

## Centre Pompidou visits

Guided audio tours through the exhibitions and permanent collection.

## #PompidouVIP

As cornerstones of the Centre Pompidou, the VIP, or Very Important Pieces, have been created by artists with unrestrained, passionate personalities, and unique life experiences. This podcast features conversations between a journalist and a guide, for you to enjoy a special moment, as you contemplate each masterpiece.

### Colour code:

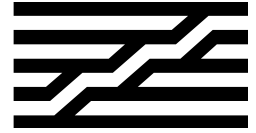
**In black**, the journalist's narrating voice and questions

**In blue**, the guides' interviews

**In purple**, the musical excerpts

**In red**, all the other sound indications





## Podcast transcription

[jingle of the show] Hello, good evening, welcome. Open wide your eyes and ears. You'll be taken for a visit at the Centre Pompidou.

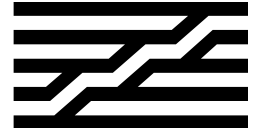
### 1 - Henri Matisse, *La Blouse roumaine*, 1940

[jingle of the show] Almost by chance – and certainly by necessity – the young Matisse first discovered a treatise on painting in 1890, while hospitalized because of a terrible flare-up of appendicitis. This treatise was to determine his future.

He was 21. He gave up his job as a solicitor's clerk and went to Paris to paint. There, he attended Gustave Moreau's workshop at the School of Fine Arts and made friends with several young painters. At the time he used to copy the works of great masters at the Louvre. But his discovery of Paul Cézanne showed him that another reality was possible.

Matisse experimented, trying his hand at impressionism and divisionism à la Seurat, visiting retrospectives of Van Gogh in 1901 and Gauguin in 1904. In 1905, he caused a scandal at the Salon d'Automne exhibiting his *Woman with a Hat* (in French, *Femme au Chapeau*). Her three-quarter angle face was painted with broad grey, green and pink strokes and a defiant pose. Critic Louis Vauxcelles dismissed this canvas and the young painters as "fauves". The young painters promptly seized on the term and Matisse became the somewhat reluctant leader of the fauvism movement.

Thirty-five years after this dramatic debut, he was to produce *La Blouse roumaine* – which we can see here. Matisse never relinquished his youthful sense of liberty, audacity and freshness – in this less than conventional portrait bathed in colour, as recounted by a conference speaker at the Centre Pompidou.



His approach to colour, which emerged with the fauves in 1905, is really fascinating. Building on the work of Van Gogh and many others, they decided to construct the picture using colour only. It sounds really simple but it's actually highly complex.

Why? Because this entire generation of artists learned all the academic rules, and about perspective. Artists used to compose a picture starting with the space afforded by perspective, a method inherited from the Italian Renaissance. With perspective, you get a vanishing point and you build up the space based on this vanishing point. Then you introduce the subject.

So the fauves wanted to break free of this. First because it had already been done and very well, and secondly because they wanted to introduce new viewpoints.

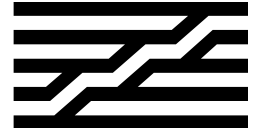
Yet another factor was the invention of photography and film that inspired alternative approaches to painting.

There was an additional layer of difficulty: doing away with the vanishing point introduces boundaries, so they started working with "colour blocks", with each colour being used with reference to its degree of brightness.

For example, to work with a slightly lighter red, you don't mix it with white because Matisse and Derain held that this would make the colour opaque. They would maybe favour a slightly diluted red or a red with a hint of yellow.

So it's also a completely new way of working with colour. In French, Matisse referred to a term I rather like, "plage colorée", which could loosely translate as "colour block", instead of "plan coloré" (or "coloured background"). And why did he choose to swap that expression for "plage"? Because he felt that "plan" had too much of a geometric connotation, it was rooted too heavily in perspective; while "plage" appealed more to emotions, sensations and how the colour vibrates through space. [transitional sound]

As you can see, this picture is called *La Blouse roumaine*, but why did Matisse choose this title?



Matisse often used to work on pairs and series. This picture, *La Blouse roumaine* is part of a series of canvasses that Matisse started on in 1936. He worked on this portrait for a very long time, six months. And he photographed it at several stages during this time.

I have the photos of those stages of his work and you're right, they are absolutely brilliant!

He had photographs taken. I believe he exhibited 16 photographs at the Maeght Gallery. He did this to show that when he said he wanted to simplify the painting, it wasn't quite that simple. How did he go about simplifying? He started by simplifying the background, and then he simplified the blouse itself.

He wiped out the front motifs, on the bodice.

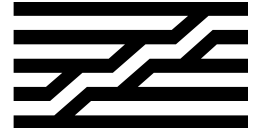
Yes, the motifs disappear from the bodice, the wallpaper motifs disappear from the background. Gradually, the young woman turns towards us. And in the last stage, he removes the armchair, he brightens the bodice within a heart shape, he draws the head upright, he makes the hair more striking, using arabesque strokes. And then there is all this work on the hands, where you get the impression that precisely those lines we mentioned earlier correspond to all the lines from the previous stages.

As if all the arabesques from the wallpaper were transferred to the hands.

Exactly! [transitional sound]

Do you think the three main colours he used here, red, white and blue, are of any significance?

I think they are highly significant, given Henri Matisse's anxiety over World War II, like many others in Europe in this period. For me, it's an act of resistance, using the three colours of the French flag, blue, white, red. Additionally the notion of this ethereal young girl, pensive, serious, calling herself into question, this shows in her hands. She is ethereal, like a dove symbolising peace, but with a message of resistance as well. [piano music]



Here in 1940, Matisse at the age of 71, soon to be wheelchair-bound, has adopted a no-frills approach to paint this free-spirited young woman staring straight back at us. The big, bright colour blocks suggest that she prefigured the cut-out gouaches and collages that were to occupy Matisse towards the end of his life.

When he gave up painting with brushes to paint with scissors, cutting up huge sheets of coloured paper. [\[jingle of the show\]](#)

## **2 - Marc Chagall, *Les mariés de la tour Eiffel*, 1938-1939**

[\[jingle of the show\]](#) Chagall had been back in Paris some 15 years when he painted *The Bridal Pair with The Eiffel Tower* (in French, *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel*).

It was the second time he had escaped from the Russia of his childhood.

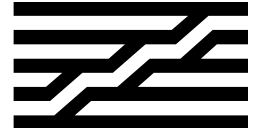
Born in 1887, Marc grew up in Vitebsk, Russia, in a typically ethnic Jewish town called a “shtetl”, with wooden chalets often depicted in his canvasses.

Determined to free her son from this confined atmosphere, his mother managed to get him enrolled in an official state school, despite it normally being off-limits to Jews.

Marc turned out to have artistic talents. He left for Saint Petersburg at the age of 19 to take painting lessons. Four years later, he took a train to Paris, like so many other Russian artists, and happened upon a thriving art scene that he would never completely forsake.

In *The Bridal Pair with The Eiffel Tower*, the painter revisits the theme of the couple in love, representing Chagall himself alongside the love of his life, Bella, in each other’s arms, floating in space, amid a cockerel – symbolising love –, angels and a fiddler goat.

The canvas appears to be a haven of peace, despite being painted in 1938 in the run-up to war. Chagall was well aware of the strife in Europe at the time, having left Russia for the second time after the Bolshevik revolution and travelling extensively through



Europe during these troubled years.

In 1935 he went to Poland and felt the force of anti-Semitism threatening the Jews. During the same period, Chagall painted the *White Crucifixion* in which the figure of Christ on the cross is surrounded by a burning synagogue and village, and Jews attempting a desperate exodus by boat. The canvas is white, as in the *Bridal Pair with The Eiffel Tower*.

Yet they are happily taking refuge in Paris.

The sun, in the top left corner, is somewhat cold and the blue base of the Eiffel Tower is very metallic. [transitional sound]

Migration.

In the bottom right corner of this picture, we can see a tiny village with a tree growing up from its roots to the top of the picture and even beyond. Chagall was portraying his own roots, in his native village in Russia. A second vertical line, the Eiffel Tower, rises parallel to the tree, representing the painter's second home country, for he first came to Paris in 1911.

He returned to Russia in 1914 to get married in 1915, then came back in 1921 and obtained French nationality in 1937, just a year before painting this picture.

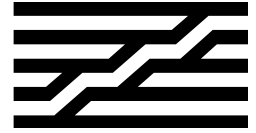
The sense of belonging was very important for him, as what we may term a wandering Jew. When you migrate, you have everything you own on you, your memories and pictures in your mind. And Chagall, in this sense, was a forerunning surrealist.

