

For more than a century, every 24 and 25 May, in the month of lilacs and lilies, a whole people has been gathering at Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer for a singular cult: the Gypsy pilgrimage.

The Gypsies come from all over Europe to trample on the original sea and honour Sara the Black, their patron saint. Virgin of the sun, she is said to be the handmaiden of Mary Salome and Mary Jacobean, who with Mary Magdalene took to the sea after the crucifixion of Christ and the death of Mary, to drift to the coasts of Provence. The Camargue village with its Romanesque church, a stage on the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, sees thousands of travellers pass through during this spring weekend. An obligatory stopover for the community, the caravans, families and animals settle in with the wind in order to pay their respect to the saint. The men have brown complexions, wear black felt hats, open shirts with gold chains, rings and bracelets on their hands. The women wear colourful dresses and gold coin necklaces. Children run barefoot through the streets, begging for alms like princes asking for tribute. The week before, one vigil follows another, people come to light their candles, they pray until their voices break, they baptise the children, and above all they dress the saint before her journey through the city to the shore.

Roma from Central and Eastern Europe, Italian tzingaris, gypsies from Alsace, Lorraine and the Rhineland, gypsies from Spain, but also horse guards and Arlesian women in traditional costumes, all these people come together at the time of the procession to the sea. This ceremony is directly linked to the Camargue rites of the 17th century, when believers went through the woods, vineyards and onto the beach to prostrate themselves on their knees in the sea. A purifying procession perpetuated through the Rogations and Carnival celebrations.

But this crowd of believers is joined by tourists

and onlookers, and the high media profile of the event brings with it its share of inconvenience. Photographers and videographers from France and abroad come to immortalise the religious scenes, a real photo safari where exoticism is within everyone's reach. This mysterious people, with ancient traditions, attracts the lens. The sunburnt faces, the deep black hair and the clear eyes give the photographers dreams of iconic shots. Gypsies are a cabalistic people for gadjos and gadjis, a nomadic bastion in the face of the world's disenchantment. Since religions and magic seem to be receding in the face of the pragmatism of science, this tribe still carries the history of ancient myths.

There are thousands of reports on this pilgrimage, and the iconography, often identical, means that we only retain the author's prism of this event, the main information becoming secondary. In the end, clichés about gypsies are perpetuated due to the lack of depth of the work done, and the following report by Yan Morvan is no exception. But placed in the context of the archive, the photos take on a new meaning, they become temporal markers. The interest is no longer in discovering a Catholic rite but in bearing witness to a vanished period: clothes, haircuts, accessories, banal details that take on importance as time passes. Therein lies the strength of the photographer, being able to understand that certain works will only be of interest ten, twenty, or even thirty years after they were taken. It is important to approach this series in this way, the brief chapter of a life, that of the author on the gypsy pilgrimage.

## **Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer**

1978, (France)

### **ARCHIVE N°10**

YAN MORVAN

300 ex. 2021

IC