

André Masson Surprises With Surreal Streams at Robilant and Voena

BY LISA CONTAG | JULY 19, 2016



Robilant and Voena's St. Moritz gallery in Switzerland is currently presenting a selection of works by André Masson (1896-1987), one of the first painters to translate the principles of "stream-of-consciousness" writing ("écriture automatique") to the canvas.

The gallery aims to "reinforce André Masson's position as a unique artist, whose extraordinary and turbulent imagination resulted in an incredibly diverse output of works, which are permeated with poetry and symbolic content." To this end, the show presents a selection of works from different periods in Masson's career. For one, the transition between Cubism and Surrealism, with the colorful "Femme Surprise" of 1932, and "Le Faucheur," of 1934, which Masson painted in trance-like states.

Like many artists of his generation, Masson's youth was overshadowed by conflict. In 1912 he moved to Paris to study Fine Art. Two years later the First World War broke out and Masson enlisted as a

soldier. In 1917, he was severely wounded. This, and the horrors he experienced, would leave an enduring mark on his future as an artist.

After having returned to Paris in the 1920s, Masson was initially interested in Cubism, before becoming involved with the newly forming Surrealist movement. Particularly the surrealist interest in the unconscious and subconscious, the suppressed and irrational spoke to Masson, who began experimenting with new techniques of drawing and painting that would allow him to unlock these inner forces.

Following the principles of *écriture automatique*, he began to create “automatic drawings” – treating his hands as entities of their own, suppressing any attempt to willfully master their movement, and rather following their abstract actions as an observer. This approach, as well as his experiments with unconventional materials such as sand or glue in painting, made Masson one of the forefathers of Abstract Expressionism and would later have a deep impact for example on American painter [Jackson Pollock](#).

Also on view in St. Moritz are later works that speak of his interest for psychoanalytical symbolism to address traumas and instincts. (Masson was the brother-in-law of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and also deeply involved with Georges Bataille’s Surrealist publications). His eerie forests and landscapes seem charged with a sense of horror and uneasiness, such as in “Les Vieux Platanes,” 1949, and “Désir,” 1959. Works such as “Fécondité,” 1956, “Les Predreaux,” 1952, or “Les Trois Colonnes,” 1953, on the other hand, convey his sensitivity to the painterly translation of light in the vein of Impressionism, while “La Foudre,” 1956, is representative for Masson’s interest in Eastern Asian calligraphy, philosophy, and Zen Buddhism.