

MARTHE DONAS & PROMINENT MONTPARNASSE COLLEAGUES IN NICE DURING WORLD WAR I

by Dr. Kenneth Wayne © 2025

Like many of her esteemed Montparnasse colleagues during the First World War, Marthe Donas gravitated to the warmer and safer Riviera, specifically Nice, arriving by the spring of 1917. Nice continued to offer its residents and visitors a relatively carefree life: the casino, luxury hotels, and movie houses still operated on a limited basis, tourist cafés along the Promenade des Anglais remained open, charity events were held, operas were performed, an international tennis tournament took place, and tourism to the area was encouraged.¹ “Nice is still Nice” declared one local newspaper on October 15, 1914. “The charm of the Riviera, even during war has not been lost. The years of war in Nice proved to a turning both in the artistic history of the region and in the careers of several of the artists and writers who congregated there, including Marthe Donas.

Among the Montparnasse literary figures with close ties to artists who contributed to the creative mix Nice were Guillaume Apollinaire, Blaise Cendrars, and Jules Romains. It was in the Nice area in 1917-18 that Cendrars worked on his two famous war-related works: *J'ai tué* and *Profond aujourd'hui*. Romains's biographer André Bourin wrote that after Paris, no other town was as lovingly described by Romains as Nice. The Belgian writers Maurice Maeterlinck (the Nobel Prize winner for literature in 1911 whose early plays took Symbolism into the theatre) and Franz Hellens (whose dreamy writings prefigure Surrealist literature and whose portrait was painted by Modigliani) also spent much time in Nice.

Of the literary figures, Apollinaire deserves extended discussion, for his ties to the area were especially strong.² Raised on the Riviera and schooled in Monte Carlo, Cannes and Nice, he returned on several occasions. When war broke out, he traveled to Nice to be with friends, and it was there that he enlisted in the French army, actually, given his Polish nationality, the Foreign Legion. It was also in Nice that he met one of the great loves of his life, the Countess Louise de Coligny-Châtillon, whom he affectionately called “Lou.” His numerous letters to her, published as *Lettres à Lou*, are filled with references to Nice. This volume contains many of the

¹ An excellent source on wartime Nice is Ralph Jean-Claude Schor, *Nice Pendant la Guerre 1914-1918*, Travaux et Mémoires, no.32 (Aix-en-Provence, . Publications des Annales de la Faculté de Lettres, 1964, quotation on 118.

² For extensive references to Apollinaire in Nice, and these other writers, see my catalogue essay: “Montparnasse Heads South: Archipenko, Modigliani, Matisse, and WWI Nice” in Kenneth Wayne, ed., *Impressions of the Riviera: Monet, Renoir, Matisse and their Contemporaries*, Portland, Maine, USA: Portland Museum of Art, 1998.

artist's famous visual poems—his calligrammes—including one that he called “bien Niçois,” which depicts a pear, an eyelet, and an opium pipe. Apollinaire's other wartime writings also make reference to Nice. Marthe Donas knew this central figure of the avant-garde.

Nice had become an important center for movie making. Both the Pathé and Gaumont movie companies opened studios there, Pathé in 1910 and Gaumont in 1913. Cendrars was immersed in film. He worked with director Abel Gance on *J'accuse* and other films and for other projects tried to enlist the collaboration of Apollinaire, Romaine, Jean Cocteau, Picasso, Morgan Russell, and even Charlie Chaplin. Cendrars cinematic experiences in Nice informed his essay “L'ABC du cinema,” begun in 1917 and completed in 1921.

Like Montparnasse, Nice was intimate in size. More important, Nice was also remarkably cosmopolitan, with large communities of Englishmen (who were responsible for the construction of the Promenade des Anglais, Nice's famous boardwalk), Russians, and Italians, not to mention the multinational group of artists above. If Montparnasse was “the first truly international colony of artists we ever had,” as Marcel Duchamp put it, then Nice was surely the second.³ Whereas Montparnasse had the famous intersection carrefour Vavin as its center of activity, Nice had the rue de France, on or near which many of the artists discussed here lived. For three major artists in particular—Archipenko, Modigliani, and Matisse—this was a crucial period for their art. Each benefited from artistic contacts in this new community and became deeply interested in representing light.

In Nice, artists duplicated the intoxicating synergy of Montparnasse and formed one of the most potent and creative artistic environments in the history of art with many masterpieces being created there. Among the superstars in and around Nice there were Henri Matisse and Amedeo Modigliani. Even the Impressionist master Pierre Renoir lived in the area, next door in Cagnes, where fellow artists visited him regularly until his death in 1919. Renoir and Monet had legitimized the area as an artistic hotspot. The socialite Baronne d'Hélène d'Oettingen ran a salon in Montparnasse, like Gertrude Stein, and then did the same in Nice adding to this heady creative environment.

