Avant–garde Art from the Stava Family Collection

The exhibition *Avant-garde Art from the Stava Family Collection*, for the first time, showcases a selection of over 120 works by about 40 artists at the family's Bechyně Castle. It reflects a personal selection, highlighting a number of artists, especially from the postwar period in Europe when art reached the height of its personal diversity. The show is framed by art historical information to explain the context and endeavours of the 20th century avant-garde represented in the collection. The viewer will discover how the artists have step-by-step gained freedom of expression, freeing art from conventions ever more, each in their personal way. Yet, the exhibition is by no means meant to be a museal or educative all-encompassing overview but a glance into the personal world of a private collector with a passion for avant-garde art.

The exhibition is open until 29. 9. 2024.

Curator and author of the texts: Nicole Stava and Claudia Rajlich
Production and installation: Jiří Novotný and Miroslav Topič
Logistics: Vedes s.r.o.
Graphic design and media: FiftyFifty creative agency

Art PANSTVÍ BECHYNĚ

GROUND FLOOR

EARLY 20th CENTURY AVANT-GARDES

The foundation of 20th century avant-garde art is primarily laid in France by artists' reactions to revolutionary inventions in the previous century, notably photography, which marks the start of the era of freedom in art. Avant-garde artists, such as the Realists and Impressionists, translate traditional subject matter into contemporary terms. By the turn of the 20th century, artificial paints allow artists to paint outdoors, where they discover industrial subject matter. Questions about what reality is and how to represent it arise. Art now appears in different ways, as an image abstracted from reality, where forms are simplified or schematized, and a sense of dynamics may be added. Avant-garde artists now create imaginatively and conceptually, basing themselves on the world around them.

The avant-garde artists and their movements succeeding one another at a rapid pace in Paris in the first half of the 20th century are assembled under the term École de Paris. Numerous French artists like André Derain and Georges Braque, as well as a significant number of foreigners like Marc Chagall, Max Ernst, Joan Miró, or Pablo Picasso, shape its revolutionary nature. Their influence can be felt in other countries, such as in German Expressionism or Surrealism, among others.

Marc Chagall

Artists of Jewish origin, many of whom are immigrants from Eastern Europe, play a significant role in the École de Paris. Among them is **Marc Chagall** (1887-1985), who incorporates the characteristics of Symbolism (using symbolic images to express mystical ideas) and Fauvism (employing expressive colors and bold brushstrokes in painting in a non-naturalistic manner). He develops a unique style that will influence the German Expressionists. Free from conventions, his works are vibrant and highly expressive in both form and content, resembling an emotional escape from reality into the world of dreams. Chagall remains true to this distinctive visual language throughout his life.

Marc Chagall's *The Arabian Nights* is a series of works depicting scenes from *The Thousand and One Nights*. This legendary tale follows Scheherazade, who is purportedly an unfaithful bride to the Persian king. Each night, she invents parts of a story for him that never ends, thereby ensuring her survival until he is convinced of her innocence. Among other tales, Scheherazade recounts the story of a poor fisherman who captures a merman in his nets. They thrive in trade together until they part ways due to a disagreement about worldly versus spiritual views on life. This conflict is symbolized by the division between a bright red and strong blue; the tension of the worldly realm overpowering the spiritual one is palpable in the expressiveness of the merman caught in the net.

Daphnis & Chloe is a Greek pastoral by Longos that recounts the story of two aristocratic orphans raised by goatherds on the island of Lesbos. They fall in love and are torn between the cultural norms of their descent concerning sexuality versus the freedom of love in the pastoral class in which they were raised. The French version by Jacques Amyot, published in 1961, is illustrated by Marc Chagall. Reminiscent of Fauvism, in Chagall's rendering, color is freed from its subject, appearing as bright color patches on a green plane that highlight the various stages of harvesting grapes and turning them into wine in the underlying drawing. In this way, he uses the ancient Greek symbolism of grapes representing prosperity and abundance, and wine representing love and ecstasy, to comment on the story.

Marc Chagall's *King David with Lyre* depicts the biblical figure in his deep red royal garment and crown, playing the lyre – the musical instrument with which he is commonly associated. The dynamic composition and execution of the subject evoke the melody of the music. The visual translation of a piece of music can be found in art throughout 20th century abstraction.

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner

While the École de Paris dominates the art scene, and despite new impulses from France, in Germany, art remains characterized by a sentimental and naturalistic idealism. This serves as the basis for German Expressionism. In 1905, **Ernst Ludwig Kirchner** (1880-1938) forms the artists' association Die Brücke (The Bridge) (1905-1913). The name symbolizes bridging between "all revolutionary and surging elements" and breaking away from all that surrounds them and that they're against. The members aim to create freely, guided by an artistic "inner force" that empathizes with its subject.

The German Expressionist focus on empathy with the subject is evident in Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's *Study for Standing Nude Sculpture, Dresden*. The drawing gives more attention to the face and its expression than to the nude body. Yet, Kirchner extensively studies the human figure and nude throughout his career. He approaches it not as a posed subject, but as a body existing and moving in space, similar to how Auguste Rodin revolutionized sculpture. In fact, Kirchner's influences extend beyond avant-garde currents in contemporary France to earlier works such as Rembrandt, Art Nouveau, or German Gothic art, creating a truly new avant-garde style.

This group of drawings showcases Kirchner's various styles. Although executed in graphite on paper, the *Drahseiltänzerin* (Tightrope Dancer) is composed of large flat planes, reminiscent of the color planes of Fauvism. The composition is also unconventional, being off-center, with the figure appearing very close to the picture plane. In contrast, the drawing in *Diskussion am Tisch* (Discussion at the Table) appears jagged and angular, akin to German Gothic architecture. *Atelierszene* (The Artist Studio) exhibits the expressive economy of Rembrandt's scenes, while *Vier Tänzer auf der Bühne* (Four Dancers on Stage) is abstracted to merely a few lines yet still manages to convey their movement and expression.

SURREALISM

After World War I, the movement of Surrealism emerges as a revolt against the institutions and philosophies that led to the war. It aims to liberate thought from aesthetic, moral, and rational constraints. In 2024, Surrealism celebrates its 100th birthday. Thought, in the absence of all control, is seen as a potential solution to life's main problems. Following this principle, art must be both a destruction and a creation.

Surrealism manifests in two main directions. Organic Surrealism focuses on the automatism of the psyche, associated with artists like Hans Arp and Joan Miró. The other direction presents recognizable scenes or objects in meticulous detail but distorted, taken out of context, or combined in absurd ways. This is the Surrealism of Salvador Dalí, René Magritte, and Paul Delvaux. Max Ernst explores both directions at different times.

One of the earliest Surrealists is **Hans Arp** (1886-1966), who emerges from Zurich Dada. During World War I, in neutral Switzerland, artists seek new, fantastic, and absurd subject matter as a reaction to the madness of the war. As a visual artist, Arp eventually finds his own direction in a fantasy language of geometric, organic shapes, guided by his belief that „art is a fruit that grows in man." His reliefs and sculptures are dedicated to mass and their material presence, resembling growing organic entities of undefined nature.

Max Ernst (1891-1976) also originates from Dada, having co-founded its German wing with Arp when the latter moved to Cologne in 1919. His artistic vocabulary is highly eclectic yet consistently Surrealist. The titles of his works are integral to the fantasy and absurdity of his art. *Paroles peints* (Painted Words) resembles drawn waves over a line drawing, while *Le jeu de carte* (The Card Game) presents a recognizable subject in a nonsensical context. *Le plus beau mur de mon royaume* (The Most Beautiful Wall in My Kingdom), on the other hand, either represents or requires some imagination. It depicts a very recognizable subject of a sun above a stone wall, but its title raises questions: Why is this plain stone wall considered the most beautiful in the kingdom? Whose kingdom does it belong to?

