

**CARLOS LLERENA AGUIRRE**

*Goddesses*, 2013  
Oil on canvas, 40 x 46 in



COURTESY COCONUT GROVE ARTS FESTIVAL, GALLERIE 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, Bemelmans 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 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 1952, 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