

JACQUES FROMONOT

EXTENDED BIO

EARLY YEARS

Born in Isere, in the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes region of eastern France that is named after the river that runs through it, Fromonot moved to Lyon as a young child, spending his summers in Marseille with his grandmother. His father was a chemist and the director of the pharmaceutical company Rhône Poulenc in Lyon. Fromonot excelled in all subjects at school, driven by brilliance and boredom in equal measure, and spent much of his time drawing in class. He qualified as an engineer and practiced in Lyon for a couple of years, before giving in to restlessness and heading for the harbour of Bordeaux with a bag over his shoulder. His intention was to board the first vessel that could offer him safe passage to 'anywhere tropical in Latin America' and he ended up a cargo ship bound for Santos, the naval port of São Paulo.

BRAZIL AND LATIN AMERICA

Fromonot spent the next twenty years in Brazil and travelled extensively throughout Latin America. São Paulo inspired him to devote more time to painting. Earning a living in typically resourceful ways, he worked as a stage set technician, manually moving a timber ship across its stage-bound ocean journey for several months, as well as on various construction and painting jobs. After a couple of years in the megalopolis, he headed into the interior of Brazil, to the terrifying and fascinating mines of Mato Grosso do Sul where he found employment as a foreman. He quickly became appalled by the conditions imposed on workers and moved on to open a bar and run a nightclub and casino in Curitiba for a while. Probing deeper into lesser charted territory, he became a navigator on the Amazonian rivers of Tapajós and Xingú, prospecting gold and diamonds with free government concessions, trading with natives in exchange for precious metals and working on a rubber plantation. His professional training briefly proved useful when he worked as a hydrographer of the Parana river and as an engineer on the construction of dams and the Trans-Amazonian Highway.

Fromonot's rich imagination was fuelled by his travels and adventures. As he gained the means to buy materials, he began to load his brush with vibrant colours, painting along the way and selling as he moved on. The anecdotes were too many to tell. In Belem, the gateway port to the lower Amazons, he was commissioned by the town governor to paint his brother, only to arrive at the palace on the agreed date and be ushered to the chapel where his waxen subject lay in wait of a post-mortem portrait. On his return to Rio, Fromonot supported his painting with customary versatility,

as a decorator, a fashion designer for the haute couture and even as a perfume distiller who illicitly recreated famous French scents under the name Fath.

In addition to leaving a trail of paintings behind, Fromonot began to produce a body of work suited to exhibitions which earned him regular reviews in the local press. He became known as The Hunter of Light, "O Caçador de Luz", a painter whose vibrant colours conveyed the radiance of Brazil - the exotic nature, fevered rhythms, the distress and euphoria of its peoples and burgeoning urban structures of a land of contrasts and extremes. He also made the acquaintance of local artists such as Cavalcanti and Portinari, both of whom he greatly admired. In the 1970s, he travelled to Bolivia, Peru, Chili, Ecuador, Argentina and further north to Mexico to contemplate the monumental Frescos of Diego Riviera, discover the works of Siqueiros and d'Orozco and explore the sun-symbol worship of ancient civilizations to which he was deeply drawn. His Constructivism series was produced after studying pre-Columbian civilizations in relation to modern architecture which was reshaping the continent in giant strides. At some point, he referred to himself in his notes as an «a constructivist and integralist of space».

RETURN TO FRANCE

After almost two decades in Latin America, Fromonot began to feel stirrings of nostalgia for his home country, triggered by a chance encounter with Marcel Camus with whom he shared long discussions about the Cote d'Azur. Fromonot first stopped over in Lyon to visit his parents but couldn't dwell too long in "these grey towns where, on reaching up, you can almost touch the cloudy sky." Yearning for a place "where the sunshine rains», he moved to the Cote d'Azur in the electric summer of 1968. Cannes was to remain his primary base throughout what continued to be an artist's life of travels, quests and torment.

While many of Fromonot's earlier paintings were dispersed throughout Latin America, traded along his travels or later sold through galleries in Brazil, Mexico City, Buenos Aires, Lima, Montevideo, as well as the São Paulo Biennale, his later work was exhibited in France, London, Munich, Spoleto, and New Delhi. In 1961, Fromonot was awarded first prize by the Grand Prix de Paris at the Salon d'Art Moderne, as well as 2nd prize at the Grand Prix de la Peinture in the Côte d'Azur in 1966.