Perhaps the artist who thrived the most in wartime Nice was the Ukrainian Alexander Archipenko and clearly Donas was most inspired by him with his work that integrated light, shadow, color and Cubism. So it makes sense to discuss him and his work at length here. Donas quickly became one of the protégés of Archipenko. Indeed, she moved into a studio just above Archipenko in the Château Valrose (which is now the Administration building of the Université de Nice). With great sophistication and aplomb, Archipenko successfully integrated the

³ Quoted in James Charter, *This Must the Place*, (London: Herbert Joseph, 1934), 295.

principles of Cubism into sculpture in his vastly appealing statuettes of curvy, sexy women and in his remarkable sculpto-paintings where two and three dimensional elements create an interplay of form, light and reflections.

Although Archipenko had experimented with Cubist principles before the war, during his time in Nice he fully developed his most important contributions to modern sculpture. His use of voids and concave and convex elements introduced to sculpture the Cubist notion of the equivalence of space and mass. The artist's residence in Nice and his friendships there conditioned his developments. It is important to note these facts, for this five- year period is often considered in the literature as part of his Paris experience. Archipenko's immediate environment had always had a decisive influence on the works he created and Nice was no exception.

We see voids and concave/convex elements at play in three of Archipenko's most famous statuettes: *Woman Combing Her Hair*, *Seated Woman Combing Her Hair*, and *Standing Figure*, all of which were made in Nice. One is made more aware of mass by dint of its absence. The elements help fulfil the Cubist aim of breaking down the barrier between an object and environment. "Negative" space surrounding the work thus becomes positive space, that is an active element in the sculpture. This concept was to be of seminal importance in twentieth-century sculptors; it is easy to see for example, how crucial it was to Alexander Calder and his mobiles. Similarly, because concave areas reflect light, this empty space becomes "positive" space. If one changes one's position and/or that of the light source, shadows and light alternate. Once again, object and surroundings interact.

If the bright white ceramic *Standing Figure* evokes the sunshine of the Riviera, the green patina on the other figures recalls the Mediterranean Sea. These figures are slim and curvaceous whereas Archipenko's pre-war Parisian figures, despite their dynamism, seem clumsy and awkward by comparison. The sensuality of the Niçois figures contributes to their Cubism, as sexy, side-swung hips accentuate the play of geometric forms with curves alternating with sharp angles. These figures depart from the prewar Parisian works in another way: their subject matter. Bathers and nudes have replaced circus performers, dancers and boxers.

Although the date found on examples of Archipenko's famous *Flat Torso* varies between 1914 and 1915, it was undoubtedly made on the Riviera and probably in 1915. In terms of style and subject, the luminous *Flat Torso* is more akin to the classical and elegant Riviera statuettes rather than the dynamic Paris ones. In addition, *Flat Torso* is not among Archipenko's latest works illustrated in the June 1914 issue of the avant-garde periodical *Les Soirées de Paris*, reinforcing the idea that he made it after that date.

Aside from these curvaceous statuettes, Archipenko's other major innovation of the Nice period was his sculpto-painting, an art form that shows increased sophistication over his earlier

work. Visual stimulation is created, not by colorfully painted subjects, but by a kaleidoscopic combination of mixed media, varied textures, plays of dimensionality, and an interest in light and color. The barrage of visual stimuli produces a highly unstable, disjointed image that prevents the eye from focusing completely. Sculpto-paintings formed the bulk of Archipenko's production in Nice and were, for the most part, limited to that period. Later, Archipenko called the sculpto-paintings his most-important works. Archipenko had made mixed-media constructions before he went to Nice, painting his figures with opaque colors, but they were meant to be seen the round, whereas the sculpto-paintings were meant to hang on the wall and are more visually jarring. *Before the Mirror* is an excellent example of his sculpto-paintings, containing a variety of relief elements and textures—tin (meant to function like a mirror), paper, a photograph, and wood—which activate the picture surface. They also create a picture within a picture. Indeed, were it not for the title, one would not know whether one was looking out a window, at a picture, or through a doorway. The third dimension is represented through three types of reality: painted, photographic and actual three-dimensional relief elements.

