

**CARLOS LLERENA
AGUIRRE**

Everglades, 2012
Oil on canvas, 44 x 46 in



COURTESY, COCONUT GROVE ARTS FESTIVAL, GALLERY, COCONUT GROVE, FLORIDA

other *New Yorker* writers, Bemelmans blanched when confronted with a galley with Ross's "What meant?" and "What the hell meant?" scribbled all over the margins. Once, when Bemelmans's mother, now living in New York, picked up one of those marked-up manuscripts, she burst into tears. They reminded her of the failing papers Ludwig used to bring home from school during the *Lausub* days in Regensburg. According to William Maxwell, one of Bemelmans's editors at the *New Yorker*, "He needed immense amounts of editing, his tenses wouldn't agree, the sentences were dreadfully ungrammatical." Bemelmans admitted that his own personal purgatory would be a place where he had to edit his own writing. But editors like Maxwell were happy to work with him on his *New Yorker* stories. "With Bemelmans, the hard work was a pleasure, his work was so full of life, so full of humor," Maxwell recalled.

Bemelmans drawings also found favor at the *New Yorker*. Between 1942 and 1962 he produced more than thirty covers, and the doodles that were the offhand by-product of his incessant phone chats were often used as "spots" in the magazine.

The world of Bemelmans was a universe unto itself, a fantastic world in which the voluptuous detail always counted more than the reason for that detail. Bemelmans was first and foremost a painter and his work, both drawn and written, was done with flawless visual strokes that froze the rarest, the most savory and sensual detail. In his writing, Bemelmans would always follow advice once given him in regards to his drawing, "avoid the regular-featured people, they are too simple: Your attention should concentrate on the faces with unique features." Bemelmans had by now established himself, one critic wrote, "as the pixie of American letters," a man whose gifts included "an absurd humor and a moonstruck quality very near to madness."

With something approaching clockwork precision, critics would describe Bemelmans's work as something along the lines of "a special gem of eccentric literature." Meant as high praise, the cumulative effect of this stereotyping would be to permanently place Bemelmans outside the mainstream of American literature.

In August 1943, Bemelmans rode west in the drawing-room splendor of the 20th Century Limited with the sweet taste of the first big money of his life. He had received more than ten thousand dollars from Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer for

his story *Yolanda and the Thief*. In the mid-forties MGM was the classiest studio in Hollywood, and the class of MGM was the Arthur Freed unit, which produced the top-drawer Metro musicals, including Judy Garland's iconic classics *The Wizard of Oz*, *The Harvey Girls*, and *Meet Me in St. Louis*.

Freed wanted *Yolanda* as a vehicle for Fred Astaire and his rising star, Lucille Bremer, then reputed to be Astaire's mistress. Astaire would play the part of a romantic con man. Naturally, there was to be much singing and even more dancing. When Bemelmans arrived at MGM, he was marched right past the "the battleship gray linoleum floors" of the \$1,000-a-week writers and taken to the "deeply carpeted corridors off of which were the suites of the \$3,000-a-week writers."

Louis B. Mayer himself greeted Bemelmans and urged him to take his time before he got down to serious work. "We have all the time and the money in the world ..." Bemelmans took the advice and proceeded to decorate the walls in his office with what he admitted was a confusion of grotesque animals, quarreling waiters, and bibulous boulevardiers. This desecration of Mayer's pristine intellectual sweatshop brought Bemelmans to the immediate attention of studio heads, who didn't quite know what to make of the offbeat, garrulous Austrian. Bemelmans quickly became the talk of MGM. To work on *Yolanda*, Bemelmans was paired with screenwriter Irving Brecher, a man responsible for several Marx Brothers movies as well as many of the Freed musical extravaganzas. Brecher hated *Yolanda* and thought, correctly as it turned out, that Bremer could not possibly carry off the role. But he and Bemelmans hit it off, and rather than work on a doomed script, Brecher introduced Bemelmans to the great eating and drinking establishments in and around Los Angeles.

During their extended chats, Bemelmans did manage to break out his brushes and paint storyboards of *Yolanda and the Thief* ... all over the walls of Brecher's office. The paintings went all the way around the office and ended with a representation of a timely and honorable exit from the silken bondage of MGM. Brecher later allowed that "the only thing I hated about leaving Metro was having to leave that office."

Script ultimately was produced, but it took over a year for *Yolanda and the Thief* to begin shooting. In the meantime Bemelmans worked on another film called *Weekend at*