influential contacts, a plaything of high society. She aroused envy. The main charge was that she had become fashionable. Rather than with painters, she was more at home with celebrities, introduced to her by Bois, such as the author and journalist Louise Weiss, who befriended her, acquired several of her paintings and promoted her work. Bois had said to Weiss, '*La petite Charmy est une des artistes les plus sensibles, les plus fortes, les plus complètes parmi les femmes qui ont illustré la peinture française. Elle est l'originalité même.*'

Louise Weiss was a fervent feminist and an equally fervent European, publisher of *L'Europe Nouvelle*, a journal which, from 1918 onwards, preached Franco-German reconciliation – until, that is, Hitler came to power. Weiss then launched another publication, *La Femme Nouvelle*, which championed feminist ideals, and chained herself to a lamp post in the cause of women's suffrage. After the Second World War, she was to win prominence as a French politician and a member of the European Parliament. A building in the 'European quarter' of Strasburg bears her name.

Unlike Louise Weiss, however, Charmy was not an early feminist. She never suffered from being a woman, and could not conceive of campaigning for women's causes. Her instinct was to side, if not with men of property, at least with men of influence. She was not any sort of a radical, but rather a *bourgeoise* by conviction. In terms of her art, this was a period of rather cold, uninspired facility – portraits of prominent people or renderings of bouquets of flowers sent to her by admirers. It is curious that the years in which she was most honoured and acclaimed by the press and the public were those in which she produced her least memorable work.

In the 1920s and 1930s, Charmy's many men friends – admirers rather than lovers – formed a sort of salon at the rue de Bourgogne, where they used to meet in her studio and chat for hours. Among the regulars was no less a person than Edouard Heriot, leader of the Radical Socialists who had governed France at the time of the great financial crisis of 1924, and was to serve as mayor of Lyon for over half a century. Jouvencel, Bois and their friends introduced Charmy to a world she could not have known without them. She blossomed in her relations with them, enjoyed the notoriety, developed a sense of power. But these men were not art dealers. The moments of glory they provided were no substitute for the steady promotion and sales, in France and abroad, which a leading dealer like Vollard, for example, could have accomplished, had she placed her affairs in his hands. This was perhaps the principal reason why she did not become known internationally. Her career as an artist did not progress in the late twenties and thirties, as she was perhaps distracted by social success. In adversity, her work had been better.

### **The years at Ablon, and then the War**

It need hardly be said that Bouche's relations with Bois were not particularly cordial. He did not appreciate Bois' expansive manners or the all-pervasive smell of musc in the apartment of the rue de Bourgogne. Not to be outdone, in 1926 he bought a large Italianate villa at Ablon on the Seine outside Paris, no doubt with the proceeds of his work in Spain, where he spent six months of the year as a highly-successful salesman, representing Sanderson wallpapers and other firms' products. In 1925, for example, he was said to have earned 800,000 francs, a vast sum for the period. This was the setting for a splendid decade for Charmy. She enjoyed life at Ablon where Bouche kept four servants, a chauffeur and a fast launch on the river, which he named '*Le Charmy*'. In 1931, Bouche and Charmy were married, and their son Edmond legitimized. He, too, enjoyed the luxuries of the place and started seeing more of his parents. But Charmy would often return in the evenings to the rue de Bourgogne.

The war, and the great drama of the French defeat, brought an end to these opulent years. Bouche and Charmy withdrew to Marnat during the German occupation. It was a dark moment in their lives. For the first six months all went well, with both of them doing a little painting and managing as best they could with the scarce provisions available on the black market. But Bouche soon fell ill. His heart was not functioning properly, circulatory problems set in, and his legs started to swell making movement difficult. A bed was made up for him in the dining room downstairs and there he lay, getting larger day after day. Edmond, who had been a medical orderly in the first months of the war, spent his time foraging for food and wine for his father, and making sure that he kept warm at night. The year 1940-41 was long and hard.

