

**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 *Tom & 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, Litchow's, or the 21 in New York, Maxim's or La Méditerranée 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