

CHARCHOUNE: THE EXHIBITION IS OPEN

Serge Charchoune (1888 -1975) may not be as well-known as some of his Dada and Surrealist associates, but for that reason his work comes as a fresh discovery; evading easy categorisation, it has not been over exposed or explained. In his lifetime Charchoune seemed partly to lament and partly value his relative invisibility. He often seemed to be hiding in plain sight, as encapsulated in a couplet from his 1921 Dada Poem, *Foule Immobile*:

The exhibition is open. / And still no-one sees it.

This exhibition provides a rare opportunity to appreciate something of the range of the Russian-born painter's enigmatic work, from aleatory mark making, obscure landscapes and arcane symbolism, to almost gothic religious imagery, calligraphic drawing and dense monochrome abstraction.

“I LIE LOW, AND HAVE A
LOT OF FREEDOM”

By 1927, the date of the earliest work in this exhibition, Charchoune was firmly enmeshed in the avant-garde circles of the day. He had assimilated Cubism, contributed to the Dada journal *391* and at various stages associated with Francis Picabia, Max Ernst, André Breton, Tristan Tzara, Arthur Craven and other influential artists and thinkers. From the outset Charchoune shared the open and experimental attitude of his peers, embracing poetry, music and performance.

Charchoune's openness to artistic possibilities was broadened by time spent in Moscow, Berlin, Barcelona and above all Paris, where he would spend much of his artistic career. By the late 1920s Purism, particularly the work of Amédée Ozenfant, was having the greatest impact on him.

Charchoune was starting to demonstrate a knowing way with the vocabulary of painting, deployed as a series of tropes. He was starting to gain recognition.

Charchoune's relative obscurity today might have something to do with the awkward relationships he had with galleries and dealers in subsequent decades. He was not interested in sales or maintaining a clearly defined 'progressive' career, as evident in the obstinate, capricious character of his output.

In retrospect, Charchoune seems to have anticipated in very personal ways a number of diverse developments in painting. He was deploying Pollock-like dripping and other abstract-expressionist techniques by 1930. His use of the surface of the painting anticipated the evolution of the monochrome, preceding artists like Robert Rauschenberg, and his return to bizarre post-abstract figuration can be seen to foreshadow Philip Guston. His periodically morbid, distasteful or eccentric turns can even seem to share something with strains of recent post-conceptual painting.

This exhibition was curated by painter Merlin James. He trained at the Central School and Royal College of Art in London. His critical writing on art is extensive. With artist Carol Rhodes he runs the exhibition space 42 Carlton Place, in Glasgow.

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THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH

Year of
Creative
Scotland
2012



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Curated by Merlin James

Serge Ivanovich Charchoune

1888: Born on 4 August in Buguruslan, in the Samara region of Russia. Charchoune's father is a trader originally from Slovakia, his mother Russian. As a youth he aspires to be a poet, musician or artist.

1909: Charchoune moves to Moscow where he discovers Modernism at the museums; the international avant-gardes at the collections of Shchukin and Morozov and in vanguard exhibitions. He meets Mikhail Larionov, Natalia Goncharova, Vladimir Tatlin and other artists and frequents poets and writers.

1911 – 1920: Charchoune arrives in Paris in 1912, having spent time in Berlin and Munich. He enrolls at the Académie Russe and then the Académie de la Palette. In 1913 he exhibits at the Salon des Indépendants; he meets the sculptor Helena Grünhoff with whom he will live for ten years. With the outset of WWI (1914) he and Grünhoff take refuge in Barcelona and Mallorca with a group of artists and writers that includes the Delaunays, Marie Laurencin, Arthur Cravan and Olga Sacharoff. He moves in Dada circles and exhibits at the progressive Dalmau gallery. With the onset of the Russian Revolution in 1917 the young artist considers returning to Russia. He briefly joins the French expeditionary corps to Russia, but contracts Spanish flu. In 1919 he returns to Paris and becomes closely associated to with Dada, meeting Francis Picabia, Tristan Tzara, André Breton and others. Charchoune works for Povolozky's bookshop and publishing house and is intimate with Russian émigré circles in Paris.