On the right, there is a character that's part goat, part fiddler.

The surrealists produced what is known as "exquisite corpses", or "picture consequences", assembling apparently random elements. These figures of Chagall's were exquisite corpses. [transitional sound]

The cockerel.

The cockerel is a very strong element in Jewish culture, because he heralds the day and distinguishes day from night, and, by extension, good from evil.



He thus takes on symbolic value in a strong Jewish culture. With his outsized eye, almost like a third eye in the composition, he distinguishes between good and evil.

On the right, while everything else is ascendant in the composition, just one element descends, an angel with an upside down chandelier, looking like someone out to set the village on fire.

The cockerel has an announcing role: he announces what is to come. It's 1938, the Second World War is looming. Chagall already knew that in Germany three of his works previously exhibited in museums were included in an exhibition on "degenerate art". So he knew about the imminent danger. [transitional sound]

### *Luftmensch.*

*Luftmensch* literally means "air man" in German and refers to a poet or an artist, someone who is not materialistic. Weddings are important in all cultures, especially in Jewish culture.

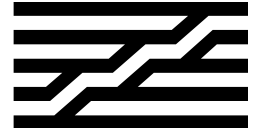
When celebrating a marriage they throw bride and groom in the air. We see this in several pictures, it's a way of expressing joy, light-heartedness and happiness. And the couple were to travel through many countries, encountering many difficulties, through to Bella's death in 1944. It's a real microcosm on which all hinges, which can change any course. [jewish music for violin]

Troubles and migrations were not over for Marc and Bella, who were to leave Paris in 1940 – then France in 1941, after a raid – to take up exile in the US.

Bella, the beautiful bride, died a brutal death in 1944.

Wherever he wandered, Marc continued to paint his imaginary world teeming with love, sadness and joy, using colour to depict his brides and grooms, animals and creatures, like poetry in pictures.

But here, as he paints, Chagall as yet knows nothing of this. [jingle of the show]



### 3 - Joan Miró, *Bleu I, Bleu II, Bleu III*, 1961

[jingle of the show] Joan Miró was Catalan. When he arrived in Paris in the early 1920s, he took a workshop on rue Blomet. There, he met other artists who were to influence his work forever.

Rue Blomet later attracted artists who formed the surrealist movement, with painters like André Masson and Yves Tanguy, and poets like Antonin Artaud, Jacques Prévert and Michel Leiris. This contact with surrealist artists led him to abandon his intricate style.

He hit his first crisis in 1924, then started paring his work down, harnessing geometry at first, then an increasingly fanciful style. In his series of imaginary landscapes, he painted coloured backgrounds punctuated with lines and enigmatic, very poetic figures.

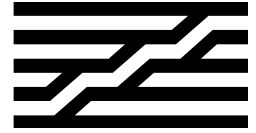
Yet throughout his life, Miró would search, work and experiment. He sought to reproduce the first gestures of babyhood, and drew inspiration from streamlined signs and prehistoric drawings, sometimes playfully or provocatively. As with this 1928 *Spanish Dancer* (in French, *Portrait d'une danseuse*) reduced to a cork, a feather and a hairpin, which often hung outside André Breton's museum office.

Joan Miró's three *Blues* paintings, painted between December 1960 and March 1961, were designed in his spacious new workshop in Palma de Mallorca. Resulting from a long maturing process, these three masterpieces ensued, according to Miró, from a "great inner tension to achieve the emptiness I wanted". He claimed to have condensed all previous research. [transitional sound]

Blue.

When he moved to a larger studio, he went back to what he had been working on in 1920s: paintings with blue backgrounds, liquid backgrounds painted with a sponge, with writing or traces in the background.





Admittedly, with blue he chose a colour of universal symbolic significance, since it refers to the sky, the sea, infinity, there is a spiritual, cosmic dimension in all cultures.

For Miró the Catalan, blue is also the colour of houses back home, all painted blue. Using blue for houses depicts them as an ideal or dream home.

Miró actually wrote on one of his pictures that blue is the colour of his dreams.

You mentioned the workshop. What was the link between these canvasses and the workshop?

This was the workshop he'd been dreaming of, giving him the opportunity to produce larger pictures than on an easel. Huge works, in fact. He had long been yearning for this, to paint something universal, open to all. Space, the huge canvas, is a way of appealing to the many. And checking out American painting from the 1950s prompted him to follow suit. [transitional sound]

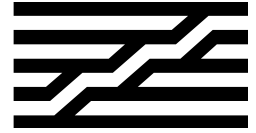
You also wanted to discuss meditation. Coming here obviously you think of an Asian world, Asian meditation.

Yes, also, he prepared for these three paintings like Japanese archers, for whom breathing in and out is very important.

There is a physical dimension in this preparation, probably. Physically he opened his lungs, breathed in and out. And then he started working on scraps of paper no bigger than ten centimetres, scraps that he used for sketches using a charcoal and colouring pencils.

To prepare for these three pictures, he kept the scraps of paper in his pocket, where they got crumpled after a while. And then suddenly he'd start painting. It's as if those scraps of paper were something very intimate that he wanted to keep to himself, before suddenly revealing it.

And then he started painting the background blue, but "not like a house painter", he



said. He said that perfecting the background put him in the right mood to continue the rest. So painting the blue was like continuing this meditation and only after that did he start writing. [transitional sound]

This writing is black and red marks and strokes. It's surprising that he spoke of the background but not about the writing.

In his accounts? Or in his letters?

In his written accounts. In his accounts, he talks about making the blue, saying that it's not like painting a house. He says no more. He stops there. And so we don't know how he did the rest. And we don't know much about how it happened.

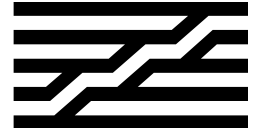
But you can still feel it because it's like calligraphy: he only had one chance, there was no going back, he produced it in a single stroke. In the end, we don't know if they're fragments, viewpoints, near or far, cosmic shapes, planets, we don't know if it's sky or water. We may wonder. There is something bordering on the aquatic there.

And he threw himself into the void: you can tell he produced it in a single brushstroke. In the end it's very bold, and joyful too. I feel there's something joyful about these huge pictures. [soft piano music]

His *Blue* paintings were followed by a period of great freedom in his language, without any constraints in space, shape and figures. He emphasised the expression of his creative act, gesture, spontaneity and momentum. [jingle of the show]

## 4 - Constantin Brancusi's workshop

[jingle of the show] Brancusi was a man of many legends. Some of which he forged himself. When showing visitors round the workshop we are about to look at, he would often cover his sculptures with black sheets, then pull them off theatrically for his admirers, including his faithful friend Marcel Duchamp, composer Erik Satie, artist Fernand Léger, photographer



Man Ray, poet and compatriot Tristan Tzara and many others who passed by.

Legend has it that Constantin Brancusi arrived in Paris on foot, in 1904, from his home country Romania, after passing through Vienna, Zurich and Basel, catching pneumonia and surviving doing odd jobs.

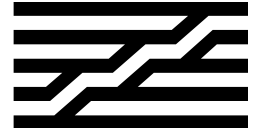
Already as a child he wanted to run away from the countryside where his father had placed him as an apprentice at the age of 7 or 8. He managed to do so aged 11, when he went to the nearest large town, Craiova – after walking for three days and sleeping in trees by night to avoid wolves.

His legend was made. He was a self-made man, getting by thanks to the friendship of a cafe owner who hired him, thanks to the intelligence of his town which gave him a grant, thanks to his sheer obstinacy enrolling first at the Bucharest School of Fine Arts, then the Paris equivalent by the age of 28.

He was never to leave the French capital. Lodging with compatriots, he found a workshop on rue Montparnasse, then in 1916 moved to the impasse Ronsin, in the 15th arrondissement, first at no. 8 then no. 11, where he stayed for the rest of his life and which has been replicated here. We will be shown around by a conference speaker at the Centre Pompidou.

This workshop is an exact reconstitution of Brancusi's Montparnasse workshop at the turn of the century. He set up shop here very early on, in 1916, but the workshop underwent great changes, since he didn't have all four spaces you see there to start with. We're looking at a reconstitution by Renzo Piano. In the beginning, he only had one room, then two, and ended up with two more.

If this workshop is here, it's because Brancusi decided he wanted it to be. He bequeathed it to the French Republic, but on condition that this workshop could be reproduced exactly as it was after his death. And for Brancusi, it was absolutely



essential, because once he had decided that the workshop was some kind of work of art in its own right, all the sculptures had to be preserved in it as they were, along with their relations to one another. [transitional sound]

So that brings us to the second idea and key word, when we look at all this space: Brancusi worked on a series.