René Magritte's (1898-1967) work is characterized by the effect of shock, achieved through a combination of the ordinary, the strange, and the erotic. The lithograph *La géante* (The Giantess) is evidently named after Baudelaire's poem, in which he examines a giant female nude. It clearly depicts a tree, but simultaneously presents itself as a single leaf. This juxtaposition highlights the specific characteristics of a tree while positioning them in a manner that contradicts the viewer's expectations. Furthermore, if the imagery of the tree was not explicit enough, there is also a curtain – a soft fabric traditionally hanging down – standing freely on the opposite lawn. Magritte's simultaneously humorous and absurd image prompts viewers to reconsider reality and question what they take for granted.

La metamorphose de l'objet (The Metamorphosis of the Object) showcases René Magritte's trademark subject of a briar pipe, with a piece seemingly broken out of it, floating over a wooden table alongside a small white ball. The shadows cast onto the tabletop may initially appear to be the shadows of these two objects, but upon closer inspection, they are inconsistent with their shapes. The image is situated at the bottom of an ashtray that resembles a set of plates increasing in size. The ashtray, in turn, is framed in a Plexiglas box, which reproduces the artist's handwritten note to the registrar detailing how to frame the work in this manner.

Paul Delvaux (1897-1994), like Magritte, is Belgian. He is renowned for his Surreal scenes that resemble dreams, featuring fair-skinned nudes or women in Victorian attire amidst architectural elements reminiscent of Classical temples. *La fenêtre* (The Window) embodies his trademark theme, depicting female nudes or partially undressed women in Victorian dress quietly seated as if in conversation in front of a window. The scene is richly colored and exudes a nostalgic sadness, rendering it not only absurd but also elusive.

Salvador Dalí (1904-1989) is perhaps the household name that epitomizes Surrealism in the public mind. The artist himself and his life embodies Surrealism. During the 1950s, he paints a series of watercolors illustrating Dante Alighieri's *Divina Commedia* (The Divine Comedy), which are exhibited in 1960 and first published in 1964. This image from the *Canto Inferno* (Hell) depicts Minos, one of the judges of the underworld. Minos listens to the sins of the souls and determines their destination in Hell, which he indicates with his serpent tail. Dalí depicts him as an eerie and anatomically incorrect skeletal nude, dominating the wretched souls in the distance.

Wifredo Lam (1902-1982) has a multicultural background dominated by esoteric aspects. He is acquainted with Dalí and studies with Picasso, resulting in his work being a curious blend of styles and cultural influences. Unlike other Surrealists, his subject matter is derived more from mystic beliefs of various indigenous cultures than from the subconscious. *The Horselady* depicts a hybrid figure combining a female nude and a horse. Reminiscent of a female Centaur, which typically has the body of a horse and the torso and head of a woman, Lam's creation seems to have both the bodies of a horse and a woman, with the heads appearing to fuse, one figure morphing into the other. This absurd yet humorous situation evokes the unsettling feeling characteristic of Surrealism.

Joan Miró

Joan Miró (1893-1983) has a keen interest in the subconscious mind. He is among the first artists to utilize automatic drawing – a method of spontaneous drawing following his unconscious thoughts – to discard traditional painting techniques. This places him among the first Surrealists, despite his unique style and experimentation throughout his career. In his iconic works, Miró creates an abstract, symbolic world characterized by flat colors and black-and-white organic shapes, interspersed with recognizable motifs such as ladders, birds, eyes, and planets. Often, these images, with their vibrant primary colors (red, yellow, and blue) and bold black lines, evoke a sense of escape to the innocent world of childhood imagination.

In Joan Miró's *Equinox*, the connection to the Sun manifests as a ladder-like structure, symbolizing a means of escape as well as connection. The Equinox, marking the moment when the plane of Earth's equator intersects the center of the Sun's disk, signifies a time when day and night are of equal length everywhere on Earth. This special moment represents the juncture where the universal and the earthly converge, adding depth to the symbolism of the ladder as a pathway between worlds.

Equinox, L'astre du marécage (The Star of the Marshes), and *L'adoration du soleil* (The Adoration of the Sun) are typical of Miró's affinity for celestial motifs. The realm of the planets is a magical and spiritual world, captivating mankind with its lucidity and beauty for millennia. It exemplifies a dream-world cherished by both the young and the old.

Barcelona is the most Surrealist-looking work in this group. Its title references Joan Miró's native city and the capital of Catalonia. Typical of one of Miró's styles, it features an organic figure drawn with a sharp white line on a black plane, as if it were carved out. Such ovoids with wavy lines emanating from them are a recurring theme in his work and can be considered symbolic of the origins of life in this context.

The matador is a Spanish national hero celebrated for his courage in facing a raging bull. He embodies a popular heroism, originating from times when the working class lacked societal recognition. Joan Miró depicts the matador in a pose beneath the towering bull, possibly inspired by the sociopolitical context of the time. During this period, the Basque region's attempts at independence were suppressed by Franco's regime, suggesting a symbolic parallel between the matador's struggle against the bull and the broader political struggles faced by marginalized communities.

Hommage à Joan Prats (1971) is a series of 15 large-scale lithographs dedicated by Joan Miró to Joan Prats i Vallès (1891-1970). Prats, an entrepreneur and important art collector from Catalonia, was Miró's compatriot and one of the founders of the Joan Miró Foundation. He donated a significant collection of the artist's works to the foundation, solidifying Miró's legacy in his homeland.

Pablo Picasso

Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) stands as one of the iconic figures in 20th century art, profoundly influencing the art world through decades of experimentation and innovation. A central figure of the École de Paris, Picasso continually rejects realistic depictions of the world, co-invents Cubism (which employs multiple viewpoints to represent reality), and engages with Surrealism. His postwar period paves the way for movements like Pop Art, demonstrating his unique ability to transcend and transform contemporary art over more than half a century. Throughout his various styles, Picasso remains focused on eliciting emotional and intellectual responses from viewers, reflecting the socio-political turbulence of his era. Picasso epitomizes artistic freedom and independence.

Pablo Picasso's *L'Atelier* (The Artist Studio), *Sculpteur et son modèle avec un groupe sculpté réprésentant des athletes* (Sculptor and His Model with a Group of Sculptures Representing Athletes), and *Sculpteur et trois danseuses sculptées* (Sculptor and Three Sculpted Female Dancers) all provide a glimpse into an artist's studio. *L'Atelier* exemplifies Picasso's Neoclassical style, characterized by clear outlines that evoke the clarity, order, and proportions of ancient Greek and Roman art. In contrast, the other two engravings stem from Picasso's Surrealist period and feature distorted proportions for expressive purposes. These scenes depict both the artist and his endeavors to capture life on canvas or in sculpture, prompting viewers to ponder questions about reality and illusion.

Pablo Picasso's *La petite grappe* (The Small Bunch of Grapes) depicts a still life of a bunch of grapes, partially eaten. This detail can be interpreted as a traditional *memento mori* – a reminder of the inevitability of death – commonly depicted in traditional still lifes. However, presented in isolation, it takes on a simple yet powerful quality that imbues the scene with an eerie connotation, reminiscent of Surrealist works.

