CARLOS LLERENA AGUIRRE

Musas, 2014
Oil on canvas, 48 x 54 in

COURTESY COCONUT GROVE ARTS FESTIVAL GALLERY, COCONUT GROVE FLORIDA

RICHARD RAPAPORT

Ludwig Bemelmans, The Professor of Joy

The creative life of the writer of the *Madeline* books for children

"In an old house in Paris that was covered with vines
lived twelve little girls in two straight lines. . . ."

—Madeline,
Ludwig Bemelmans (1939)

In June 1954 Ludwig Bemelmans received the Caldecott Award for the best illustrated children's book of the year. *Madeline's Rescue* was the third in the charmingly rendered and deceptively simple series about a plucky French orphan, her eleven mates, and their wise mistress, Miss Clavel. Madeline had been enchanting children and their parents since 1939.

Fourteen years later, Bemelmans's reputation was at its zenith. His adult stories and travelogues were in demand at the silk stocking magazines, notably, the *New Yorker, Holiday*, and *Town & Country*. He had published nearly two dozen books and his work was solicited avidly by Viking Press, Simon & Schuster, and other publishing houses in America and abroad. "Bemmie," as he was called, was a favorite with juries at the Book of the Month Club and the Literary Guild.

Bemelmans's watercolors, drawings, and *New Yorker* covers warranted serious attention by art critics, galleries, and collectors in Europe and the United States and a Bemelmans show would make both the *New York Times* and *Le Matin*.

At age fifty-three, Bemelmans inhabited the phrase *bon vivant*. His forays to the Pavilion, Lüchow's, or the 21 in New York, Maxim's or La Méditeranée in Paris, were the stuff of gourmand legend. He had, and conveyed in his writing, an easy and complete mastery of great vintages and savory viands. He could order beautifully in French, German, or English.

Bemelmans's conversations, like his writing, could be a mad, pyrotechnic performance. He would, by turn, be elegant, colorful, ironic, pointed, or profane: his wide-ranging experiences, rendered even a little broader for a particular audience. In New York in 1953, there was no one like Bemelmans, not the least because he was that rarest of rara avis: a funny German. But the Bemelmans wit had been spread a little too thick at a lunch in late June 1953, when he met with two *Time* magazine staffers to discuss his recent Caldecott Award.

During the meal at the three-star San Marino, Bemelmans revealed a sinister subplot in *Madeline's Rescue*. Miss Clavel's school, so Bemelmans suggested, was actually a brothel and Madeline and her mates prostitutes. This, needless to say, had perked up the *Time* magazine reporter who dutifully noted Bemelmans's suggestion that "It is all

very naughty. Madeline goes out to look for Genevieve, another girl, whom I made a dog in the book. Genevieve has become pregnant and the management of the establishment turns her out into the street. Genevieve cannot be found," Bemelmans told them, burrowing deeply into his wry imagination, "but one night she returns, she has her baby, which in the book is twelve puppies. Everyone rejoices and the girls all live happily together as before."

All of which appeared in a *Time* story linking Madeline's naughtiness with the recently awarded Caldecott given, *Time* noted, with sheer satisfaction, by the "unsuspecting" American Library Association.

Bemelmans subsequently announced, via his friend, Walter Winchell, the iconic *New York Daily Mirror* columnist, that he was prepared to sue *Time* for several million dollars. He even offered to furnish *Time* with a retraction, which, absent anything suitable, he would let them use. Not surprisingly, *Time* politely declined. Bemelmans's editors at Viking were finally forced to admit that it probably was "a lunch-table joke that misfired." But there was much head shaking over the fact that Bemelmans had slandered Madeline, the beloved creation not only that defined illustrated children's books, but whose sales had cushioned his continually overdrawn Dom Pérignon existence.

L'affaire Madeline ended in a flurry of letters to the editors at the Viking Press and *Time* magazine. The overwhelming majority of them absolved Bemelmans and instead blamed *Time* for daring to bring into question the bona fides of the man who, when all was said and done, produced Madeline.

Why had Bemelmans undertaken to undermine his own creation?

Those who knew him best had little trouble recognizing the real Ludwig Bemelmans in the *Time* dustup. He was a spinner of stories, and his performance had simply been his wicked wit alcohol enhanced. But there was more to it. There were those who believed that the author was beginning to resent the "twelve little girls in two straight lines" who were casting a shadow over the more serious works in the Bemelmans folio.

Perhaps Bemelmans was staring posterity in the face and was possessed of an inkling that later, when he was remembered at all, it would be for Madeline, not the three decades of stylish, often profound writing and wildly original drawings that made him among the most interesting and original artists of his time.

And perhaps it was because Bemelmans realized that even if he were to complete the *Sisley Romance*, the as-yet-unwritten "masterpiece" he had been promising his editors for years, history would likely mistake his "lighter-than-air" imagination as merely "lightweight."

