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ART AND THE SACRED

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Stained glass depicting Johann Sebastian Bach in the Church of St Thomas in Leipzig (Germany), where he officiated as 'Kapellmeister' from 1723 until his death in 1750.
Stuart Black / Alamy Stock Photo

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Editorial

The sacred, the driving force behind creation

In studying the influence of the sacred on creation, the first reference that comes to mind is religious. This is why we requested eminent representatives of major religions to share their views with us – although that is of course not the only angle of study we considered.

Whether an artist believes in a god or not, when confronted with a concept that is beyond them and may transcend them, they will sacralize it.

To paraphrase Cioran, we could say that even if God did not exist and had simply been invented to inspire Johann Sebastian Bach to compose music, that in itself would be great.

It is actually fascinating to see the creativity of entirely atheistic artists when they deal with religious or mystical subjects. Think of architects who are commissioned to build a cathedral, for example, or even a simple church.

Le Corbusier, who was born into a Protestant family and was himself a complete atheist, designed three Catholic buildings: the Notre-Dame du Haut chapel in Ronchamp, the Sainte-Marie de La Tourette convent, and the Saint-Pierre church in Firminy. His approach to light, common to all three works reveals the mystical dimension of this great architect's personality. With his Requiem – one of the most beautiful in the history of music –, Giuseppe Verdi, an agnostic if not an atheist, proved that genius thrives on the sacred, even though it does not always share all of its codes.

For many creators, the sacred is a question rather than an answer, which is what makes it so extraordinarily stimulating.

Laurent Petitgirard

Composer and conductor,

Permanent Secretary of the Académie des Beaux-Arts

Pavillon Comtesse de Caen - Palais de l'Institut de France

2023 PIERRE DAVID-WEILL – ACADEMIE DES BEAUX-ARTS DRAWING PRIZE

This prize, created in 1971 by member of the Académie Pierre David-Weill (1900-1975) to encourage the practice of drawing among new generations of artists, is awarded every year thanks to his son and fellow member of the Académie, Michel David-Weill (1932-2022). The competition supports artists under forty years old who use drawing techniques (pencil, Indian ink, charcoal, engraving, sanguine, biros), and helps to foster the emergence of new talent in this discipline, which lies at the very heart of artistic creation.

The 2023 jury was made up of members of the Académie's Painting, Sculpture, and Printmaking Sections **Jean Anguera, Pierre Collin, Érik Desmazières, Astrid de La Forest, Philippe Garel, Fabrice Hyber, Catherine Meurisse, Ernest Pignon-Ernest, Anne Poirier** and **Brigitte Terziev**, as well as Académie correspondent **Françoise Docquier**. The Académie received 235 applications.

The winners were Alexis Frémont (1st prize, €8,000), Cassius Baron (2nd prize, €4,000) and Aude David (3rd prize, €2,000). Three special acknowledgements were awarded to Yann Bagot, Arthur Dujols Luquet, and Lucas Ngo. Alongside their works, the drawings of 27 other artists were exhibited at the Palais de l'Institut de France's Pavillon Comtesse de Caen.

First prize: **Alexis Frémont**, born in 1992, a self-taught student of art history, is now a 4th year student at the École des Beaux-Arts de Paris. He works exclusively in painting and drawing.

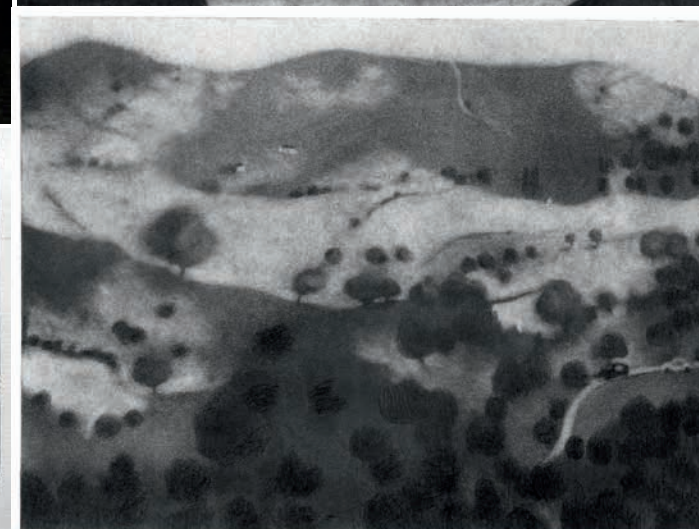
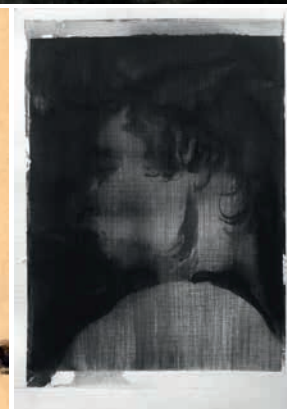
Second prize: **Cassius Baron**, born in 1999, also studied at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Moving between painting, music, performance, and other disciplines, he is currently specializing in drawing and sculpture.

