

Sylvie Morabia

First of all, I would like to express our deep affection for Jean-François Prat, on behalf of my partners, if I may, and of the whole firm.

He was not a man to show his feelings, his attachment, other than through actions and undertakings.

It is this particular meaning that we, his fellow colleagues, want to give to the Prize which carries his name, which is far more than just a form of commemoration. We feel pride, emotion as well, in paying tribute to young artists, at this time when memories painfully grip us.

He was attentive in the arts, in his profession and in this firm, to new talent; he liked to recognise it in people and single them out in turn.

He would maybe have smiled on seeing this evening contemporary art experts become "litigators" defending their cause with all their knowledge and their conviction; and seeing us, his partners, as a punctilious jury, a little less questioning than last year, somewhat more turbulent. I would hate to have to plead before such a jury!

Maybe he would have uttered: "It's unheard of!"

It is important to award this Prize in the presence of you all, as you reflect the different aspects of the life and realities of Jean-François. The lawyer, the aesthete, the husband, the father, the grandfather and the friend, were never disunited in him. And this more than contributed to the special depth, warmth and radiance of his personality.

He was an aesthete, in a firm whose native trait was just that. But focused on verbal expression, whether literary work or oratorical art. He was sensitive to that as he was to any form of musicality and fine tuning. This arose out of the "traditional lawyer" culture that he respected without however claiming to exemplify it. He changed its style and gave it a new dimension.

It is impossible to speak of aesthetics and Jean-François Prat without mentioning his special intelligence. Mathematicians often speak of "elegant demonstration". A demonstration which surprises us by its simplicity and its speed and which allows a particularly complex problem to be solved in a quite unexpected way. He had that perspicacity to get directly to the crux of a matter. He excelled at it. He would leave his interlocutors disconcerted and without words.

This gift, together with his demanding look and his unrelenting expectation of excellence, generated around him the need to achieve the difficult task of meeting the standard. I see traces of this in Marie-Aline and Sébastien's overseeing attention, during our discussions and in the way they have worked at putting this Prize together.

A man is seated behind his desk; he is focused. In front of him, there is an ashtray

littered with cigarettes, each one with only a third of it smoked. Maybe the essence of the man lies in this incessant and electric to-ing and fro-ing between measure and excess, wisdom and audacity, sense of tradition and a swerve towards modernity. This agitated search for balance gave him remarkable mobility and energy.

It was surely the mobility and energy needed for a period marked by the major transactions and cases which completely changed the legal landscape and gave rise to new laws. These battles sometimes had the strength and beauty of jousting contests.

Time went by powerfully in Jean-François' office. There were many comings and goings. The visitor's chair was often still warm from the previous person.

Either side of him there were two warriors, maybe sorcerers, knees partially bent. Were they African or Malagasy those statues? We have forgotten. Like the secret of their longevity in Jean-François' office.

His office often metamorphosed. The contemporary art works formed a continually changing universe around him. They sprung up on the walls, like remote countries, which disappeared, then others came, at a rhythm and according to the seasons of a couple which was always moving forward.

Jean-François was his wife's great standard-bearer.

The corridor and office walls were pollinated. All those years, those decades, of working together, have their vintage years. The earliest, the years of the friend Yan Meyer, then the Villeglé years, then the Christo years, then Hantaï and Martin Barré...

Occasionally, in the middle of a discussion, which could be sometimes be quite animated, one of these works would give us a sideways glance. He would then observe us. It was possible to catch fleetingly, in this man of action, a glimpse of a pensive man at his window.

His latest choice of company was a photo by Erwin Olaf. It is still in his office. A young blond woman, with intriguing and icy grace, turns her back to the light of a window. At a three-quarter angle, her silhouette skims the surface of the photo. Ready to step out, she remains immobile and projects onto her admirers the shadow of Tantalus.

Or rather not; she is just an elegant image detaching herself from another world and directly hitting our retina.

Since he has left us, I believe I can see in her Jean-François Prat's sensitivity, which is all the more powerful because of its silence.

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