La naissance des papillons (The Birth of Butterflies), *L'aiguille des seconds* (The Second Hand), *L'arbre qui marche* (The Walking Tree), and *Le bois d'enfer* (The Wood of Hell) are all drypoints created by Pablo Picasso as illustrations for Maurice Toesca's *Six contes fantasques* (Six Fantasy Stories), published in 1953 by Flammarion. These images appear to be more related to Picasso's interpretations or associations with the short stories rather than directly depicting the content of the stories themselves.

For instance, *La naissance des papillons*, which explores the relationship between art and nature through the story of a Chinese girl who passionately paints butterflies until they surpass reality, shows the profile of a viewer observing something resembling a figure, possibly a sculpture or an artist's model. The second drypoint, *L'arbre qui marche*, reflects Picasso's Surrealist inclination, nearly literally illustrating the title, which is an absurdity in itself.

The illustration for *Le bois d'enfer*, the final tale where the author contemplates old age, is rendered in Picasso's Neoclassical style. It depicts the profile portrait of a young woman adorned with a garland of flowers in her hair. The connection to the story remains ambiguous. Thus, all these illustrations serve as a tribute to the artistic freedom of interpretation.

In the latter half of the 1950s, Pablo Picasso's art, particularly his printmaking, displays a newfound inventiveness. *Femme assise en pyjama* (Seated Woman in Pajamas) embodies this fresh and expressive abstract style characterized by bold lines and planes, influenced by tribal arts. Despite this departure, the artwork retains a psychological potency reminiscent of Surrealism. It stands as one of Picasso's most radical interpretations of the female nude. Interestingly, there is little visual reference to the pajamas specified in the title.

During the 1950s and 1960s, Pablo Picasso turns his focus to the artists of the past, reinterpreting their work in various styles. Between 1959 and 1962, he becomes particularly fixated on Édouard Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (Luncheon on the Grass). One of the first Impressionist paintings, it caused a scandal at the Salon des Refusés in 1863 due to its juxtaposition of a female nude with fully dressed men, which was perceived as both scandalous and avant-garde. This aspect of the painting obviously intrigues Picasso, and the theme is reflected in his lithograph.

ENTARTETE KUNST

By the end of the 1930s, Europe and its avant-garde art face suppression under the spreading influence of National Socialists. The Nazis promote an ideal in art that aligns with their Pan-Germanic ideals, resulting in the banning of all other forms of art, particularly avant-garde movements. In 1937, a large-scale exhibition titled *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art) opens in Munich and tours major cities in Germany and Austria. The exhibition includes works by artists such as Marc Chagall, André Derain, Pablo Picasso, Joan Miró, Alexej von Jawlensky, as well as German Expressionists like Erich Heckel, Emil Nolde, and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, who as a result tragically takes his own life. From the perspective of today's viewer, their works seem rather undramatic.

André Derain (1880-1954) is recognized as a key figure in Fauvism, a French movement that emerges around 1905 to 1910, characterized by its bold use of colors and expressive brushwork. In his later works, Derain demonstrates an interest in Primitivism, incorporating visual elements from various tribal arts, while also revisiting the techniques of Old Masters and 19th century painting. He once stated that he does not feel compelled to adhere to any specific principles in painting, except for the principle of freedom, which he sees as somehow connected to tradition.

Erich Heckel (1883-1970) is a prominent member of the German Expressionist group known as Die Brücke (The Bridge). He is particularly drawn to depicting the subject matter of the working class. In his artwork, Heckel maintaines a Germanic sense of expressive rendering and form, often characterized by Gothic angularity and dynamic compositions.

Emil Nolde (1867-1956) is associated with Die Brücke. Following the World War I, he develops a particular fondness for painting flowers, primarily executed in watercolor. His work, titled *Rote Dahlienblüten und Feuerlilien* (Red Dahlias and Fire Lilies) from the mid-1920s, is notable for its expressive composition. In this piece, the color palette is dominated by vibrant reds with a bright yellow accent cropped into the foreground. Upon closer inspection, one can observe that the flowers are highly abstracted and merely suggested through vigorous brushwork, adding to the expressiveness of the painting.

Alexej von Jawlensky (1864-1941) is a Russian immigrant to Germany and a member of the German Expressionist group in Munich alongside Wassily Kandinsky. Over time, Jawlensky increasingly gravitates towards the expressive use of color and form in his artwork. *Landschaft mit Wäldchen* (Landscape with Small Forest) is an early painting characterized by abstraction from reality, following the avant-garde trend of expressive brushstrokes prevalent at the turn of the century. *Nacht in Kasachstan* (Night in Kazakhstan), on the other hand, originates from Jawlensky's final years and is part of a series of small-scale works on cardboard called Meditations. The composition features a strong vertical stroke divided by two horizontal ones in the upper part, reminiscent of the composition found in his trademark portraits from the 1920s. While the painting's subject matter remains unclear, it evokes a meditative mood more than anything else.

Le Corbusier

Architecture also does not escape the National Socialist scrutiny. In 1939, the term „entartete Baukunst" (degenerate architecture) is coined, specifically targeting the architectural designs of **Le Corbusier** (born Charles-Édouard Jeanneret, 1887-1965). Le Corbusier is known for his specialization in creating new models for contemporary urban living. His architectural designs are based on systems of proportions, geometry, and, most notably, modularity. His buildings often resemble mini-cities, constructed using novel industrial materials and characterized by their unadorned aesthetic.

Modulor (a name derived from the verb "to modulate") exemplifies Le Corbusier's architectural principle developed between 1942 and 1955, which emphasizes proportions and a relationship to the human body. It represents a quest for harmony, both with nature and through objective measures. Additionally, Le Corbusier's drawing *Untitled* from the same period contains an allusion to his concept of human proportions in architecture. The drawing features a sitting human shadow connected to a nude female figure in a window, integrating architectural elements around them.

After World War I, Le Corbusier founds the art movement known as Purism. Purism aims to simplify the intricate geometric abstraction of Cubism by using basic geometric and organic shapes. Le Corbusier's still life with mask from 1929 exemplifies this style. The artwork is constructed simply with thin and thick black lines, forming a flat labyrinth on checkered paper. Sparse hatching strokes suggest depth and convey the presence of a table with objects on it. A few hatching strokes in purple indicate a carafe on the table and a window in the background.

FREEDOM

The period following World War II is marked by a widespread desire for freedom, away from the circumstances that had led to the horrors of the conflict. One of the pillars of the École de Paris and co-founder of Cubism, **Georges Braque** (1882-1963), discovers a fondness for the motif of birds in flight. By the mid-1950s, he develops this motif into a trademark design. The symbolism of freedom associated with birds, capable of taking flight from the ground and soaring high in the sky, is undeniable. Furthermore, the act of flight represents a transition from one time and place to another, evoking the idea of the lightness of being. These values hold particular appeal in the postwar era. Additionally, René Magritte also incorporates the image of a flying bird in his lithograph *L'idole* (The Idol).

Cinq poésies en hommage à Georges Braque (five poems in honor of Georges Braque) is Georges Braque's design for the cover of a book containing poems by René Char dedicated to the artist. The cover features Braque's trademark stylized bird and a head, depicted as organic black shapes with minimal detail in white lines, as if carved out. Both elements point towards the opening of the book, inviting the reader to explore its contents.

Georges Braque's *L'ordre des oiseaux* (The Order of Birds) is the title of a series of aquatints inspired by the poetry of Saint-John Perse. In these works, Braque presents a flock of birds, skillfully portraying each bird from multiple perspectives simultaneously. Braque's rendering has reached a level of abstraction where the birds are recognizable primarily by the outlines of flat black color planes. The work has a delicate shimmer, adding an elegant and otherworldly quality to the birds in flight.