1921 – 1922: The Dada performance poem *Foule Immobile* is published. The text is proof-read by Philippe Soupault, a French writer and critic central to Surrealism. Intended for a choir of twenty-five voices, it is unlikely *Foule Immobile* was performed publicly. Charchoune is one of the signatories of Picabia's famous painting *l'Oeil Cacodylate* (1921). He inscribes it "Soleil Russe" in optimistic reference to the future of Russia. He takes part with the Dadaists in the *Barrès Trial* performance, a fictitious trial of the conservative nationalist Maurice Barrès. In 1922 Charchoune travels to Berlin with the intention of gaining papers to return to Russia. American dancer Isadora Duncan, returning from a trip there, warns him of the political dangers and he abandons the plan. He splits with Helena Grünhoff. In Berlin he exhibits at Der Sturm gallery and elsewhere, alongside El Lissitzki, Alexej von Jawlensky and others. He meets Van Doesburg, founder of De Stijl, publishes a Russian-language anthology of Dada and founds his one-man journal *Perevoz Dada* ('Cross-border Dada').

1923 – 1930: Charchoune moves back to Paris and collaborates with the Russian journal *Chisla* ('Numbers'). He is in contact with Kurt Schwitters and contributes to *Merz* and other avant-garde journals. He continues issuing poetry pamphlets, which will appear throughout his life. He will remain in long-term contact with Max Ernst, Man Ray, Jean/Hans Arp, Marcel Duchamp and others of the Dada circle. Charchoune has various addresses over the following years, around Montparnasse, St Germain, and République. By 1925 he is interested in Theosophy and the theories of Rudolf Steiner. A solo exhibition at Jeanne Bucher contributes to the beginnings of critical acclaim and some commercial success. In 1927 Charchoune meets Amédée Ozenfant and associates closely with Purism. He has a solo show at Galerie Aubier. Toward the end of the decade he has a solo show at Galerie Percier where Picasso buys a painting and in 1930 he has a solo exhibition at Galerie Boneparte. He joins the Cercle et Carré (Circle and Square) group for abstract artists.

1931 – 1940: In 1931 he has a solo show at Galerie Aux Quatre Chemins. He is also a member of the Abstraction-Création group. The financial crisis of 1929 is still affecting the art market and Charchoune cannot sell work. He spends time at the 'new age' colony *Terre Libérée*, run by Louis Rimbault in Touraine. Back in Paris he survives on a state benefit for artists and intellectuals. He concentrates on small format paintings, alternating abstraction and representation, frequently returning to atmospheric landscapes. Though solitary, he is friendly with Nicolas de Staël, André Lansky, Fernand Léger, John Graham and numerous other artists. He writes prolifically – cryptic prose and quasi-poetic texts, mostly in Russian – which he largely self-publishes using a duplicating machine.

1941 – 1950: Charchoune moves into a studio at Cité Falguière in Montparnasse in 1942. A few collectors and dealers support him towards the end of the war. In 1945 he joins the Raymond Creuze gallery, where he will exhibit for over ten years. Towards the end of the decade he works in the small town of Juan-les-Pins and resumes his poetry pamphlets after a break of some years.

1951 – 1960: Traveling to Spain in 1953, Charchoune paints Spanish architecture and madonnas from Murcian churches. In 1956 he is awarded a Copley Foundation Prize (advisors include Duchamp, Arp and Man Ray). Released from an exclusive contract with his Paris dealer he begins to exhibit more widely. In 1960 moves to Vanves, south of Montparnasse, his final studio.

