

An artistic trip in company of Fikret Mualla

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Beyond artistic, historical, social, political contexts, great masters have their own universe, their works are remarkable.

Imaging a resemblance-difference game between some Fikret Mualla's paintings and famous works in correlation, let us try to understand how the talent and personality of Fikret Mualla transcend with humour influences exerted upon him.

To enter the world and works of Fikret Mualla, the 20th century Turkish painter, is to discover and have fun at his gentle nods to various artistic movements. His gouaches, his drawings, his paintings whether they represent a street scene, a café, a house are unique, they have a strong personality. And implicitly they remind us that the artist was in symbiosis with all the artistic movements of the beginning of the 20th century, without leaving out his Turk-ottoman boyhood.



Fikret Mualla was born in 1903 within a well-to-do stambouliote family, heir to Byzantine colourful traditions. Brought up according to ottoman customs, he studied at a French-speaking secondary school. On his mother's premature death, his father kept him away from the family circle and sent him to Switzerland and then to Germany. There he followed the course of the Berlin Fine Arts Academy where he studied German expressionism, in particular the works of the members of "Die Brücke" School. Back in Turkey, in the young Republic stemming from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire, he did not find again the artistic, cosmopolitan and innovative effervescence of Germany. Disappointed, frustrated, with his father's inheritance in his pocket, he set off for Paris in 1939. Just before the Second World War, Parisian artistic circles were, they, luxuriantly prolific. In his element at last, he rubbed shoulders and mixed with artists from all schools, in painting, music, literature. Until his death in July 1967, he drew from this creative pool.

This multi-cultural artistic training explains his extensive knowledge of the works of his contemporaries and of the "classical".

OTTOMAN MINIATURES (13th – 16th centuries)

In continuity with Persian miniatures, ottoman miniatures are characterized by lack of perspective, bright colours and numerous details. This allows artists to represent, several successive or concomitant scenes, the bottom of the painting presenting the foreground and the top the background. Some large paintings can be read as comic strips.



Banquet offered by the sultan to dignitaries



Card players



Sultan Mehmet II Fatih hunting



A stroll beside a duck pond

On the four paintings we take notice of the perspective distorted by the background above the foreground, proportions reversed. Figures are part of a “fake sky” which is, in fact, a background where the scenes take place. Their faces are highly expressive, frozen and seized in their immediate existence. Colours are pure and flaming.

Fikret Mualla lays particular emphasis on the features, thickens them, verging on caricature. The details he adds are few but particularly expressive like the player cheating on the left of “the card players” painting.

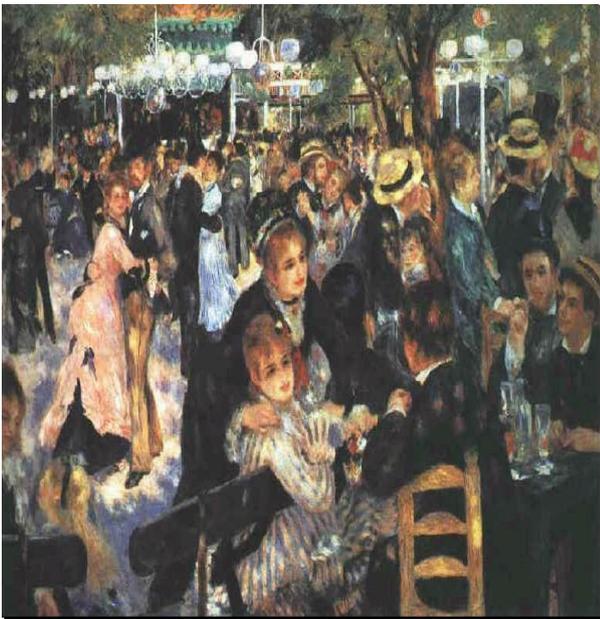
PIERRE-AUGUSTE RENOIR (1841-1919)