René Magritte also incorporates the motif of a bird in mid-air in his work. In his painting titled *L'idole* (The Idol), Magritte portrays the bird as a subject of worship, aligning with the symbolism of freedom associated with flying birds. However, to infuse a Surrealist element, Magritte depicts the bird appearing to be made out of the same material as the rocks below.

Also, the horse emerges as a recurring motif in the repertoire of avant-garde artists after World War II. **Wifredo Lam** (1902-1982), in particular, frequently depicts horses in his Surrealist paintings. In his work titled *Divinita* (Goddess), Lam presents the elegant animal somewhat wrought in a style reminiscent of Cubism. Notably, he emphasizes the horse's tail, which serves as its primary communicative tool, adding a layer of symbolism and intrigue to the artwork.

Italian artist **Marino Marini** (1901-1980) devotes a significant portion of his artistic oeuvre to the noble animal, the horse. Revered for its beauty, strength, and determination, the horse symbolizes freedom. Marini's depiction of horses and riders throughout his career often reflects his perspective on the sociopolitical context of his time. *In La Caduta* (The Fall), Marini portrays a horse throwing off its controlling rider, symbolizing rebellion against authority or oppression. Similarly, in Marini's etching from 1971, the rider appears to have lost control, as indicated by his gesture of throwing his hands into the air in despair. These artworks suggest themes of struggle, defiance, and the human condition in the face of adversity.

After World War II, like many artists, Marino Marini ventures into abstraction. *Composition of Basic Shapes* is one of his more unconventional paintings, consisting solely of shapes in primary colors. Through the use of black shadows, he adds a sense of elegant volume to the shapes, creating a three-dimensional effect reminiscent of the muscular bodies of horses – Marini's favored subject. This artwork showcases his ability to convey depth and form through simple geometric elements while maintaining a connection to his thematic interests.

In Marino Marini's collage *Three Figures*, the white figures, subtly shaded in pastel colors against a dark background, evoke the spectral quality of ghosts. The ethereal and sensual portrayal of the female nudes stands in stark contrast to the grim realities of the postwar human condition. Additionally, the composition bears resemblance to Italian Renaissance painting, thereby asserting a cultural identity. This subdued approach to addressing the sociopolitical situation reflects a common theme among postwar avant-garde artists.

1st FLOOR

POSTWAR AVANT-GARDES

The end of World War II signals the emergence of diverse abstract tendencies across Europe. Artists, who had previously worked in abstract styles during the 1930s and whose work had been labeled as „degenerate," such as Max Ackermann and Julius Bissier, are further emboldened in their belief that abstraction is the path forward. Rejecting prewar ideals, artists seek ways to envision a better world. They draw inspiration from various abstract movements of the early 20th century, which pursued universal ideals like inner force, spiritual absolutes, or the innocence found in childlike dreamscapes.

However, as many artists are too young to recall earlier abstract movements in detail, and with the majority of early avant-garde artists having either died or emigrated, their exploration of abstract art is largely based on theories and limited visual examples. Abstraction can be categorized into two approaches: one abstracts from visual reality, while the other creates imagery entirely within the artist's mind, analog to music, as exemplified in some works by Max Ackermann. Moreover, there are two currents within abstraction: a „warm," expressive approach, seen in the works of Willy Boers, and a „cool" approach, which seeks to create simple, pure, and emotionally calming art, as seen in artists like Ben Nicholson or some works by Italo Valenti. Thus, postwar abstraction begins as an experimental exploration of various styles or a fusion of styles.

Max Ackermann

In 1912, Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) publishes the groundbreaking *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* in Germany, a treatise on the relationship between art and music. This work allows Kandinsky to develop an artform created solely through colors and lines, devoid of reference to observed reality. **Max Ackermann** (1887-1975), who had encountered the French avant-gardes in Paris and had already pursued „absolute painting" in the 1930s, continues along this trajectory. His postwar works originate from his imagination and, analog to music, are compositions of lines, colors, and shapes that convey a particular, universal mood.

Max Ackermann's artistic journey from representational to non-objective abstraction is evident in his works from different periods. *Begegnung* (Meeting) from 1940 is a brilliantly colored composition where discernible figures are still present, indicating a transition from representational to abstract elements. In contrast, Ackermann's *Ungegenständliche Komposition* (Non-Objective Composition) from 1947 represents an attempt to create art solely through colors and shapes, yet it retains a semblance of still-life objects in space, suggesting Ackermann's ongoing exploration of abstraction. *Senkrechte strebende Akzente* (Vertical Aspiring Accents) from 1949 further showcases Ackermann's progression, with its composition of lines and colored planes conveying a greater sense of movement and depth, although traces of figural elements are still perceptible.

Max Ackermann's artistic exploration of music through abstraction is evident in works like *Untitled* from 1950, where agitated white chalk lines on black paper capture the movement and expressiveness of a melody. In contrast, *Hymne* (Anthem) presents a more solemn piece of music through its composition of large white planes on a light blue ground, colorful accents and a delicate line drawing, suggesting a singer amidst the shapes. Similarly, *Fanfare* evokes a vivid piece of music with its multicolored abstract composition hinting at a figure carrying an instrument. Towards the end of the decade, *Unterwegs* (On the Road) represents a truly non-objective composition with various colors on a modulated plane, although the downward sequence in red vaguely resembles notes in a musical score.

Julius Bissier

Julius Bissier (1893-1965) emerges as a unique figure among German artists. Coming from an academic background of Romanticism and inspired by a sinologist friend and collector, he delves into abstraction as early as the 1930s. Motivated by a trip to Paris, Bissier begins producing ink drawings characterized by freely brushed strokes resembling calligraphy, aiming to achieve spirituality akin to Wassily Kandinsky's ideals. He continues to work in this style until his death, incorporating watercolor in the 1950s and briefly experimenting with geometrical abstraction. Towards the end of

his life, Bissier focuses on smaller formats, known as „miniatures," maintaining his commitment to spiritual expression through abstraction.

Julius Bissier's brief exploration of geometric abstraction that he started in the 1940s is evident in his *Untitled* works from 1954. In these pieces, he employs flat geometric shapes in primary colors or non-colors (black and white), arranged freely within the empty space of the paper support. One work consists of red squares arranged centrally, creating a static quality due to the symmetrical arrangement, while the vertical rectangles exert a visual pull downwards. In contrast, the other work features horizontal black rectangles and an arch, conveying a sense of movement and direction sideways. The small black square below the rectangles appears to be falling due to gravity, adding a dynamic element to the composition.

Julius Bissier's untitled works from 1955 exemplify his signature style of ink drawing characterized by freely assembled brushstrokes that bear resemblance to Chinese calligraphy. This approach positions him as a pioneer of Art Informel, an art movement that emerges in the 1950s in France and emphasizes spontaneous, intuitive, and non-geometric forms of abstraction. Bissier will continue to work in this style for the last three decades of his life.

In the 1950s, Julius Bissier ventures into watercolor. Pieces such as *Untitled* (1955) and *Untitled* (1959) represent an intriguing fusion of his penchant for black ink and experimentation with watercolor. Executed in black ink on paper, the use of large planes and the dilution of the black ink into various shades of grey, as seen in the still-life composition, is reminiscent of watercolor techniques. It showcases Bissier's ongoing exploration of artistic expression.

