

# MAX ERNST

milano,  
palazzo reale  
4.10.2022 –  
26.02.2023

Press release

The **first retrospective exhibition ever held in Italy** dedicated to Max Ernst (1891-1976), the German painter, sculptor, poet and art theorist, later naturalized American and French, opens in Milan on October 4th.

The exhibition, promoted and produced by **the Municipality of Milan-Culture** and by **Palazzo Reale with Electa**, in collaboration with **Madeinart**, is curated by **Martina Mazzotta and Jürgen Pech**.

**It will present over 400 works** including paintings, sculptures, drawings, collages, photographs, jewellery and illustrated books from museums, foundations and private collections, in Italy and abroad. Among them: **the GAM in Turin, the Peggy Guggenheim Collection and the Ca' Pesaro Museum in Venice, the Tate Gallery in London, the Centre Pompidou in Paris, the Museo Cantini in Marseille, the State Museums and the Arp Foundation in Berlin, the Fondation Beyeler in Basel, the Thyssen-Bornemisza National Museum in Madrid.**

The lengthy work of study and investigation conducted by the curators has made it possible to include among the works on loan exhibits and documents that have not been shown in public for many decades, together with a total of some eighty paintings.

The immense range of themes and experiments covered by Ernst's work covers over seventy years of the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, between Europe and the United States, constantly escaping any definition. *Pictor doctus*, a profound connoisseur and visionary interpreter of the histories of art, philosophy, science and alchemy, Max Ernst is presented in this context as a **humanist in the neo-Renaissance sense**.

André Chastel claimed to find in Ernst a sort of "reincarnation of those Rhineland artists of Bosch-type devilry", while Marcel Duchamp saw his work as "a complete inventory of the different eras of Surrealism".

On the main floor of Palazzo Reale, visitors can immerse themselves in an exciting itinerary that traces the artist's adventurous creative parabola, marked by the great historical events of the twentieth century and as well as extraordinary loves and illustrious friendships. The layout narrates Ernst's **biography**, grouping the significant events into **4 major periods**, in turn divided into **9 thematic rooms** that reveal interdisciplinary approaches to his art.

A great, ideal **library**, the artist's own, made up of illustrated books, study manuals, photographs, objects and documents, unfolds through the whole course of the exhibition, inviting visitors to be

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active in grasping the interplay of references and correspondences between the sources of inspiration and the works themselves.

At the entrance to the exhibition galleries, the public is immediately invited to wrestle mentally with a masterpiece that attains its century this year: *Oedipus Rex* (1922).

The first two rooms, entitled **1. The Copernican Revolution;** **2. Within the Vision** accompany the first part of Ernst's biography, **Germany: 1891-1921**. They present his childhood and formative years in Germany, the sources of memory and inspiration for the artist's whole life; the Great War, in which he fought and equated with a period of death; the resurrection, the return to life, marriage and the birth of his son Jimmy, the revolutionary advent of Dada and the invention of collage, the first exhibition in France and proto-Surrealism.

The second part of the biography - **France, 1922-1940** - accompanies the next two rooms. In Room **3. The House at Eaubonne** presents a reconstruction, integrated with original fragments, of the frescoed house where Ernst had a *ménage a trois* with Gala and Paul Éluard.

The central role of love, friendship and eroticism in his choices and poetics is then the focus of Room **4. Eros and metamorphosis**.

Among the works in the first 4 rooms: *Crucifix* (1914), *Fiat Modes Pereat Ars* (1919), *Cormorants* (1920), *Les Malheurs des Immortels* (1922, in the only watercolour edition), the fragments of the house at *Eaubonne* (1923), *The Kiss* (1927), *Men Shall Know Nothing of This* (1927).

The exhibition continues with the years Ernst spent in Paris and France, the rise of Surrealism, his second marriage to Marie-Berthe and then his love for Leonora Carrington, his deep friendships, exchanges of ideas and collaborations with many leading figures of the avant-garde, travels and experiments, the advent of World War II and imprisonment as a "degenerate artist" by the Nazis. His exile in the United States, organised thanks to the support of his son Jimmy and especially Peggy Guggenheim, whom the artist was married to for a short time, introduces the section of the biography **America, 1941-1952**.

His adaptation to the international scene of New York, his great love for Dorothea Tanning and their marriage, the move to Sedona, Arizona, in the house built and decorated by the artists, introduce the following rooms: **5. The four elements (forests/land, birds/air, sea/water, hordes/fire), 6. Nature and vision, 7. The pleasure of creating forms (Gestaltungslust) - the pleasure of the eye (Augenlust)**. Here appears in particular the role that **nature and landscape play in the** invention of techniques (*frottage, grattage, decal and dripping*), in the creation of strands of the fantastic and the wonderful that also involve **sculpture and jewellery**, reflecting a constant dialectical tension between word and image, between spirit and matter. Notable among the works in these sections are *Histoire Naturelle* (1925), *Monument to the Birds* (1927), *The Forest* (1927-28), *Bird-Head* (1934-35), *Un orecchio prestato (A Lent Ear)* (1935), *The Entire City* (1936-37), *A Tissue of Lies* (1959), *La Fête à Seillans* (1964).