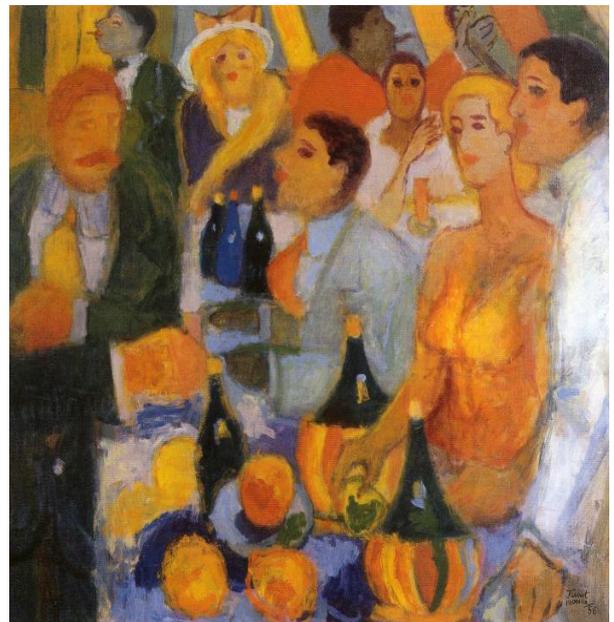
Le déjeuner des canotiers



Banquet



Le moulin de la Galette



Banquet

The compositions, the themes of the paintings facing each other are the same, bathed in a subtle light which bursts in different spots of the painting. The sensuality of the scenes where the figures touch and kiss each other is almost palpable in Renoir.

In contrast Fikret Mualla's figures are paralysed, almost a caricature as the tediousness of the meal drawing to a close comes to light. This rigidity is increased by the scarcely marked perspective where only the figures' very pronounced shadows make up the background. The stroke does not fade but underlines the audacity of the drawing which allows room for bold flat tints¹ with pure colours.

¹ Flat tints technique: placing of a layer of colour on a flat surface without any roughness or interruption.

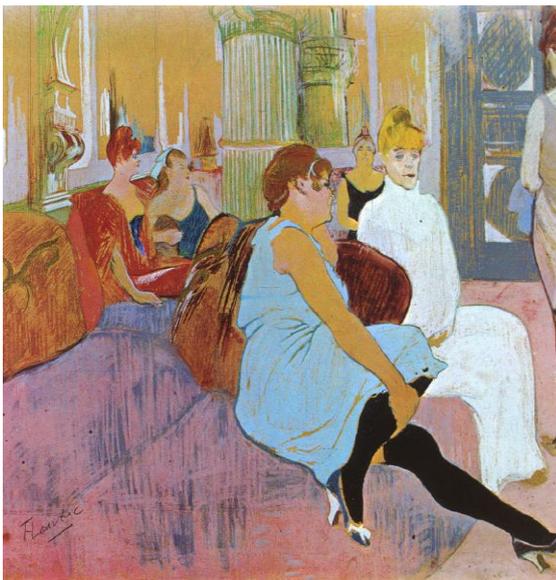
HENRI DE TOULOUSE-LAUTREC (1864-1901)



Café scene



Parisian café scene



Rue des Moulins



The toilet



In the restaurant A la Mie



Couple at a bar

The compositions and the themes are strangely close on these paintings representing interior scenes. However Fikret Mualla simplifies the stroke verging on caricature, the background figures are colourful silhouettes or shadows. Black used as focal point, characteristic of Toulouse-Lautrec's works is often reinterpreted and taken up by Fikret Mualla.

On the two "café scenes" the magnificent profile of the woman in the foreground and the bar diagonal seem a gentle nod from Fikret Mualla to Toulouse-Lautrec Montmartre. Mualla's scene remains more bustling; the waiter with a white jacket seems ready to come out of the painting!

