

Centre Pompidou visits

Guided audio tours through the exhibitions and permanent collection.

"Gérard Garouste" exhibition

This podcast accompanies you to the Gérard Garouste exhibition with the explanation of the artist about his interest for tales, myths and above all words. Through the painting as much as through the choice of his subjects, often religious or literary, the painter transmits his poetic vision of the world and talks about the great figures that punctuate his works, the *Classicist* and the *Apache*, Dante, Queen Esther, clown Auguste and many others.

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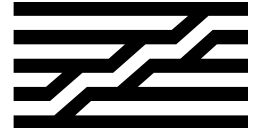
In black, Gérard Garouste

In blue, the narrating voice

In purple, the musical excerpts

In red, all the other sound indications





Podcast transcription

0 - Introduction

[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 – The *Classicist* and the *Apache*

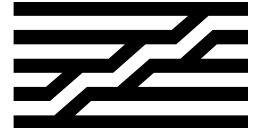
The *Classicist* and the *Apache* comes from a dream I had, in which a rather fatherly voice told me: “You know, in life there are two sorts of people, Classicists and Apaches”. I wondered what they meant by the “Classicist” and the “Apache”; I got the idea of classicists and modern people, Indians and cowboys, but I couldn't see any connection between Classicists and Apaches. My friend Jean-Michel Ribes told me: “You're punning on “Classicist” and the French word “cacique”, used for Amerindian chiefs, as well as the type of person who passes all his exams with flying colours, who wears a tie, with plenty of mettle, the complete opposite to Apaches, who are a bit bizarre.

In terms of their characteristics, the Classicist walks a straight line: he is Apollonian. The Apache taps into intuition, he is Dionysian. The ultimate Classicist is annoying, a kind of president, and ultimately the Apache is a madman.

A recurring theme in the exhibition is the links between the madman, the prophet and the child. [transitional sound]

2 – Burgundy and mythology

The first thing you notice is a depiction of a great chunk of my childhood, i.e. Burgundy. My childhood with my parents was very traditional, even difficult, but in Burgundy I spent my time with an alcoholic uncle, who was great, who produced art brut. Uncle Casso taught me to paint and shared his art with me.



Burgundy was also frightening, with a well that was cursed: a woman had committed suicide in it. When I would go to get water for my aunt, in the winter, I was frightened of the black hole from which we drew the water. If I mention it today, it's because for me, it was like the Middle Ages. The fear I felt was the stuff of fairy tales. So this fairy tale atmosphere forged my taste for legends and myths, that's the first point.

But now another point is that during this period, I had just left the school of fine arts, where I had learned absolutely nothing. I had all sorts of technical and quality issues with my painting. But I was lucky enough to meet art restorers at the Louvre, Misters Petit and Ballot, who were my masters. Because for me, painting is about technique and form.

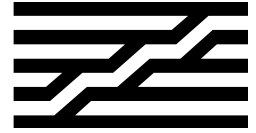
There is a link between the subject of the picture, that I harness, and the story that is told. This link is the key to my painting. With its qualities, achieved using glaze, paste, etc., the painted image is a screen, concealing the meaning of the picture, like a gigantic lie in which the liar admits to lying.

The title of this retrospective could be "a lie". **[transitional sound]**

3 – Dante

Dante's very subject is the Bible, but as a fairy tale. With Dante and Virgil who go through the dark forest of hell, there's great pleasure in depicting very compelling moments. What I love in the rings of hell is that the more precisely Dante describes the torture, the torment suffered by damned souls, the less you understand, the more abstract it becomes. There's a paradox, the more Dante gives the less he gives. That's what painting is like.

My painting is very figurative but it gives nothing away: it's space that is important, the empty spaces between the pictures. This is how I learned to read the Bible with my masters: when seeking meaning in the text, it's not the verses that count but the



spaces between the words. What meaning is missing here, between each picture. In this Dante room, as in the other rooms for this retrospective we're visiting, the blank spaces are very important, and the connections from one picture to another.

[transitional sound]

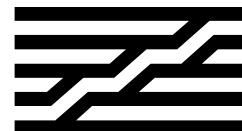
4 – The *Dive Bacbuc* [Oracle of the Holy Bottle]

With Rabelais, we discover something extraordinary, which crops up again with Cervantes in *Don Quixote*: humour. Humour is how we manage to get serious messages across. The four books of *La Dive Bacbuc* are full of codes: just reading doesn't show you anything. You need to be initiated, this is why it is handed down. What is accessible, however, is humour.