Third prize: **Aude David**, born in 1990, discovered the various possible associations between different sound and visual worlds when experimenting with the moving image as a student at the École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs in Paris. She is working on a short film, *À présent il faut atterrir*, of which the drawings presented are the first stage.

Special acknowledgement: **Yann Bagot**, born in 1983, graduated from the École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs de Paris in 2008. His drawing practice is based on *in situ* experiences in contact with nature.

Special acknowledgement: **Arthur Dujols Luquet**, born in 1999, is a student preparing for the Diplôme National Supérieur d'Arts Plastiques. His work explores the porosities between drawing, dance and writing. His drawings, which are often inked and sometimes embellished with chemistry, form the bedrock of his artistic research.

Special acknowledgement: A graduate of the École Européenne Supérieure de l'Image in Angoulême, **Lucas Ngo**, born in 1992, works between Berlin and Paris. His childhood in Collioure has left a lasting mark on his pictorial practice, which veers between narration and abstraction. ■



Top: Alexis Frémont (1st Prize), *Untitled*, black stone on paper, 54 x 48 cm, 2022

Top right: Cassius Baron (2nd Prize), *Untitled*, lead and graphite on paper, 30 x 40 cm, 2022

Below: Aude David (3rd Prize), *À présent il faut atterrir 1*, graphite powder and 4B pencil, 22 x 16.5 cm, 2023

Above: Yann Bagot (Mention), *Pointe du Grouin #51*, Indian ink on paper, 56 x 76 cm, 2021, © ADAGP, Paris, 2023; Arthur Dujols Luquet, (Mention), *Ce qui fleurit de l'encre - Pot rond et fleurs crépues*, Indian ink on bamboo paper mounted on canson paper, 29.9 x 27.8 cm, 2023; Lucas Ngo (Mention), *Reflet n°5*, ink on paper, 26 x 36 cm, 2022

Pavillon Comtesse de Caen - Palais de l'Institut de France

BRUNO BARBEY « LES ITALIENS »

With this exhibition at the Pavillon Comtesse in Caen from 11 May to 2 July, the Académie des Beaux-Arts paid tribute to Bruno Barbey (1941-2020), a member of its Photography Section.

In 1962, at the age of 21, Bruno Barbey decided to travel around Italy. He was determined to 'capture the spirit of a nation through images' and to draw a portrait of its inhabitants.

At the dawn of the 1960s, the trauma of the war was beginning to fade and the dream of a new Italy was emerging. It no longer was quite the Italy neo-realist filmmakers had portrayed. People were beginning to believe in the 'economic miracle', and Bruno Barbey was one of the first to record this moment of historic transition. From north to south, east to west, he photographed every social class, from *ragazzi* to aristocrats, and from nuns to beggars and prostitutes. His lucid but always kindly gaze captured a shifting reality and shed new light on the Italians, a people that are so near and yet so far from the French.

Robert Delpire, who was planning to publish a book in the 'Encyclopédie essentielle' collection – which already included Robert Frank's *Les Américains* (1958) and René Burri's *Les Allemands* (1962) – noticed this work. Yet it took until 2002 for a first edition to bring together these images of an Italy that had ceased to exist.

The exhibition featured around sixty prints chosen personally by Bruno Barbey shortly before his death. It was curated by Caroline Thiénot-Barbey and Jean-Luc Monterosso.

Bruno Barbey studied photography and graphic art in Vevey (Switzerland). His reportage on the Italians (1961-1964) allowed him to meet Marc Riboud and Henri Cartier-Bresson and to join the *Magnum Photos* agency. He became vice-president of the agency in 1978 and then president of Magnum International in 1992. He travelled across the globe to cover many of the 20th century's major conflicts, in Nigeria, Vietnam, the Middle East, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Northern Ireland, Iraq, Poland, and Kuwait. He would often return to the places he had reported on, sometimes ten or thirty years later, to capture a world in motion. For him, photography often takes on a memorial role. In 1999, an exhibition of his photographs taken in Morocco over a period of thirty years was presented at the Petit Palais. In 2015-16, the Maison Européenne de la Photographie presented 'Passages', a major retrospective on his work. His colour photography work, 'Color of China' was shown in 2019 at the National Museum in Beijing. Bruno Barbey has received numerous awards for his work. The author of some thirty books, he has collaborated with Jean Genet, Tahar Ben Jelloun, Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio, and Philippe Tesson, among others. His photographs feature in museum collections around the world. He was knighted in the Ordre National du Mérite, and on 13 April 2016 was elected as member of the Académie des Beaux-Arts' Photography Section. ■



