

2.

AFTER THE GREAT WAR, BETWEEN LISBON AND PARIS

The faces of his generation
and his world

Arrested by agents of the International and State Defense Police (the PIDE) at the Caxias prison, in 1948, due to "being part of a clandestine organization" (the juvenile branch of the Movement of Democratic Unit), and due to distributing anti-fascist propaganda, João Abel Manta came of age fulfilling, fully and voluntarily, a destiny somehow conditioned by the environment he had been born and in which he grew up: the one formed by the supporters of the First Republic (1910-1926), radically opposed to Salazar's New State, the "*revirahistas*" (decades later, the artist still described himself as a "Jacobin Republican"). Being the son of Abel Manta, one of the best national portraitists and a figure of reference in the Portuguese Modernism, and of Clementina Carneiro de Moura, equally a painter but also an activist next to the National Council of Portuguese Women, João Abel, from an early age, hung out with his parents' artist friends, understanding that the life he wished for or aspired to have depended, a lot of times, on a minimal compromise with something unbearable: this way, the young man would leave the Pedro Nunes High School ("terribly reactionary and fascist", as he described it later) "and in the afternoon I would have contact with Jewish kids who were running from Hitler" or "I would meet my dad at Brasileira", and "the good people were people that attended Brasileira: Almada, Viana".

The major part of the drawings on display in this section belong to an immediate subsequent phase to his incarcer-

ation in 1948, at the time of a journey and accommodation in Paris: they show a young portraitist, an architect in training, without any aspiration to become a painter (his dad's fame, and the latter's insistence on him not to study Painting at the Fine Arts, but instead something that would guarantee him a more stable job, were dissuasive) and only dedicated to drawing, but with a rather comfortable technique, halfway between Realism (Ernesto de Sousa or Villaret) and the deconstruction modes of that realism that could bring him closer to a "caricature" in Cubist shades (Mário Dionísio), with surprising color notes which add an expressionist *pathos* (Arpad Szenes' hair). Not only friends, acquaintances or Portuguese artists admired by him can be seen here: Boris Vian would have certainly been spotted



▲ Maria Helena Vieira da Silva



▲ **Le Corbusier**



▲ **Leslie Howard**



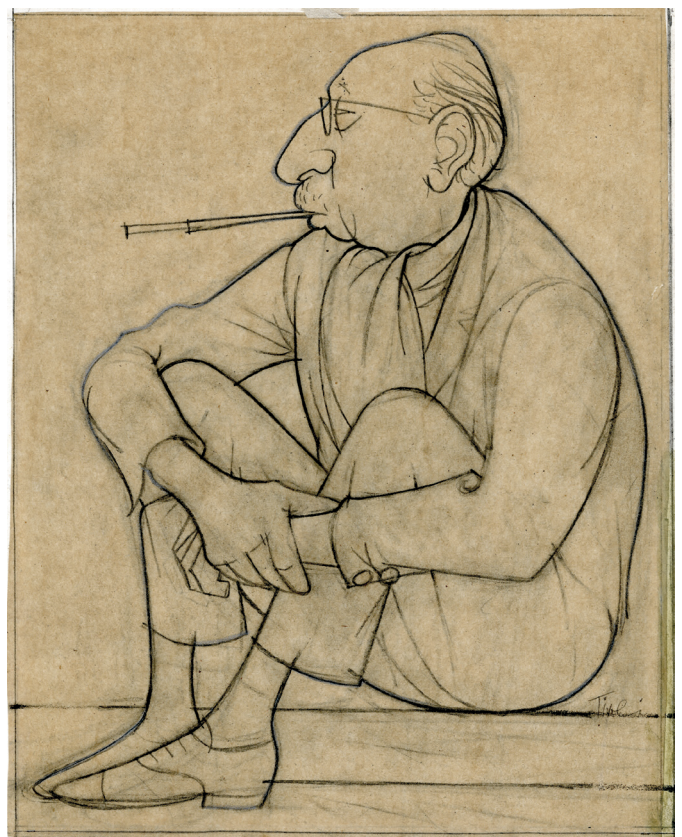
▲ **Arpad Szenes**

in Parisian coffees, and Leslie Howard, the famous English actor of *Gone with the wind* (1939), was in the memory of João Abel Manta due to having seen him in 1943 in a conference on *Hamlet* at the National Theatre D. Maria II, hours before his plane back to the UK was to be shot by a German fighter jet.

Having been made only for self-recreation and practice of the stare and the hand, there is however next to these ones a drawing which belongs to a series of three made in 1954, upon a trip of Igor Stravinsky to Lisbon, by observing the composer rehearsing with the orchestra: of an unsurpassed simplicity, vivacity and linear tension, they already belong to a phase in which the talented designer would start to see his published work on newspaper and books, in this case, the *Gazeta Musical e de Todas as Artes*.

Welcoming the visitor, we chose to place the surprising *Retrato de família* of 1956, the work of a draughtsman with already a national and international exhibition record (nationally, the General Exposition of Visual Arts at the NSFA; internationally, the Biennial of São Paulo in 1953 and the Bianco e Nero in Lugano in 1954), a rare self-portrait surrounded by the portraits of his closest family (his parents, his wife and his daughter), a drawing that fully shows the artist stylistic maturity even before his 30th

anniversary and an amazing technical proficiency, allied to a near-obsession with Belle Époque (the figures seem to pose for a photography around the end of the 19th century or beginning of the 20th), common to other drawings from this period, and to a pleasure in sprinkling the drawings with sense defying details, remotely uncomfortable or disturbing.



Igor Stravinsky ►