

Maurice Utrillo 1883-1955
<http://www.utrillo.com/lang.htm>

"Ah, Montmartre, with its provincial corners and its Bohemian way, how many stories could be written on this corner of Paris...I would be so at ease near you, sitting in my room, composing a motif of white-washed houses." (1916)

Born into the reckless, artistic milieu of Montmartre, Paris, the son of the model-turned-painter Suzanne Valadon and an unidentified father, Maurice was adopted by the Spanish art critic Miguel Utrillo and acquired his surname. His youth was characterized by persistent alcoholism and chronic depression, and it is something of a miracle that he survived as long as he did. After being committed for the first time at the age of eighteen, he was encouraged by his mother to take up painting. Within ten years he had received some encouraging recognition for his paintings of such landmarks as the Lapin Agile Café (despite his bad habit of exchanging pictures for drink).

His most impressive paintings date from his "White Period" (1908-1914), a time of personal deterioration, marked by drunken brawls and frequent spells in jail and hospital. Utrillo used an unpromising mixture of plaster, eggshells, and gum to achieve the right "look" for the white exteriors of his buildings, and often relied on monochrome picture postcards for subject matter.

During the 1920s he gradually introduced more color and even some human figures into his compositions. Trips with Suzanne to Corsica and Brittany inspired some beautiful canvases, but views of Montmartre continued to predominate. Mother and son had a successful joint exhibition in 1923, and his reputation continued to grow to the point where he was awarded the Cross of the Legion of Honor in 1929. Eventually he became a revered national icon, ending his days in comfort and security. This was due in large part to the ministrations of Lucie Pauwels, a well-to-do artist who became his wife in 1935, and made his welfare her top priority. Suzanne died in 1938.

Throughout his troubled life Maurice Utrillo remained a devout Catholic; he loved painting churches and cathedrals. He did not care for the throngs of tourists in Paris and was increasingly drawn to "la France qui travaille," the placid, unchanging countryside where village life revolved around simple farms and medieval churches. The KIA's *Paysage (Countryside)* is a typical expression of this love of quiet, unpretentious places: cottages, church, flower gardens, and cabbage patch drowse under a cloud-flecked blue sky. The attention to geometry, the warm but subdued color palette with the signature white walls, the absence of human or animal activity -- all contribute to a sense of suspended animation, of life's impulses held in check, and dangerous emotions kept under strict control.

By Christina Griffin