Agape, a piece from Julius Bissier's „miniatures" series, exemplifies his work from the mid-1950s onward. Executed in watercolor on paper, the title „agape" references a meal shared among friends. Despite featuring a composition of larger and smaller planes in black, blue, and red hues, along with a couple of grey dots, that could suggest food items on a table, the artwork is fully abstract in nature. The inclusion of the letters „a" and „g" in golden writing adds an intriguing element to the piece, juxtaposing abstract forms with recognizable symbols. This amalgamation of styles reflects Bissier's experimentation and versatility as an artist.

Ben Nicholson

Ben Nicholson's (1894-1982) journey into abstraction begins in the 1920s during his time in the Italian part of Switzerland. As a member of the Seven & Five Society, a British artists' group initially resistant to avant-garde trends, Nicholson's influence leads the organization towards abstraction, ultimately becoming the UK's avant-garde movement in this direction. Throughout the 1930s, Nicholson makes several trips to Paris, where he visits the studios of prominent avant-garde artists such as Hans Arp, Pablo Picasso, and Georges Braque. These experiences inspire Nicholson to create his first geometric reliefs. He later joins Unit One, a British avant-garde group catering to both Surrealist and abstract artists. Nicholson's work embodies British modernism, which remained relatively unaffected by the upheavals of World War II.

In Ben Nicholson's works *Untitled, Euboea, Olympia 2*, and *Tools*, recognizable subjects like still life and landscape are hinted at with fine graphite lines enclosing large geometric planes of blank paper. Viewers interpret these lines as outlines of objects and crossing lines as indicators of space, allowing the subject mentioned in the titles to stand out. In contrast, Nicholson's works from the 1970s feature more indicative realistic rendering, especially evident in *Euboea*, which includes shadows creating the space of the landscape.

Willy Boers

In the Netherlands, which suffered extensive destruction during World War II, the postwar period is marked by economic crisis and political tens on. Despite public disinterest in art-related matters, the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam stages influential exhibitions tracing the evolution of abstract art in the first half of the 20th century. These exhibitions showcase works by De Stijl and artists of the École de Paris, representing geometric and expressive veins of abstract art, respectively. Dutch artists, feeling unable to resume prewar artistic endeavors, turn to these prewar avant-garde tendencies for inspiration.

Willy Boers (1905-1978), a founding member of Vrij Beelden (1946-1955) and founder of Creatie (1950-1954), pursues radical abstraction. Vrij Beelden is the first artists' group in postwar Netherlands prioritizing abstraction, with many members embracing

an expressive approach. Creatie aims for even more radical abstraction, defined as free creation independent of nature or optical reality.

Willy Boers has a background in restoration and between the wars takes art classes at the avant-garde Académie de la Grande Chaumière in Paris, initially working in a Surrealist style. However, the trauma of World War II leads him to believe that abstract art is the only valid means of expression. In the late 1940s, he begins creating paintings characterized by thick, agitated black lines across fields of various colors. One painting from 1952 exemplifies this period, with the thick black lines suggesting figurative elements without fully representing them. In another painting from the same year, some black lines are filled in with color, resembling three-dimensional objects. By 1955, his works take on a different character, resembling compositions of colored objects floating in a varied grey space. These paintings represent his interpretation of abstract images created solely through colors and shapes, conveying emotions ranging from dynamic movement to agitated aggressiveness and quiet drifting, respectively.

Giuseppe Santomaso

In postwar Italy, in a sociopolitical divide between the North and South, artists demand a radically new art to break free from the academic styles of the Fascist period. In Venice, the Secessione Artistica Italiana, later renamed the Fronte Nuovo delle Arti, is formed. Artists in this group are inspired by Pablo Picasso's interwar style, which they believe is capable of challenging the *status quo*. The group emphasizes expressive and technical heterogeneity while focusing on unity of intent. From this movement emerges the Gruppo degli Otto, a group of eight painters including Giuseppe Santomaso, who pursue a concrete, geometric, and „cool" form of abstraction.

Giuseppe Santomaso (1907-1990), a representative of Art Informel in Italy during the 1950s, continues to explore this style in various forms until his death. His works from this period often feature color planes on a monochrome background, arranged in a way that conveys something about them to the viewer through their coloring and placement. This approach is evident in his later works such as *En angle* (At an Angle) and *Untitled* from 1985. In the 1970s, Santomaso begins incorporating shapes and skylines reminiscent of the palaces in his hometown of Venice into his works, as seen in Poeta II.

Italo Valenti

Italo Valenti (1912-1995) joins the Corrente movement of Expressionist artists in the late 1930s, which emphasizes the social and civil contributions of art. After World War II, he moves to Locarno, Switzerland, where he is influenced by avant-garde artists such as Hans Arp, Ben Nicholson, and Julius Bissier, who are also living in the Ticino region at the time. Under their influence, Valenti's abstract works evolve from being abstractions of reality to being created solely from the artist's imagination. His focus shifts towards exploring the effects of shape and color, aligning closely with the principles of Lyrical Abstraction associated with the Nouvelle École de Paris.

Italo Valenti's *La collina* (The Hill) represents a hill with trees and houses through an accumulation of angular color planes that appear to float on a dark ground, with faint contours of other hills barely visible. Similarly, *Cielo grigio* presents an abstract composition of black brushstrokes over white planes with soft edges on a light gray ground, with the title providing the only indication of the artist's intended representation. *La magicienne Maga* (The Magician called Maga) and *Monteverdi*, then again, feature large, flat geometric planes in two colors on a pure white ground, reflecting the „cool" vein in abstraction.

NOUVELLE ÉCOLE DE PARIS

In postwar France, Pablo Picasso continues to wield significant influence over the avant-garde art scene. Abstraction, characterized by emotive and highly personal expressions, becomes a means for artists to convey their anger and frustration. The French avant-garde of this period, known as Lyrical Abstraction, encompasses a heterogeneous style unrelated to objective reality, with artists of the postwar generation referred to as the Nouvelle École de Paris.

Serge Poliakoff

Serge Poliakoff (1906-1969), originally from Russia, studies art in Paris and London as well as he studies metaphysics. His postwar works feature large colored planes juxtaposed against each other, with the structure of the brushstrokes providing a sense of materiality. Despite the muted colors, the

juxtaposition creates a dynamic interplay of colors and luminosity, establishing Poliakoff as a prominent figure in Lyrical Abstraction and the Nouvelle École de Paris during the 1950s and 1960s.

Serge Poliakoff's paintings and works on paper from the 1950s and 1960s demonstrate the diverse compositions and effects achievable with just a few colors and geometric shapes. In *Composition 14*, for instance, a small blue plane visually recedes amidst a multitude of protruding yellow planes, with greenish planes anchoring the composition at a distance.

Composition abstraite and *Composition grise, verte, bleue create* visually complex compositions, suggesting profound spatial depth with various colors occupying different levels.

In Composition grise, rouge et noire, the colored planes seem to flow like liquid due to their jagged and rounded edges. Conversely, *Composition monochrome* presents subdued red planes resembling a structure covered in a red fog.

Untitled and *Composition rouge et bleue* visually resemble rock formations against a blue sky, suggesting varying distances. However, their structure and brushstroke arrangement remind the viewer that all colored planes exist on the same flat surface. They are undeniably a non-objective composition

ART INFORMEL

Lyrical Abstraction serves as the common term for the works of the Nouvelle École de Paris, describing an expressive abstract manner derived from the artist's imagination. Within this group, Art Informel emerges as a significant subcategory, encompassing artists employing highly gestural techniques like Hans Hartung or Sam Francis, as well as those exploring the materiality of their artistic medium, such as Antoni Tapiès.

