



Charles and Gisèle Rollier in Carouge, 1948.

Charles Rollier, c'est moi

In this issue, we meet the great Swiss painter Charles Rollier (1912–1968).

Summer 1964. We have just come back from the Venice Biennale, where one of my paintings was exhibited. I also went with my wife Gisèle to revisit the mosaics that we so admired ten years ago – that is when I understood the value of icons. More than ever, I am convinced of the sacred aspect of art.

I am considered an outstanding figure of lyrical abstract art. This is something I disagree with, even if my *Broussailles* or *Ondoiments* series are frequently associated with this trend. People often think that abstract art is easy; well, to create an abstract painting is a difficult task. I copied the great masters when I studied painting at the Brera Academy in Milan, so I know what I'm talking about.

I was born in Milan. However, in 1934, I fled fascist Italy for Switzerland – my ancestors were from Sarraz (Canton of Vaud). I initially settled in Basel, and then followed the painter Coghuf to the Bernese Jura. But France attracted me, especially Paris, where I lived for two years and frequented many artists. In 1941 I returned to Switzerland, this time to Geneva. At the time, I rented a studio in the Eaux-Vives district. That is where I met the sculptor Alberto Giacometti. In 1946 I met him again in Paris, as well as the writer Tristan Tzara and the painter Nicolas de Staël, to whom I was very close. Having lived between Paris and Geneva until 1952, I ended up 'retiring' to Chêne-Bourg with Gisèle and our two children.

I came from a protestant *milieu* in which art was not considered a spiritual necessity. In 1954 I discovered my interest in Buddhism, particularly

Zen Buddhism. A little later, while I was studying in the Canton of Vaud, I experienced a true revelation: woman is the route to the divine. From now on, she was to be at the center of my painting. Four years later, I immersed myself in the study of India, where I found the very essence of my inspiration. From 1957, I exhibited my work both in Switzerland and abroad.

That year, the Musée de Lausanne showed three of my works at the *Art Suisse au XXe siècle* exhibition, including *Les très saintes émanations odorantes*. The Musée Rath had already offered me a retrospective, but I was reluctant...



Untitled, 1962. Charles Rollier did not like being described as an abstract painter: "Abstract or figurative painting – it's a non-issue," he affirmed.

On May 15, 1968, Charles Rollier collapsed, the victim of a heart attack, just after reading a verdict at the courthouse in Geneva, where he was acting as chief juror at the court of assizes. He is buried at the city's Cimetière des Rois.

The Place Charles Rollier will be inaugurated in Chêne-Bourg before the end of the year. Two exhibitions have been organized this autumn to coincide with the centenary of the artist's birth. For further information, please visit www.charlesrollier.com. □