Why is this *La Dive Bacbuc* [Oracle of the Holy Bottle] presented with inward-opening apertures? It's a device to prevent you from ever seeing the entire picture. What am I getting at? Rabelais shows details, quite juicy details, like the "bogroll" which is the core element of this installation. With these downy birds which are the delight of back sides, Rabelais places great distance between this scatological picture and the subtlety of the subject.

Rabelais compared words to pieces of flint to be rubbed together to produce sparks. We open up to association. In Hebrew, all words have at least four meanings. Take the word "Midbar": from this same root, you get desert, plague, bees and words. What links desert, plague, bees and words? Transmission. We cross the desert on a camel; bees go from one flower to the next seeking nectar; the plague is spread; words are obviously about transmission.

This exhibition could quite simply have been called "words". [transitional sound]



5 – The Donkey and the Fig

What do donkey and figs have in common? We see the donkey eating figs. She looks very happy.

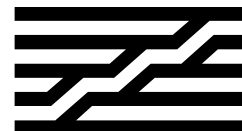
But why a donkey and a fig? Because in the Talmud when I was studying with my master, Aroch at the time, at one point we saw a comment about the donkey and just below, a comment about the fig. I said: “It’s weird, “athown” and “te'en” have nothing in common”. My master replied: “Can’t you hear the sound between “athown” and “te'en”? That’s all it is, that’s all you need, a sound.” And suddenly, I was struck by just how out there my master’s comment was, how poetic: an association of sounds that is so pleasant you could write a melody about it.

And in the course of the exhibition, there is “zeugma”. This is what follows on logically from what we said about the donkey and the fig. “Zeugma” is a Greek word, to designate a bridge from one bank to the other. This bridge, or “zeugma”, actually existed and was destroyed. The fact that it was destroyed, is a way of connecting the two banks. The bridge itself is no longer there, so it’s about connecting two things that have nothing to do with each other.

Also in terms of hanging order, there are links from one picture to the next. With these five pictures, it’s up to you to have fun finding links. The entire exhibition could have been called “Zeugma”. [\[transitional sound\]](#)

6 – The Banquet

That brings us to the last room. The centrepiece is a triptych called *The Banquet*. In fact the triptych should have three names. The left panel could be called “Purim”, the central panel “Esther’s Feast” and the third “The Gathering of the Manna”. The whole revolves around the myth of Esther. It’s a fairy tale, a story with plenty of drama, but which ends happily. That’s the surface interpretation of the story.



There's a second level of interpretation, to be studied with a master like Marc-Alain Ouaknin. What do these three panels reveal to us?

Purim is a carnival, an important moment in Jewish tradition.

Esther's Feast: Esther narrowly escaped death, because she had to fast in order to ask a favour of King Ahasuerus, who did not know she was Jewish. However, Haman, his vizier, had decreed the extermination of the Jews. Esther obtained from the king the right for Jews to defend themselves if they were attacked. Ultimately the king acknowledged that Queen Esther and her husband together saved the people from what would have been the first genocide. And in philosophical terms, it's interesting to see comparisons between this scuppered genocide and the successful genocide perpetrated by Hitler.

And with "The Gathering of the Manna", I'm punning on "Haman" and "manna", the name of the bread that the Israeli people received, and Haman, the vizier who was a horrible man.

For me it's like a game of chess, with combinations. These masters work on texts without modifying them; we don't modify the letters but we combine them, as on the chessboard. And we reach infinite complexity in the game.

This is how you need to embrace this room: we could call it "The Chessboard".

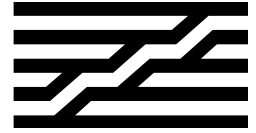
[transitional sound]

7 – *White Clown and the August One*

All these pictures use stylistic figuration, my writing, it's all rather anamorphic.

But for the picture with the *White Clown and the August One*, I reproduced a black & white photograph from Studio Harcourt.

The White Clown represents light, with glitter and sequins. He is holding a panel, a sheet of paper, showing Maxwell's equations from the late 19th century, which helped to define light. That wasn't on the Harcourt photograph. And to the side, a diptych with the August one, a kind of madman, an alcoholic: the Apache. The complete opposite



of the Classicist. He's the one who makes us laugh, unlike the white clown. There's the August one, in his bowler hat, on the rim of which you can make out a sentence in Hebrew, traditionally translated as "Let there be light – and there was light".

Here, the picture appeals to three categories of people: those who understand the language of mathematics and know Maxwell's equations, those who speak Hebrew, and those who understand neither and only have the picture to look at, *The White Clown and the August One*. And these pictures do also work without any commentary.

Let's end there: if we wanted to be pompous, we could call the exhibition "Different levels of interpretation"... but it would have been too pompous! [laugh]

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

Credits

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