

The Museum of Modern Art

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ANDRE MASSON

Over 80 paintings and a wide selection of drawings by André Masson will be on view at The Museum of Modern Art from June 3 through August 17, offering Americans their first opportunity to see Masson's work in depth and continuity. This first major retrospective exhibition, for which works are being lent by private collections and museums in the U.S. and Europe, spans every phase of Masson's career, from his Cubist beginnings in 1922 to the present, with special emphasis on the decades of the 1920s and 40s. Organized by William Rubin, Director of the Museum's Department of Painting and Sculpture, the exhibition will later travel to The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and the Grand Palais, Paris. The exhibition is accompanied by the first major monograph on Masson and his oeuvre, André Masson* by Mr. Rubin and Carolyn Lanchner, Research Curator of Painting and Sculpture.

Jean-Paul Sartre has remarked of André Masson's work that "the project of painting cannot be distinguished from the project of being a man." Masson's art confronts the universal lot of humanity--birth, death, sex, war, and the dark recesses of the mind--while being rooted in the particulars of twentieth-century life and of his own existence. Unlike earlier artists, however, Masson explores these themes not through direct illustration, but with an allusive poetic imagery grounded in the frequently turbulent interior of the imagination.

Born in 1896, Masson was part of the generation which came to maturity on the battlefields of World War I. Masson served as a front-line infantryman and was critically wounded in the Chemin des Dames offensive of 1917.

*ANDRE MASSON by William Rubin and Carolyn Lanchner. 232 pages, 235 illustrations (24 in color). \$20.00 clothbound; \$8.95 paperbound. Published by The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

During the twenties he took an active part in the Surrealist attempt to revolutionize the world by liberating the unconscious and irrational, and he was a determining influence on the development of Surrealist art during its first decade.

Initially indebted to Analytic Cubism, Masson, in Picasso's humorously resentful words, "turned Cubism inside out" by introducing fantastic subject matter and an organic form language into the received structure of Cubist art. Masson rejected the sheltered life that he felt was implicit in Cubist painting while at the same time retaining Cubist pictorial syntax and forcing it to accommodate his spiritual, emotional, and erotic concerns. Masson is a dominant figure in what may be called the abstract side of Surrealist painting, which as Mr. Rubin points out "reposed largely on the technique of automatism that was at the center of the definition of Surrealism in the first manifesto." Automatism for the Surrealists was the almost mediumistic process through which the artist, with no preconceived subject matter, allows his hand to move freely, producing marks and gestures that allow the creative unconscious to emerge. Masson virtually invented automatic drawing as understood by the Surrealists, and he extended the automatist approach into his painting.

This exhibition brings together for the first time most of the still extant "automatic" sand paintings of 1926-27, including one of the finest works of the series, Fish Drawn on the Sand, from the Bern Kunst Museum. In their spontaneous method of execution, these works anticipated developments in American painting after World War II, most notably the paintings of Jackson Pollock. Lyrically violent and revealing a primordial eroticism, such paintings as Battle of Fishes, Painting (Figure) and Fish Drawn on the Sand communicate a sense of energy and movement. In her catalog essay, Ms. Lanchner describes Masson's technique in Battle of Fishes and other subsequent sand paintings: "After covering the canvas with a thin layer of gesso under which

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were scattered sparse areas of sand, Masson placed the canvas on the floor and sprinkled glue randomly over its surface. Then, after pouring sand over the entire area, he turned and tilted the stretcher, causing patterns to emerge where the sand adhered to the glue. With a pencil he rapidly sketched in a web of lines whose directions and contours were suggested to him by the shapes of the glue-and-sand 'archipelagos.' Lastly with paint spilled directly on the canvas, he elaborated the composition. In subsequent paintings he drew with charcoal, ink, or (occasionally) oil; variously he shifted the sand, incorporated in it bits of shells, applied it layer upon layer, and blew it through a straw. Before making his sand shapes he sometimes left the canvas bare, sometimes treated it with a thin film of paint; and from time to time he used a canvas completely covered with sand as his initial ground--always adding at the last 'a few lineaments..., a spot of sky blue above, a bloody trace below.'"

Masson's second Surrealist period, 1930-40, is represented in the exhibition by paintings and drawings from the Massacre series of 1931-34 to its culmination in the tormented, violent work of the immediate pre-war years. The Massacre series, which includes some of the strongest drawings Masson has ever made depicts the horrific slaughter of women in a manner that recalls the writings of Sade and Lautreamont's *Maldoror*. Masson has remarked of these works: "These massacres of female figures take on a ritual, sacrificial cast. I can't believe that they grow out of some misogyny of mine that I'm unaware of." As Ms. Lanchner notes, the Massacre series seems "to reach back to ancient myth to celebrate Dionysiac orgies." The paintings of the later thirties, for Masson a time of intense involvement in the tragic cause of republican Spain and a period of reconciliation with André Breton after their estrangement of the late twenties, is marked by Masson's reemergence as a draughtsmanly painter interested in exploring pagan myth, especially that of the Minotaur, through tortured and fantastic imagery.

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Like many of the Surrealists and a number of other artists living in France, World War II meant exile in America for Masson, who moved with his family into an old Colonial house in New Preston, Connecticut. Ms. Lanchner writes, "Masson's uprooting to America proved to be the catalyst for an extraordinary revitalization of his art" and it was during this period that "he achieved as never before the...synthesis of his innate gifts as a draughtsman with his great skills as a painter." Several of the paintings that are shown from this era, such as the all-over compositions Entanglement of 1941 and La Curée of 1944, have not been seen in America since the war years. Also assembled for the exhibition are examples from the Telluric series of paintings including Meditation on an Oak Leaf and Indiar Spring of 1942, and Iroquois Landscape and Meditation of the Painter of 1943. These works were inspired by the painter's experience of the American countryside and the colors of a New England autumn. "Masson's response to nature in New England," Mr. Rubin writes, "was less to depict it...than to suggest its forces. The morphologies of the Telluric pictures start from descriptions of actual living things--foliage, insects, and animals--and gradually evolve into metabiological fantasies....The themes of germination and eclosion return to inspire a newly inflected and enriched vocabulary of organic forms. These new forms have a rich, glowing, and at times almost phosphorescent quality achieved in part by setting their reflecting, sand-enriched colors against a black or dark brown that provides a kind of background matrix."

Masson's post-war work, influenced at different points by a growing interest in Oriental art and Zen as well as by Turner and Impressionism, is represented throughout its evolution and diversity. Included are the lyrical Nocturnal City of 1956, a volatile celebration of the artist's experience of Paris, and such masterful, rarely exhibited paintings as La Chute des Corps of 1960 and A la poursuite des eclosions et des germinations of 1968.

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Surveying Masson's stylistically various but consistently passionate art, Mr. Rubin observes: "In contemplating Masson's oeuvre, we are confronted with an artist who is finally not unsure of style but of art itself. Even as he loves it and uses it, he is trying to get beyond it, outside it.... Such unity as exists in Masson's enterprise is not one of style, although the constant return of his personal form of drawing provides a sense of continuity on that level. Nor is it even one of imagery, though the poetic continuity is more manifest than is the plastic one. The unity is felt rather in the way Masson's strong and very unique personality--as experienced through an amalgam of poetic, philosophic, and psychological attitudes--pervades all he does. The unity is thus that of the man, to which all he does as an artist...responds."