Yes, and very few series. If you look there, there is the imposing series of *Endless Columns*, the series of *Muses*, and *Kisses*, which then took on monumental proportions, the *Fish* and the *Bird* series. Perhaps the most essential series for him is the *Bird* one, because it was started very early on, in the 1910s.

Do we have one of the first examples here?

Yes. Just after the cockerels. There are the cockerels, the corner, and then on the wooden base, there is this sculpture in grey-blue marble, right there, which is not called “the bird” but *Măiastra*.

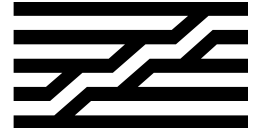
The *Măiastra* is a direct reference to Romanian fairy tales and legends. It’s a fabulous bird with the ability to reunite long-lost lovers, and which can also transform itself. So there is this *Măiastra* series, but he was soon to stop doing these representations that resemble birds. [sounds of visitors in the workshop’s reconstitution]

Yes, you can see it. You can tell it’s a bird.

You see the claws and feathers, folded at the back, you see the breast. You can almost make out a beak, there is still something of a bird to it. But he soon dropped this, for sculpture was no longer for him a means of representing a model.

He moved on to another series, which he called *Oiseau (Bird)* that you can see over there on the mantelpiece. Here we have a sort of ellipse, a puffed-up breast, an upward direction that’s much more powerful. The bird figure seems to grow up out of a cone shape.

The cone is not part of the bird. It’s not his claws for example.



I don't think he was embracing the bird sculpture in those terms: claws and body. He was seeking to capture momentum in flight, propelling the shape into the emptiness of the sky. He was not yet satisfied with this series, because the bird was still anchored in the ground. One might say it is having trouble taking to the skies. I think this is quite simply because of the very shapes, especially the cone, itself sitting on another geometric shape, giving it the status of something to be looked at, but which would no longer be visible in the work he calls *Oiseau dans l'espace* (*Bird in Space*).

Is there an *Oiseau dans l'espace* here in the workshop?

There is an *Oiseau dans l'espace* in the first area, where we came through from the front door to the workshop.

If you stand at what used to be the workshop entrance, you're just opposite the bronze *Oiseau*, which is placed before a red curtain?

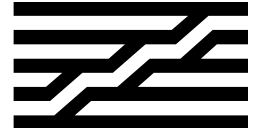
Yes, exactly. The first thing you would see as you entered the workshop is this *Oiseau dans l'espace* in polished bronze. This red in the background heightens the vibration and luminosity.

This bronze one is magnificent but perhaps the most beautiful birds are the ones sculpted from marble, because I feel that marble is a material that negates any idea of flight, weightlessness, or vibration. It weighs a ton.

There is a sort of paradox, or contradiction. How can you use such a heavy material to depict momentum, fragility, a sort of weightlessness, ascending into space?

And that's what I find magnificent in Brancusi's work on materials, because it's as if he were achieving alchemy. The way he sculpted and polished, he managed to change our very perception of the material. [transitional sound]

So we move on to a different area and get to the work area, which looks nothing like the other space.



Yes. On the other side, there were all the sculptures, all reacting one against the other. In the work area, we see blocks of stone which have been started on, but apparently not finished.

We hadn't mentioned it before, but Brancusi was from an old-fashioned, rural background. When he arrived in Paris, he didn't have the same relationship with the world as that of sculptors like Auguste Rodin. [transitional sound]

He worked with Rodin?

Yes, he did indeed, but not for very long I believe. He met Rodin just as he was graduating from the Paris School of Fine Arts. He caught Rodin's eye at an exhibition. And Rodin asked him to come and work in his workshop. He was soon to learn that nothing can grow in the shade of a great tree.

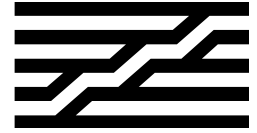
Brancusi said that?

Yes, he did. And their approach to matter was very different.

On the one hand, you have an artist like Rodin, an artist in the primary meaning of the term, which means a demiurge. Someone moving from the chaos of matter, clay as it happens, and makes a shape out of it. And on the other hand, you have Brancusi, for whom the matter has its own opinion. And when you work on sculpture, it's the artist's hand that needs to do the thinking. But thinking along the same lines as the matter.

In so doing, Brancusi realised he was producing shapes that were increasingly simple, pared-down. It's well beyond the intention of the artist who imposes such forms, we're putting our finger right on the thrust of Brancusi's sculpture, caught in this fragile balance between the artist wanting to induce and produce a form and the material's capacity to absorb this form. [soft piano music]

Shapes sometimes resist, like the broken birds we see on the floor here. We have to bear in mind that the ones he was happy with, these birds in space, measuring up to 1.90 metres, are attached to their base by way of a metal wire no longer than six centimetres. An amazing balancing act. [jingle of the show]



## **5 - Vassily Kandinsky, *Mit dem schwarzen Bogen (Black Arc)*, 1912**

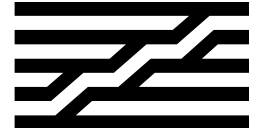
[jingle of the show] There were sites afforded by nature that used to fill Vassily Kandinsky with joy to the point of upending his soul. Born in Moscow in 1866, he used to watch the sunset over the roofs of the Kremlin churches. A singular sight: "The sun melts all of Moscow into a single vibrant block, like a tuba powerfully rattling, your entire soul." However, this Russian painter deplored that the means procured by painting proved incapable of reproducing this state of ecstasy.

As a law student, he had very little time to indulge in his favorite hobby, painting. In 1889, he took part in an ethnographic expedition to the northeast of Moscow to study law in the countryside. For this assignment, he visited peasants living in large wooden houses covered in sculptures.

Everything, including the tables, benches, stove – a central feature of a Russian farmers home – and wardrobes was painted with thickly drawn colourful ornament. To which could be added the popular images and the "red corner": a wall entirely covered in icons. He experienced something unique. These magic homes taught me to move within the picture, to live as if in a picture.

A few years later, he dropped out of Economic Law and enrolled in an Art School in Munich. This city had a vibrant art scene and he met some decisive acquaintances. He founded the Blaue Reiter, the "Blue Rider" group, with other painters, who all expressed themselves using pure strong bright colours and lines shaking off the shackles of reality.

Kandinsky started researching colour as a means of conveying emotion. In his treatise titled *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, published in 1911, Kandinsky expounded on his vision of art that its purpose was above all spiritual. Kandinsky wanted to move away from overly fleeting appearance and put together, a supreme language to create active creative works of art capable of reaching and thrilling the soul. But he had to set up a



whole different system. He produced his picture at this turning point when he's suddenly veered into abstraction. A lecturer from the Centre Pompidou explains creation of space-time.

The shapes and blocks of colours are not fixed. They are in evolution. The contours are not defined, the three masses do not seem to have the same weight. The matter seems to transfer from one mass to another. At the top left, the red spot seems to be expanding, diluting. It is a living moving world like tectonic plates. Freed from the descriptive function, colour becomes a channel to reach the soul. For Kandinsky, the relationship of colour with the soul is based above all in movement. The painting becomes a theatre of movement traversed by the spectator.

One of the inaugural episodes and his pictorial search, was an exhibition where he saw Monet's *Haystacks*. "The artist palette went beyond all my dreams", he says. He sees in the movement towards abstraction a means to finally restore this enchanted vision of the Kremlin sparkling at sunset, in front of which all his being vibrated and which led him towards an urgency to paint. He then set up a method where he isolated the colours and let them act upon him. His principles are applied through these painting qualities: hot and cold, light and darkness. Yellow and blue are the contrast of proximity and distance. Red is a typically warm colour, it acts internally as a very lively agitated colour.

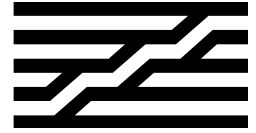
With his brush, he gives vibrations and movement to his colours. Then it is the infinite range of tones that resonates intensely and brings us back into the subtleties of this abstract world that Kandinsky was inventing in 1912. Kandinsky said: "It was the hour of dusk when suddenly I saw a canvas of indescribable beauty in which the subject was incomprehensible. It was one of my canvases laying against the wall".

[transitional sound]

Black arc and *duga*.

The inspiration for the black arc in the center of the painting was the *duga*, the arc





shaped harness typical in a Russian three horse-drawn carriage, the *troika*, renowned throughout Europe for its high speed.

