

INDEPENDENT 20TH CENTURY

September 5-8, 2024

The Lost Art of Raoul Dufy

by Julie Baumgardner

August 22, 2024



Raoul Dufy, *Nogent-sur-Marne*, 1934, Oil on canvas, 38 4/5 x 51 2/5 inches © Estate of Raoul Dufy/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris

During his lifetime, Raoul Dufy ran alongside the modern masters. The turn-of-century French painter circulated with the Fauvists, was represented by gallerist Louis Carré alongside Matisse and Picasso, won the grand prize for painting at the Venice Biennale, and his exuberant brush left an influential legacy perhaps most evident in Ludwig Bemelmans' classic children's book *Madeline*.

Dufy lived between 1877 and 1953, born in Normandy but after military service he studied at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris and continued to work in the city as well as in the South of France. Like

the Impressionists before him, painting “en plein air” was foundational to his practice. Working outdoors led him to evolve a theory he called “couleur-lumière,” distributing light across the canvas through radiant color.

Perhaps Dufy is best remembered by his oils of seascapes and flocks of preening tourists dating from his brief dalliance with Fauvism in the early 1900s, and these works are still the ones to fetch the highest prices in the art market. Yet he can hardly be typecast into one artistic group or mode. After 1906 his own “Dufyesque” style of vivid color contrasts and flat, graphic lines emerged, and he embarked on prolific commercial collaborations with fashion designer Paul Poiret and silk manufacturer Bianchini-Férier.



Raoul Dufy, *La fenêtre (The Window)*, 1923, Oil on canvas, 36 1/4 x 28 3/4 inches © Estate of Raoul Dufy/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris

Today, however, Dufy has fallen out of fashion compared with his peers: a name known to graduate art history programs and a select few European painting collectors who seek depth in their holdings. Obscure or uncelebrated he is not, but Dufy's place in the history of modern art remains a categorical quagmire, even as critics through the decades have recognized the deceptive simplicity of his work.

"Dufy is a benefactor of the human race," declared Louis Vauxcelles in 1936. "At a time of greatest fear of what is to come, a time when the press is full of terrible events, here is the minstrel of joy, the painter of lightsome grace, of freshness and happiness." Alfred Werner, in 1968, wrote that, "Of the great French artists who have died within the last twenty years, Raoul Dufy is most in need of re-evaluation." And Peter Schjeldahl penned "The Illicit Joy of Dufy" for *Vogue* in 1984, writing, "Raoul Dufy was perfect in ways for which generations of serious art people had no use."

Forty years on, the artist still hasn't shaken off the aspersions described by Schjeldahl's essay. Dufy's mature style has been commonly viewed as "commercial" or "decorative," and therefore less worthy of scholarly attention, a point reiterated by Nahmad Contemporary director Michelle Molokotos ahead of the gallery's solo presentation of his 1920s to 1950s works at Independent 20th Century. "He's been reduced to just these brief Fauvist associations," she says, even though he never entirely committed to the modernist movement that ignited his career.



Raoul Dufy painting on the terrace in Caldas de Montbuy, Spain, where he was treated for arthritis in 1949, photography by Gjon Mili © Life Magazine

If Dufy remains locked in a cryogenic capsule, it is perhaps a function of the times in which he lived and painted, when artists were framed more by their critical reputation than their market success. Dufy's celebratory scenes of bourgeois leisure pursuits—regattas, bathers, concerts, and days at the races—were (and still are) critically incongruous with the trope of the sad, starving artistic genius. His production also equated all expressions of art making, defying the long-held ideological distinction between the "fine" and "decorative."

As Molokotos says, “Perhaps these perspectives are what sets him apart from the more austere approaches of some of his contemporaries, as Dufy found light-hearted delight in his life and work, and really relished his subject matter and his mediums.”

Then there is the question of his compositions. Airy, fanciful, whimsical—all are adjectives that have been ascribed to Dufy. His light-touch outlines of oil, watercolor, and ink over pastel and near-tropical Mediterranean backdrops convey an impression of ease and visual harmony that is all too often dismissed as superficiality or stupidity.



Raoul Dufy, *Epsom, les turfistes dans les tribunes (Epsom, Racegoers in the Grandstands)*, 1939, watercolor on paper, 19 3/4 x 25 1/2 inches © Estate of Raoul Dufy/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris

“If Fragonard could be so gay about the life of his time, why can’t I be just as gay about mine?,” retorted Dufy, rejecting the notion that he was “a painter of the leisure classes, a purveyor of luxury for the elegant drawing rooms of the rich,” as Werner put it. The artist once stated that art’s role was “to render beauty accessible to all, by putting order into things and thought,” and proclaimed, “My eyes were made to efface that which is ugly.” But beauty is a battleground in modernist aesthetics, and Dufy’s search for it has ironically led him to be downgraded into the realms of mere decoration.

Contemporary art is now in a distinctly different moment, where critical consensus bears less influence on the valuation of an artist than the market, and the old hierarchies between “high” and “low” genres no longer hold. This attitude shift is one motivation for Nahmad Contemporary’s dedicated showing of Dufy’s oils and watercolors at Independent 20th Century, a call to action from the market itself for the artist’s overdue reconsideration.

The works coming to the fair originate from various private collections, where most of Dufy’s works currently reside in “very sophisticated, historically savvy” hands, Molotokos says. However, with the gallery’s continued exposure of Dufy as “a staple of our art fair program,” new patrons are arriving. That growing interest stems in part from the resonance between Dufy and contemporary painters such as Karen Kilimnik and Jutta Koether, who have drawn upon his loose, dynamic brush in their own expressive forays into figuration.



Raoul Dufy, *Le concert orange* (*The Orange Concert*), 1948, oil on canvas, 23 1/2 x 28 7/8 inches (60 x 73 cm) © Estate of Raoul Dufy/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris

Dufy’s primary subject was modern life but the arc of his practice can also be seen to “follow his life,” Molotokos notes. Whereas his earlier paintings focused on outdoor spectacles such as horse races and bullfights, the onset of arthritis in the 1940s redirected his gaze toward interiors of the studio and the orchestra. The gallery is bringing prime examples of this trajectory, including the watercolors *La Corrida* (*The Bullfight*) from 1920 and *Chevaux et jockeys* (*Horses and Jockeys*) from 1928 and the late oils *Le concert orange* (*The Orange Concert*) and *Au concert* (*At the Concert*), both from

1948. Here, visible shifts in brushwork and spatial composition reveal his condition, but they also represent the growth of a person whose attitudes and desires change over time, too.

In that spirit, such a presentation can finally re-evaluate Dufy against the grain of convention and attempt to correct a historical oversight through the lens of the contemporary art market. History has never forgotten Dufy, but now the time might just be ripe to embrace his unswerving eye for joy and beauty.

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