That same year, Viking published Bemelmans's *Father, Dear Father*, a smart, quixotic travelogue, which again illustrated that Bemelmans was as at home in Paris, Rome, Capri, and Vienna as he was in Gramercy Park. One critic suggested that Bemelmans deserved the title of "one of our most treasured world citizens."

In 1953, however, in an America shivering in the doomsday Manichean arctic of the Cold War, the internationalist accolade simply cut against the cultural grain. People and products with a foreign accent were suspect; it was a time for Marlon Brando, Milton Berle, Jack Kerouac, Dwight Eisenhower, and Davy Crockett. Bemelmans's adopted country was moving away from the sardonic, elegant, continental cultural syntax of the previous two decades—leaving behind the time of Cary Grant, William Powell, Charlie Chaplin, Fred Astaire, Alexander Woolcott, Dorothy Parker, and the most cosmopolite of cosmopolitans, Bemelmans.

* * *

Bemelmans came by his internationalism honestly.

Born in 1898, the fifty-ninth year of the reign of Emperor Franz Joseph, he spent his childhood in the Alpine resort of Gmunden, where European royalty and the haute bourgeoisie waltzed away the final golden years of imperial Austria-Hungary.

Bemelmans's father was a Belgian artist whose family owned several luxury hotels in the Tyrol region of Austria. His mother came from a prominent Bavarian family, owners of a successful brewery in Regensburg. Throughout his life, Bemelmans would return to his beloved Tyrol and a number of his books and movies would be set there.

It was not surprising that German education under the Hohenzollern Prussian-ruled Second Reich did not agree with the free-spirited boy who would rather daydream and draw pictures than pay attention to the uniformed *Schulmeister*. Bemelmans's inability to accept this kind of discipline led to failure at a number of increasingly strict schools, and in disgrace, the *Lausbub*, or "lousy boy," was given the choice of attending German reform school or going to America. One kindly uncle suggested that in the freer air of the new world, a *Lausbub* had an excellent chance of becoming a millionaire.

* * *

Bemelmans's arrival in America was impeccably timed. He reached New York shortly before the outbreak of the 1914–1918 World War, which would have surely sucked the young man into very different circumstances as a foot soldier for Kaiser Wilhelm. Bemelmans's knowledge of America came largely from books like James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*. He left for New York toting a set of pistols under the assumption that he would soon be fighting off hostile natives.

More realistically, Bemelmans was armed with letters of recommendation from his hotel-owner uncle to friends who managed various of New York's finer hotels. Bemelmans was put to work as a busboy in the Hotel Astor. His employment ended abruptly when the homesick boy was found hiding behind a pillar in the hotel restaurant penning requests for the orchestra to play Strauss waltzes. He pulled out another of his uncle's introductions and went to work at the Hotel McAlpin and then, after breaking too many dishes, to the Ritz.

Some of Bemelmans's most acute and charming writing deals with backstage life at the Ritz, which he would transmogrify into his fictional Hotel Splendide and later the Cocofinger Palace. Working his way from busboy to assistant waiter to headwaiter he learned how "every waiter, like every prisoner, has a dream." His own was to polish his already evident talent as a painter. On slow days in the dining rooms at the Ritz, Bemelmans would unsheathe his pad and draw wicked caricatures of the rich, famous, and—often—corpulent guests of New York's greatest hotel.

Both Bemelmans's art and his trade were interrupted by America's April 1917 entry into the World War where at one point he volunteered for duty in a ward for the dangerously insane and found himself measuring the frighteningly small difference between guard and guarded. Later he would write that his life had been permanently colored by his assignment as a medic in the violent wards. "I learned there to block myself against things," he said about the experience, "to impose a rigid discipline on my own mind and emotion."

Bemelmans managed to survive his tour of duty, and returned to New York intent on booking passage to Munich to study art. But he was waylaid by a friend, a former headwaiter at the Ritz, fictionalized in the *Hotel Splendide* stories as Mr. Zigzag, who convinced him that there was a fortune to be made managing the fabulous catered affairs held in the hotel. Thus Bemelmans became "Monsieur Louis," the assistant catering manager. Through the 1920s Bemelmans lived at the Ritz, overseeing state dinners, coming out parties, and the highest of high society weddings.

Bemelmans also continued to draw and take notes about the characters who would later inhabit Bemelmans's storybook world; characters like the waiter with the dangerous compulsion to fondle women in crowded banquet rooms and who prevented discovery by relying on an acute sensitivity in the backs of his hands.

The Ritz was a magnet for the rich and powerful during the twenties. Business was good and stock market tips given by grateful, well-connected fathers of the bride gave Bemelmans the wherewithal to enjoy the life of a young scion.

He had the run of the Ritz, drove a Hispano-Suiza, and was given, he recalled, "two bottles of champagne a day, the run of the ice box, and a valet to look after my clothes."