This arc formed a bridge over the neck of the middle horse and connected it to the two lateral horses on its side. A distribution of forces was set up between the three horses. The two lateral horses ensured the high speed of the coupling and the central horse ensured the cohesion and stability of the coupling. The forces generated by the speed of the other two horses converged toward it. The *duga* is like the keystone of different tensions on both sides.

Kandinsky uses his arc shaped by adapting it to the painting since he does not maintain the tension between the three horses, but here between three blocks of colour. The black arc refers to the *duga* in a metaphorical way.

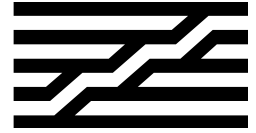
All the painter's work of those years was to set up a system of analogies between initial sensations and the painting, reproduced by lines and colours. The other black lines are accents, forces in the composition. [transitional sound]

#### Birth of abstraction.

Schönberg's music and principles of dissonance helped him to invent this abstract world based on emotions and man's interstices and spiritual resonance.

After Monet's *Haystacks*, Kandinsky had a second artistic revelation, Wagner's opera *Lohengrin*: "The violins, the deep basis, and especially the wind instruments personified the forces of the hours at dusk. I could see all of my colours mentally, they were in front of my eyes. It became very clear to me that art in general had a much greater power than what I had first thought, that on the other hand, painting could deploy the same forces as music".

His mission was to try to visually represent these forces with the same intensity in painting. He gave his paintings the names *Impression*, *Improvisation* or *Composition* which were referred directly to music. Arnold Schönberg's principle of dissonance made him feel deliberately these harmonious sounds in relation to the music he



listened to. He understood that what Schönberg brought to music, he could do in painting. And his colours are full of vibrations and tensions.

Kandinsky wanted to make painting a total experience, as such strong and enveloping as the experience of a concert or of his visit to Russian peasant houses. "For years, I've been looking for the possibility of getting the viewer to walk through the painting, to force him to blend into the painting by forgetting himself."

[musical excerpt: *String Quartet No. 4* by Arnold Schönberg]

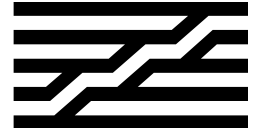
Over the next thirty-two years Kandinsky created works with the purpose of taking the onlookers view into the unknown, hoping to make them as wondrous as those gleaming Kremlin vistas from his youth. A sensorial world in which all comes to life and even has a sound. For a while, music inspired Kandinsky's colours. Let us sink into Kandinsky's paintings and hear their sounds. [jingle of the show]

## **6 - Piet Mondrian, *New York City I*, 1942**

[jingle of the show] Mondrian is world famous for his black grids and primary coloured blocks. And yet he searched for a long time before settling on this new style, which he called neoplasticism, in 1917. He was 45 years old.

He started out using a highly figurative style since he first affiliated himself with symbolist painters after studying art. He mainly produced northern landscapes imbued with a mystic feel. He discovered Van Gogh in Amsterdam in 1905 and the way he exalted colour inspired Mondrian to paint huge horizontal swaths of bright colours, as well as imposing the vertical views of mills and bell towers, then trees in 1910.

Trees with natural twisted branches, smooth into increasingly spare lines for better clarity, a sense of geometry and pair details. The general outer form of the tree disappeared, leaving a network of lines going from top to bottom, right to left and vice versa. He thus embraced abstraction taking a short-lived incursion into cubism after



frequenting the Paris art scene from 1911 to 1913. Cubism helped assert his penchant for grids. In 1914, he reached the conclusion that he needed to use straight lines, flat surfaces and colour combinations to express beauty in general.

A lecturer from the Centre Pompidou will explain this concept of universality.

In 1908 Mondrian adhered to Theosophy. This was a system of beliefs related to an ancient mystical society that was revived at the end of the 19th century. It advocated the search for common laws between man and nature and a form of communion between beings of all kinds.

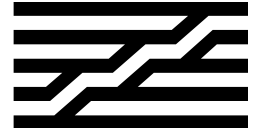
Mondrian was looking for common ground and all of humanity to go beyond differences. During the First World War, Mondrian was forced to leave Paris, where he experimented with cubism, and gradually turned to grid compositions. In the Netherlands, he began a new series on the theme of the ocean.

The series was decisive. Facing the North Sea, he felt a double movement: vertical with ascents and descents, and horizontal with waves moving forward and backward as well as the horizon line. He manages to translate these movements into a system of pluses and minuses, encoding the movement of waves, and vertical and horizontal dashed lines, so to speak. From the waves, he paints the general movement. From this dual general movement he created an aesthetic, a metaphysical principle.

[transitional sound]

The creation of neoplasticism.

The dashes are still close to optical sensation are stretched becoming vertical and horizontal. These lines are true archetypes. For Mondrian, only verticals and horizontals carry this universality. They represent a foundational identity and vitality. Mondrian's universal system is subtly interwoven. The lines are the constance and give the painting a homogeneous appearance. Yet no Mondrian is similar. This is because he introduces blocks of colour that disturb, unbalance and re-balance the grid.



The colours in the system act as a variable. It is mainly by their position and their setting and rhythm and harmony that the painting stands out and projects universal beauty. Mondrian conjectured that this neoplastic world, would continue in architecture and then in the city. That is why his workshop was organized on the principle of horizontals and verticals in the arrangement of paintings, objects and furniture. Many people came to visit it from all over Europe and America. [transitional sound]

### New York City.

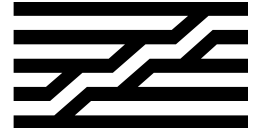
*New York City I* is the first painting and Mondrian's abstract period to have a figurative title. In 1938, he left for London. The war is declared, he decides to go to New York. After experiencing curfews and aerial bombings, he arrives in this dynamic and bright city. It's dazzling!

The city is in constant movement with intense traffic and illuminated signs offering a fascinating nightly show. Fernand Léger, who arrived at the same time, said that New York was the most colossal spectacle in the world.

Mondrian, who loved the rhythm of jazz, discovered the boogie-woogie with excitement. *New York I's* optical structure is colourful, vibrant and cheerful. It integrates the energy and rhythm of the city and music. The painter's technique also evolved, he used scotch tape he could move at will.

Moreover, three other *New York City* compositions exist, among which two are unfinished, still at the stage of adhesive tape. With these three colours, Mondrian creates a code for moving and crossing colours, top to bottom alternating as if to intertwine surface and ground, overhead and elevation.

Yellow dominates, with its dazzling and frenetic energy, passing over the blue and red lines, but Mondrian allows for some exceptions. Look for his initials P.M. in red on the blue line to the left, and the date 42, on the right. The painting follows the rhythm of a jazz score that repeats itself with variations. [musical excerpt: boogie-woogie music by Meade Lux Lewis]



Boogie-woogie inspired the title of his last picture : *Victory Boogie-Woogie*, still unfinished when he died in 1944. The music he loved so much, inspired an explosion of colourful beats, created using a multitude of coloured squares. The painting's entire surface comes to life, while the underlying grid appears to literally pulsate.

[jingle of the show]

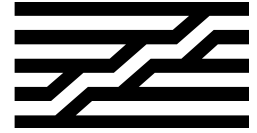
## 7 - Sonia Delaunay, *Prismes électriques*, 1914

[jingle of the show] In her autobiography, Sonia Delaunay claimed that she was lucky not to inherit her mother's plaintiveness. Married to a man from a more modest background than herself, her mother used to constantly moan about her domestic chores, with three or four children. She grumbled so much that her brother, by then an important lawyer in Saint Petersburg, and who was unable to have children with his wife, offered to raise one of them, despite never having seen them. He crossed Russia and Ukraine by train, visited his sister and got to know his nephews and nieces.

Sonia's bubbly personality was such that he surprisingly chose her over her two brothers. This was in 1890, when Sonia was five years old. She took her first ever trip by train, a long trek to Saint Petersburg, where she was educated like a princess. She travelled often, visiting major art capitals in Europe with her aunt and uncle.

In her autobiography, Sonia also recounted that she inherited her father's fighting spirit. To the despair of her adoptive parents, she left in 1906 to paint in Paris, where she fell in love with the city and its vibrant art scene.

Her adoptive parents pleaded with her to return home, but she ardently wanted to remain. To justify staying, she went as far as to organise a marriage of convenience with a young German gallery owner, Wilhelm Uhde, a great talent-spotter. As a homosexual, he too needed to give his family an alibi for staying in Paris, the hub to which all artists converged in the early 20th century.



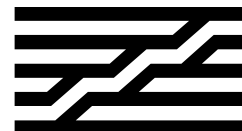
Sonia used brightly-coloured paint from the outset. Greatly influenced by Van Gogh and Gauguin, she aimed to reach further. She discovered the fauves in 1906, but they were not audacious enough for her taste... if only she knew the scandal they would provoke!