Above: Palermo, 1966
Left: Rome, 1966
Below: Rome, 1964
Opposite: Rome, 1964

© Bruno Barbey / Magnum



Musée Marmottan Monet - Académie des beaux-arts

« 'ENGRAVING LIGHT, PRINTS IN 100 MASTERPIECES' »

Le musée Marmottan Monet présente du 5 juillet au 17 septembre une exceptionnelle collection de gravures, appartenant à la Fondation suisse William Cuendet & Atelier de Saint-Prex. Une centaine de chefs-d'œuvre, du XV^e au XXI^e siècle : Dürer, Rembrandt, Piranèse, Goya, Corot, Manet, Degas, Bonnard, Vuillard... Les œuvres des plus grands maîtres sont mises en regard de créations d'artistes contemporains.

With this exhibition on the history of engraving and its techniques, the Musée Marmottan Monet is opening its doors to what was one of the most popular means of communication until it was supplanted by the newspaper industry and photography. But the engraver's art is also one that offers an extraordinary wealth of subtle inventions and surprises. To be able to interpret the magic of light, to express all its secrets, was engravers' endeavour in their quest to translate its nuances through the sole contrast of black and white.

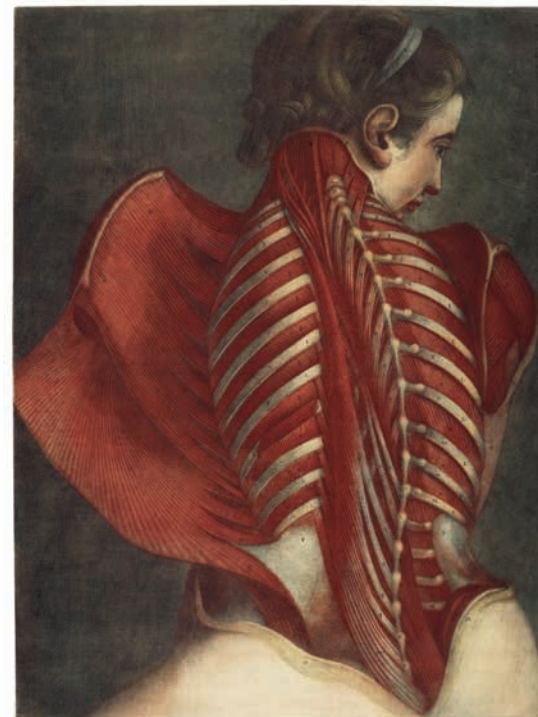
In the late 19th century, their reflections on rendering light echoed the approaches of certain Impressionist painters to signify its rapid and vibrant passage through their paintings. Redon, Degas and Monet, in particular, were not insensitive to the new methods of rendering light effects in copper or stone. A special section at the end of the exhibition is devoted to photogravure, the printing process that offered late 19th-century photographers the possibility of engraving light – at the same moment as Impressionists were painting it.

This exhibition reflects the diversity of the William Cuendet & Atelier de Saint-Prex Foundation's collection (entrusted to the Musée Jenisch Vevey in Switzerland) as well as its curators' distinct spirit of curiosity. The collection of prints is the result of several private collectors' patient work to bring together the great names in the art of printmaking, and a product of the passion of contemporary creators. It reflects the history of printmaking from the first woodblock prints in the 15th century to 19th- and 20th-century inventions. In addition to the masterpieces, this selection focuses on images that are emblematic in terms of their content or technique, representing the richness of a collection that is much appreciated by collectors and artists alike. This is not a chronology, but a free and sensitive approach that seeks to put forth affinities between old masters and contemporary artists.

Great examples by Dürer, Rembrandt, Canaletto, Piranesi, Goya, Lorrain, Nanteuil, Daumier, Degas, Bresdin, Redon, Bonnard and Picasso hang side-by-side with creations by artists working at the Atelier de Saint-Prex. The exhibition is divided into 7 sections, covering the art form's themes, functions, and processes. ■

Curated by Florian Rodari, curator of the Fondation William Cuendet & Atelier de Saint-Prex.

Until 17 September 2023



Top: Rembrandt, *The Hundred Guilder*, circa 1649, etching, drypoint and burin on laid paper, 28 x 39.7 cm. Vevey, Musée Jenisch Vevey - Cabinet national des estampes, Fondation William Cuendet & Atelier de Saint-Prex, inalienable gift of the Cuendet family.

Above: Francisco Goya, *Follies*, ca 1824, additional plate from 'Proverbs', published in *L'Art*, 1877, etching, aquatint and drypoint on laid paper, 24.5 x 35.6 cm. Vevey, Musée Jenisch Vevey - Cabinet national des estampes, Fondation William Cuendet & Atelier de Saint-Prex.