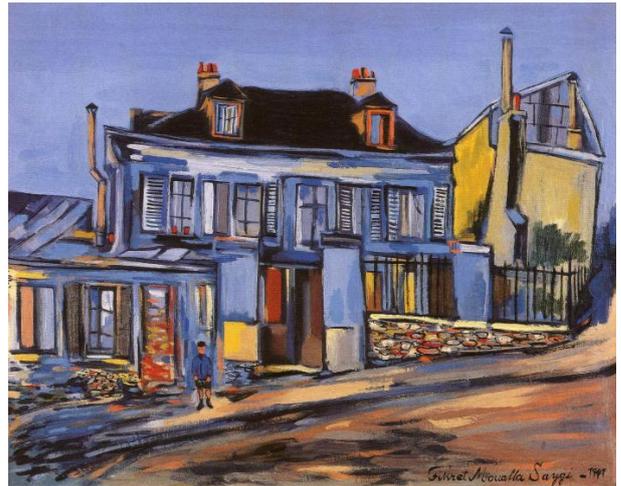


Toulouse-Lautrec seen by Fikret Mualla

VINCENT VAN GOGH (1853-1890)



A house



Montmartre



Sunflowers



Bunch of flowers

The theme of the house, the distorted composition, the subdued colours echo each other. Fikret Mualla's house is serene. Life is present : simple, not tormented, humble without pathos. Van Gogh's landscape is much more tortured. And in both painters, the voluptuous curved lines of the flowers shine out with beauty and freshness.

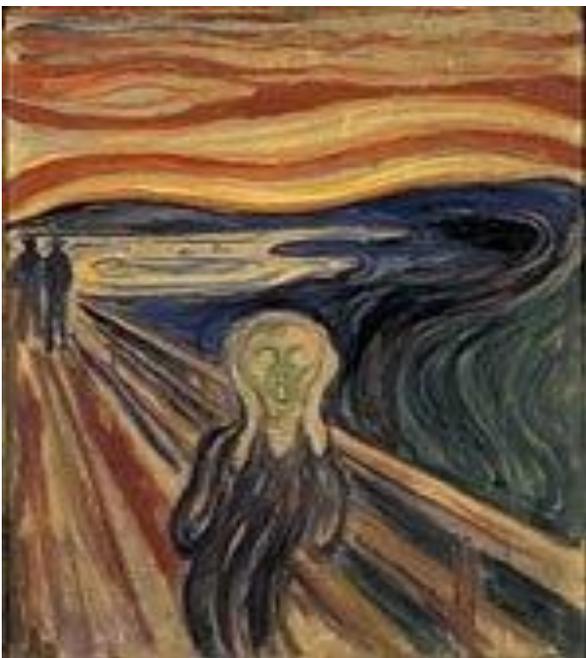
GERMAN EXPRESSIONISM

Expressionism starts at the end of the 19th century in Germany. It is the projection of a subjectivity which aims at distorting reality to inspire the spectator with an emotional reaction. Lines are sharp, colours harsh, subjects often pessimistic and not very “aesthetic”. After the advent of photography, paintings become more and more subjective. The movement refers to artists like Grünewald, El Greco, Toulouse-Lautrec, Van Gogh.

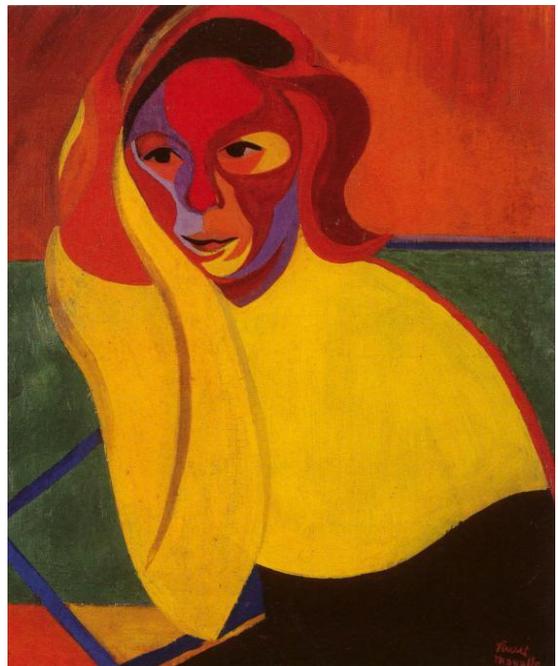
There were several German artistic movements including :

- “Die Brücke” (1905) with Ernst Kirchner, Emil Nolde. Their inspirer was Edvard Munch (Norwegian).
- “Der blaue Reiter” (1913, in Berlin) with Wassily Kandinsky and his theory of colour as a means of expression.
- “Bauhaus” (1919) started in Weimar by Gropius.
- “Expressionist realism” (1919) with Otto Dix, George Grosz, Max Beckmann, Emil Nolde.