But it was also the first, of many, periods during which Bemelmans questioned the worth of life in America, a land, one of his characters suggested, "where the flowers have no perfume, where the birds lack song, and where the women offer no love."

During slow seasons at the Ritz, Bemelmans returned to his family homes in Regensburg and the Tyrol. During one such visit back home in the mid-twenties Bemelmans, now in his late twenties, convinced himself that his future lay in the Tyrol. He bought an old sawmill, moved in, and invited his mother to come from Regensburg. But even before she arrived, he had decided that the Tyrol was "a mediocre stage set" and packed for a return to New York.

Bemelmans had also decided that he did not want to end up like one of the bloated and snobbish characters he catered to at the Ritz. He wanted to be an artist. But as would happen so often in his life, Bemelmans's timing failed him. He left the Ritz just weeks before the Wall Street crash in October 1929. It was not an auspicious time

to be starting over. There was little work for a novice freelance artist. The money quickly ran out and Bemelmans was forced to move into the Queens apartment of his former valet. Days were spent over innumerable cups of coffee in freezing cafés, making sketches of unimpressed patrons. And nights, more and more, were spent in melancholy contemplation of suicide. The means was to be a green velvet rope, a souvenir from the Ritz.

Ultimately, the hopeful in Bemelmans's nature won out. He held on and was able to sell a half-dozen drawings to the *Saturday Evening Post*. Thus he launched his career as an artist at last. Sort of. Bemelmans rented a studio and proceeded to spend his time painting imaginary furniture, that he could not afford, on the walls, along with Tyrolean landscapes on the window shades.

* * *

It was to Bemelmans's whimsically decorated studio that, in 1933, May Massee descended. Massee, the Viking Press's children's book editor, had practically invented the genre of modern children's books, which had degenerated into little more than cartoon books before she began setting a higher standard of fine art illustrations and literate text.

Massee was charmed by Bemelmans's window shades and wondered if the artist might be interested in attempting a children's book along the same lines.

He would, and he set to work on *Hansi*, the adventures of a young boy in the "High World of the Austrian Tyrol." *Hansi* was published in the autumn of 1934 to wide acclaim. But as Bemelmans would discover, acclaim did not always translate into sales.

Hansi did not make much money. Bemelmans was forced to turn to one of his established artist friends to show him the techniques that would enable him to commercialize his work. Eventually, one of his storyboards, "The Adventures of Prince Jell-O" got the attention of Young & Rubicam, the successful ad agency, started in 1923, that had put its then main client, Jell-O, on the map. Bemelmans was paid nine hundred dollars for "Prince Jell-O," a princely sum at the time. Bemelmans proceeded to charm several of Y&R's rising stars to back a restaurant. Like Bemelmans, it would be Bavarian, charming, and pricey.

Best of all, Bemelmans would decorate the walls with his drawings.

A partnership was formed and in 1934, the group purchased a townhouse on East 55TH Street. Bemelmans lured a chef from the Ritz, built a *Bierstube* in the basement, hired a zither player, and decorated the walls with gemütlich drawings of "lopsided pigeons, spare pants, spread fingers, open windows, and patches of flowers here and there," as he would later note.

The Hapsburg House, as it was called, was an immediate sensation, all the more so because of its outrageous prices, snooty waiters, and, of course, its witty, worldly owner. One of the benefits of the location was the apartment above the restaurant, into which Bemelmans moved with his new bride, Madeleine Freund, in late 1934. Because she didn't have to cook, Madeleine thought that living above the Hapsburg House was a wonderful arrangement. But the always-difficult Bemelmans soon had a series of disagreements with his partners who by early 1935, agreed to buy him out.

* * *

The money from the sale of the restaurant paid for a trip to Germany the following spring, where Bemelmans planned to work on a new children's book. But Germany had changed since his last visit in the 1920s. A newly Nazified Germany opened his eyes politically.

Bemelmans was repulsed by the spectacle of children's work brigades marching under beautiful German horse chestnut trees in springtime Regensburg. He complained in a letter, "to my unruly nature, that kind of precision is unbearable."

Bemelmans's loathing for the New Order in Germany finally erupted one spring day in Berchtesgaden. He had been drinking heavily in a tavern in the very shadow of Hitler's mountain retreat and took exception to a nearby group of storm troopers. He stuck a cigar butt on his upper lip, jumped up, and proceeded to do a Chaplin-inspired parody of the führer.

The following day, Bemelmans was arrested at his hotel and charged with making "derogatory remarks about the government." Escorted to an SS prison outside of Munich, Bemelmans was interrogated and held incommunicado for several days. Luckily by then, as an American citizen, he was freed through the intercession of the U.S. consul, fined one hundred marks, and invited to leave Germany. When they returned to the United States, the Bemelmanses were so poor that when a daughter, Barbara, was born, the family could not afford to pay for baby pictures. Bemelmans decided that since all babies looked more or less alike, he would "borrow" a photo to send to his mother in Germany. She wrote back that the child looked just like Ludwig.