Centre: Félix Vallotton, *Les Petites filles*, 1893, woodcut on Japanese paper, 14.2 x 20.3 cm. Vevey, Musée Jenisch Vevey - Cabinet national des estampes, Fondation William Cuendet & Atelier de Saint-Prex, Collection P.

Right: Jacques-Fabien Gautier-Dagoty, *Femme vue de dos, disséquée de la nuque au sacrum, appelée L'Ange anatomique*, 1746, manière noire and burin on laid paper, 61.5 x 46.5 cm. Vevey, Musée Jenisch Vevey - Cabinet national des estampes, Fondation William Cuendet & Atelier de Saint-Prex.

© Olivier Christinat, Lausanne

Pavillon Comtesse de Caen - Palais de l'Institut de France

TRIBUTE TO VLADIMIR VELIČKOVIĆ

Until 24 September, the Académie des Beaux-Arts is paying tribute to one of its recently lost members, Vladimir Veličković (1935-2019), a Franco-Serbian painter elected in 2005 to the chair previously occupied by Bernard Buffet.

A selection of fifteen works, complemented by mixed media on paper, dating from 1974 to 2019, testifies to the singularity of a resolutely figurative oeuvre that stands apart from the categories of contemporary art.

"The expressive power of his painting and his sharp draughtsmanship (always with a pen, never with a pencil) resolutely serve the human or animal figure that is at stake in a dialectic of the body. Vladimir Veličković's work bears the deep scars left by the civil war that tore his country apart and is a mise en abîme of an existential and mystical theatre of cruelty". Lydia Harambourg.

Vladimir Veličković was born in 1935 in Belgrade (Serbia) and first exhibited his work in 1951. After graduating from the Belgrade School of Architecture in 1960, he turned to painting and held his first solo exhibition in 1963. He won the painting prize at the Paris Biennial in 1965 and moved to Paris the following year, where he would soon meet a broader public in an exhibition at the Galerie du Dragon (1967).

A witness to the atrocities committed during the Second World War and again in the 1990s, and scarred by the Yugoslavian civil wars, he devoted his painting to representations of the human body, an inexhaustible field of investigation for him. In his work, desolate landscapes, blocked horizons, visions of war and carnage form a universe where representations of the world and the human body are illustrations of the suffering inflicted on man by man.

Appointed head of studio at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris in 1983, Vladimir Veličković taught for eighteen years, constantly striving to pass on his knowledge and to accompany and support creative work.

In 2007 he was appointed Curator of the Serbian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. In 2009 he set up the Vladimir Veličković Fund for Drawing, which rewards young Serbian artists. He has held numerous solo exhibitions around the world and received prestigious awards for drawing, painting, and printmaking.

Vladimir Veličković was the first Franco-Serbian artist to be elected to the Académie des Beaux-Arts, to which he was particularly attached and whose work he followed assiduously. He was also a member of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts. ■

Until 24 September 2023



Top: *Schacht*, 1981, oil on canvas, 198 x 146 cm.
Above: *Descente Fig. XXI*, 1989, oil on canvas, 285 x 195 cm.
Opposite: *Feu*, 2005, oil on canvas, 250 x 500 cm.
Right: Vladimir Veličković in his studio

© Zarko Vijatovic / © ADAGP, Paris, 2023

ART AND THE SACRED

From time immemorial, art has fed on the sacred and, beyond and below religious sentiment, the sacred has informed artistic creation. Many atheist artists claim to be inspired by the sacred, by elevation and inner illumination. Historical examples are legion, and contemporary artists with widely diverse practices and philosophical stance also acknowledge, even publicize, this sacred aspect of their work. Beyond words, this is art as a vehicle for an existential trajectory, stretching towards the sublime.

BEAUTY ALONE IS WORTHY OF FAITH

By **FATHER JEAN-ROBERT ARMOGATHE**, member of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres

It took a long time for the notion of beauty to enter the conceptual field of Christianity. Medieval theologians borrowed the idea of transcendentals from ancient philosophy. These are the most universal properties that transcend all divisions of being, which they inventoried as follows: Being (*ens*), the Thing (*res*), the One (*unum*), the True (*verum*), and the Good (*bonum*). Being and the One refer to the world, and the two faculties of the soul, intelligence and will, grasp the world, respectively, according to the True and the Good. There is no place for beauty here: contemplative pleasures are but the certain contemplation of the true; artistic representations are intended to support piety or perpetuate memory; there is a 'history of art before the age of art'¹. Sculpture and painting were categorized with the servile arts, and music placed among the liberal arts, along with arithmetic and logic.