She later met the painter Robert Delaunay, the love of her life, who said: "Sonia brought the colours of Ukraine into my life". They worked together, inventing a new style of painting, which Apollinaire called "orphic cubism" and Robert called "simultaneity". She brought colour, he theorised their aesthetics. During her childhood in Ukraine, she was struck by the colourful *isbas*, or chalets, decorated all-over with bright colours like the headscarves of peasant women.

Sonia claimed all her life that "colour speaks, just like words. Each colour has a life of its own." Colour was like a mother's milk she was weaned from too soon. Let's think in terms of colour as we contemplate the picture she produced at the end of this first major period of artistic research with Robert, in 1914, on the eve of World War I.

Colour is generated by light. If there's no light, there's no colours. From two colours blotchs, blue and yellow for example, the colours can be mixed in two ways: mechanically, on the palet with the brush we obtain green; or optically in the eye: the two colours can be seen simultaneously by juxtaposing colour brush strokes, as the post impressionists experimented. The mixture occurred directly in the viewer's eye.

With the fauves, the brush strokes widened, becoming spots and lines and colours were applied directly from the tube. Mixture is replaced by a simultaneous vision of the two colours and this causes a vibration if the colours are contrasted: yellow and blue for example vibrate. To intensify the contrast painters put blue next orange or yellow next to purple. This colours theory was based on Chevreul's law of simultaneous contrasts which the two painters read.



Here we have taken a step further in the painting. The contrasts vibrate with its geometric shapes. The circles give a dynamic rhythm to these contrasts. It is the shape of the sun, the electric globes, the wheels, the planet, the eye.

Sonia Delaunay adopts these forms in her paintings as a dynamic and modern principle. The couple was fascinated by electric lights. Sonia Delaunay illustrated the boulevard Saint Michel newly electrified by street lights, modern prisms containing all the colours of the spectrum. [transitional sound]

What does simultaneity mean?

Simultaneity is a principle that informs and explains all aspects of Sonia Delaunay's personality, life and colourful work. For Sonia, applied arts and painting are one and the same. Her Russian origins facilitated this conception of art.

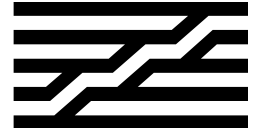
She very quickly made clothes, collages, binders, illustrations, at the same time as paintings. She even managed a boutique after the First World War in which she sold fabrics, dresses and simultaneous costumes. She herself always was dressed with contrasting colours that she had made herself.

One of the episodes that best illustrates the comings and goings between paintings and objects is the bal Bullier. Sonia and Robert Delaunay, as well as many artists, went to this bal every Thursday to dance. For this purpose, Sonia crafted colourful jackets, suits and ties which she designed according to everyone's personality. Dancing fabrics put her painting in motion.

Painting and poetry also coexisted on the page in her collaboration with Blaise Cendrars, a poet and traveller for whom she illustrated his poem *La prose du Transsibérien*.

Simultaneity is also a principle of modernity. The speed of the new world and electricity accelerated the pace of everyday life. Suddenly, one had the feeling he could be in two places simultaneously. Sonia Delaunay was the inventor of a modern lifestyle and embodied the avant-garde in her person and environment.

[transitional sound]



Within the picture, a box evokes the Trans-Siberian.

Here we have a painting that our gaze embraces in a single glance, all at once.

Movement is everywhere, in contrasts, in circles, in syncopated and concentric rhythms.

Even the square format of the canvas in which the circles can't be inscribed is an invitation to rotational movements. Colour stands on its own, it takes us far away into an imaginary world: the world of colour, the world of abstraction.

All this is contemporary with the work of the avant-garde in Germany, around the figure of Vassily Kandinsky. Sonia Delaunay is German speaking. She and Robert Delaunay are opened to the latest research on abstraction. Their created paintings of pure colour, where everything resonates and attracts.

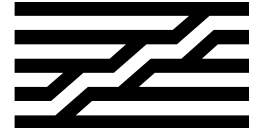
They also integrated sound in their artistic research. In Cendrars' poem, words create sounds which respond to one another. This community of European artists that circulated between Paris, Munich, Berlin and Moscow, was brutally mowed down by the war and its trenches in 1914. [tango music]

Robert was dispensed from military service and they left for Portugal, where they stayed until 1920. They continued to support each other, thinking and creating together while leading their separate careers, until Robert's death in 1941.

Sonia's works shall forever be odes to the colour and light they project, that she worshipped above all. Her writing was later titled *We Shall Go Up To The Sun*.

[jingle of the show]





## 8 - Yves Klein, *SE 71, L'Arbre, grande éponge bleue, 1962*

[jingle of the show] "My works are but the ashes of my art." If we are to believe the words of Yves Klein, contemplating one of his works means that part of the work we are looking at escapes us. These words contain more than what they show.

This sculpture belonging to the Centre Pompidou, *Tree, Large Blue Sponge* stands before our eyes, but what was the long process that produced it? An entire life's worth of process, given that the work has been dated the year the artist died.

Klein died at the age of 34, and he created works from 1954 to 1962.

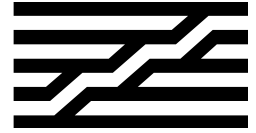
For eight years, he shaped an artistic world brimming with poetry, mysticism, and utopia. A world dominated by blue, where, in his most fervent dreams, he imagined our bodies floating through walls freed of any restrictive matter.

He chose blue for its initial reference to immense infinite elements in nature, sky and ocean, as well as immaterial matter, air and water. Looking beyond this symbolism, Klein chose an exotic blue bordering on mauve at once dark yet luminous, hot yet cold.

Imbued with this blue, the *Large Blue Sponge* becomes a surrealist planet. The runoff paint falling to a puddle on the floor, later to become the tree trunk, serves as a reminder of when the work was created, the point when the artist dip the sponge into the paint, then pulled it out. Klein's sculpture is held in place by the paint, this is quite the paradox.

Klein's "ashes of my art" also refers to the many milestones in those eight intense years of creation, during which his life and works formed a single whole. Almost all of his works have been integrated into performances or are the outcome of a performance, such as the women's footprints on canvas, produced in public.

For Klein, life and art were intertwined. This is why his works use the great elements underpinning life itself: aquatic, we can see it here, with a runoff paint and marine



nature of the sponge; earthly, with the pigments, which he liked to keep powdery; fire, used for a series of works, and air, loaded with artistic sensibility.

The tree, like humans, is a living being drawing its resources, from these four elements, swallowing them up, letting them circulate inside, then expelling them. It is at the centre of major flows and reactivates them.

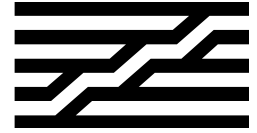
Here, the tree appears to function upside down with sap that runs down and foliage, plunging into the sea. But in Klein's works, major phenomena in nature are reinterpreted in the artist's personal mythology, which starts out with a void.

Yves Klein, whose parents were painters, was familiar with the art world's at an early age. However, he turned to judo training and reached a very high level after a stay in Japan in 1952. This practice linked to Buddhism trained him in self-control. At the same time, Yves Klein adhered to the esoteric order of the Rosicrucians, which allowed him to glimpse the power of imagination and the knowledge of the immaterial.

He organized his first solo exhibition in 1955, where he displayed monochromes of different colours. A monochrome painting is a canvas covered with a single colour. The first copies he made were intended for decorating his judo training rooms or for decorating Rosicrucians cult objects. They are uniformly orange, green, purple, white or yellow. They vary according to different sizes and formats.

Why reduce painting to a single colour? This reduction gave Yves Klein the means to achieve what he called "pure sensitivity". It makes us fully enter into a single colour, without the need for psychological explanations.

In 1958, he organized the exhibition *Le Vide* at the gallery Iris Clert. From the outside, the blue painted windows showed only blue. On the night of the opening, the Republican Guard in full presidential dress, stood on either side of the entrance. A blue cocktail was served. Klein painted the inside of the room white, in order to purify the exhibition space from previous exhibitions and to temporarily transform this space



into his studio. On the outside, tangible and visible from the street, was the colour blue, and on the inside the white space was charged with his artistic sensibility. This is what Yves Klein called "the immaterialization of blue".