A wealth of similar stories led Bemelmans's friends to plead with him to write down some of his reminiscences. He did, and in 1936, several of Bemelmans's stories were published in *Harper's Bazaar* and *Story* magazine. In early 1937, Viking Press bought his first adult work, a diary of his experiences during the World War called *My War with the United States*. Written in charmingly stilted English, the manuscript made fun of his earlier wrestlings with the language. And while Viking editors themselves wrestled with the manuscript, Bemelmans, by now bored and looking for new material, boarded a freighter bound for Ecuador where he could sketch and take notes for another children's book as well as gather material for a series of articles for *Vogue*.

Bemelmans's stories did not necessarily endear him to his subjects, some of whom thought he was having sport at their expense. Bemelmans tried to explain that "my friends can't see that I really love them when I make fun of them." By Bemelmans's standards, there was much love in his satiric take on the American army, *My War with the United States*, which was published just weeks before Bemelmans returned from Ecuador. With Germany once again making warlike noises, it seemed like a particularly apt time for this offbeat story about a German in the American Army.

Critics loved the book, several comparing Bemelmans to Henry Fielding and Mark Twain. When his boat docked in New York, Bemelmans gave a dockside interview in the best Mark Twain tradition, announcing to reporters that he planned to write a "new best seller" called *A Handy Guide to Dilettante Archeology and Ethnological Exploration*.

Back in New York, Bemelmans was becoming one of the fresh faces of 1937. He was hired to paint murals on walls of the renowned, for example, the studio of the great violinist Jascha Heifetz. Bemelmans supervised the scenery, costumes, and animals for the staging of his hit biblically based Broadway play, *Noah*. He even tried acting. Fortunately, Bemelmans did not have to depend on his short-lived stage career. A collection of stories called *Life Class* was published by Viking in late 1938. *Life Class* chronologically bracketed *My War with the United States* and covered both Bemelmans's early life and the Ritz days. It was in *Life Class* that Bemelmans introduced the Hotel Splendide to the world. *Life Class* was hailed as superior to anything Bemelmans had done before and acclaimed as "the work of an original mind, of a humorist who knows that there are other values than humor."

The late thirties and early forties were exciting times for Bemelmans. Following *Life Class* came another children's book entitled *Castle Number Nine*. His stories now papered the slick magazines, and in 1939 he published another collection titled *Small Beer*. Following that, *Madeline*—named for Bemelmans's wife, although she spelled it Madeleine—appeared in September, just as Hitler invaded Poland. It was a huge success, a rare and happy gift to a world that had plunged again into global war.

The inspiration for *Madeline* had come in the summer of 1938 during a stay on the Île d'Yeu. Located off the coast of Brittany, the Île d'Yeu was France's Martha's Vineyard and had been introduced to Bemelmans by his friend the Count of Polignac of Monaco.

Returning from town on a bicycle, Bemelmans had been run off the road by the island's only auto. Hospitalized next to a young girl with an appendicitis, he wrote that "I remembered the stories my mother had told me of life in the convent school … and the little girl, the hospital, the room, the crank on the bed, the nurse, the old doctor, who looked like French Prime Minister Leon Blum, all fell into place."

* * *

As Bemelmans's renown spread, he joined New York's wittiest writers and artists in a group that could give Dorothy Parker's Algonquin "Vicious Circle" a run for its cerebral musings. The coterie included future film and magazine executives Collier Young and Ted Patrick, both still at Young & Rubicam, writer Charlie MacArthur, his wife Helen Hayes, actor Hume Cronyn and his wife Jessica Tandy, Jack Houseman, and Orson Welles.

Bemelmans's *New Yorker* period began in late 1937 when he began sending dispatches back from Ecuador. Along with his South American tales, more than a dozen stories based on Bemelmans's hotel days appeared in the *New Yorker* between 1939 and 1941. Not that dealing with editor Harold Ross was remotely easy for Bemelmans. Like

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 mean?" and "What the hell mean?" 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 *Lausbub* 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."

A 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*

the Waldorf. Hungry for story material, Bemelmans began recording his comings and goings in Hollywood. As always, he took copious notes on matchbooks and tablecloths, asking waiters for notepads or commanding his wife to "take that down, it's pure gold."

Bemelmans's first novel, *Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep*, came out in early 1944. It was Bemelmans's most mature work to date, a sui generis tale that Bemelmans would describe to a thoroughly befuddled Mayer as being about "an eighty-year-old Ecuadoran general who has epileptic fits every thirty days" and "an English governess seventy-five years old who carries her coffin with her wherever she goes."

* * *

Bemelmans soon became one of Hollywood's most sought-after guests and escorts. He was a welcome presence at producer Sam Spiegel's home—the closest thing to a salon in wartime Hollywood. He squired Olivia de Havilland and Rita Hayworth and dined at Romanoff's or Chasen's, where he would sometimes whip off a quick sketch and offer it in lieu of payment for the meal. Because he was Bemelmans, the restaurants usually accepted.