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The **return to Europe, 1953-1976**, continues with room number **8**, entitled **Memory and Wonder**, which brings together works from the different decades and illustrates how the history of culture and the return of antiquity became sources of inspiration and the object of Ernst's wonderful art: an art that creates an intimate and conscious relationship with the past and memory. Among the works presented: *Pietà or Revolution by Night* (1923), *The Antipope* (c.1941), *The Angel of Hearth and Home* (1937), *Dream and Revolution* (1945-'46), *Project for a Monument to Leonardo da Vinci* (1957), *In the Streets of Athens* (1960), *Hölderlin Poems* (1961), *Il Romanticismo* (Romanticism, 1964), *Portrait of an Ancestor* (1974).

A grand finale, with an eye turned to the stars, is room **9**. entitled **Cosmos and cryptographies**.

In the years leading up to the first moon-landing, art and science engaged in a dialogue in Ernst's works, opening up new views of the cosmos and involving astronomy and anthropology, physics and pataphysics. Artworks, books and films introduce the artist's extraordinary secret writings, cryptographies that go beyond coded languages and are intended for those capable of unravelling the mysteries of the cosmos.

Among the works on display: *The World of the Naive* (1965), *The World of the Confused. Absolute Refusal to Live As a Tachist* (1965), *Maximiliana or the Illegal Practice of Astronomy* (1964).

As in a great **Wunderkammer**, and by analogy with the universe of Max Ernst, the exhibition and the volume that accompanies it challenge visitors to try their hand at fascinating and intriguing games of perception between amazement and wonder, where logic and formal harmony are accompanied by impenetrable enigmas, where works, techniques and constellations of symbols lead **beyond painting**.

The exhibition will be accompanied by a **catalogue published by Electa, a guide and a new edition**, also by Electa, **of two fundamental studies** by Paola Dècina Lombardi on the Surrealist movement: *Surrealismo 1919-1969. Ribellione e immaginazione* and *La donna, la libertà, l'amore. Un'antologia sul surrealismo*.

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*Technical info*

*title:*

Max Ernst

*curated by*

Martina Mazzotta and Jürgen Pech

*venue*

Milan, Palazzo Reale

*date*

4 October 2022 – 26 February 2023

*exhibition by*

Palazzo Reale  
Comune di Milano  
Electa

*in collaboration with*

Madeinart

*times of opening*

Monday closed

Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday: 10am-7.30pm

Thursday: 10am-10.30pm

last admission one hour before closing time

*tickets*

(presale excluded)

full open: 18 euro

full: 15 euro

reduced: 13 euro

reduced schools: 6 euro

family ticket: 1 or 2 adults €10 - €6 / children from 6 to 14 years €6

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Exhibition tour

## INTRODUCTION

Max Ernst: the Dadaist, Surrealist, Romantic, pataphysicist and humanist interested in the Renaissance. Today, his life and work seem kaleidoscopic, extremely multifaceted yet unmistakable. A painter, sculptor, draughtsman, graphic artist and poet, Max Ernst summed up his extraordinarily varied, multiform art and life in a single credo: “My wanderings, my unrest, my impatience, my doubts, my beliefs, my hallucinations, my loves, my outbursts of anger, my revolts, my contradictions, my refusals to submit to any discipline – even my own – and the occasional visits of *Perturbation*, *My Sister* and *The Hundred Headless Woman*, certainly did not produce a climate conducive to the creation of peaceful, serene work. [...] Seditious, heterogeneous, full of contradictions, it is unacceptable to the specialists – in art, in culture, in behaviour, in logic, in morality. But it does have the ability to enchant my accomplices: the poets, the pataphysicians and a few illiterates.” The vast range of themes and experimentation in Ernst’s oeuvre spans 70 years of the history of the 20th century, between Europe and the United States, inevitably defying concrete definition.

The artist’s universe confounds and amazes, continually challenging perception by combining logic and formal harmony with unfathomable enigmas, while art and nature, beauty and the bizarre magically coexist, as in the Mannerist and Baroque tradition.

The turning point in his career in 1919 was akin to a Copernican Revolution, triggering the creation of indirect techniques and new modes of representation. In fact, the devices employed by Max Ernst were a creative mix of passive and active, evoking the modalities of inner vision but at the same time generating interpretations of the outside world. He never abandoned the Dada approach of subverting traditional aesthetics.

The techniques of overpainting, *collage*, *frottage*, *grattage*, decalcomania and oscillation, enabled the artist to take endless pleasure in experimentation, producing wondrous realities and rendering the banal poetic.

From the outset, Ernst utilized theatrical sets, stages and even wooden floorboards to create his works. Art became the staging of fiction and informed engagement with a fundamental theme: the relationship between the real image and the observer’s perception. The artist introduced stratagems reminiscent of 17th-century wit and the Romantic irony of the late 18th century, and deliberately distanced himself in presenting motifs and elements of his world by employing scenic devices, representative images, and even a figure/ alter ego like the imaginary bird “Loplop”.

In the art of Max Ernst, the polarities between past and present, natural and artificial coexist in a constant dialectical tension. Thus, the past expands to embrace the universal: knowledge and culture, space and time are interwoven in lofty philosophical play. Everyday objects, the structures of nature, the mundane world of technical images and illustrations, the artworks of mental patients, non-European art, but also the

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dream and the home, become stimuli for artistic inspiration. Innovative modes of representation exist alongside a new vision of the world that extends the gaze to the farthest boundaries of the visible.