The word 'aesthetics' took a long time to transition from Latin (and German) to French: only in 1835 did the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie* accept it as 'the science whose purpose is to research and determine the characteristics of beauty in the productions of nature or art'. Between his 1818 first edition of *The True, the Good and the Beautiful* and its reprint in 1853, Victor Cousin corrected his sharply original thought to reintroduce God as the principle of beauty, the 'author of the physical world and father of the intellectual and moral worlds'. The Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar would be the one to undertake a 'theological aesthetic': the inaccessible truth of God is revealed by the 'figure' of Christ alone. The manifestation of the Son changes the economy of the visible; it is no longer a

question of representing the gods of paganism: all Christian art is at the crossroads of the visible and the invisible. The *paradox* of Incarnation leads to the *paradox* of the Crucifixion: glory (*doxa*) manifests itself in abasement and death.

As Saint Irenaeus claimed (IV, 20, 7), the Son, the divine Word, preserved "the invisibility of the Father, lest man should at any time become a despiser of God, and that he should always possess something towards which he might advance; but, on the other hand, [revealed] God to men through many dispensations, lest man, failing away from God altogether, should cease to exist. For the glory of God is a living man; and the life of man consists in beholding God"; hence the famous statement: "the Son is the revealer of the Father".

Christianity in art will therefore manifest the invisible; this manifestation can take the most diverse forms, because if there is only one 'figure' of the Father, who is the Son, what we see (*to blepómenon*) is not made up of 'phenomena' (*phainómena*, visible things); instead, everything has been formed by the Word of God (Hebrews 11, 3: in the Vulgate, the things of the world (*saecula*) were formed *ut ex invisibilibus visibilia fierent*).

This is what Cézanne, the most 'Catholic' of painters (along with Poussin, whom he regarded as his master), understood with a profound sense of faith, when he treated a landscape, or a simple apple, as an image of the Creator. On 12 May 1904, he wrote to Émile Bernard: "The Louvre is a good book to consult, but it should be only a means. The real, prodigious study to undertake is the diversity of the scene offered by nature".

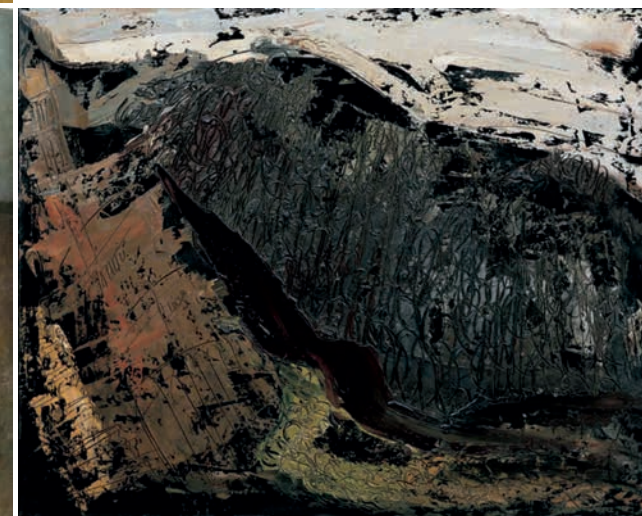
The 'sacred images' that have proliferated in the West are inadequate: in any case, they do not have a monopoly on the 'sacred'. Any 'artistic' expression (in literature, music or the visual arts) can refer, beyond figuration, to the 'hidden' God. In this sense, there is no opposition between the figurative and the non-figurative. To quote Cézanne again, "drawing and colour are not distinct, everything in nature is coloured"². ■

1- Hans Belting, *Bild und Kult, eine Geschichte des Bildes vor dem Zeitalter der Kunst*, Munich, 1990; French translation: *Image et Culte. Une Histoire de l'art avant l'époque de l'art*, Paris, Éd. du Cerf, 1998.

2- 'Aphorismes' XXV, *Conversations avec Cézanne*, Macula, Paris, 1978, p. 16. See Guila Balas, *La Couleur dans la peinture moderne : théorie et pratique*, Adam Biro, Paris 1996.



