

FAVORITE

ANDRÉ ACIMAN

Novelist,
Memoirist,
Literature
Professor



Window Opening on Nice
RAOUL DUFY (1877–1953)
1928, oil on canvas, 25 1/2 x 31 3/4 in.
Shimane Art Museum, Japan

André Aciman doesn't like the beach or the sun or even the city of Nice, and yet he remains captivated by a scene that depicts all of those elements in exquisite detail. The noted novelist and memoirist — one of whose books, *Call Me by Your Name*, was recently made into a movie nominated for an Oscar in that other famous city by the sea, Los Angeles — claims, “Ten minutes in the sun and I get a headache. My entire childhood I was fighting with my parents not to go to the beach. But I long now for cities by the sea, places like Barcelona, Naples, and Genoa.” Among Aciman's favorite painted scenes are a series by Raoul Dufy (1877–1953) that depict the Nice waterfront through open windows. Versions of it are held by such institutions as the Museum of Modern Art (New York), Art Institute of Chicago, and Japan's Shimane Art Museum.

In addition to his writing, Aciman is a distinguished professor of literature at the Graduate Center, City University of New York, where he leads his devoted students in classes that parse the motivations of fictional characters. In books by Ovid, Boccaccio, Stendhal, Henry James, Jane Austen, and others, he remains fascinated by the way characters make sense of their motivations, especially when it comes to matters of love.

Aciman's motivations for loving the Dufy scene, and others that the painter completed, mostly in the 1920s, do not, however, elude him. “This painting is a simulation of the kind of world I come from,” he says confidently,



referencing his childhood in Alexandria, and later exodus, as he and his family were exiled from Egypt during the anti-Semitic zeal of president Gamal Abdel Nasser. “I love this Dufy work, and the other similar scenes he made, because of what it means to me. The memory of my place and this place, Nice, is essentially evoked by the image he painted.”

Aciman looks at the painting as if he himself is occupying the very room Dufy shows, standing in back, out of range. He points to the old-fashioned furniture and accessories, the floral motifs, the views of the blue Mediterranean framed by an open window. “I like open windows because they suggest an access to the sea but maintain a distance from it. I can feel the breeze coming in, in what seems to me, by the light he paints, late morning, and it kind of awakens in me the sense of promise of a wonderful day and a wonderful evening to come.”

Dufy, and his brother Jean, were often labeled Fauves (“wild beasts”) for their bold colors and forms. While many of Dufy's works adhere to that moniker, his Nice paintings, in particular, are softer and more visually poetic. At a time when cubism and early abstraction were in vogue, Dufy remained true to representational art. “Aesthetically, I have no ability to recognize if it's great art,” Aciman admits, “but when I saw a Dufy exhibition at the Centre Pompidou years ago, I was very moved.”

Aciman's Manhattan apartment does not have water views, but it does look out to Central Park. “Whenever I am traveling in a place by the sea, I'll actually stop the car and put my feet in the water. If I've touched water, I feel I'm reconnecting with something primordial. I'm reacquainted with my past.”

As for this painting, Aciman says, “If I could buy it, I would. If I could steal it, I would.”