Hans Hartung (1904-1989), a prominent figure in the Art Informel movement, experiences severe trauma during World War II, which greatly influences his postwar artworks. His pieces often convey a profound aversion to human violence through bundles of energetic and expressive pencil strokes, primarily in black. Within these compositions, bundles of bright colors intersect with the central black strokes, creating dynamic interactions that imbue the works with emotional intensity. The angularity of the lines and the tension between the vibrant colors and the dominant black contribute to the dramatic impact of Hartung's art. Despite their minimalist approach, his compositions possess a remarkable ability to evoke strong emotions in viewers.

Antoni Tàpies (1923-2012), a leading figure in the Art Informel movement in Spain, is known for his focus on materials in his artworks. His style often falls under the subcategory of Matiérisme, which explores the transformative qualities of artistic and non-artistic materials. In works like *Chaise ficellée* (Woven Chair), Tàpies presents a simple yet evocative image of a pair of hands beneath a piece of cloth nailed to the wall. Despite its technical simplicity, the work carries layers of meaning. The hands appear to interact with a tangled mass of yarn, represented by a bundle of black lines drawn onto the depicted cloth. This dynamic and agitated line drawing reflects the influence of Art Informel, while also paying homage to Tàpies's early Surrealist roots. Through such humorous compositions, Tàpies invites viewers to contemplate the relationship between form and meaning.

THE FRENCH AVANT-GARDES AND THE USA

After World War II, Paris regains its status as a capital of the arts, drawing artists from around the world. The Nouvelle École de Paris, following in the footsteps of its prewar counterpart, attracts foreign artists like Serge Poliakoff alongside Americans such as Alexander Calder and Sam Francis. The influence of avant-garde artists who have emigrated to the United States, including Fernand Léger who lives and teaches there during the war years, plays a significant role in shaping postwar American art.

Sam Francis

Among the foreign artists drawn to postwar France, **Sam Francis** (1923-1994) stands out as a prominent figure associated with the Nouvelle École de Paris. Although American by nationality, Francis lives in Paris during the 1950s and becomes immersed in the artistic scene there. He is often linked with Tachisme, a subcurrent of Lyrical Abstraction characterized by large gestural strokes, splashes, and blobs of vibrant color. Despite returning to the United States in the early 1960s, Francis remains more closely aligned with Lyrical Abstraction than with America's own Abstract Expressionism. His focus on the expressiveness of color and gesture defines his artistic approach throughout his career.

Sam Francis's *Trietto* series, created in 1991 during a period of intense activity in his Santa Monica Litho Shop, showcases his distinctive „tachist" style. Characterized by vibrant colors and energetic brushwork, these works feature brightly colored shapes and lines layered upon each other, creating an explosive visual effect. The title of the series, „trietto," alludes to a musical composition for three voices. Much like Chagall or Ackermann in their own ways, Francis translates the dynamic interplay of melody into visual form, using his signature style to capture the rhythm and movement of music on paper. He invites the viewer to a synesthetic experience.

Fernand Léger

Fernand Léger (1881-1955) is not only an artist but also a dedicated teacher whose avant-garde modernism will leave a significant impact on future generations on both sides of the Atlantic. Notably, artists like Sam Francis and Hans Hartung are among his pupils. In the 1910s in Paris, Léger develops a unique visual vocabulary known as Tubism, which he refines and develops throughout his career.

Léger aims to capture the world in a language that makes contemporary art more democratic and accessible to all viewers. He depicts everyday workers using geometric shapes reminiscent of industrial materials, such as cylindrical and conical forms, rendered in primary colors such as red, yellow, and blue, as well as green, with bold black outlines against a white background. This simplified treatment and vibrant coloring of contemporary subject matter positions him as a precursor to American Pop Art, which emerges in the 1950s.

After World War II, Fernand Léger shifts the focus in his artwork, becoming less abstract and concentrating on depicting subjects and scenes from contemporary popular life. His desire to portray the common man and create works accessible to the working class reflects the socialist ideals nurtured by avant-garde movements before and after the war. However, Léger's works maintain a neutral and unpolitical humanism. Pieces such as his abstract watercolor in vibrant colors, a bronze relief depicting a woman's portrait, and an ink drawing of a still life with flowers, all from the 1950s, exemplify both his freely abstract and abstract figurative styles.

Alexander Calder

American-born **Alexander Calder** (1898-1976) is renowned as the pioneer of mobile sculpture. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, he lives in Paris and is inspired by the artistic environment of the École de Paris to work in an abstract manner. He returns to France in the 1960s and remains there until his death. Throughout his career, Calder also explores various other artistic media. Notably, as his fame increases in the postwar era, he becomes more prolific in producing prints, which he often uses as a means to advocate for sociopolitical causes.

Alexander Calder's prints echo the boldly colored abstract shapes of his groundbreaking sculptures, which aim to eliminate the disparity between form, mass, and movement. His iconic sculptures typically consist of large flat oval slabs in primary colors suspended from metal threads attached to a central trunk or suspended from the ceiling. Achieving balance in these sculptures requires careful consideration of the various weights and lengths of suspension. This delicate equilibrium between shape, size, and color is also evident in the composition of his prints.

In works such as *Untitled* (1976), the same sense of lightness and movement found in Calder's sculptural pieces is conveyed. The elements within the composition are perfectly balanced on the paper plane, evoking a dynamic sense of harmony and rhythm. Through his prints, Calder effectively translates the essence of his sculptural vision, capturing the spirit of movement and balance in two-dimensional form.

In *Sea Creatures* (*Squid*), Alexander Calder not only represents the evolutionary history of life on

Earth before the emergence of mankind but also carries a contemporary message that extends beyond its seemingly prehistoric subject matter. The title of the portfolio, *Our Unfinished Revolution*, hints at this broader significance. This portfolio is published in the mid-1970s to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the National Emergency Civil Liberties Committee, an organization dedicated to advocating for civil liberties such as freedom of speech, assembly, and travel.

2nd FLOOR

STARTING FROM SCRATCH

In the postwar era, at first most artists who turn to abstraction grasp back on prewar theories and avant-gardes. However, a number of avant-garde artists wants to break free from the abstraction of prewar avant-garde movements and start from scratch. One of the first groups to formulate this desire is CoBrA in 1948. A new generation of artists with the same scope follows: Ten years later, German ZERO is founded, soon expanding to other European countries, and in 1960, the Nouveaux Réalistes conquer France.

Karel Appel

CoBrA, founded in 1948, is the first postwar radical avant-garde movement that seeks to break free from the constraints of contemporary art and reinvent humanity through art. The group rejects the established norms of abstraction prevalent in prewar avant-garde movements and advocates for total freedom of color and form. Inspired by tribal art and the work of artists like Joan Miró, CoBrA aimes to tap into the spontaneity, experimentalism, and innocence found in children's art. **Karel Appel** (1921-2006) embodies the group's spirit of artistic freedom and uninhibited expression.

This untitled sculpture by Karel Appel depicts a rabbit, a motif that symbolizes purity and innocence, jumping through a hoop, transcending boundaries and constraints. This theme of freedom resonates deeply with Appel's artistic philosophy, which seeks to tap into the raw, instinctual creativity of children's art and change the course of history.

Dessert View by Karel Appel exemplifies his distinctive approach to painting, characterized by the primal energy of his gestural brushstrokes and a brilliantly colored childlike style. The landscape depicted in the artwork is rendered with spontaneity, as Appel prioritizes the act of painting itself over achieving a specific outcome. Thus, his compositions invite the viewer to engage with the artwork on an intuitive level. As a member of the Nouvelle École de Paris, Apple's works reflects Art Informel.