This saturated emptiness is found in this work, *Tree, Large Blue Sponge*. To make the blue paint enter the sponge, you have to empty all the water. Little by little, the paint will occupy all the air present in this material. It invades everything uniformly, respecting the relief and hollows of the sponge. Klein would say that it's saturated with pure pictorial, sensitivity. [transitional sound]

#### Immaterial.

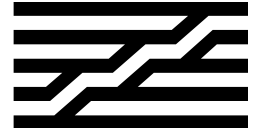
This sponge was made from the IKB – International Klein Blue – for which Klein filed a patent in 1960. It is a colour fixing formula, that keeps the pottery appearance of the pigments in the painting, despite the use of a liquid binder and a perfect uniform surface.

This blue is the colour of the immaterial because applied to a surface, it vibrates, moves forwards or backwards, plays with the surface, as you can see clearly in front of a monochrome. The painting seems to levitate on the wall of the museum. That's why Klein also painted the edges and fixed it by moving it as far forward as possible. When the IKB covered women's bodies, the prints looked like sirens or sea animals.

Here the sponge becomes a magical meteorite, a body that is both celestial and maritime. Meteorites are rocks that have no particular aesthetic appeal, but are more expensive than gold. Because they come from so far away, they carry within them the cosmos they have been through. With this sponge, Klein seems to have visually restored this celestial and magical part of the meteorite.

Blue has no dimension. It is out of dimension, while the other colours differ.

In commenting on his exhibition *Le Vide*, Klein considers that inside the gallery, repainted all in white, resided the true blue, the blue of the blue depth of space, the



blue of his kingdom... of our kingdom, he adds, so important was it to involve the spectators in this adventure that he had achieved with extraordinary heights.

[transitional sound]

Absorption.

Whether it is the artist's tools, bodies or objects that he integrates into his artistic process, the idea of absorption is important to the artist.

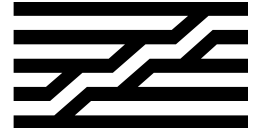
In 1958, Klein experimented with a new way of painting by making the "anthropométries". Naked women smeared themselves with blue paint and left their imprints on the canvas. They were called living brushes. Then he used the term "anthropophagie" for his live performances with women.

For Yves Klein, Beauty pre-exists the work of art, it is in the invisible state. His task is therefore not to be the author, but to grasp the air, the matter on the surface of the bodies and to make it visible. All these materials are captured by the artist who absorbs his tools, his works, his models and the spectator. With the use of sponges, Klein finds the best absorption material. In order to avoid the brushes trace, he uses sponges to apply colour to the support of his paintings. Then this material which he uses as a tool will be integrated into his work, which seems to swallow everything.

*Tree, Large Blue Sponge* from 1962, is all of this. A tool, a person soaked in blue, a spectator in front of a blue work by Klein.

Since 1958, and his exhibition *Le Vide*, Klein has been trying to transmit and make people aware of another reality, more poetic, sensitive and vital. [soft piano music]

Klein died a brutal death aged 34. His mythology did not explain this brutal ending, as if his ongoing exaltation finally carried him off into this blue world he loves so much. Or as if his own material envelope, could but dissolve into immaterialism, yet again, adding fuel to the mystery surrounding this unique artist. [jingle of the show]



## 9 - Fernand Léger, *Les Loisirs - Hommage à Louis David*, 1948-1949

[jingle of the show] The war had been over for three years when Fernand Léger embarked on this huge canvas. It conveys the atmosphere of his Front Populaire years alongside his discovery of a vibrant America.

In 1940, Fernand Léger left Marseille for a flamboyant New York. He taught at Yale during the war then, in 1945, came back to France and his workshop in Montrouge. He continued with his work celebrating the working class for which he had earned an international reputation since the 1930s.

Fernand Léger decided to become a painter in 1900. His father, a farmer, died when he was four. His mother raised him single-handed. He was easily distracted at school, so she enrolled him as an apprentice with an architect in Normandy.

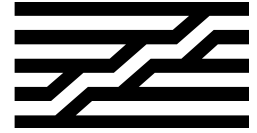
The young Fernand then moved to Paris, where he befriended Marc Chagall, Blaise Cendrars, the Delaunays and Amedeo Modigliani in Montparnasse.

The 1907 Cézanne retrospective had a profound influence on him. He embraced cubism, but bright colours seemed just as important to portray the modern world playing before his eyes.

He would often use cylinders or tubes in his canvasses, to the point that Louis Vauxcelles – the art critic who invented the “fauve” label – called him a “tubist”.

In the aftermath of the World War II, Fernand Léger joined the Communist Party. He had already supported the Front Populaire movement in the 1930s. His dedication to the working class was a significant marker in his work, as seen in this canvas we will be discussing *Leisure - Homage to Louis David*, Jacques-Louis David being the great neoclassical painter from the 18th century.

First, let's speak about Léger's bold use of colour.



Blue, yellow, red and green: all really eye-catching. Violent colours and poor taste in dress were what fascinated Léger in the United States. These are clothes he copied from what he saw in the US. They, and advertising spots, were what struck him most.

Here, the atmosphere is joyful, festive and sunny. It's the holidays.

A family portrait against a blue background: four adults and two children stand still, posing together, facing the camera and staring right at the lens.

They look rather stiff, but they each demonstrate pleasure in life. The woman in orange is lying down, resting, or perhaps has just fallen over. The other, in a multicoloured jersey, on a bicycle, her child on the luggage rack, has just put her foot down. A man in yellow is holding his small daughter. The other in red is smoking, caressing his partner's arm.

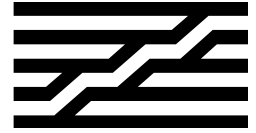
The dark sky background is dotted with clouds. The grey contrasts with that of the figures. The notion of contrast is of utmost importance to Léger. He especially enjoys creating interplay between the people, sky, clouds and metal.

The picture title and its message are a prominent foreground feature: *Homage to Louis David*. [transitional sound]

Nature, an unusual topic for Léger.

We associate Léger more readily with modern machinery. In the aftermath of the war, machines were no longer synonymous with progress but with alienation. His pictures no longer featured tubes and pipes, ousted in favour of circles, curves, convolutions, nooks and crannies.

Yet one machine remains: the bicycle. It is the means of reaching paradise lost, nature. Léger used to say : "As nature puts on shows like clouds, waves, the sun and the moon, inspiring childish awe, I feel that when I'm riding my bike slowly, as the fancy takes me, smoothly rounding the road's turns, I am at one with nature." But here nature is arid, the lost paradise resembles a moonscape.



But his figures do still recall machinery: their stiff limbs look almost metallic, rather like poorly articulated marionettes, and the woman's floating hair resembles a chain. Each of the characters could be a cog. The group works like a machine: the woman lying down could almost be turning the bicycle wheel, her outstretched hand holds a flower, like a helix at the centre of the picture; the children wrap their arms round their parent, and this human steam engine produces cigarette smoke swirling up to the clouds. The bicycle hanging off the tree forms a chain with the branches; the machine blends into nature.

[sounds of visitors in the museum] Louis Aragon suggested adding the grey doves and clouds because Léger was in despair at the lack of balance in the canvas. Doves also symbolise peace. These characters all deserve a rest. [transitional sound]

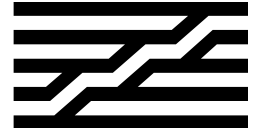
#### Activism.

Since 1936, the right to paid leave meant everyone could take a holiday. When Léger painted this picture, that right had been earned over ten years previously.

He stated: "I wanted to go back to basics, producing art that's straightforward and easy to understand." He seized the opportunity with the bicentenary of French artist Jacques-Louis David, born in 1748.

A key figure in the French revolution in 1789, Marat was known as a "friend of the people" like the name of the newspaper he founded. He was assassinated in 1793 by Charlotte Corday who opposed his revolutionary radicalism (Marat had demanded 270,000 executions).

The Convention asked the painter David, who knew Marat well, to commemorate the event. The result was this almost-religious picture, *The Assassination of Marat*, which is conserved in Brussels. David depicts Marat as a martyr, holding the note Charlotte Corday used to gain access to him, in which she appealed to his compassion. And David elevated the work to commemorative monument status by writing "To Marat, from David" on the actual picture.



Léger, in turn, joined in the celebrations for the bicentenary of David, who he admired for his “anti-impressionist”, dry painting, as well as the subtlety of contrasts and sober colouring. And he painted his own take on the picture. Here we see not a corpse but truly alive contemporaries, actors in a painting depicting modern history rather than ancient. It clearly depicts a great idea, for all to see and understand: the dignity of humble people, the right to rest and be happy.

“I don’t know if it’s an ancient or modern subject. I only know this new interpretation, that’s all.” [jazz music]

During his entire postwar career, Fernand Léger continued to teach as well as paint. This artist who was rejected by the Paris School of Fine Arts was to found several academies! He was always mindful of initiating the people into modern art and avant-garde movements.