The major issue of the differences between art and reality is explored through the architecture of the exhibition. Each of the nine rooms is a stage for vision. The itinerary follows a chronological criterion – Dada in Cologne, Surrealism in Paris, exile in America, return to Europe – combined with nine powerful themes: The Copernican Revolution, Within the vision, The House at Eaubonne, Eros and Metamorphosis, The Four Elements (air, earth, water, fire), Nature and vision, The pleasure of creating forms / Pleasing to the eye,

Memory and Wonder, Cosmos / Cryptography.

Some of the works presented have not been on public display for decades and, besides being the first retrospective dedicated to Max Ernst in Italy, this exhibition and its accompanying catalogue aim to extend and to renew the field of research on the artist, by adding a new chapter to the appraisal of his oeuvre at the international level. Lastly, due prominence is also given to his prolific output of catalogues, invitations to exhibition openings, and publications featuring texts by himself or by likeminded authors, such as Hans Arp, Antonin Artaud, Lewis Carroll, René Crevel, Paul Éluard, Friedrich Hölderlin and Alfred Jarry. Max Ernst was a remarkably cultured artist whose interests went beyond the visual arts, extending to poetry, literature, philosophy, alchemy and the sciences. The history of culture, the inner world comprising memories, dreams and visions, along with the great book of nature, were always the artist's chosen sources for representing the "Great Theatre of the World". It was composed of forests, birds, animals, female and celestial bodies that hybridized unexpectedly with the artificial, myth, the classical and religious themes of the history of Italian and German Renaissance art and of Romanticism, as well as the tools of science and technology, form constellations that were increasingly different.

By constantly alternating between mimesis and metamorphosis, between the animation of the inanimate and the petrification of the animate, the philosopher/painter transmitted, until his dying day, an ideological message founded on a new art of seeing, proving to be a worthy heir to his own long late-Renaissance tradition of the *Wunderkammern*. Max Ernst's life and work still have a powerful effect: they are part of history, but their impact and significance can be timeless and open up ever-new perspectives. Starting from the world and the cultures he found himself experiencing in the course of his life, Max Ernst created a world and a cosmos that were truly his own.

## 1.

### THE COPERNICAN REVOLUTION

Max Ernst drew and painted from childhood, following in the footsteps of his father Philipp, who taught at a school for the deaf and dumb. The young Max was self-taught and did not go to art school, but was nevertheless interested in study and research. From 1910 he attended the University of Bonn, where he read classical philology, philosophy, psychology and art history.

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In 1912, he formulated his first artistic credo in *Volksmund* magazine: “Knowing means knowing how to forge forms. Knowing implies that one is able to feel the inner life of line and colour [...]. Knowing implies that one has lived experiences. For the artist, the most common but also the rarest things can become lived experiences: a sound of a colour, an interweaving of lines.” His works of the 1910s were characterized by a variety of styles; in fact, the artist’s experiments drew on Impressionism, Pointillism, Futurism, Orphism, Cubism and Expressionism: “One’s eyes drank in everything that entered one’s field of vision,” he would later say. The discovery of Giorgio De Chirico’s work through the magazine *Valori Plastici*, triggered something akin to a Copernican Revolution. The series of lithographs entitled *FIAT MODES pereat ars* (Let There Be Fashion, Down with Art) features stages, theatre sets, wooden floors and mannequins. Here the worlds staged in “metaphysical painting” are integrated with writing and used in puns, their melancholic gloom banished by the subversive energy of Dada. And nearly all the sheets of the portfolio bear references to relationships between the two sexes.

In the painting *Justitia*, Max Ernst creates a theatrical interior setting, enclosed by two reddish walls supported by a fairly tall base. The half-length female figure behind the counter points, with both her hand and a knife, to an amorphous mass on a plate. On her left stands another female figure, wearing an apron and holding a second knife and a scale. These are the attributes of Justice, which in Ernst’s iconography is not blind but has eyes, while the woman behind her is depicted with empty eye sockets. In this emblematic painting, the artist plays with the idea of liberating vision: by substituting the ancient representation of Justice with his new version, *Justitia*, he claims his right to draw inspiration freely by seeking to “rid himself of his own blindness”, as he would later say.

## 2.

### ALL’INTERNO DELLA VISIONE WITHIN THE VISION

In parallel and consequent to his interest in empty places and the wooden mannequins of metaphysical painting, Max Ernst extended his research to unconventional methods of making art. In fact, he used indirect techniques that became a source of inspiration in their turn. Firstly, Ernst utilized impressions made with preexisting printing plates, which he recontextualized through drawing interventions or new combinations, overturning and broadening their meaning. Secondly, he overpainted the illustrations in school textbooks on mathematics, geometry, anthropology, zoology, botany, anatomy, mineralogy and paleontology, or reworked the linear structures of cut-out paper figures. This creative method was determined by processes involving selection and the creation of light through colour, or by drawing.

These small-format works derived from a single source-image, but the artist referenced other sources through superimposition and displacement. For his photographic and woodcut collages he used publications dating to World War I and popular magazines of the 19th century, such as *La Nature* and

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*Le magasin pittoresque*. In *Design for a Manifesto*, created at the end of 1921, the artist experimented with the same techniques in a large format, describing himself in ironic Dadaist terms in the left margin: “Max Ernst is a liar, legacy-hunter, slanderer, cheat, defamer and boxer”.