In the late sixties, he produced an outstanding series on the folklore and traditions of India for a private collector. He was commissioned to paint the portraits of Prime Minister Nehru (who posed for him) and the leaders of India's Independence movement. These were exhibited in London in 1962 at the Royal Society of Arts under «Aspects of India», inaugurated by Pandit Nehru and Indira Gandhi in the presence of the artist. Among Fromonot's patrons was the Italian Countess Alicia Spaulding Paolozzi, heiress to the United Fruit Company, a philanthropist, activist and pioneering sportswoman who was instrumental in establishing the Spoleto festival in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1977. Other series are known to have gone to an American Art dealer, a French collector, as well as a wealthy American tea merchant by the name of Clement Hakim who famously claimed the entire exhibition at the Grand Hotel Normandy in Deauville.

He was described by journalists and art critics as an adventurous but level-headed man of physical and moral actions, a wanderer though not a bohemian, a thinker, an artist who looked like a leading film star, and consistently as a free spirit. His intense yearning for a pure, large experience of life led him on extraordinary adventures which inspired his body of work, capturing the unique quality of light and life in Brazil, the jewel colours of India and the visceral quality of intimate encounters. His style can be loosely described as the visual expression of an ongoing inner dialogue between the artist's cerebral and intuitive sides, translated into structure and colour, negotiated by light. Being both an intellectual and instinctive artist, Fromonot's sincere pursuit of themes - from the ancient mysticism and modern materialism of Latin America, to the philosophy of secular millennial India, interwoven with cultural folklore - vested his paintings with inner workings which continue to engage the viewer in his quest.

Given his lifelong refusal to be part of the system, Fromonot was self-possessed and engaged with the common worker and his famous peers with an equal measure of interest and independence. He spent time with Camus in Rio, Cocteau in Villefranche-sur-Mer, frequented Pablo Picasso and fellow artists in Vallauris and Golfe-Juan, met with Dali in Cannes, and socialised with many celebrities in Cannes - including Brigitte Bardot whose portrait he painted in St Tropez. In his later years, recoiling from what he saw as the materialism of consumer society and speculation around art, he retired to the countryside, living between Mallorca and Cannes. Although he refused to exhibit publicly, he worked to the very end and left behind a substantial legacy comprising some four hundred oils on canvas and board, as well as numerous drawings and notebooks.

Though Fromonot's work needs to be seen to understand the rich colours, depth and brushstroke which images fail to convey, the wealth of paintings and drawings that constitute his estate have been photographed and loosely ordered by his widow Nina Fromonot, into series according to style and period, waiting to be contextualised in the history of twentieth century art.

Jacques Fromonot:

« Si j'ai donné ma jeunesse à ce pays nommé Brasil, rêve de ma petite enfance bien loin sur l'autre rive d'un immense océan, celui-ci en échange m'a comblé d'une éternelle jeunesse, d'un devenir humain et non matérialiste insensible au souhait du cœur et de l'âme ; il m'a forgé la base d'une condition acceptable de vie avec ses imprévus, de joies, de larmes, d'espoirs, de réalisations, d'illusions. Oui, quel fabuleux investissement ces décennies de jeunesse consacrées à ce pays de multiples horizons que j'appelle « Mon Brésil ». Terre d'immense contrastes tant passionnels que visuels - Terre de trésors de Dieu éblouissants ou cachés, où mes instants de souffrance se transformaient en sourires, en découvertes et où mon moyen d'expression - qui est la gamme de l'arc en ciel - se réfugiait sur mes toiles, qui illumine ma vie et mon œuvre constamment enrichie de manifestations picturales nouvelles. Mon esprit, donc mon Être né dans cette terre généreuse et au cours de mes expositions là ou à travers le monde, mon Brésil chéri est toujours présent soit par les thèmes choisis, soit par l'explosion des couleurs ou le rythme endiablé.»

Translation:

« If I gave my youth to this country called Brazil, dream of a childhood spent on faraway shores to the other side of an immense ocean, it has rewarded me in kind. With eternal youth and a sense of human becoming, freed from materialism and insensitivity to the desires of the heart and soul. It has allowed me to build the foundations for a life that I could accept in its entirety, with its unforeseen turns, joys, tears, hopes, achievements and illusions. What a fabulous investment these decades have been, spent in that land of contrasts and multiple horizons that I call 'my Brazil', rich with treasures both apparent and concealed, where my moments of suffering were transformed through magnificent adventures into invaluable discoveries and insights. My spirit, and therefore my being, were recreated in that generous land. Brazil has remained like an eternal light within me throughout my life, finding its way into all of my work.»