Feeling as if he had clinched his entrée into high society Los Angeles, Bemelmans rented a beach house near Malibu and immediately painted a backdrop of a full symphony orchestra in the living room. He began holding nightly soirees and inviting the fellow European intelligentsia who had escaped the Nazi dragnet and found their way to Hollywood. These included writers Franz Werfel, Kurt Weill, and Thomas Mann.

Sir Charles and Lady Mendl were two of a number of dispossessed Brits with the wherewithal to wait out the war in style in Beverly Hills. Lady Mendl, the former Elsie de Wolfe, was a stage actress who had gone on to virtually invent the profession of interior designer before becoming one of prewar Paris's leading hostesses. While the Mendls awaited the liberation of their Villa Trianon in Versailles, they slummed in "After All," a mansion that Lady Mendl had turned into one of the great Southern California showplaces, where she collected the finest in "foiniture," as the Brooklyn-born Lady Mendl pronounced it, paintings, and people.

Soon after he arrived in Hollywood, Bemelmans received a summons to cocktails with Lady Mendl. He was stunned to find in the tiny, ancient—in her late eighties—Elsie Mendl his metaphysical mate. "Stevie," as she decided the too-Teutonic "Ludwig" should instead be called, "I have second sight and instant recognition. We will be very good friends you and I, such good friends that when mother talks to you, it will be as if she talked to herself." Bemelmans was given a bedroom at "After All" and developed an almost filial relationship with the Mendls. Anita Loos, the actress and author of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, a friend of both, felt Bemelmans and Lady Mendl "got along so well because they were both such terrific snobs."

Yolanda and the Thief began shooting in mid-January 1945, directed by Vincente Minnelli. Bemelmans had prepared a number of sketches to guide Minnelli, and the picture, when it was completed, possessed a dreamy, childlike quality, looking, many thought, like a Bemelmans painting brought to life. Bemelmans loved the film, but *Yolanda* proved a box office dud. In the ensuing finger-pointing postmortem, Bemelmans tried to heed the lesson he later put into the mouth of a Hollywood scriptwriter in his 1947 novel, *Dirty Eddie*. It was that to beat a successful retreat from Hollywood, to have any chance of being invited back at some future date, it was critical to "anticipate the moment, to sense it and to leave before they throw you out."

In this, Bemelmans was not entirely successful. Always happy to bite the hand that fed him, Bemelmans poured his Hollywood experiences into the biting satire of *Dirty Eddie*. He transformed Mayer into a power-mad and not-so-bright studio mogul called Moses Fable, whose "thin veins on his massive cheeks were like the engraving on gilt edge securities." When Mayer was apprised of his *Dirty Eddie* simulacrum, he raged and issued one of his famous malaprop orders: "Never hire that bastard again, unless we absolutely need him."

* * *

Hollywood would have to get along without Bemelmans. He had years worth of projects lined up and had completed another novel, largely on MGM's dime. *The Blue Danube* was completed in late 1944 and it proved to be among Bemelmans's most lyrical and cohesive works. It also provided one of the clearest insights into why Germans had danced to the Nazis' malign tune.

Long before the war in Europe was over, Bemelmans was angling for a way to visit his former homeland. He believed that the Nazis had damaged Germany's inner life more totally than any physical destruction the Allies could have wrought. He wanted to see and record both kinds of damage. He also wanted to visit his family's properties that had languished in Nazi Austria for the duration.

In 1946, Bemelmans's friend Ted Patrick had taken over a sagging Philadelphia-based magazine called *Holiday*. Patrick, by now one of America's best and best-known magazine publishers was given the task of transforming Holiday from what was little more than an editorial travel poster into a publication capable of covering a world currently on anything but a holiday. One of Patrick's first *Holiday* assignments was to fly Bemelmans to Europe in July 1946. Bemelmans arrived in Paris and found the city "miraculously" intact: "the silver and golden roofs glowed, the majestic perspective of velvety black and gray streets, the horizon framed in old trees, the arches, fountains and the lampposts with their peculiar green light, all to welcome you back."

During his postwar European adventures, Bemelmans reached an acuteness of insight and reportorial precision that should have given final lie to his reputation as a writer of froth. In the ravaged landscape of Europe, Bemelmans's sardonic wit and nonpolemical intelligence enabled him to write about things that few postwar observers would see so clearly. In Paris, he found that the proprietors of luxury hotels and the best restaurants had enjoyed the most comfortable war. But it was in his own Bavaria and Austrian Tyrol that Bemelmans was able to mine the substrata of resentment and duplicity that conquered Austrians and Germans were largely able to conceal from their naïve and well-meaning occupiers.