In 1922, publications featuring his woodcut collages began to appear. For *Répétitions* Ernst made 9 collages to accompany the 33 poems by his friend Paul Éluard. The frontispiece bears an overpainting in colour and the cover is decorated with a collage in which the motif of the pierced eye symbolizes the liberated inner

gaze. *The Misfortunes of the Immortals*, on the other hand, contains 20 texts, written jointly by Paul Éluard and Max Ernst and marked by constant reciprocal exchange, illustrated by 20 collages, with one more on the frontispiece. In a letter of 1927 to the art historian Franz Roh, Max Ernst writes that “through the juxtaposition of opposite elements, theretofore completely foreign and unrelated to each other, I want to produce an electric or erotic tension. This generates charges and high-tension currents. The more unexpected the pairing of the elements, the more amazing the spark of poetry that is ignited seems to me.”

### 3.

#### LA CASA DI EAUBONNETHE HOUSE AT EAUBONNE

Max Ernst entered Paris illegally in 1922, using Paul Éluard’s passport, and moved into the house that the poet shared with his attractive Russian wife Gala. Here Ernst made the large painting, *Rendez-vous des amis*, a portrait of the embryonic Surrealist group. It was also here that he and the couple began their *ménage à trois*, which would continue more passionately in the house at Eaubonne, a few kilometres away. After Paul Éluard’s father had bought the property in April 1923 and it had been partly modernized, Max Ernst painted murals on two floors, while the attic became his studio. In the lounge and dining room on the ground floor the artist depicted life-size figures on individual sections of walls and doors, also decorating a ceiling with three ballerinas in silhouette on a boat, and a door with an image of hands.

The two adjacent doors on the first floor, which lead to the bedroom and bathroom, are decorated with butterfly wings that seem to flutter when the doors are opened and closed, creating the momentary illusion of a living insect. The bedroom of the Éluards’ five-year-old daughter Cécile has a frieze just below the ceiling, in which there is a constant interplay of thematic variations. The individual scenes are divided by images of houses and rooms that open onto the exterior, leading the eye to various figures: a woman, a pair of twins, two fish. Expanses of water delineated by low horizons alternate with sweeping landscapes that prefigure proto-Surrealist imagery. In one segment a duck with a kind of moped and large fan is swimming, accompanied by a cross between a tadpole and a snake. Next to this, a lady is about to leave the sea and undertake a journey with a little boy floating in the air. In other segments of the frieze there is a frog and a tree creeper, a rider and horse,

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the blue flower of German Romanticism and an enormous foot on a sailboat, a craft loaded with animals and a human ear, as well as plants and a bird amidst the ocean waves. On the three walls of the adjoining bedroom, reached through a connecting door, the key to all the imagery lies in various large paintings: a fantastical garden in which real and imaginary space are magically combined.

#### 4.

##### EROS AND METAMORPHOSIS

Max Ernst associated the experience of love with knowledge and poetic insight, which makes it fundamental to understanding many aspects of his life and art. In the Surrealist view (and also that of alchemy and Oriental disciplines), a work cannot be constructed or an individual transformed without the help of love, the instrument of knowledge and change. Thus, physical Eros and spiritual love are two complementary aspects of the same phenomenon: the lovers who find each other again and who cultivate their elective affinities, reconstitute the myth of the androgyne through their union.

According to this view, Eros culminates in a metamorphosis that achieves an almost complete organic and psychic unity, connecting the individual to the universe and giving him the means to change it. The chosen woman (one and one alone) is therefore loved and celebrated as the magnetic centre of life, ethics, poetics, and aesthetics. An essential theoretical and poetic text by Max Ernst of 1959, in the form of questions and answers, is significantly entitled *Woman's Nudity Is Wiser than Philosophical Teachings*.

The female bodies represented by Max Ernst are mostly forms with a marked sensuality, which hybridize

with the dimension of myth, the cosmos, and the animal, vegetable and mineral kingdom.

The composition of the masterpiece *Men Shall Know Nothing of This*, painted in 1923 and with a dedication to André Breton on the back, is based on a cosmological scheme dating to the 17th century. The centrally placed sexual act has given rise to many different interpretations in a homosexual vein, mostly in the field of alchemy and psychoanalysis.

The theme of liberated vision, of seen/unseen, becomes tactile vision in *Two Girls in Beautiful Poses* (1924), whereas in *Portrait of Gala* – the female protagonist of the Eaubonne *ménage à trois* – executed in 1926, it is a ghostly, enigmatic figure against a blue background. Flowing, unbroken lines unite the figures in a coherent, sensual whole in *The Kiss* (1927), a homage to Leonardo da Vinci's *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne* of 1510-13. Ernst replaces the lamb in Leonardo's work with a bird, significantly alluding to the kite that is central to Sigmund Freud's famous interpretation of the painting and of Leonardo's sexual identity. In the silver *Sculptures* of 1961, men and women are transformed into archetypal forms and hybridized with animals and plants; they have protruding mouths/orifices and adopt knowing, ironic expressions. In *Love Code* (1966), forms of secret writing (which the artist would develop further in his final years) offer alternative access to a realm to which common codified languages do not have the key – that of Eros and its metamorphoses.

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## 5.