Above: Antiphony of Philippe de Lévis, Bishop of Mirepoix, *The Adoration of the Magi*, 1533-1537, lettering E, illumination, 1533-1535, parchment, 27.3 x 20.6 cm.
© Musée des Augustins / © STC - Mairie de Toulouse
Opposite page: Paul Cézanne (1839-1906), *Still Life with Apples*, 1885-1887, oil on canvas, 28.5 x 30.2 cm.
© Société Paul Cézanne, R637 - FWN809
Right: William G. Congdon (1912-1998), *Subiaco 4*, 1962, © The William G. Congdon Foundation



ART AND ISLAM: BETWEEN GENIUS AND HUMILITY

By **CHEMS-EDDINE HAFIZ**, Rector of the Grande Mosquée de Paris

“*‘Iqra’*. “Read in the name of your Lord, who created man from a clot”¹. This is the inaugural verse of the Koranic revelation, which calls for the elevation of man through knowledge and learning. Placed at the beginning of the verse as a fundamental marker, the verb literally means ‘read’ in Arabic. Above all, it can be understood as an injunctive invitation to read – an understanding in its broadest, most encompassing sense, of what man’s power of creation and innovation can produce, by analogy with the God who created the world and the humanity that inhabits it. From East to West, all readers of the Koran agree that this one is the most beautiful text, the one that gives the Holy Book its specific rhythm, scansion, and melody. Poetry was already flourishing in the pre-Islamic period and would continue to bloom with the advent of Islam. We need only mention mystical poets such as Saadi, Ferdawsi and Nizami, as well as Farid al-Din Attar, whose *Song of Birds* is considered a masterpiece of Sufi poetry. And of course Rabia al-Adawiyya, the Muslim poetess and mystic born in Basra, Iraq, in the eighth century. Many have sung love, which remains a central theme.

It is no secret that Arabic love poetry has been a source of inspiration for great Western poets, as instanced by Aragon’s *Le Fou d’Elsa*, which has its roots in the famous lament *Majnun Leila*. Is the predominance of the subject of love in Arab poetry not suggested precisely by the being and doing of Mohammed, the Prophet-Love? This was the Prophet who aroused the interest and admiration of Victor Hugo reflected in his poems *L’An 9 de l’hégire* (1858) and *La Légende des siècles* (1859), relating the death of ‘Mahomet’. Literary creation in the Muslim world has been considerably enriched by contact with surrounding cultures. While the Western world

was especially enthralled by the *Thousand and One Nights*, the list of Arabic texts in which the fine art of writing flourished is certainly as long as the fourteen centuries of Islamic culture, on which other artistic expressions have also made a mark.

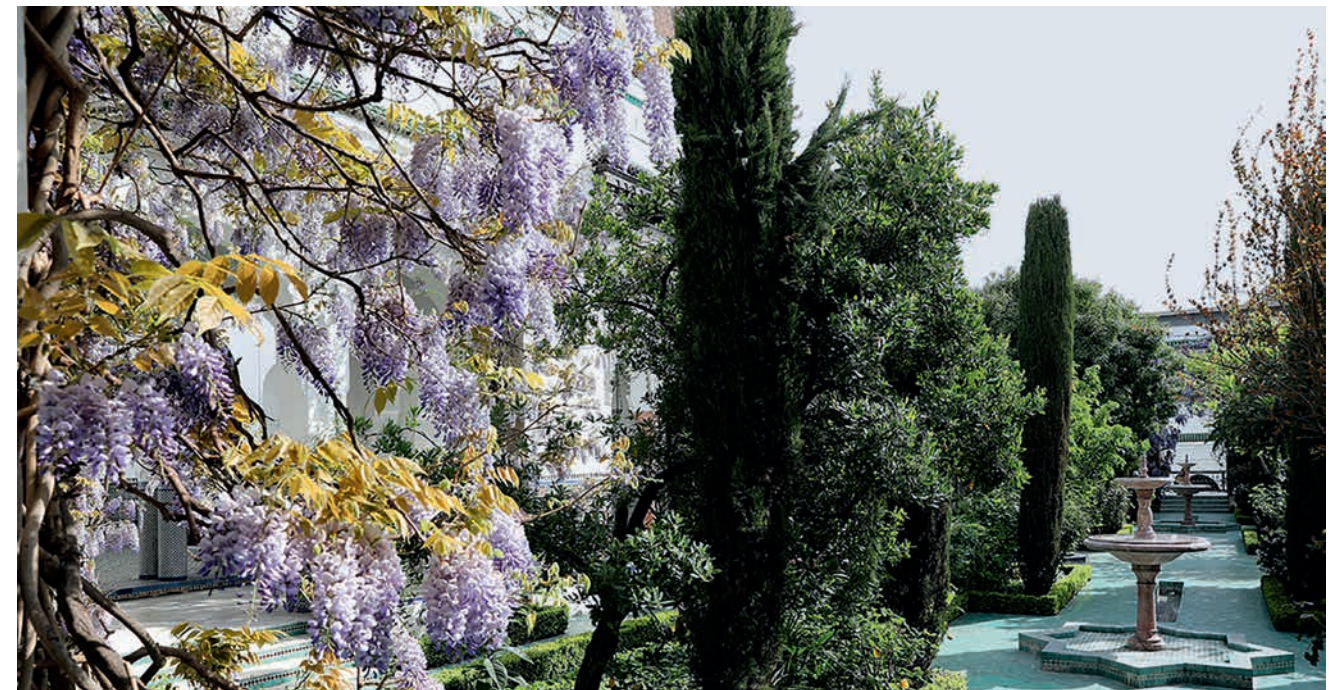
The Koranic word has given rise to a discipline elevated to the level of the sacred: calligraphy. One sura is called ‘The Pen’. The Arabic word used in the Koran is ‘*Qalam*’²: a reed cut to a point, which allowed Muslim calligraphers to create complex forms of writing in different styles that could evoke the spiritual significance of the Koranic text. Thus, calligraphy is intended to be a transcription of the word of God. The first calligraphers were the Prophet’s companions, who memorized the verses and then transcribed them onto various supports: palm leaves, hides, camel shoulder blades. Writing as an artistic practice really came into being with the use of paper, a disruptive innovation that transformed the aesthetics of calligraphy. From its rudimentary beginnings, calligraphy would innovate with the interweaving of lines and letters – a true architecture of full and loose lines guided by a concern for fluidity and harmony that generates poetry.

