



## Nicolas de Staël Lettres 1926-1955

Comments and notes by **Germain Viatte**

Postface by **Thomas Augais**

### THE LETTERS

This book, the correspondence of Nicolas de Staël, makes available for the first time, to the wider public, all the letters of the painter that have been discovered hitherto. Taken together, they constitute a resource which bears comparison with the *Letters* of Van Gogh or the *Journal* of Delacroix. A portion of these letters have been available since 1968, when they were included in the first *Catalogue raisonné* devoted to the work of de Staël. What André Chastel wrote at the time – “*the public has yet to discover the copiousness and the exceptional interest of this correspondence which in effect [...] delivers the autobiography of the painter, the life as it was veritably lived through time, in all its pride and power, in a way that no posterior account could ever hope to reproduce*” – is even truer of this new edition, which includes nearly 200 unpublished letters. These are of exceptional interest as they consist for the most part of the letters to Françoise Chapouton, his second wife, and all the letters that were kept by Jeanne Polge, with whom de Staël was passionately in love. Their publication throws new light on the painter’s last years. The transcription of these letters has been revised, and certain names that for reasons of privacy were initialized have been restored in full. Germain Viatte’s learned notes give the wider circumstances in which the letters were composed, thereby turning the book into a reading experience akin to that afforded by the fullest and most revealing biographical study. The postface by Thomas Augais justly lays emphasis on the importance of writing in the painter’s life, in particular his attachment to poetry.

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The letters reveal de Staël in all his restlessness – his travels, his conflicts, his professions of faith, his compulsions, his hesitations... They range from his apprentice years in Spain and Morocco all the way through to his so-called “business letter” period, when at the height of his fame he corresponded with figures like the poet René Char, the critic Georges Duthuit, the writer Pierre Lecuire and the dealers Theodore Schempp and Paul Rosenberg. To quote Chastel’s elegant summary : “*The letters contain everything we need to know – and more – about Nicolas de Staël. Within them a whole constellation starts to scintillate – made up of friends, famous names, interests and passions, along with the rapid changes and vivid ephemera that make up the trajectory of a powerful personality.*”

### NICOLAS DE STAËL

Born in Russia in 1914, he was the son of a general close to the Tsar who went into exile when the Revolution broke out. Orphaned when very young, de Staël was educated at a Jesuit school and subsequently at the Académie des Beaux-Arts in Brussels. But his real training as a painter came with his travels in Spain and Morocco – where he met his first wife, the painter Jeannine Guillou – and then in Italy. The “lean years” that followed his return to France in 1938 did nothing to dent his painterly ambitions. His rise was rapid, and after his exhibition at the Jeanne Bucher Gallery in 1945, his meeting with the American art-dealer Theodore Schempp, and his friendship with Georges Braque, he emerged as one of the major painters in post-war France. His affection for his new family (after the death of Jeannine, he married Françoise Chapoutin in 1946), his literary allies (René Char, Pierre Lecuire), the fame and financial security that came with his first exhibition in New York in 1953, his love for Jeanne Polge, who became his model, his art itself – none of this could sate his craving for more light, and he chose to put an end to his life in March 1955.

### GERMAIN VIATTE

The Editor of this book, Germain Viatte, was Director of the National Museum of Art at the Centre Georges Pompidou from 1992 until 1997. Today he is honorary curator general of national collections. Since the publication in 1968 of the *Catalogue raisonné* of de Staël’s works, with its preface by André Chastel, he has been involved in all the editions of the painter’s letters. He has frequently contributed essays to exhibition catalogues, and he wrote the Introduction to the *Catalogue raisonné* of de Staël’s works on paper, edited by Françoise de Staël and published by Ides et Calendes in 2013.