“Die Brücke” Movement



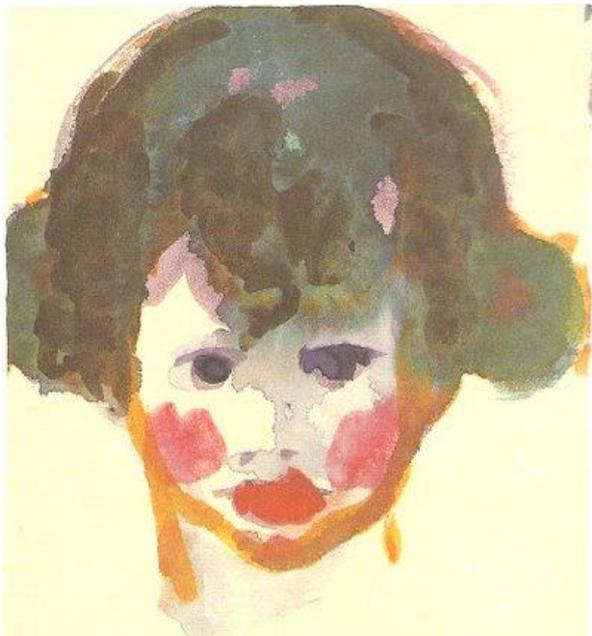
The scream



The thinker

Like movements and twisting features appear on the two paintings stressed by the composition and the flat tints' pure colours. But in Fikret Mualla the colours are brighter, the figure is pensive, perhaps sad, but does not generate Edvard Munch's anguish. Munch's distorted horizon is agonizing; Mualla's very “horizontal” one is soothing.

EMIL NOLDE (1867-1956)



Child's head



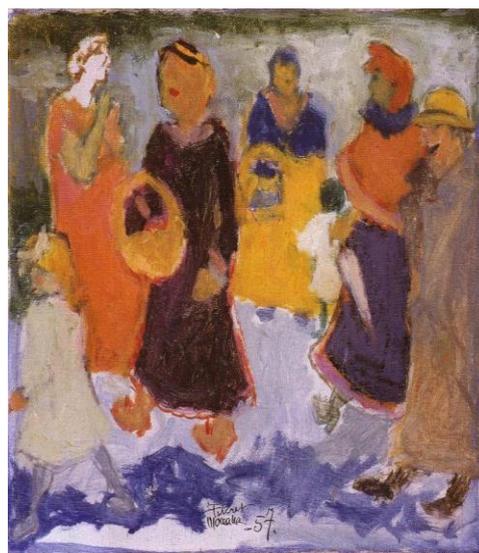
Young girl with a beret

So many similarities between these two youngsters' heads! The painters look at them with so much tenderness. With Nolde and Mualla, these not excessively lenient observers, this softness is precious.

GEORGE GROSZ (1893-1959)



People



Five figures and two children

Street scenes, life scenes: the figures continue on their way indifferent to those who are watching them. Under the apparent neutrality of the painters, the acknowledgment is uncompromising. Throughout Mualla's work this bitter-sweet look will be persistent. Often less cruel, more humorous than his German contemporaries, it will remain none the less very incisive.

ERNST LUDWIG KIRCHNER (1880-1938)



