

# Stage Sets by Marie-Josée Ouellet

By Myriam Gagnon

Over the last two years since she took up painting full time, Marie-Josée Ouellet's paintings have centered around one theme : café-bistro life, in Vienna, Paris, Greece, New York... The result ? Pictures full of charm and interwoven with dreams.

Marie-Josée Ouellet combines the naïve with the cartoon colorist and the stage producer. Each of her paintings tells a short imaginary story. Her cafes are, as in real life, places where people pass through, places where anything is possible and where the improbable can happen just as easily, meeting places, waiting places. They are her stage, which she fills with characters and, to our surprise, we suddenly discover in the features of a customer or waiter the familiar traits of Robert Charlebois, Woody Allen or Agatha Christie's Miss Marple, a well-known Japanese film producer or Marilyn Monroe. " I paint what I love most : The European life-style and the cinema. "

Her style evokes famous Parisian shop window fronts of André Renoux which were sold mainly in the form of posters and postcards from Montmartre to the île Saint-Louis. However, unlike the French painter, Marie-Josée Ouellet varies her style according to the subject : Almost graphic when she is depicting the stark simplicity of a taverna overlooking the Aegean Sea, neo-impressionist when she is illustrating the smoky atmosphere of a literary café, inspired by the baroque or decidedly expressionist in the chiaroscuro tradition reminiscent of Toulouse-Lautrec.

However much the scenes described by Marie-Josée draw on the imagination, they reveal a keen sense of observation : " For a long time, my specialty was trompe-l'œil drawing. I used to be so good at copying that my teachers said I would have made a good career as a counterfeiter ! On the other hand, I had no creative skills. Strangely enough though, the moment I set foot in Europe, my creativity exploded. "

These days, acrylics touched up with charcoal and Indian ink have replaced her lead pencils. Sometimes she applies paper element to the composition, giving it a slight hyperrealist touch tinged with humor. Details such as these abound in Marie-Josée's work and part of the pleasure in beholding it lies in discovering them all, one by one.