Another area of art on which Islam has left a visible mark is architecture. This is particularly true of places of prayer.

The collective Friday prayer, during which Muslims prostrate and recite verses from the Koran, takes place in spaces whose architectural design has undergone significant change. Following the expansion of Islam, the sobriety of the premises that characterized its first decades was replaced by a reformist architectural ambition born of an unprecedented cultural mix.

The spiritual density of Islam, combined with the practice of religious rites, had to be reflected

in the grandeur and magnificence of the places where it was practised. Thus, the architecture of places of worship had to be an artistic corollary of Islamic values. Architectural aesthetics were thus endowed with the role of transmitting what Islam contains. For example, one image of paradise as evoked in the Quran can be found in the Alhambra in medieval Andalusia, where the lush gardens and gushing fountains are a prefiguration of heavenly Eden. Landscape architects claim that certain gardens in Granada, Cordoba and Seville are paradises on earth. One might therefore be tempted to say that art lends itself to paying homage to the beauty and complexity of divine creation. At the Grande Mosquée in Paris, the main garden has been named ‘The Garden of Eden’³.



Over the course of time, and through architectural metamorphoses revealing a desire for grandeur and refinement, the upward trajectory of the exercise of religious power as assumed by the Muslim dynasties is evidenced. Thus, the flourishing of artistic expressions to depict Beauty also mirrors the pre-eminence of religious power, which in absolute terms can only be beautiful insofar as it is charged with transmitting the beauty of the Word. This aspiration was not always achieved serenely, as the history of destructive invasions in the land of Islam teaches us. Look at what became of Baghdad with the arrival of the Mongols in the 12th century! But, like the phoenix rising from its ashes, religious masters never forgot that the pre-eminence of their words is bolstered and amplified when they speak with art made available to all in its various aesthetic expressions.

The result is a heritage of Islamic art that can be admired in a variety of museums, found mostly throughout the vastness of the Western world. This is perhaps a paradox, born of the accidents of history, but one that certainly testifies to the recognition of Islamic art and its universal significance.

This art has long been held head-down by the paradigm of traditional conservatism and needs to be revived to keep pace

with the reality of dialogue between civilizations. Guided by this truth, the Grande Mosquée de Paris strives to give it concrete visibility by encouraging the expression of arts and letters. To this end, it has set up a calligraphy school, and now a literary prize that has been enthusiastically received by publishers. The Grande Mosquée de Paris therefore wishes to continue to cultivate the pleasures of reading and of writing. Its ambition is to reconnect with aesthetics as a major spiritual path. ■

1- Verse 96 ‘Al-Alaq’ The Adherence

2- Sura 68

3- The Garden of Eden, which features in all three monotheistic religions, is considered to be the idyllic place where Adam and Eve lived. In Islamic tradition, it is also called the ‘Garden of Delights’.

Above: the main garden of the Grande Mosquée de Paris, known as ‘The Garden of Eden’.
Grande Mosquée de Paris / Omar Boulkroum.

Left page: Ismâ'il Zühdi, figurative calligraphy in the form of a stork, ca 1604, ink on paper. Topkapi Palace, Istanbul, Turkey.
Wikimedia Commons licence / Yasmine Mrabet

THE SACRED IN ART

By **HAÏM KORSIA**, Chief Rabbi of France and member of the Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques

Here are two notions, the sacred and art, which may seem antinomic at first sight, and yet work together in a very enriching way in Judaism.