A visual comparison of Archipenko's sculpto-paintings and Marthe Donas's art present two dimensional work with refined, delicate, and sophisticated art with collage, plus drawn and painted elements. Her oeuvre was quite prolific at the time and depicted still lifes, figures and Madonnas and children. Both artists produced outstanding work that was partly abstract and also figurative. The result was exceptionally creative and imaginative.

Archipenko's change from opaque to luminous paint is not only a response to the general milieu of the South but may also have reinforced by a more specific source, the Russian artist Léopold Survage, who spent the war years in Nice. Archipenko first met Survage when they were students together in Moscow at the School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture. Survage, a painter passionately interested in color, saw paintings by Matisse and the Impressionists in the collection of well-known collector Sergey Schoukin and decided to move to Paris to study under Matisse. There, he got into touch with Archipenko, and the two stayed close friends for the rest of their lives. Survage's style and Rythmes Colorés also permeated Marthe Donas's Niçois art and helped develop her interest in color and light. They are composed of abstract geometric forms resembling rays of light. A highly innovative joining of the old medium of painting and the new one of cinema, the film images taken as a whole can be considered a Cubist film. Apollinaire himself described the work in this poetic manner: "The origin of this art can be traced back to fireworks, fountains, electric signs, and the fairy-tale luxury hotels we see in exhibitions, which have taught our eyes to derive pleasure from kaleidoscopic changes in shades."

Archipenko's Italian friend Amedo Modigliani was in the Nice area for thirteen months, from April 1918 to May 31, 1919, and the paintings he made there are now considered among his

most important and desirable works. No longer stiff and angular, his figures became rhythmic and curvaceous. At the same time, his palette lightened and brightened, giving the works a certain buoyancy. This was a particularly productive time for Modigliani, and he painted a steady stream of works, perhaps motivated to support his growing family. His girlfriend, Jeanne Hébuterne, was pregnant –a development that led to their move South, out of harm’s way—and would give birth to a baby girl on November 29, 1928.

In Nice, and nearby Cagnes, Modigliani spent time with his old friends Archipenko, Cendrars, Foujita, Soutine and Survage. He made portraits of some friends and acquaintances, including Hellens, the pianist Germaine Meyer (later Mrs. Léopold Survage and her husband), the actor Gaston Modot, Rachel Osterlind (wife of the painter Anders Osterlind), Morgan Russell and the dealer Zborowski. Hellens remarked on how quickly Modigliani painted his portrait, although Hellens considered the painting inspired, he and his wife felt that it did not resemble him at all, so he sold it (for less than the twenty francs he paid for it). The many portraits of Jeanne that Modigliani painted in and around Nice to be quite varied and also do not bear a striking resemblance to her (compared with the photographs of her that are reproduced in Modigliani literature). Not interested in realistic portrayals at this time, Modigliani used his sitters as sources of inspiration.

In a new development for him, Modigliani made many portraits of peasants and young people, some of these who worked on the local farms. Their relaxed pose and the sinuous outlines of the figures are characteristic of Modigliani’s Riviera work. Modigliani may have painted local workers and children given the dearth of professional artist models on the Riviera then. These models resulted in works with enormous sentimental appeal that could be sold. Also, given the birth of his daughter in Nice in November 1918, Modigliani was doubtless thinking about children and young people.

Modigliani tried painting about four landscapes. This may owe something to Renoir, Modigliani’s neighbor in Cagnes, whom he visited. A written account of their visit remains⁴ The landscapes are even more reminiscent, though, of the flattened landscapes or hillside scenes of his friend Leopold Survage, who encouraged Modigliani to try the landscape genre. Survage noted that Modigliani was too introspective and interested in the human spirit to continue painting landscapes.

Matisse moved to Nice in late 1917. His art changed significantly over the next few years in a direction that would characterize it for much of the interwar period. The change has typically been called, or dismissed, as a “retreat” from an abstract -symbolic style to a more

⁴ Modigliani’s visit to see Renoir is recounted in the massive biography of the artist by Pierre Sichel, *Modigliani*, New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, Inc., 1967, 409-412

figurative Impressionist style, in which light and atmosphere reign supreme. Matisse's chief concern did indeed shift from color to light, no doubt prompted by the intense light of the Riviera. His visits to Renoir in 1917 and 1918 are also crucial to the process as scholars and Matisse himself observed. Marthe Donas's art shares some of these new interests.

Donas would have seen Matisse at the Salons of the Baronne d'Oettingen in her large apartment in Nice, along with Modigliani and dealer Léopold Zborowski who subsequently included her in an exhibition in 1919 in London: "An Exhibition of French Art 1914-1919" at the Mansard Gallery at Heal and Son Ltd run by Osbert and Sacheverall Sitwell.