Fascinated by cities and their fast pace, Fernand Léger continued to embody modern painting, despite never owning a telephone or learning to drive. [jingle of the show]

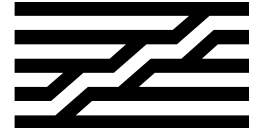
## **10 - Otto Dix, *Bildnis der Journalistin Sylvia von Harden (Journalist Sylvia von Harden’s Portrait)*, 1926**

[jingle of the show] Otto Dix had just moved to Berlin, when he started work on this portrait of Sylvia von Harden. He had already produced a number of cruelly abrasive sketches of personalities, dancers, art dealers and photographers.

Dix broke through at the age of 36. Coming from a working class background, he had studied art early on, then got caught up in World War I. The horrors witnessed on the front were to haunt a sizeable proportion of his work.

He volunteered for the artillery. As an artist he wanted to witness senseless butchery up close, all the better to condemn it later. Back from the front, he moved to Düsseldorf in 1919, to study pictorial techniques of great 15th- and 16th-century masters.





Later, he settled in Berlin, the hedonists' haven, where intellectuals used to hang out in cafés. Imitating Dürer, Cranach and Van Eyck, Otto Dix used tempera to achieve colours that were bright yet near translucent. But Otto Dix was not content with the Renaissance masters' forms.

He went on to invent Neue Sachlichkeit, or New Objectivity, with Georg Grosz and Max Beckman. The more left-leaning artists within this pictorial movement wanted to depict reality in the crudest possible terms.

The first New Objectivity exhibition was organised by art historian Gustav Hartlaub in 1925. He asserted that this new, "crudely contemporary movement sought to express chaos, as the true face of our time, with a primitive hunger for attachment and overexcited baring of oneself".

This uncompromising portrait of journalist Sylvia von Harden was produced during this period.

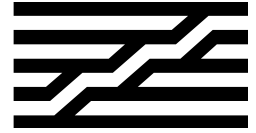
[sounds of visitors in the museum] She was a novelist and poet. She was best known for her articles, especially discussing literature, in the German press. Dix first noticed her at the Romanisches Café in Berlin. He approached her and told her he simply had to paint her.

Sylvia von Harden was surprised. Dix answered: "You have brilliantly characterized yourself, and all that will lead to a portrait representative of an epoch concerned not with the outward beauty of a woman but rather with her psychological condition. You represent our generation's idealism." This is what he set out to portray.

[transitional sound]

Emancipation.

Her emancipated status is obvious from her modern, eye-catching check dress. This style of dress was first worn in the 1920s. With its loose fit, the wearer could jettison corsets in favour of a new style of lingerie, hinted at with that glimpse of



slipping stocking. Her highly masculine haircut which accentuates her elongated face is another sign of emancipation. Lastly, her monocle, usually a male accessory, signifies her intellectual status.

Dix represents all these elements to provide insights into ways to break free from attitudes and conventions of the time. It was not done for a woman to sit alone in a café. Such women were immediately stigmatised.

[sounds of visitors in the museum] Dix also implicitly shows Sylvia von Harden's character. She is not as comfortable as all that. She is a little tense, she is not sitting in a relaxed position. Her hand looks more like a claw. [transitional sound]

#### Ambivalence.

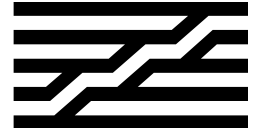
One aspect revealing the sitter's ambivalence is the pink hue. Dix claimed that colour showed individual character. Each person has their own.

I feel that this pink tint is a clue to something that has been concealed, dissimulated.

Dix used pink for the background, the sitter's drink and hands. It's the colour of a healthy complexion. The slipping stocking shows that she is not in such a good health. Her complexion is pale.

Another element revealing this young woman's ambivalence is her name written in the cigarette case. It is quite discreet. You can barely make out the "von" but it is very telling. This woman has made up her own name. She was born Sylvia von Halle. At the time of this portrait, in 1926, she was married to Felix Lehr. Harden was a pseudonym crafted from the first letters of her ex-partner's name. She had been with poet Ferdinand Hardkopf for nearly six years, frequenting bohemian circles in Munich and Berlin. Adopting the "Hard" from Hardkopf was probably her way of expressing her mostly unfulfilled desire for recognition as a writer.

This woman making up her own name feels somewhat false. Which is what makes her portrait so fascinating. We see a very sober setting, highly significant details, a very precise technique used by German Renaissance.



Yet we don't really know what we are looking at. Is it a man or a woman? Is she really that sure of herself? All these questions arise from the artist's observation of her.

[musical excerpt: *Das ist Berlin* by Marlene Dietrich]

After Berlin, Otto Dix moved to Dresden where he taught at the School of Fine Arts. But in 1933, he became a Nazi target and was fired. In 1937, his art was deemed « decadent. 270 Otto Dix works were removed from German museum collections. The Nazis burned eight canvases.

The painter was sent to the front, aged 54 and once more experienced the trauma of war. In the aftermath of World War II, Otto Dix was less productive, shunning contemporary movements. He was to enjoy recognition from the mid-1950s onwards.

[jingle of the show]

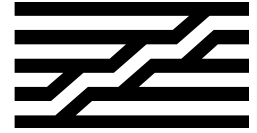
## 11 - Marcel Duchamp, *Fontaine*, 1917-1964

[jingle of the show] In 1912 Marcel Duchamp painted a picture in the spirit of the cubist and futurist movements, *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*. He first submitted it for exhibition at the Salon des Indépendants in Paris, yet it was rejected, despite his own brother being on the panel.

[sounds of visitors in the museum] He then left for New York, hugging his picture under his arm, where he achieved great success. He loved American culture and was to spend much of his life living there.

In the meantime, in 1913 he returned to Paris. With the stateside success of *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* behind him, his failure in Paris gave him pause for thought as to the living conditions of painters, subjected to the whims of panels, dealers and collectors.

Marcel Duchamp decided to dissociate his life as an artist from earning his living, and started working at the Sainte Geneviève library.



This gave him total freedom to experiment at his own pace, in purely intuitive style. He questioned the act of painting which irked him somewhat. He thus turned his workshop into a place for experimentation without any obligation to produce results, productivity or aesthetic criteria.

This is how his research on movement was conducted in *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*, in which he decomposes the successive phases of mechanical movement by a figure, itself very mechanical was thus expressed via a simple bicycle wheel that he attached to a stool. When you turned the wheel, the spokes produced an optical illusion. He was fascinated by this movement, “as with the flames in a fireplace”.

Originally, the device was set up for mere private enjoyment, but later was to become the work known as *Bicycle Wheel*, often exhibited in this room at the Centre Pompidou.

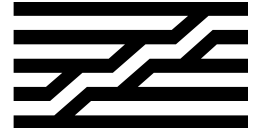
The road toward the readymade was embarked upon. From this point on, Duchamp created works without limiting resources. He had a very playful spirit.

He and two artist brothers organised steeplechase races on Sunday afternoons in Puteaux. Then, he earned his living organising chess tournaments for a while. Games were very serious, an all-important element in his life.

But let's get back to the beginning of his career as an artist, to be precise in 1917, in the throes of World War I. Unfit for battle, Duchamp returned to New York and continued to work as an artist, using neither paint nor paintbrush.

He decided to test the jury system by sending a urinal bought in a shop selling bathroom fittings. He turned it over, signed it with the pseudonym Richard Mutt and sent it to an exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists in New York.

Duchamp was on the panel and saw his work rejected by it. This story is one of many legends surrounding this work, spawning numerous comments.



This urinal was taken out of context, deprived of its pipes, removed from the bathroom and displayed up in the air like many items in Duchamp's workshop. It was later showcased horizontally, on a stand. It was turned upside down, changing its meaning. By removing the urinal from its context, it became a work of "readymade" art. But is it art? Is it modern? An artist's commentary on industrial production? All these aspects are valid. [transitional sound]

#### Masculine/feminine.

Originally, this urinal was sent for an exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists in New York, apparently from a woman in Philadelphia using the pseudonym Richard Mutt.

Duchamp was soon to take on a feminine alter ego, Rose Sélavy. The R of Rose can be rolled exaggeratedly, and Sélavy is pronounced like "c'est la vie", "that's life" in French. He much enjoyed puns, playing with language and objects.

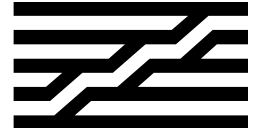
The form of this object was reminiscent of fountains still seen in early 20th-century buildings in Paris, typically in corridors leading to garret rooms inhabited by maids. These small washbasins were higher at the top than most.