Bemelmans took to dressing as an Austrian workingman and traveled around the country, noting how quickly the towering wrath of a railroad conductor had "collapsed" into abject groveling when Bemelmans's identity as an American was revealed. "The fuhrer you will remember, was not a German, but an Austrian," Bemelmans, the antipodal Austrian, noted. He wondered if Germans' willingness to abase themselves in front of their new masters was any different from the eagerness with which they had embraced their former overlords. And he questioned if a student's essay, in which the boy defended his membership in the Hitler Youth, did not bode better for a democratic Germany than all of the anti-Nazi claptrap that was being parroted for the benefit of the new masters.

"To me," Bemelmans wrote, his *Lausbub* past firmly in mind, "the German tragedy has come from the schoolroom, from heartless corporal punishment. … The school set the pattern for the treatment of the child at home. It instilled from youth fear of parent, of teacher, fear of the policeman and of anyone who wears a cap with insignia or a coat with brass buttons. The Nazis could accomplish what they did only with an absolutely obedient population. The benefit of that training still is ours. They offer very few police problems. They are happy to receive commands, and commands that they can (order) someone else to carry out are a delight to them." Bemelmans traveled to Dachau where the horror robbed him of his ability to draw—"my paints gave out," he said simply. But he also found former camp inmates who could still recall and cherish the few moments of decency they had encountered in humanity's most indecent chapter.

Bemelmans even found places where "the smallest flower of happiness grew," in the benign French occupation of the Tyrol and in the Parisian chef who told him "next year, monsieur … we will have white bread, we will have butter, we will have cream, we will cook again." And he found hope in the indomitable spirit of Lady Mendl, who, in 1947, at the age of ninety, had returned to her beloved Villa Trianon to begin the time-consuming task of repairing the damage of five years of occupation and neglect.

Notes and drawings in hand, Bemelmans returned to the United States in the fall of 1946. He remained in New York and moved his family into the Hotel Carlyle, where he had been given an apartment in exchange for painting the walls of a ground-floor bar with a "Madeline in New York" motif. Bemelmans returned to his nightly tours of the Manhattan bars, restaurants, and clubs that met his impeccable standards. He was a full-blown celebrity now and his entrance at the Waldorf rated a rendition of "In God's Mountain Green" by Emil Coleman's orchestra.

By the late forties Bemelmans was quarreling with his publisher, Viking, over money and advertising support for his books. "We have to know now if we are going on," Viking's senior editor, Marshall Best, wrote Bemelmans at the time. Best, who also handled James Joyce in America, wondered, Casablanca-like, "whether this is the end of a beautiful publishing friendship!" Bemelmans replied that

CARLOS LLERENA AGUIRRE

Goddesses, 2013
Oil on canvas, 40 x 46 in

COURTESY COCONUT GROVE ARTS FESTIVAL GALLERY, COCONUT GROVE FLORIDA

he was going to retreat to the Tyrol, "to write a book that I have always wanted to write." In words that either confirmed his ambivalence toward his existing works or were simply a writerly ploy, Bemelmens announced that this novel would be "otherwise than my other books, the hero for once is a good man."

Bemelmans had by now regained control of several of his family's hotels and spent the winter and spring of 1948 at his inn, the Gasthof Post, in the village of Lech am Arlberg. By late 1948, Bemelmans was back in the United States with a draft of *The Eye of God*, published in late 1949. The reviews for this transwar history of a small village in the Tyrolean Alps were generally good. Bemelmans was growing increasingly adept at weaving a number of his inimitable stories into a coherent whole.

The Eye of God was not a best seller; Bemelmans blamed it on the word "God" in the title and swore that if a movie were made—*The Third Man* producer Carroll Reed was interested—it would use the European title, *The Snow Mountain*. Despite the disappointing sales, Bemelmans was at least temporarily solvent. Not only were the family's Tyrolean hotels doing well, but his wife's father had bought the White Turkey Inn in Danbury, Connecticut, with Bemelmans as part-owner and host.

In 1949 there was more good news. *Life* magazine wanted an article by Bemelmans, and he was also summoned to Hollywood to do a screen test for the *The Asphalt Jungle*. At the same time, *Good Housekeeping* was paying him fifteen thousand dollars for a children's story and his 1945 novel, *Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep*, was being produced for Broadway with its opening set for early 1950. In preparation for the play, Bemelmans spent many evenings at his New York apartment with Hume Cronyn, who was scheduled to direct the play, and Fredric March, who would star along with his wife Florence Eldridge.

It was a typical Bemelmans collaboration; the men would drink, he would play Édith Piaf and Theresa Brewer records with little work being done. Fortunately, *Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep* had already been produced for a small theater in Los Angeles, and, with some enhancements, the new version of play actually did go into production. And what a production it was. March and Eldridge were two of the biggest box office draws on the American stage, and a huge sum was invested in the thirteen sets, which were so elaborate that they reminded one critic of the legendary production of *Ben Hur* that had included an onstage chariot race.