1961 – 1970: Charchoune travels more frequently, to Italy and to Slovakia (1963 or 65), visiting Bratislava, and Martin, and probably Vienna. He twice reprints *Foule Immobile* at the original Austrian publishing house of Elbmühle. Also in this decade Charchoune re-works and adds to many of his writings, issuing them as commercially printed books under his own imprint 'La Question'. In 1965 he is included in the major Dada survey exhibition in Zurich. In 1968 he makes a second visit to Slovakia and makes illustrations for a Slovak edition of Valéry's *Mon Faust* which appears in 1970. He goes to Moscow and St Petersburg, sending back letters and cards to Pierre Lecuire that will be incorporated into an artist's book, *Abracadabra* (1971).

1971 – 1975: There is a major retrospective at the Musée d'Art Moderne, Paris, in 1971. Though ailing, Charchoune undertakes a major trip to the Galapagos Islands in 1974 where he paints the landscape and animal life. Charchoune returns weak but continues working. He dies in 1975 in a nursing home he had not long moved to, in Villeneuve-Saint-Georges, Paris.

LIST OF WORKS:

1. *Epiderme - Paysage* (1929) Oil on canvas, 165 x 218 mm. (Catalogue no.2)
2. *Impressionisme Ornamental No.5* (1930) Oil on canvas, 150 x 470 mm. (Catalogue no.3)
3. *Grossissement* (1927) Oil on canvas, 186 x 198 mm. (Catalogue no.1)
4. *Le Secret du Tombeau* (1932) Oil on card, laid on masonite, 150 x 200 mm. (Catalogue no.8)
5. *Nocturne* (1931) Oil on canvas, 650 x 810 mm. (Catalogue no.7)
6. *Pluie Colorée No. 1* (1937) Oil on canvas, 225 x 246 mm. (Catalogue no.9)
7. *La Dolorosa de Murcia* (1953) Oil on canvas, 330 x 410 mm. (Catalogue no.12)
8. *La Amargura II* (1953) Oil on canvas, 360 x 560 mm. (Catalogue no.13)
9. *Virgen* (c.1953). Oil on canvas, 190 x 330 mm. Hillsboro Fine Art, Dublin. (Catalogue p. 20)
10. *Untitled* (probably late 1950s) Gouache and pencil on paper, 460 x 372 mm. (Catalogue no.14)
11. *Weber Concertino Pour Clarinette Var. II* (c.1965) Oil on canvas, 460 x 655 mm. (Catalogue no.18)
12. *Piano, Clavecin, Harpe* (1962). 46 x 55 cm. Ravenscourt Galleries, London/Moscow. (Catalogue p.16)
13. *Untitled (Meule de Foin)* (c.1960) Probably woodcut, image size 211 x 152 mm. (Catalogue no.15)
14. *Untitled* (1973) Oil on canvas, 322 x 542 mm. (Catalogue no.19)
15. *Drawing* (1964) Ink on card, 95 x 154 mm. (Catalogue no.16)
16. *Drawing* (mid 1960s) Ink on paper, 98 x 210 mm. (Catalogue no.17)
17. *Axis Mundi* (1942) Oil on canvas, 460 x 372 mm. (Catalogue no.11)
18. *Paysage - Moulin à Vent* (1938) Oil on canvas, 260 x 400 mm. (Catalogue no.10)
19. *Impressionisme Ornamental* (1930) Oil on canvas, 190 x 370 mm. (Catalogue no.4)
20. *Val de Loire 1* (1930-31) Oil on canvas, 220 x 535 mm. (Catalogue no.5)
21. *St. Germain* (1931) Oil on canvas, 202 x 208 mm. (Catalogue no.6)

Glass cases include a selection of catalogues and publications from throughout Charchoune's career.

The corner room contains some reading material and screens a recent performance of Charchoune's Dada performance poem *Foule Immobile* (1921).

EDUCATION AND EVENTS

All events run by the gallery are free and unless stated otherwise should be booked by: **Email:** info.talbotrice@ed.ac.uk
Tel: 0131 650 2210 or **In person:** Reception Desk, Talbot Rice Gallery, Old College, South Bridge, Edinburgh, EH8 9YL

Talks

Artist's Talk / Zoe Beloff in conversation with Peter Kravitz / Saturday 17 November / 3pm

Zoe Beloff will be joined by Peter Kravitz, a psychotherapist working in Edinburgh to discuss the themes in her work with particular reference to *Dreamland* and *In the Days of the Commune*, the two major bodies of work in the Talbot Rice exhibition.