Gewecke in an armchair



The hospital



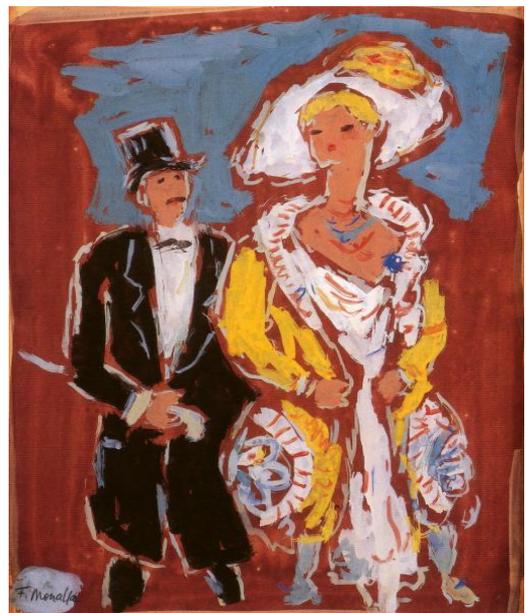
Street in Dresden



The Stroll



Dodo and her brother



The couple

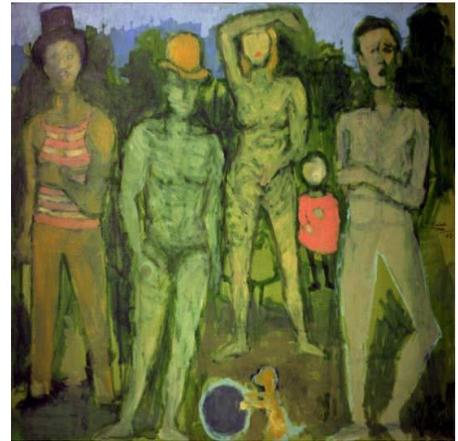
Kirchner-Mualla, the two painters take a sharp look at their characters; a grimace, a fixed stare allows them to figure out the characters' social environment. However Fikret Mualla's "oriental" look is more easy-going and more optimistic.

PICASSO (1881-1973)

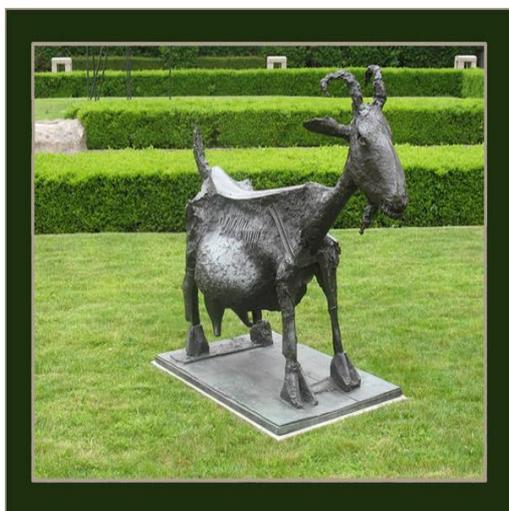
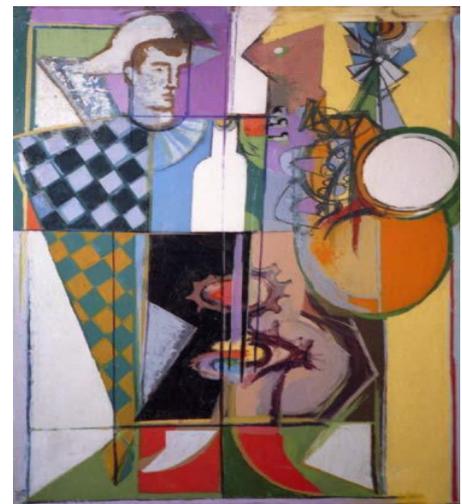
"I don't work according to nature, but in front and together with it." (Picasso)



The travelling acrobats



Harlequin



The goat





Woman

In these works references, conventions are transcended to result in stroke stylization and simplification. Around a same theme, travelling acrobats, Harlequin, woman body, the two painters have studied and imagined variations.