Bemelmans also pondered writing Lady Mendl's biography. His editors at Viking begged him to go ahead and do something with the forty-two notebooks he had kept during his years with Lady Mendl. But Viking would have to wait. Bemelmans had decided to make the break from Viking and accepted an advance from Little Brown. And he more or less had to. The Bemelmans lifestyle was increasing in scope—and in cost. Not only was he supporting the apartment in New York and his studio in Paris, but he had recently purchased a boat which he kept on Ischia, an island in the Gulf of Naples.

Bemelmans was by now spending less time in America—he told friends that life in the age of Eisenhower was as dull as a filtered cigarette. More and more now, he spent time with his royal and high-society friends on Mallorca, in Florence, Vienna, and of course in Paris. While he was in Paris, Bemelmans had befriended a clochard, one of the Parisian street people who live under the Seine bridges.

Bemelmans's clochard returned the favor by finding him a house for sale on the Île de la Cité near Notre-Dame. Bemelmans looked over the place—it had once been the abode of a mistress of King Francis I—and decided that it had the makings of a chic restaurant and bar. He then learned the hard way the ins and outs of Paris's permits process—Bemelmans spent more than twenty thousand dollars renovating 4 Rue de Colombe, which he named "La Colombe."

When *New York Herald Tribune* columnist Art Buchwald paid Bemelmans a visit at his new restaurant, the restaurateur explained the reasoning behind his undertaking, "Every man wants to live like a king, but you can't anymore unless you are in the inn-keeping business."

In early 1955, Bemelmans published *To the One I Love the Best*, his biography of Lady Mendl, and, with his restaurant up and running, he returned to the United States to begin work with Anita Loos and Charles MacArthur on a stage version of his tribute to Lady Mendl, starring Helen Hayes. In *To the One I Love the Best*, Bemelmans, perhaps for the first time, expressed intimations of his own mortality. "I am speaking," he wrote, "of the day or night after which a

photograph of me, and a bad one, will appear on the most somber page of the newspaper." Under it, he continued, would be "my name, and a resume of my career, which was mainly dedicated to the enjoyment of life. At least that is what it will say, for I have also acquired a reputation as a lover of life and a professor of happiness."

The professor was not happy. In May, 1956, Bemelmans's "blood brother" MacArthur succumbed. Bemelmans's own fear of death and sickness kept him from visiting the dying MacArthur, something Hayes was slow to forgive.

Bemelmans had not been feeling well himself and began seeing a New York Dr. Feel-Good who catered to the mortal rich with supposedly rejuvenating injections of sheep glands. He was rejuvenated to an even greater extent by a dancer at the Crazy Horse saloon in Paris. Her name was Dodo D'Hambourg and Bemelmans had met her hanging around the Crazy Horse painting scenes in the manner of Toulouse-Lautrec.

D'Hambourg was the inspiration for *The Woman of My Life*, a novel that appeared in 1957, and for *The Street Where the Heart Lies*, what Bemelmans called a *"roman d'amour,"* which was published in 1962. Both were greeted by the now de rigueur comments about any Bemelmans as entertaining as "scribbled soufflé." He was by now firmly marked as a writer of light, sexy odes to the good life. Nor were his adult books selling very well. When a coffee table book for Harper & Brothers did not move, editor in chief Cass Canfield professed to being "stumped on what to suggest as an adult book to earn the $5,000 I so imprudently advanced him." The canny Canfield asked his children's book editor to help Bemelmans out.

With money ever a problem, Bemelmans began assembling coffee table pastiches like *Bemelmans' Italian Holiday*, which included versions of his earlier stories cleverly rewritten and colorfully illustrated. He winnowed another five thousand dollars advance from World Publishing Company of Cleveland for a promised two books. He authored a guide for the European Travel Commission and sold his Paris restaurant.

He sold the restaurant in Paris and now when Bemelmans traveled, he would borrow a friend's apartment in Paris, an estancia on Majorca, or a villa in the South of France. Bemelmans often rewarded hospitality by producing a painting, which he would then value, for tax and insurance purposes, at tens of thousands of dollars. Not that this was a false valuation. Exhibits of his paintings at the Hammer Galleries in New York and at Paris's Galerie Durand-Ruel sold well and kept him solvent.

Critics too were beginning to appreciate Bemelmans's painting—"like Raoul Dufy, James Thurber and Peter Arno tossed into salad and marinated in strong beer," suggested one.

Bemelmans was becoming a favorite of the rich collectors.

"I'll swap oil for oil," he told one Texas tycoon who offered him petroleum shares for a painting. He picked up a minor fortune when a Greek tycoon bought the largest of his Crazy Horse canvases.

Still, Pascal Covici, his editor—and John Steinbeck's—at Viking, continued to plead with Bemelmans to get on with his writing.