Curator's Talk / Charchoune's trans-modernism / Wednesday 21 November / 5.15pm

Organised by the Princess Dashkova Russian Centre at the University of Edinburgh, this discussion by Merlin James, curator of the exhibition, will offer an opportunity to consider Charchoune's very individual work as a painter and author, in particular in the context of the Russian cultural diaspora.

Talk / Serge Charchoune: a low profile / Wednesday 28 November / 6pm

Artist Merlin James will introduce the exhibition and give an overview of the unique achievements of artist and writer Serge Charchoune. Reserved by nature and often overlooked by mainstream art history, Charchoune was nevertheless an associate of Picabia, Schwitters, Léger, Tzara, Breton, Ernst, de Staël and many others. From post-modern perspectives his significance is increasingly emerging.

Symposium / Word & Image in Russian Contexts - The Legacy of the Russian Avant Garde / Friday 1 February

Organised by University of Edinburgh's Dr Alexandra Smith and sponsored by the Centre for Russian, Central and East European Studies, University of Glasgow, this daylong symposium (9am – 7pm) will examine the Russian Avant Garde in Exile with reference to the Serge Charchoune exhibition.

Tours

Artlink Tours / In the Loop / Tuesday 4 December / 11am

Artlink Tours / In the Frame / Wednesday 30 January / 11am

In the Loop is an audio assisted tour for visitors with hearing loss, *In the Frame* is a verbal description tour for visitors with a visual impairment. Join us for an introduction to the exhibitions with Zoë Fothergill, Curator, Education & Development and Rachel Thibbotumunuwe, Assistant Curator (Equality & Diversity). For booking please contact Susan at Artlink 0131 229 3555 option 1 or email susan@artlinkedinburgh.co.uk.

Regular Tours / Wednesday Walkabout & Saturday Social / 1.15pm and 3pm

An informal half-hour tour of the exhibitions, presented by members of the gallery's team. Free to attend, no booking required.

Workshops

Workshops / Families / Dreamwork / Saturday 1 December and 19 January / 11am, 1pm and 3pm

Looking at the current Zoe Beloff exhibition, artist Ailsa Lochhead will lead short workshops throughout the day for children and families focusing on dreams, hopes and fantasies through drawing, signs and 2D props. For more information contact Ailsa.Lochhead@ed.ac.uk.

Workshop / Young People / Scenes shift / Please contact the gallery if you are interested for dates and times

This performance and installation workshop lead by artist Ailsa Lochhead for young people will begin with Beloff's *Days of the Commune* work. The group will work together to rewrite a script and develop scenes with props, which will then be acted out and documented. For more information contact Ailsa.Lochhead@ed.ac.uk.

Workshop / Occupy The Future: The Prospect of a Utopian Scotland / Saturday 12 January / from 10am

Using Zoe Beloff's theatrical interventions at last year's *Occupy* protests and Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* as starting points, this workshop and collaborative presentation led by artist Anthony Schrag, explores current debates of an Independent (or not) Scotland, and sees participants perform the various conflicts and possible futures as a creative pre-living of our destiny.

Screenings

Saturday Screenings / Mirrors of the Mind / 8 December 2012, 26 January 2013, 16 February 2013 / 5-6pm

Talbot Rice Gallery will open late on three Saturday evenings for a programmed series of surreal short films. The first two will bring together a selection of artist's films from archive. The final event on 16 February will consist of the pick of new works submitted for the Mirrors of the Mind project. For more information see the project blog Talbotrice.blogspot.com.

At our events a portable FM hearing loop is available for visitors who are hard of hearing - please contact the gallery in advance to book the equipment.

A large print version of this guide is available at the reception desk and if you require this document in an alternative format please contact the gallery.