Charmy did nothing for her ailing husband. He seemed to fill her with distaste. She spent the day in her room, painting or brooding. Occasionally, she would pass through the dining room with a curt, *'Bonsoir. Ça va?'* Absorbed in herself, she did not have the temperament to be a nurse. Relations were barely civil in the last weeks, with Bouche often raging at what he saw as her lack of heart. 'It's terrible to be dying like this in the hands of a heartless woman!' he would exclaim. One day, in such a mood, his legs swathed in bandages, he stumbled out into the snow seemingly intent to get right away. Edmond found him a good mile down the track and brought him back. 'It's just not possible,' he kept saying. 'She's impossible to live with. No heart! No heart!' As Bouche was dying, his former mistress, Katia Granoff, who had taken refuge in Lyon during the war, came to see him a number of times. Charmy did not care for Granoff but, cowed perhaps by the imposing presence and sharp mind of the Russian woman, received her well. As a dealer, especially of Bouche's works, she had come to be an important influence on the family.

Bouche died on the 12 May 1941. Charmy spent the rest of the war at Marnat, going up to Paris very occasionally for a day or two when she could get a *laisser-passer*. But she was bored, locked up in a remote hamlet from 1939 to 1945, hardly seeing anyone, but managing nevertheless to do some interesting work. By the end of the war in 1945, she was already 67. Marnat was not the place she would have chosen to spend those years. Several of her contemporaries had fled occupied France to live abroad. At Marnat, the roads were muddy. The place was snowbound for six months of the year. It was hardly on the international circuit, or on any circuit at all. It required considerable strength of character to put up with it.

After the Liberation in 1945, Charmy returned to Paris and Edmond reopened the house at Ablon. It had been pillaged by the Germans. The three-story house had been gutted and all his father's treasures taken. Charmy never lived there again. It remained empty until it was sold in the 1970s. She returned to the rue de Bourgogne. Although she had a few exhibitions after the war, hardly anyone knew she still existed. No one dealer had an interest in promoting her work. Her universe was a limited one. Apart from the rue de Bourgogne and one or two other streets, she seemed to display no great curiosity. When her friends died -- the editors, politicians and writers -- the memory of her died with them. By the 1950s, she had outlived most of her distinguished friends. Her really important relationships had been restricted to just a few persons, Bouche, Jouvencel, Bois, men who had counted for her and about whom in old age, as I well remember, she continued to talk when they had long since passed from the scene. Another was her great friend, the novelist and art critic Roland Dorgelès (1886-1973), who was to preside over the *Académie Goncourt*.

No doubt she was largely omitted from the history books written after the Second World War because she also suffered from what Mary Cassatt's biographer, Griselda Pollock, has called 'the rampant sexism' that ruled the world of art history until the 1970s. A more profound reason,

however, lay in the core of privacy, perhaps even of snobbery, which was a feature of her personality. She would never go to a café, yet cafes in the early decades of the century were the birthplace of French artistic life. So much of cultural life of the time took place in public. Being seen and attracting attention was part of the fun. She was absent from it. She was not part of the world of Paris café society where art and politics were discussed, schools were born, and friendships forged. It was unimaginable that she would allow her thigh to be pummeled under a café table. If anyone were to touch her *fesses*, it would have to be a minister! As Edmond later explained to me, her aloofness did not make her popular with the artistic fraternity. There was little sympathy for a woman who preferred to hug her cat alone at home between her pink sheets, perhaps hoping for a telephone-call from Monsieur so-and-so.

Charmy may have been solitary, but she was also daring in her solitude. In her own way, she shared in the battles of her artistic contemporaries and must be judged on her own account. This retrospective exhibition at the Musée Paul Dini will, I hope, allow her to be rediscovered in her own right. No one who sees her work can fail to recognise her importance.

Charmy's apartment on the rue de Bourgogne was a stone's throw from the Musée Rodin on the rue de Varenne, where some of Rodin's great sculptures have been housed since 1919. She loved the place and, when I knew her, would sometimes cross the road to stroll in its gardens. I used to think that she may have compared herself to Camille Claudel, who was about a decade older than herself. Like Charmy, Camille had come to Paris as a very young woman, determined to make her mark as an artist. She had been Rodin's assistant, then his mistress, and was one of the very few women to be recognized as a major artist in her own time. Charmy was another.