### THE FOUR ELEMENTS

As from the 1920s, nature as mother and source of endless possibilities is the protagonist of many of Ernst's works, for which he invented the *frottage* technique: by rubbing a pencil over a sheet of paper laid on the graining of wooden floorboards, he conjured an extraordinary fauna of biomorphic creatures, resembling the imprints of ancient fossils. This can be seen in the amazing encyclopedic compendium titled *Natural History* (1926). Max Ernst's interest in the natural sciences was accompanied by a fascination with, and knowledge of, hermeticism and alchemy, which was primarily concerned with reuniting the human being with the forces of the cosmos. According to ancient theories, traceable mainly to Pythagoras and Aristotle, the number 4 indicates the spectrum of earthly possibilities, while the combinations of air, water, earth and fire are at the origin of creation. The four elements reappear constantly in the history of science, alchemy and art, and are adopted here to organize the works on the subject of nature from different stages of Max Ernst's production.

*Air.* A predilection for birds and for the freedom of air is a constant in the research of the artist, who chose the French "Loplop" and German "Hornebom" as ornithological pseudonyms. In the masterpiece *Monument to the Birds* (1927), two pairs of birds, enveloped by unbroken, fluid lines, symbolize the burial and ascension of Christ. Here Max Ernst imposes his own Surrealist formula of the free monument.

*Earth.* The artist used the *grattage* technique, which involves scraping multiple layers of coloured paint, to conjure the magical presences of Romantic inspiration that animate forests and woods, as in *Forest and Dove* (1927) and *The Forest* (1927/28).

*Water.* This element is evoked by Ernst through the use of different techniques and materials. The seascapes, such as *Two Swallows Cross the Ocean in a Suitcase* (1925/26) and *Gulf Stream* (1926), are filled with potential; they feature forms, objects, animals and events in which the natural and artificial, art and science are interwoven, reflecting the mirroring between micro and macrocosm, emblematic of alchemical mystery.

*Fire.* The incandescence of fire, an element essential to transmutation in alchemy, but also destructive, is skilfully rendered by Ernst with the decalcomania technique, as in the superb *Volcano II* (1946/77) and *Arizona Red* (1951). The Barbaric hordes advance, enveloped in flames that constantly change shape; they presage the dark events of history, as in *Young People trampling on Their Mothers* (1927) and *Barbarians Marching to the West* (1959). Lastly, all four elements coexist in the great enchanted garden of *A Tissue of Lies* (1959).

## 6.

### NATURE AND VISION

In the mid-1930s, Max Ernst introduced a wild, primordial and predatory nature, similar to a jungle, in his work. Many titles allude to this theme, such as *The Entire City* and *Antipodes of Landscape*. The chromatic solutions adopted by the artist to paint the sky, for example, not only suggest dawn but also nightfall, evoking the mood of threshold consciousness: the source of the dreams that for the Surrealists stimulated free thought that knew no bounds. There were correspondences between

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the external landscape and the inner world, in the sense of German Romanticism, as the artist himself pointed out: the Romantics had “a feeling of nature that went way beyond what until then had been considered the feeling of nature, and imagination and fantasy play a huge part in this.” From this perspective, vision is suspended, but in the painting *Epiphanie* the artist imagines a nocturnal scene with a full moon in which he includes the craftsman personified by Nick Bottom, the character who is turned into an ass in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by Shakespeare. The artist also used the random transfer procedure of decalcomania (as in the painting *The Beauty in the Wood* of 1957) and the indirect technique of *frottage*, to invent processes that turned the gaze inwards and, at the same time, encouraged an interpretation of the outer world. In canvases like *Zoomorphic Figure* of 1928, only individual portions of color remain visible in the overpainted areas, while the added shapes cause new beings to emerge from an expanse of granular material. The art historical precedent of these overturnings of vision is explained by the artist in his essay *Beyond Painting*, first published in 1936, which includes extracts from Leonardo da Vinci's *Treatise on Painting*: “In my opinion it is not something to be scorned, if you recall those shapes you have sometimes stopped to study in stains on a wall, in the ashes in a hearth, in clouds or streams. And if you observe them carefully, you will discover some quite remarkable inventions, which will assist the painter's genius in composing battles with animals and men, landscapes or monsters, demons and other fantastical objects that will do him credit. This jumble of things will excite the genius to new inventions, but one must know how to compose well each member with which one is unfamiliar, as well as the parts of the animals and features of the landscape, rocks and vegetation.” The universal genius of the Renaissance was an indispensable point of reference in Max Ernst's research, which firmly embraced the dimension of chance and the unconscious so that the inner gaze might express itself through the structures of the visible.

## 7.

### THE PLEASURE OF CREATING FORMS / PLEASING TO THE EYE

“Pleasing to the eye”, “vital occupation: seeing”, “one's eyes drank in everything that entered one's field of vision”: this is how Max Ernst describes, in biographical notes and other texts, his main concern in living and making art. Turning the gaze to, and gradually interpreting, the inner world, and devising indirect working techniques and modes of vision that subverted and extended the usual ones, were essentially the methodological foundations of his art. In general, Ernst's entire oeuvre is an invitation to see. The pleasure he takes in broadening and interpreting the possibilities of perception leads to the transformation of external reality, which no longer has anything to do with emulating or copying. In 1935 the artist sketched a mythical genesis for his research and for the techniques that inspired it. “Surrealism was born in the middle of the Great Flood, when the ark

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collided with the top of a mountain. Because the people on the sea had no desire whatsoever to repair the vessel or to settle on the island, everyone preferred to dive overboard.