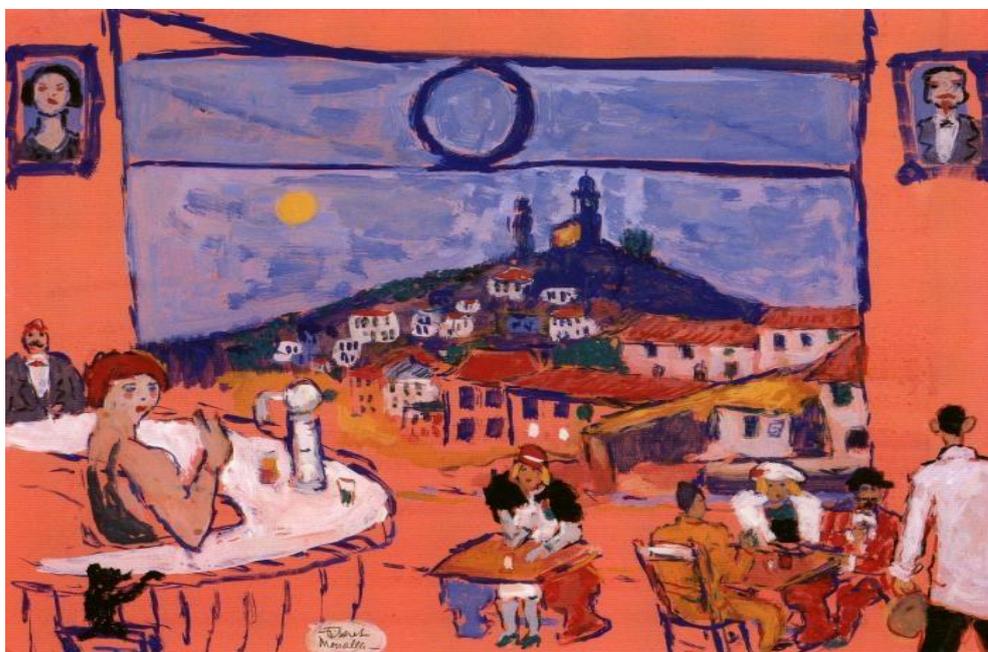
The similarities of Fikret Mualla's works with Picasso's underline their differences. Besides, homage, recognition, the latter bought one of the Turkish painter's paintings.

Influences/confluences

The more or less marked influences of great names of painting show through in Fikret Mualla's works. Nevertheless he cannot be pigeonholed for he was able to use these contributions while remaining himself and creating his universe of "confluences". The comparison game ended, two elements stand out and give its coherence to Fikret Mualla's work : his precise, incisive "master-stroke" and his work on colours overflowing with life, gusto, sensuality.

With a confident stroke, almost caricatural, Fikret Mualla presents his characters, his themes to us. Their faces are expressive. Their daily lives, their activities, the instant they are living come up to us, share a moment with us, without being insipid. His compositions are classic, always well structured with convergence lines and verticals. The subjects are placed along diagonals and then... fantasy belongs to the artist! Equilibrium and harmony are present from the smallest drawing to the most elaborate oil paintings.

His colour technique is original and primary. The broad flat tints, the bright colours, the camaïeux² create a somewhat unreal atmosphere in which the characters move around. In a few paintings this technique gives the feeling that one colour "floods" the whole surface like in the "Reillanne village Bar".



This technique of backgrounds worked in flat tints with powerful colours will be classic from the 1960s with the discovery of acrylic painting. As for Fikret Mualla, he was partial to gouache for "economical" reasons. Indeed, always short of money, he needed to sell his paintings rapidly. Gouache drying up more quickly and being less expensive than oil painting, he liked it better.

Fikret Mualla's works have the boldness of a strong personality who can allow himself

2 Camaïeu: painting technique by which an image is done in shades or tints of a single colour or in several hues irrespective of what is portrayed.

everything because his technique is solid, his gift for drawing unfaltering. Totally free and uninhibited, Fikret Mualla gives us his vision of the world. A world both quite real and completely imaginary in his presentations. He is always slightly given to mockery, expecting our connivance. His very anguish is soft and sensual, eased by "keyif," this oriental mood of enjoyment where time is suspended!



Let him have the last word: "I belong to no school".

For further information on Fikret Mualla's work

Website: www.moualla.org/ www.mualla.org

Books:

- 1/ Berk Nurullah - Kolođlu Orhan, "Fikret Mualla Hayatı" (sayfa 78-80). *Sanatı. Eserleri.* Milliyet Yayınları Sanat Kitapları Dizisi: 3, Ekim 1971.
- 2/ Dino Abidin - Güler Ara; *Gören Göz için Fikret Muallâ*, Cem Yayınevi, İstanbul 1980.
- 3/ *Fikret Moualla*, Edition La Petite Galerie, Paris, 2003