"You are just in the throes of giving birth to the most important work you have ever attempted, it has been gnawing at you for years," Covici wrote about a book Bemelmans called *The Sisley Romance*. It was a project, Covici predicted, that would be Bemelmans's greatest book and assure his place in the American literary pantheon alongside Salinger, Bellow, Hemingway, and Steinbeck.

Actually Bemelmans detested Steinbeck. At the prospect of a Steinbeck book about the French, Bemelmans averred that "for Steinbeck to write about France is like a member of the sleeping car porters brotherhood valeting Louis XIV."

* * *

In the late 1950s, whatever the prospects for his serious work, Bemelmans was riding the crest of a Madeline tidal wave.

Reprints of the books were selling out in the United States, England, Ireland, France, and even Japan. And woe be unto the American parent who did not have a Madeline book, a Madeline chapeau, or a Madeline doll—distributed by Neiman Marcus—waiting under the Christmas tree. To explain the phenomenon, Bemelmans was invited onto Edward Murrow's CBS interview series, *Person to Person*.

Even Pat Covici at Viking, forgetting for once the prospect of the Bemelmans adult magnum opus, wrote, "never forget that Madelines are your best bet for a comfortable old age—these books will never grow old." Through the late fifties Bemelmans, who was now approaching sixty, continued living at a manic pace.

In 1958, he traveled to Brazil where he produced a series of sketches, returned to New York where another Madeline book was in the works, and then headed for France to write and paint.

Madeline was about to be turned into a full-length cartoon feature and the prospect of finally making his millions in motion pictures convinced Bemelmans to buy a schooner he called the *Arche de Noe*, moored in Antibes. Virtually nothing in Bemelmans's life was immune to his art, and in due course, there would be a book called *On Board Noah's Ark*.

It was as if Bemelmans knew he had to live life in a hurry, and in summer 1959, his illness was finally diagnosed as cancer. He commuted from Porto d'Ischia, where he was living aboard *Arche de Noe*, to the Italian mainland to undergo radiation treatments. He joked that he was so radioactive that he could light a Monte Cristo with his little finger. Bemelmans would not allow the disease to control him. He continued to write and paint with his usual ferocity. Towards year's end, he put the finishing touches on a new novel, which he titled *Are You Hungry, Are You Cold*.

Published in 1960, *Are You Hungry* was better received than anything since *To the One I Love Best*. One critic, trying to make Bemelmans "relevant," suggested that the book was downright "cool" and that the young protagonist was "a female counterpart of that boy of Salinger's in *The Catcher in the Rye*."

* * *

In June, 1961, Bemelmans underwent an operation for pancreatic cancer. He seemed to recover, but he could not disguise his loneliness and fear. He wrote his friend, Liz Wicker, about it: "My first passion and love is writing and color—and as an artist, one cannot ever belong to anyone—and that is odd and unfortunate. As it is, you can die of lonesomeness and heartbreak and no cart will change its tracks for you—and when you run from it, the beast runs after you."

On Sunday September 30, 1962, Bemelmans had a good day. He produced twenty pictures and some verse for a new children's book. His daughter Barbara joined him for dinner that evening.

She couldn't believe that he was mortally ill. But it was his last day. Early the morning of October 1, Bemelmans died in his sleep. He was sixty-four, and an autopsy showed that the cancer spread so far that a second operation, which had been discussed, would have been useless.

The following day, all the New York dailies ran long obituaries about Bemelmans, "the satirist, humorist and artist." The *New York Times* spent the first third of its obituary dwelling on Madeline. It was announced that as a veteran of World War I, Bemelmans would be buried at Arlington National Cemetery. He had suggested his own obit the previous February, when he noted about the author's credit on *Noah's Ark*, "If possible, please have them delete novelist, gourmet, man of the world. Just let then say, writer and painter or painter and writer."

But it had been on the week before his death that perhaps the most eloquent Bemelmans epitaph had been acted out rather than written. Frank Zachary, the long-time art director for *Holiday*, had come to New York to show Bemelmans some proofs of drawings he had done for the magazine.

Zachary, who had not seen Bemelmans since his return from Europe, reached his studio door and was visibly shocked when he saw the frail, shrunken man standing in front of him. Bemelmans, who had lost nearly one hundred pounds, saw Zachary's distress. To put his friend at ease, he put his hand on his head and, as a ballerina might, did a funny pirouette. When he faced Zachary again, Bemelmans smiled that still-impish smile, ran his hand along his now thin body, and said in that graceful way of his, "Ah, but isn't it elegant?"

Richard Rapaport has covered such fin de siècle figures as writer Gore Vidal, Frank Lloyd Wright, architect Edward H. Fickett, and other California Moderne figures, as well as other transformational figures of the age. His book *Joe's Boys* is about the young men who worked as key aides for Senator Joe McCarthy during the red scare of the late forties and early fifties, including figures such as Roy Cohn and Robert Kennedy.