Thanks to automatic writing, collages, *frottages* and all the processes that fuel automatism and irrational knowledge, one arrived at the origin of that extraordinary invisible universe known as the unconscious, to then represent it in all its reality. No one who dives knows beforehand what he will be able to take with him. Likewise, the painter does not choose his own subjects." Two decades later, at the age of 65, he described in retrospect the gap between the real outer world and imaginary inner world: "Let's consider my favourite first occupation: my eyes not only devoured the amazing world that kindled them from the outside, but also the mysterious, restless world that persistently and regularly appeared in my youthful dreams, only to disappear again." One of the most unusual characteristics of Ernst's output is that he himself created all the catalogues and invitations for his exhibitions, starting in 1930. Prior to this, he had made postcards, drawings, engravings, collages and *frottages* for publications of poetry by artist friends or himself, as well as designing covers and decorating monographs of his work, and creating some remarkable initials. From 1950, there was an exponential increase in his graphic production, with over 500 works being published individually in approximately 80 volumes, portfolios and magazines. But the pleasure Ernst took in creating forms extended even further; for example, the goldsmith François Hugo began to make jewellery and pairs of figures in gold and silver, based on sketches by the artist, and from 1971 a series of silver dishes commissioned by Gretel Marinotti was produced in Milan.

## 8.

### MEMORY AND WONDER

Max Ernst interweaves past, present and future in amazing creations stemming from his profound culture and boundless creative imagination. Ancient and modern, East and West, North and South meet and intertwine in compositions that rigorously experiment with new artistic languages. Memory becomes an essential antidote to the loss of identity and the oblivion of Western civilization, but also a tool for the redemption of major figures who have contributed to the progress of humanity and are in danger of being forgotten. In the masterpiece *The Angel of Hearth and Home*, of 1937 (later retitled *The Triumph of Surrealism*), elements of the northern Renaissance and visionary Baroque style are combined to create a fantastical creature: a grotesque, horrific figure resembling a wader, advancing across a desolate landscape in a "surreal" atmosphere. Its movements create the form of a swastika: in the period of great dictators, Ernst's work presaged the outbreak of World War II. Similar concerns inform *The Year 1939*, executed with the oscillation technique (which would later inspire Jackson Pollock). The iconography of the Pietà, of Germanic origin, but also de Chirico's metaphysical painting, inspired Ernst's *Pietà or Revolution by Night* of 1923: the three figures represent the three figurative arts – drawing, sculpture, painting – and the work may be read as a powerful metaphor of vision. On the other hand, the *Project for a Monument to Leonardo da Vinci* (1957) is dedicated to Italian

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universal genius. Painted in the iridescent, kaleidoscopic style of the 1950s, the geometric forms of American Indian iconography are used to create the impudent mask covering Leonardo's face. In *Dream and Revolution*, of 1945/46, MaxErnst superimposes references to the French Revolution, like the red Phrygian cap, on the theme of the Copernican revolution in painting: he stages a mysterious dialogue between a darkly ambiguous, monstrous creature and a Jacobin/painter who is manoeuvring military lances that are actually poles from an artist's studio, arranged perspectively as in a battle scene by the Florentine painter and mathematician Paolo Uccello. Lastly, Romanticism was an essential reference for Max Ernst: Caspar David Friedrich and the German Romantic poets opened up extraordinary imaginative possibilities to the Surrealists that enabled them to empathically merge interior and exterior vision. The Greek goddess of memory, Mnemosyne, is central to the artist's tribute to Hölderlin's Late Hymns, rediscovered in London in 1954 and illustrated by Ernst in 1961. Here, the use of geometric forms and mnemonic systems opened up new scenarios in the artist's work, which launched him on an exploration of the cosmos.

9.

## COSMOS AND CRYPTOGRAPHY

In the Dada self-presentation published at the end of 1921, Max Ernst described the starry sky as a "touchstone of keen vision". The year before, images of stars had begun to appear in his overpaintings. In the proto-Surrealist painting *Men Shall Know Nothing of This* of 1923, a cosmological scheme determines the symmetrical composition that unifies day and night, man and woman. Images of constellations are also found in the *frottage* entitled *Teenage Lightning* of 1925, which Max Ernst included in his portfolio *Natural History*. In the catalogue that the artist himself designed for his show at the Julian Levy Gallery in New York, a universe as black as night forms the background for the titles of the works displayed. Here, the infinity of the cosmos harmonizes with the free visions of Ernst's images, as in the painting *Birth of a Galaxy* of 1969, which possesses a vibrancy that suggests the birth of ever-new constellations of stars. At the end of 1961, the so-called "cryptographs" appeared in Max Ernst's artistic universe. These were *secret writings* which, as he himself said, "held no secrets for those who had eyes for seeing and signs for interpreting". With his ciphers the artist created a system that resembled writing, but which was free, visible and yet incomprehensible. This cosmos of marks was the equivalent of "automatic writing", a method of producing art fundamental to Surrealism. At the same time, he included what may be seen as a reference to pataphysics, which he had explored earlier by playfully, yet systematically, varying the texts. The blocks and the ciphered columns in the *Maximiliana* series – one of the finest and most important artist books of the 20th century – stand out among Max Ernst's graphic works. He also incorporated a personal encrypted language in his pictorial pieces: in the vertical painting entitled *The World of the Naïve*, of 1965, he constructed a layered calligraphic space through superimposition and interpenetration. The artist harmonizes perspectives and frames planets, nebulae and figures, placing them in relief; areas

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streaked with white are combined and juxtaposed with yellow zones, thickly outlined small scenes, and orderly signs with swarms of scattered ciphers. The viewer's eye shifts constantly between micro and macrocosm, between image and writing. Max Ernst connects earthly space and cosmic infinity, offering a new, innovative take on the Surrealist reconciliation of opposites.