In *De tovenaar* (The Wizard), Karel Appel assumes the role of a magician, depicted taming wild animals akin to a lion tamer in a circus. However, these animals are not clearly defined; rather, they are portrayed as bright, multi-colored blobs reminiscent of fantasy creatures, like the frightening living trees in his *Les têtes comme les arbres* (Heads like Trees). These whimsical yet enigmatic entities serve as a reflection of the uncertainty and chaos of the times that the artist attempts to bring under control.

Güenther Uecker

In 1958, the formation of the group ZERO in Germany marks a significant moment in the art world, with **Güenther Uecker** (1930) emerging as one of its prominent figures. ZERO artists seek to break away from the burdens of postwar art and instead embrace a new beginning. Through their art, they aim to convey hope for a brighter future, offering a counterbalance to the despair of the previous generation. They experiment with unconventional materials and techniques, pushing the boundaries of artistic expression.

Starting in the late 1960s, Güenther Uecker begins incorporating nails into his artworks, a practice that will became characteristic of his oeuvre. In the 1980s and 1990s, he embarks on the series titled *Trees*, featuring wooden trunks adorned with a crown of rusty nails. The nails, an industrial material typically associated with destruction, are arranged like a crown atop the lifeless wooden trunk, suggesting both the devastation wrought by human activity and nature's inherent resilience and capacity for regeneration.

NOUVEAUX RÉALISTES

The group Nouveau Réalisme, founded in 1960, brings together artists Arman, Jean Tinguely, and later César, with Christo also associated with them, albeit not as an official member. The uniting factor is their consciousness of a collective uniqueness. Their works are based on appropriation of reality, be it urban or industrial. They wish to connect to contemporary reality through their art.

Christo (born Christo Vladimirov Javacheff, 1935–2020), is known for his distinctive artistic practice of packaging objects, ranging from small items to monumental buildings. Through his work, he offers a commentary on contemporary civilization by enveloping commercial and industrial objects, thereby annihilating them and changing their impact. To finance his large-scale projects, Christo creates multiples for sale. One such example is the *Venus Villa Borghese*, a lithograph depicting his 1974 project to wrap a statue located in the gardens of the Villa Borghese in Rome.

César, born Cesare Baldaccini (1921-1998), revolutionizes sculpture by adopting innovative approaches to materials and techniques. In the 1960s, he introduces his series of „compressions," which involve creating sculptures by subjecting everyday objects such as cars or rubbish to immense pressure in a hydraulic press. César also explores the possibilities of synthetic materials, particularly pouring polyurethane foam. He views the act of pouring as a transformative process that brings out the spirit of the material, resulting in unique forms that he calls "expansions."

Jean Tinguely (1925-1991) is renowned for his automated kinetic sculptures, which he creates using a variety of materials including natural and industrial waste products. His sculptures, often colorful and dynamic, are a satirical commentary on the absurdity of automation and the excessive production tendencies of consumer society. His colorful mixed media work from the 1980s mimics such a construction, adding color and indicating movement by way of gestural lines. In his ink drawing *Metapandemonium*, then again, Tinguely depicts industrial parts suspended in mid-air, suggesting a chaotic explosion and reflecting his fascination with mechanization and its consequences. Conversely, his collage *Hier etwas Klarheit* (Herewith Some Clarity) ironically contradicts its title, presenting a composition that is anything but clear. Tinguely's artistic approach is deeply rooted in the Dada movement, which embraced absurdity and challenged societal norms.

Arman

Arman (Armand Pierre Arman born Armand Fernández, 1928-2005) initially identifies with Surrealism before becoming a prominent figure of the Nouveau Réalisme movement. Arman focuses on the industrialized urban landscape, using manufactured goods as his artistic materials. He has a particular affinity for objects imbued with character, such as musical instruments. As Arman's career progresses, his approach to art becomes more aggressive and confrontational, serving as outspoken critiques of society.

In Romantic Suite B, Arman exemplifies his exploration of visually representing music, a theme that has been revisited by numerous avant-garde artists throughout the 20th century. In this piece, he combines images suggestive of violins with gestural rendering and paint splashes, reminiscent of both the work of Max Ackermann and Sam Francis. By blending these elements, Arman creates a dynamic composition that captures the essence of music through visual means, inviting viewers to interpret the artwork's rhythmic and (dis-)harmonic qualities.

In the mid-1950s, Arman begins experimenting with stamps made from ordinary objects. In *Engelrot*, he incorporates a small sculpture used as a stamp to create a sequential depiction of a moving figure, reminiscent of frames in a film reel. This technique adds a dynamic quality to the artwork, capturing the essence of motion and progression.

Untitled (1978) showcases the impression of a similar object in two colors repeated across the picture plane. This time, the repetitive stamping process results in a visually expressive and gestural work, echoing the style of the Nouvelle École de Paris.

In *École de Nice*, Arman takes the stamping process to another level by accumulating the repeated stamping of the title „École de Nice" in a linear, horizontal manner. The lines of stamps are then repeated vertically, creating a dense monochrome plane. This technique not only highlights the repetitive nature of the stamping process but also explores the visual impact of cumulative marks, resulting in a textured and painterly plane.

Arman's *Accumulation Colombienne* and *Accumulation* (Réveils) are representative of his innovative approach to sculpture that he calls "accumulations,"

which he begins exploring in 1959. These sculptures are composed of a large number of identical everyday objects, such as coffee kettles and alarm clocks. In his earlier accumulations, the broken nature of the objects conveys a sense of tragedy. However, in his later accumulations, Arman preserves the objects by encasing them in Plexiglas boxes. This preservation allows the objects to maintain their identity while also highlighting their inherent spirit.

Violon brûlé (Burned Violin) and *Cadre brûlé* (Burned Frame) are examples of Arman's „combustions," a series in which he burns objects. These works challenge traditional notions of art by transforming everyday objects through destructive means. *J'ai hiberné dans mon passé* (I dwelled in my past) is a lithograph that references Arman's *Violon brulé* from the previous year. The lithograph depicts the outline created by ashes around a burned violin. Through these works, Arman explores the transformative power of destruction and the complex relationship between creation and destruction in the artistic process.

Violon fleur (Flower Violin), *Trumpets*, and *Untitled (Violon)* are examples of Arman's „coupes," a series in which he slices up objects as part of his artistic process. This method too involves a deliberate and sometimes violent act of deconstruction, transforming ordinary objects into fragmented pieces of art. The sliced instruments become a metaphor for the dissonance and discord present in modern society, while also highlighting the transformative power of artistic expression.

In *Currency*, Arman depicts the symbols of various currencies emerging from paint tubes, which are partly responsible for the beginning of 20th century avant-garde art. This composition serves as a poignant commentary on the commercialization of art in contemporary society.

Richard Serra

A small group of American postwar artists takes up the quest for creating expressive art with purely color and form to convey spirituality, but free of the theoretical ballast of the various prewar European movements. They become known as the Abstract Expressionists, which is an equally heterogenous group as the Nouvelle École de Paris. The following generation, the Minimalists, takes it one step further and gets rid of both the spiritual connotation and the traditional materials in art. Follows Postminimalism in the 1970s, that takes on the pure formal aesthetic of Minimalism and uses simple material, while reintroducing the expressiveness of the artist, not unlike Art Informel or the Nouveaux Réalistes.