The word fountain appealed to Marcel Duchamp, seeing both masculine and feminine in it. Its purpose is to collect men's urine. This side up, it recalls the female body, the vagina, the female body as receptacle, the place for gestation.

There's a definite sexual connotation since the pipe holes are reminiscent of orifices. The triangular water outlets might evoke the pubis. One is truly within the other. This interpretation would have appealed greatly to Marcel Duchamp. He let people speculate about his intentions. [transitional sound]

#### Signature.

[sounds of visitors in the museum] The work would soon trigger a host of stories.



With his readymade works in particular, Duchamp was one of the first artists to embroider tales around his work; as such he may be considered a spiritual father to contemporary artists. He let people invent stories about his work.

For *Fountain*, the signature is very significant and prominent. It has been signed “R. Mutt”. Marcel Duchamp said the “R” stood for Richard, (which means “rich man” in French). However this is a common or garden urinal. He is playing with contrasts between rich and poor.

There are also several puns with English and German. The name “Mutt” obviously refers to a dog. A dog without a pedigree, and thus of no value. “Mutt” recalls the verb “muter” in French (to transfer). Similarly, “Mutter”, mother in German. In the French *verlan* (a slang in which syllables are pronounced in reverse order) it becomes “tu meurs” (you die) double T, U, M and an R.

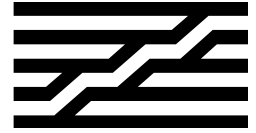
Duchamp loved to play. He never managed to live on his art. He earned his living teaching Americans French and organising chess tournaments.

Marcel Duchamp was a co-founder of dadaism in New York. This international movement emerged in the midst of World War I. Intellectuals of the time, especially artists, reacted to the absurdity of war with absurdity.

Dadaist ideas included rebellion against the bourgeois mindset.

Many held that a picture had to be framed, dated and signed. Duchamp’s friend Picabia, whose work is in on display in this room, also played around with frames and signatures.

Marcel Duchamp played around with the notion of appropriation, questioning artists’ attitudes. Firstly, he stopped making things. He decided that something was a work of art, appropriated it, removed it from its context and signed it with a pseudonym.



It referenced mystification, invention, hoaxes and provocation, prompting reaction and thought. Marcel Duchamp unpacked the meaning of art, the attitude of the public when presented with a work of art, how far you can push the public.

[musical excerpt: *Gymnopédies & Gnossiennes* by Erik Satie]

All his life, he would invent new modes of expression. The expression of a free-wheeling spirit and curious nature. Francis Picabia's wife Gabrielle Buffet, who he was very close to, said later that what interested Marcel Duchamp above all was not to paint but to express life, society and his times, exercising the playful spirit and great intelligence he was known for. [jingle of the show]

## 12 - Frida Kahlo, *The Frame*, 1938

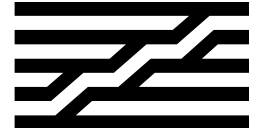
[jingle of the show] Frida Kahlo faced arduous challenges from an early age.

When she was six, she got polio, leaving her with a deformed, atrophied right leg. This physical handicap meant she was the butt of much mockery. As a result, she matured far more quickly than others, learning to turn her weakness into an asset.

She decided to study as a path to female freedom and independence. But at the age of 18, the bus she was taking home from school hit a tram. While Frida Kahlo survived this terrible accident, her injuries required many operations and serious consequences, including infertility, that would plague her for the rest of her life.

She had to stay in hospital for several months, encased in a plaster rib cage. She started painting then, never to stop. It was her way of dealing with her struggles. She painted things how she saw them. She used her self-portraits as a way of focusing on herself, making herself the subject of her art.

Painting helped her overcome her suffering. She even harnessed her own suffering as a vehicle to take up the cause of the oppressed. Her self-portraits carried messages well beyond the story of Frida Kahlo.



Self-portraiture.

[sounds of visitors in the museum] A third of her works are self-portraits. She first started painting in 1925, during a long convalescence. Her life was littered with suffering and several accidents. Her parents made her a special easel making it easier for her to paint her landscapes, portraits and self-portraits.

One thing all her portraits have in common is the look. There is barely any expression. The blank look can be interpreted in several ways. Firstly, it shows the concentration needed for observation when looking in the mirror. Also, she claimed that she was not seeking to reproduce varied expressions, she was not seeking to communicate suffering but to express it. "My painting bears the message of pain".

Another feature, almost a hallmark, is the deliberately exaggerated unibrow, elevated to icon status.

Unlike her other self-portraits, she has not dotted her hair with ribbons, only flowers. This helps draw our attention to what earned the picture its title: the frame.

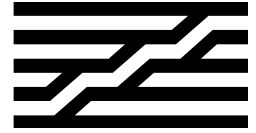
[transitional sound]

The frame.

Frida Kahlo did not paint this bright, colourful frame herself. It is a product of Mexican folklore. It is symmetrical, with these two birds and colourful flowers rising to form an alcove, thus framing her face. The flowers she usually twisted into her hair are in the frame here. In most of her works, she is dressed as a peasant in Indian dress, to identify with the Indian population and lay claim to her national identification.

Like this frame painted by a Mexican artisan on the underside of the glass, traditionally used to frame photographs, mirrors or religious icons. The decoration is painted on the underside of the glass, creating transparency. The double device of frame plus self-portrait gives extra depth. Our eyes skim over the traditional decor to contemplate Frida Kahlo's face in the background.





[sounds of visitors in the museum] She stares proudly out of the frame, confident in her rare status as a female artist. Her life and collection of Mexican artefacts, her Mexican jewellery and dresses are all part of her stand for her culture and country, in the aftermath of the revolution from 1910 to 1920. She even changed her date of birth. She was actually born in 1907, but had everyone believe she was born in 1910, a true child of the Mexican revolution. This was indeed how she described herself.

[transitional sound]

Surrealism.

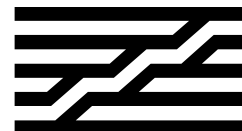
[sounds of visitors in the museum] Frida Kahlo's works cannot be classified as surrealist since she does not completely forsake reality. In Mexican culture, reality and imagination can mingle within a single reality. She claimed: "They thought I was a surrealist, but I wasn't. I never painted dreams. I painted my own reality."

She was well acquainted with the surrealists, having met André Breton through her husband Diego Rivera. She met Diego Rivera in 1928, the year she joined the Communist Party. In September 1938, André Breton was invited to Mexico City by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs to give a series of conferences on poetry and painting in Europe. It was Diego Rivera who introduced him to Frida Kahlo.

André Breton was fascinated by her. The year he met her, 1938, was an important one for her, the year of her first one-woman exhibition in New York. Breton chose to write the text introducing the twenty-five works on display. In 1939, he put together an exhibition on Mexico in Paris. The painting was sold during this exhibition. This is a singular work, the only painting by Frida Kahlo in museum collections in Europe.

[jazz music]

Frida Kahlo's life was a constant struggle. All her life, she devoted herself and her work to changing things and reducing inequality: "I wish to cooperate with the Revolution in transforming the world into a classless one so that we can attain a better rhythm for the oppressed classes".



At the time she started to paint, the atmosphere in post-revolutionary Mexico was extremely male-centred. Having striven towards revolution, women were sent back to the kitchen. Frida Kahlo could not stand this regression in gender equality experienced during the revolution, refusing to conform to stereotype.

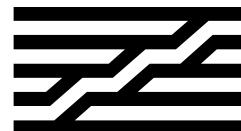
Her main weapon was painting. Her trademarks were her legendary unibrow and light moustache. She accentuated them in a bid to speak out against aesthetic ideals imposed by masculinist society.

Frida Kahlo was unconventionally beautiful, combining her facial hair with great elegance. She invented a new brand of femininity, incorporating her Mexican origins.

In 1946, she had to spend nine months bedridden in hospital, undergoing many operations on her spine. She still continued to paint. In 1953, her right leg was amputated because of gangrene. Losing her leg plunged her into deep depression. She continued to paint from her wheelchair, still representing highly taboo subjects in her paintings. Weakened by pneumonia, Frida Kahlo died in 1954. On her last painting, she wrote “Viva la vida”, amid the bright colours illuminating the picture.

[\[jingle of the show\]](#)

[\[jingle of the show\]](#) It was a Centre Pompidou podcast. You can find all our podcasts on the Centre Pompidou web site, its listening platforms and social networks. See you soon with the next podcast! [\[jingle of the show\]](#)



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