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*Artist's chronology*

## 1891

Max Ernst was born on 2 April in Brühl, near Cologne. His father, Philipp Ernst, a teacher of deaf-mutes, gives him painting lessons.

## 1910-14

After graduating from secondary school, he matriculates at the University of Bonn where he studies the classics, philosophy, psychology, and the history of art. Along with the expressionist painter August Macke, Ernst takes part in group exhibitions in Bonn and Berlin.

## 1914-18

Ernst is drafted and sent to fight both on the western and on the eastern fronts during World War I. He marries Louise Strauss.

## 1919-21

Cologne Dada Group is founded. Ernst creates *Fiat modes pereat ars*. Using cliché prints, overpainting and collages, he adopts his peculiar method of creating chance images by indirect means. Ulrich (later Jimmy), his only son, was born on 24 June 1920.

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## 1921

First solo exhibition in Paris.  
Meeting of Dadaists in Tyrol.  
Paul and Gala Éluard visit  
Cologne in early November.

## 1922

Eluard and Ernst's illustrated  
books of poetry, *Répétitions*  
and *Les malheurs des immortels*  
are published.

## 1923

Painting of the Éluard  
house in Eaubonne.

## 1924

Is published André Breton's  
*Manifeste du surréalisme*.

## 1925/26

Ernst develops his indirect  
technique of *frottage* and  
publishes *Histoire Naturelle*.

## 1927

Ernst marries Marie-Berthe  
Aurenche.

## 1928

He produces pictures of forests  
and seashells, bird monuments,  
and the series of paintings that  
make up a collection called  
*La Horde*.

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## 1929

*La femme 100 têtes*, his first collage-based novel, is published.

## 1930

*Rêve d'une petite fille qui voulut entrer au Carmel*, his second collage novel, is published.

## 1931

His first exhibition in the USA with Julien Levy.

## 1933

His first exhibition in London.

## 1934

His third collage novel, *Une semaine de bonté*, comes out in five separate volumes. He paints a mural for the Mascotte Bar of the Corso Theatre in Zurich.

## 1934/35

Ernst produces his first plaster sculptures.

## 1936

He participates with 48 works at the *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

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## 1937

The special issue of *Cahiers d'Art* dedicated to Max Ernst is published. Its contents include his treatise on art *Beyond Painting*. Whilst in London, he meets Leonora Carrington. His works are denigrated by the Nazis in the "Degenerate Art" exhibition.

## 1938

In the autumn, Ernst and Leonora Carrington transfer to Saint-Martin d'Ardèche, where they renovate an old farmhouse and decorate it with sculptures.

## 1939/40

After the outbreak of war, Max Ernst is interned several times as hostile foreigner

## 1941

On July 14, he arrives in New York with the art collector Peggy Guggenheim; in December they get married.

## 1942

The magazine *View* publishes a Max Ernst special edition. He discovers the oscillation technique of painting. At the end of the year, he meets and falls in love with the American painter Dorothea Tanning.

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## 1946

The couple relocate to Sedona, Arizona. They marry on 24 October in Beverly Hills.

## 1948

Max Ernst becomes an American citizen.

## 1949

A Max Ernst retrospective is put on at the William N. Copley Gallery. In August, the Ernsts travel to Europe for a year.

## 1951

On his 60th birthday, a retrospective of his work is held at Augustusburg Castle in Brühler.

## 1952

He spends the summer as a visiting lecturer at the University of Hawaii.

## 1953

He returns to France for good. In Paris, the couple takes up residence in two attic rooms at 13 Quai Saint-Michel.

## 1954

In June, Ernst receives the Gran Premio for painting at the 27th Venice Biennale. He moves to Huismes in Touraine.

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## 1955

He is excluded from the Surrealist group.

## 1958

On 15 November, he receives French citizenship.

## 1959

Patrick Waldberg publishes his monograph on Max Ernst.

## 1960

Publication of Ernst's work *La nudité de la femme est plus sage que l'enseignement du philosophe*, with a foreword by Georges Bataille.

## 1961

Retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

## 1969

Exhibition of rediscovered wall paintings from the house in Eaubonne.

## 1970

Max Ernst's writings are published under the title *Écritures*.

## 1972

The University of Bonn awards him an honorary doctorate.

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## 1975

Retrospectives at the  
Solomon R. Guggenheim  
Museum in New York and the  
Grand Palais in Paris.

## 1976

On the night of his 85th  
birthday on 1st April, Max  
Ernst dies in his apartment at  
19 Rue de Lille in Paris.

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Photos may be used only to accompany short articles or reports on the Max Ernst exhibition, Milan-Palazzo Reale, from 4 October 2022 to 26 February 2023  
They must be followed by a caption, must not be cut and/or tampered with and can only be used on the web in low definition (100-50 dpi).

