

About this issue's cover: Sweden's anarchist modernist, Ivan Aguéli

Recently I found myself contemplating a depiction of a multicoloured kitty settling in for a snooze by the anarchist artist and Sufi Ivan Aguéli (Abdul al-Hadi), a Swedish-born militant who died tragically in Spain on 1 October 1917.¹ Ole Birk Laursen's discussion of Augustin Souchy's activities in Sweden during World War One reminded me of Aguéli, whose fame is such that an entire museum has been dedicated to him (Aguélimuséet, Sala, Sweden).

Aguéli is now recognised as an outstanding painter, but during his lifetime involvement in the anarchist movement brought greater notoriety. In France he endured four months imprisonment for his political affiliations (1894) and was arrested a second time after firing a gun at two matadors (one was slightly wounded) during a bullfight (1900). Living in Cairo for three extended sojourns (1894-5; 1902-9; 1913-16), Aguéli was destined to be expelled from British-controlled Egypt as a dangerous subversive in January 1916. He ended up marooned in Barcelona, where Swedish attempts to provide safe passage to Stockholm during the height of World War One came to naught. Aguéli was a prolific writer, and his articles and letters constitute a treasure trove concerning the interrelation between anarchism and Islam as he conceived it. As for his paintings, a memorial exhibition at AB Konstverk Gallery, Stockholm (January-February 1920) solidified his status as one of Sweden's leading innovators.²

In 1893, after participating in a series of street uprisings in Paris, Aguéli reflected: 'It is a beautiful phenomenon, anarchism. It is for certain the most beautiful in our filthy time. Imagine a sunrise and a sunset at the same time. The dynamiters' superb, mindful, calm heroism; the revenge of the culture victims; the dreams of utopians, intuition, and artists – this may be a pale light, but it embodies the first rays of the new sun'.³ Empathy for animals was an additional terrain of struggle. Aguéli was a vegetarian and animal rights activist, inspired, in part, by conversations with Peter Kropotkin concerning interspecies mutual aid.⁴ Writing from jail after wounding the matador, he declared:

I confess completely openly that these animals [bulls and horses] were of more concern to me and infinitely more beautiful than the mob around me. They suffer like us, maybe more; their minds are a mystery for us ... I repeat, that the bulls and horses in the amphitheatre are closer to my heart than the satanic executioners with human faces who torture and kill them or who, with pleasure, stand and watch. The latter of these are particularly

sickening. It is these people, not me, who have committed a crime against humanity. I have *proved* my humanity by protesting against those possessed [by evil]. I have confirmed humanity's nobility and royalty by defending beings 'lower' than me from my equals.⁵



Credits: Ivan Aguéli, *Liggande katt (Reclining Cat)*, 1890s, oil on canvas, 40 x 38 cm, Moderna Museet, Stockholm

Aguéli's cat looks pretty scruffy, suggesting some combination of advanced age and/or rough living. An acquaintance recalled 'be it in Paris or Cairo, he nearly always had a number of street cats in his care', so I bet we're looking at one of those.⁶ We know little about these kitties, except for Mabruka ('The Blessed One'). Aguéli scooped her up from the streets of Columbo, Sri Lanka in 1899. She was 'starving, one-eyed, and pregnant,' but a little love soon turned things around and the two became inseparable.⁷ Traveling to Chennai, India they shipped out to France, where, in 1900, Aguéli would shoot the matador. After his release from jail, she apparently accompanied him to Cairo in 1902. I like to imagine The Blessed One in her element, slumbering on soft pillows, petted, coddled, and bathed in sunlight.

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NOTES

- 1 He was hit by a train at a railway crossing. We are indebted to Mark Sedwick for his outstanding anthology on the artist's career and significance. See Mark Sedwick (ed.), *Anarchist, Artist, Sufi: The Politics, Painting, and Esotericism of Ivan Aguéli* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021).
- 2 Viveca Wessel, 'Ivan Aguéli's Life and Work' in *Anarchist, Artist, Sufi*, pp17-32.
- 3 Ivan Aguéli to Richard Bergh (1893) cited by Anthony T. Fiscella, 'Kill the Audience: Ivan Aguéli's Universal Utopia of Anarchism and Islam' in *Anarchist, Artist, Sufi*, p84.
- 4 So Fiscella speculates, given Aguéli spent time with Kropotkin as the latter was writing his definitive study, *Mutual Aid* (1902). See Fiscella, 'Kill the Audience', p88.
- 5 Aguéli (1900) cited by Fiscella, 'Kill the Audience', p90.
- 6 Farid Nur ad-Din cited by Fiscella, 'Kill the Audience', p88.
- 7 Ibid.