Richard Serra (1938-2024) is one of the leading Postminimalists. His large-scale geometric sculptures, designed for specific locations, challenge the viewer's perception and interaction with space. These works often highlight the nature of the materials used and their relationship to the surrounding environment. Since the 1970s, Serra also explores the medium of print, furthering his interest in scale, process and material. In the unconventionally large-scale silkscreen *Afangar, Hreppholar III*, he employs a paint stick over ink during the printing process, creating a textured and tactile surface that adds depth and dimension to the artwork.

Freedom of Speech

The latter half of the 20th century sees art become increasingly socio-politically outspoken, reflecting the tumultuous events and ideologies of the times. While early 20th century avant-gardes often pursued more subtle and universal themes in their art, certain artists embrace a more direct engagement with topical issues. Surrealists such as Joan Miró and Roberto Matta, influenced by the upheavals of their era, incorporate socio-political commentary into their works. Similarly, artists associated with the École de Paris, including Pablo Picasso, employ their art as a platform for reflecting the contemporary world. Even within the Nouvelle École de Paris, figures like Fernand Léger and Eduardo Chillida utilize their artistic practices to engage with contemporary events, albeit in varying degrees of outspokenness. By directly addressing such themes through their art, these artists contribute to a broader dialogue about the role of art in society and its potential to effect change or provoke thought.

Roberto Matta (1911-2002) is known as a Surrealist artist for his innovative approach to painting, devising an automatic technique that allows for the expression of subconscious thoughts and emotions just like in writing. During the period from 1947 to 1959, Matta's association with the Surrealist group becomes strained, leading to his expulsion. Subsequently, his works become scenes abstracted from reality with connections to real-life events and societal issues. His works from 1953 deal with the process of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, a married couple convicted of spying for the Soviet Union, that in that year become the first American civilians to be

executed during peacetime. Matta's work rather captures the emotional and psychological dimensions of the event than provides a straightforward narrative.

Eduardo Chillida (1924-2002) originally trains as an architect and transitions to art during his time in Paris after World War II. It is upon returning to his native Basque region in Spain in the late 1950s that he begins creating his renowned large-scale sculptures in forged iron, characterized by their curvilinear and geometric forms. Chillida's sculptures, much like those of Richard Serra, are intended for public spaces and designed to interact with viewers. However, Chillida takes this interaction a step further by deliberately selecting locations with historical significance, aiming to evoke a deeper connection with the local community and its collective memory. In his *Médecin du Monde*, the title of which is revelatory of Chillida's social interests, he optically recreates the tension between the full and the void, using the black planes perceived as holes or solid structured on a white ground while adding in structured grey planes that read as heavy stone.

Roy Lichtenstein

In the 1950s, Pop Art emerges in the United States. It confines its subject matter to items from popular culture executed in a similar style to publicity material that all classes of people understand and can relate to. The visual appearance of large and colorful works of a certain clarity, at first sight, makes them into pleasing and decorative items. This seems in contrast to their purpose of food for thought aimed at the everyday person, but in fact this communicative universality underlines it. One of the main representatives of Pop Art, **Roy Lichtenstein** (1923-1997), plays a pivotal role in its the emergence and rise.

Roy Lichteinstein's *As I opened fire*, the original oil on canvas of which is part of the collection of the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, is a series of three images appropriated from the comic book *All American Men of War* that was popular in those days. In fact, Lichtenstein explores this typically American style of visual communication made for the masses in view of its ability to provoke thought. The three images create a sequential narrative. It is a story of military aggressiveness by a superhero, which is a parody on American popular beliefs. However, unlike European artists, Lichtenstein does not comment the situation but highlights it by simply presenting it.

Keith Haring

The artistic practice of **Keith Haring** (1958-1990) defies easy categorization, blending elements of Pop Art, Neo-Expressionism, and street art to create a distinctive visual language that resonates with a wide audience. Haring moves to New York City in the late 1970s, where he draws inspiration from the energy and spontaneity of graffiti culture. He soon develops his signature style characterized by bold, thick lines and simple, iconic imagery. His use of vivid colors and repetitive motifs, such as radiant babies, dancing figures, barking dogs, and hearts, creates a visual vocabulary that is instantly recognizable and accessible to diverse audiences. Haring's artwork often conveys sociopolitical messages, addressing issues such as drug addiction, AIDS awareness, and the threat of nuclear war. He seeks to raise awareness about these pressing social issues while promoting messages of love, peace, and human connection.

The *Chocolate Buddha* series created shortly before Keith Haring's death, represents a significant evolution in his artistic style. His trademark bold lines and vibrant colors are still present, but they are combined with a more intricate and layered composition. The solid colored backgrounds are replaced by backgrounds with regular or irregular motifs, adding depth and complexity to the imagery. The symbols and signs in the *Chocolate Buddha* series evoke Buddhist mandalas and tribal art, suggesting a deeper exploration of spirituality and cultural heritage reflecting the changing cultural landscape of the late 1980s. Despite these changes, Haring's universal message of peace and connection remains central to the series. The interlaced figures and lines in the images symbolize the interconnectedness of all beings and the importance of harmony and unity in the world.

NEO-EXPRESSIONISM

Artists in Germany in the 1960s turning back to Expressionism in reaction to Art Informel, reflects a broader trend of artists reconnecting with their cultural heritage and seeking new ways to engage with the world around them. They embrace a style characterized by emotional intensity, bold colors, and agitation, allowing them to convey their perspectives on contemporary society in a powerful and direct manner. In the late 1970s, the collaboration between A.R. Penck from East Germany and Jörg Immendorf from West Germany represents a significant moment of artistic and cultural exchange in the context of the divided nation. Penck and Immendorf find common ground in their shared

commitment to addressing pressing social and political issues, such as the division of Berlin and the defense of dissidents.

The artistic style of **A. R. Penck** (born Ralph Winkler, 1939-2017) is characterized by stick figures and hieroglyphic symbols. In his imagery, these figures often confront various threats or obstacles, such as the crocodile. Hieroglyphic symbols incorporated into his compositions add layers of meaning and ambiguity to his work. Penck's visual vocabulary suggests a universal quality, representing everyman grappling with the complexities of contemporary existence.

Jörg Immendorff (1945-2007) is probably one of the most known German contemporary artists and his work is very outspoken. In *Café de Flore* he captures the essence of the iconic Parisian café known as a gathering place for artists and intellectuals to engage in discussions about art, culture, and society. He incorporates a diverse array of likenesses, of well-known public personalities and a representation of himself. Thus, Immendorff inserts himself into the narrative, suggesting a personal connection to the themes and subjects addressed.

Mann mit Affenmaske in einer Schneekugel presents the figure of a man wearing a monkey mask that is recurrent in Immendorf's work, enclosed within a snow globe. It serves as a metaphor for the artist, highlighting the duality of the artist's identity. On one hand, artists are considered noble visionaries and innovators, possessing the creative power to shape and influence the world through their artistic endeavors. On the other hand, there is the artist who is confined in his little world and faces the vastness of mundane realities. The viewer is invited to ponder the absurdity of it. Herewith, Immendorf's image offers the visitor some final food for thought on the avant-garde artists and their art encountered in the Stava Family Collection.

Avant-garde Art from the Stava Family Collection

Curator and author of the texts: Nicole Stava and Claudia Rajlich
Production and installation: Jiří Novotný and Miroslav Topič
Logistics: Vedes s.r.o.
Graphic design and media: FiftyFifty creative agency

Art PANSTVÍ BECHYNĚ

© 2024 All rights reserved. No part of this text may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the author.

Art PANSTVÍ BECHYNĚ