A selection of images is available at link  
<https://www.electa.it/ufficio-stampa/max-ernst/>



*Progetto per un monumento a Leonardo da Vinci*  
(1957)

Olio su tela, 130 x 97 cm  
Collezione privata, Francia  
© Max Ernst by SIAE 2023



*Giovane uomo carico di un fagotto fiorito*, 1920

Gouache su carta, sovrappittura di una stampa, 11 x 15,3 cm  
Collezione privata, Torino  
© Max Ernst by SIAE 2023



*Danzatore sotto il cielo (Il nottambulo)*, 1922 ca

Olio su carta montato su cartone con la cornice originale  
dell'artista, 18 x 28 cm  
José María Jiménez-Alfaro  
© Max Ernst by SIAE 2023



*Il risveglio ufficiale del canarino, 1923*

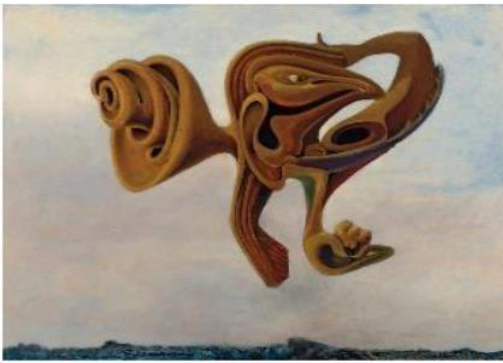
Olio su intonaco riportato su tela, 43,5 x 114,5 cm

Collezione Intesa Sanpaolo, Gallerie d'Italia - Milano

Archivio Patrimonio Artistico Intesa Sanpaolo / foto Paolo

Vandrasch, Milano

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*Un orecchio prestato,*

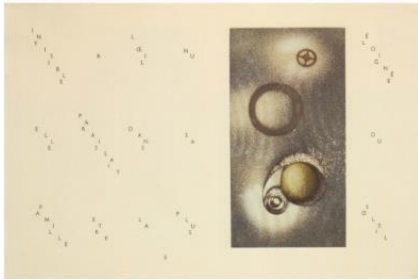
1935

olio su legno, 70 x 80 cm

Collezione privata, courtesy MALINGUE S.A.

photo credit : Florent Chevrot

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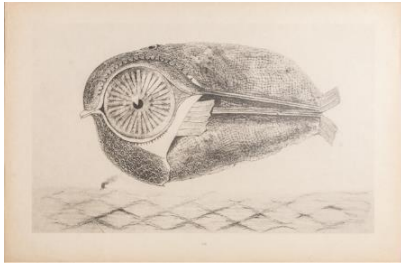
*Maximiliana o l'esercizio illegale dell'astronomia (1964)*

acquaforte, 30 doppi fogli piegati, 41,6 x 61,1 cm

copia numero 20/65

Collezione Günter Brambring

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*L'evaso da Storia naturale*, 1926  
Collotipia da frottage, 32.3 × 49.8 cm  
José María Jiménez-Alfaro  
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*Uccello-testa* (1934- 35)  
Bronzo, 52,4 x 38 x 23,2 cm  
José María Jiménez-Alfaro  
© Max Ernst by SIAE 2023



*L'antipapa*, 1941 ca  
Olio su cartone, montato su tavola, 32,5 x 26,5 cm  
Collezione Peggy Guggenheim, Venezia  
(Fondazione Solomon R. Guggenheim, New York)  
© Max Ernst by SIAE 2023



*L'angelo del focolare* (1937)  
Olio su tela, 114 x 146 cm  
Collezione privata, Svizzera  
Classicpaintings / Alamy Stock Photo  
© Max Ernst by SIAE 2023



*Edipus Rex*, 1922

Olio su tela, 93 x 102 cm

Collezione privata, Svizzera

Album / Fine Arts Images / Mondadori Portfolio

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*La festa a Seillans*, 1964 Olio su

tela, 130 x 170 cm

Centre Pompidou, Paris

Musée national d'art moderne/Centre de création industrielle

© 2023. RMN-Grand Palais / Photographer: Georges Meguerditchian

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*Pietà o La rivoluzione la notte*, 1923

Olio su tela, 116,2 x 88,9 cm

Tate, acquisito nel 1981

© Tate, London, 2023

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*Gli uomini non ne sapranno nulla*, 1923

Olio su tela, 80,3 x 63,8 cm

Tate, acquisito nel 1960

© Tate, London, 2023

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*Trentatré bambine vanno a caccia della farfalla bianca*, 1958  
Olio su tela, 137 x 107 cm  
Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid  
© Max Ernst by SIAE 2023



*La foresta*, 1927-1928  
Olio su tela, 96,3 x 129.5 cm  
Collezione Peggy Guggenheim, Venezia  
(Fondazione Solomon R. Guggenheim, New York)  
© Max Ernst by SIAE 2023



*Sogno e rivoluzione*, 1945-46  
Olio su tela, 108 x 149 cm  
Collezione privata  
photo credit : Louis de Leusse  
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*Il mondo della sfocatura – Rifiuto assoluto di vivere come un tachiste*, 1965  
Assemblage, olio su tavola, 100 x 116 cm  
Collezione privata,  
Viareggio  
© Max Ernst by SIAE 2023



*Nascita di una galassia*, 1969

Olio su tela, 92 x 73 x 2 cm

Fondation Beyeler, Riehen/Basel, Beyeler Collection

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