

Jean Hugo

Paris, 1894 - Lunel, 1984

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Great-grandson of Victor Hugo (grandson of Charles and son of Georges Hugo), Jean Hugo was an important figure of the intellectual and artistic period between the two World Wars. His oeuvre comprises oil paintings and gouaches (often of small dimensions), book illustrations, theatre sets, sketches for stained-glass windows and ceramics.

Brought up in an abundant artistic milieu, Jean Hugo was strongly attracted to drawing and painting from a very early age. Self-taught, he never sought to follow any particular teaching. He was also an avid reader and, in the years leading up to the First World War, he composed essays and poetry. His literary friendships, particularly with Jean Cocteau, led him to take part in a number of theatrical and ballet productions. His contemporaries thus saw him above all as a set designer for the entertainment world (fig.1).

Room Hugo

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The Post-war Years :
Between Figuration
and Abstraction

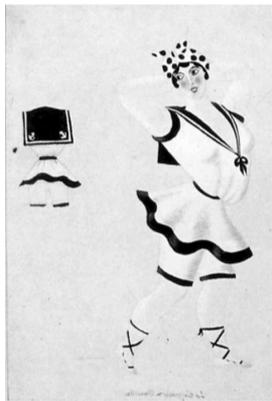


fig.1- Jean Hugo
*Three Costume Studies for
"The Wedding on the Eiffel Tower",
1921*
Private collection

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Jean Hugo's painting remains in a class of its own in the artistic panorama of the first half of the twentieth century. While it often calls to mind certain avant-gardist currents such as magical realism or metaphysical painting, it champions a real sense of originality. Alongside cheerful and naïve scenes or theatrical projects (*The Wedding on the Eiffel Tower*), he produced a series of canvasses in strange, solemn tonalities in the early 1930s (*Solitude*, 1933). The artist demonstrated an interest in forest scenes (*The Hermit of Meudon*, 1933) and religious themes (*The Last Supper*, 1933), as may be seen in the *Well**. *The Impostor** (1931) and the *Bay of the Dead** (1932) date to the same period. Jean Hugo did not paint on the motif, but from the many sketchbooks that never left his side : "Inspiration comes naturally but you have to make regular appointments", as he would often say.

The *Impostor** (1931) concludes Jean Hugo's initial artistic period, which coincided with his moving in 1929 to the family home of Mas de Fourques. This imposing work brings together in a masterful way those lessons that marked him most – that of the Italian primitives, of Henri "Le Douanier" Rousseau, of Poussin or of Picasso, models that served as constant sources of reference to him. The subject evokes the sense of malaise of the catechumen among the faithful, unable to receive communion at the Christmas Mass at the church of Saint-François de Montpellier. The setting is that of the countryside around Lunel with its extensive vineyards and austere *garrigue* scrubland. The tense, complex composition of this painting is a great success. There is nothing secondary in the elements, lines or motifs, nuances of colour, figures or objects. Each item is a pretext for a pictorial idea. Bathed in an ambiance of bright light, the delicate volumes stand out from the background. The figures are set in the space by superimposed connections in the Florentine style.

The *Bay of the Dead** (1932) is characteristic of works painted between 1930 and 1933. The artist brings together a clever schematization of forms, tiny figures, a miniaturist, graphic hatching of the contours and the vivid shades of the tempera, as a testimony to his admiration for the Italian Primitives and the illuminators of the Middle Ages. In the mid 1930s he began to work in the medium of oils for his great compositions, but continued to paint a tempera.

The *Eater in a Striped Sweater (Self-portrait)** (1940) shows the artist in his country house, the Mas de Fourques, near Lunel. He moved there in 1929 after the death of his grandmother (Madame Ménard Dorian). The striped motif contrasts with the sharpness of the contours of the table, the fireplace and the wall. In his everyday surroundings, the figure appears swathed in mystery and insouciance. Even if Hugo only makes slight reference to De Chirico, this work is not without the sense of isolation and mystery characteristic of the output of the Italian artist.

The *Quarries of Beaulieu** (1953) is an oil sketch in the Sommières region. Far removed from his previous miniaturist studies, Jean Hugo's perception of the site is portrayed here using geometrical forms and arbitrary colours.

In 1974 Hugo put together a book of hours - the *Petit Office de Notre-Dame* - and started work on a preliminary version of his memoirs, which was published in 1976. A definitive edition came out in 1983, less than a year before his death - *Le Regard de la mémoire (The Look of Memory)*.

Each of Jean Hugo's works testifies to his stance of not becoming involved in the prominent trends or theories in vogue. He never felt the need to take part in the artistic debates of his time - for which he paid the price as he never gained the recognition of the general public.

"Jean Hugo was quiet, good and generous. His life must have drifted along peaceably before him as he had no enemies. He bore the burden of such a heavy name with elegance. Like his father, Georges Hugo, he was a real gentleman, someone with great refinement of heart and mind, a nice friend, a man near whom one would have liked to live." (fig.2)

Maurice Sachs, *La Décade de l'illusion* (Paris, Gallimard, 1950 p.14-16. Our translation)



fig.2- Jean Hugo in his Studio at the Mas de Fourques, 1972
Frédéric- Jacques Temple Collection