The Bible has always been wary of the representation of a human figure, or even of the stars, or of any image whatsoever. In fact, this is one of the Ten Commandments: "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under earth". (*Exodus XX, 4*)

And this is even more explicit in the book of *Deuteronomy* (IV, 15-19): "You saw no form of any kind the day the Lord spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire. Therefore, watch yourselves very carefully, so that you do not become corrupt and make for yourselves an idol, an image of any shape, whether formed like a man or a woman, or like any animal on earth or any bird that flies in the air, or like any creature that moves along the ground or any fish in the waters below. And when you look up to the sky and see the sun, the moon and the stars – all the heavenly array – do not be enticed into bowing down to them and worshiping things the Lord your God has apportioned to all the nations under heaven". But the sacred, in its transcendental and unattainable dimension, the one that offers us a way out of the smallness of our lives, is a social notion, that is, a product of collective activity, as Marcel Mauss would say, rather than an isolated act. In other

words, art that elevates, that touches on the sacred, can always encounter a form of *kairos* that makes a human group perceive the same hope. And Judaism has always been able to create art in all its forms despite these warnings, which are in fact a call to caution for those who wield the power of the image.

The Bible itself speaks of a 'beautiful' fruit that had to be added to a bouquet made up of a branch of date palm that bears fruit but has no smell, a branch of myrtle that smells good but bears no fruit and a branch of weeping willow that has neither fruit nor smell: "On the first day you shall take of the fruit of beautiful trees, palm branches, boughs of bushy trees and willows of the brook; and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days" (*Leviticus XXIII, 40*).

But what is this 'beautiful' fruit and what tree does it come from? It is the citron, which, according to the commentaries, has a good smell and is pleasant to eat, as if it represented the convergence of spirituality and materiality.

Here we have the archetype of the sacred in art according to Judaism, that is, a convergence of the Good and the Right that elevates the moment.

At its core, art is the act of revealing realities of the world that remain invisible until a sharper or more discerning eye than our own can reveal them to all. While art brings the sacred into existence and to the attention of the broadest public, it can also freeze an image in a given moment. Therefore, it is also a way out of the whirling world around us, a way to take a step aside from it. Art thus draws a line with the material world.

To combine art and the sacred also means to draw links between them – in French, *'les relier'*, the Latin ancestor of which, *'religare'*, gave us the word 'religion'. There is a religious notion, a sacred notion in art, that is transcendent.

As it enables religious or spiritual concepts to be represented,

celebrated, or supported, art is a privileged means of expressing one's faith, one's inner self, and of materializing the intangible. It also goes hand in hand with the ritualization of religious practices, because it is above all a creative activity, in the image of God's Creation. The sacred makes man the creator, the artist of his own creation, the artist of his life, to give it meaning.

A salient example of an artist embodying this quest for meaning through art is Chagall. Beyond his faith, he translated the emotions of believers to inspire elevation in all religions, and his paintings and stained glass works made sense to all the faithful. Perhaps the sacred dimension of art, or the artistic dimension of the sacred, appear most aptly in Bezalel, son of Houri, the man Moses tasked with building the Tabernacle. All he had to

do was carry out the divine orders, and yet he interpreted them in his own way, with his own spirituality and sensitivity. The same was true of Master Hiram, whom Solomon commissioned to help build the Temple in Jerusalem. There is always a need for an artist, an architect, a dreamer to rise above the material, and this is the calling of the sacred in our world. Is that not exactly what my friend, the great architect Paul Andreu, did when he built airports, and above all when he breathed a soul into them? I used to call him Rabbi, even though he was a Catholic, because he taught me how to bring out the sacred in drawings and in objects, in places and in the world, in words and in silences. He embellished the world because he knew how to instil the sacred into it through his art. When I pray at home, my place of prayer is in front of one of his last paintings, which opens onto a void, or more exactly, which leaves room for dreams in the perfection of the world.

Yes, art is at the service of religion in the objects of worship, in the ritual, in the architecture, so much so that the Bible can read: "The Lord is my strength and song. He is my salvation. He is my God, and I praise him; I exalt him, the God of my father".

Yet the word for 'exalt' can also translate to 'embellish', offering the following translation: 'He is my God and I will make Him beautiful' (*Exodus 15.2*).

How could one imagine oneself able to embellish God? The commentaries say one should craft beautiful objects for worship. Thus, there is indeed a sacralization of art or, more precisely, a commitment on the part of art to propose a sacralization of things and of time. And this is perhaps the best access to the sacred in this world, because it is the most universal. ■



Geneviève Asse, *Ligne blanche*, 2009, oil on canvas, 60 x 92 cm.
© Galerie Laurentin. Adagp, Paris, 2023

Paul Andreu (1938-2018), *14-07-25*, acrylic, 60 x 46 cm.
Private collection

THE SACRED IN AFRICAN ART

By **MARC LADREIT DE LACHARRIÈRE**, of the Académie des Beaux-Arts' Free Members' Section

It is well known that André Breton preferred Oceanic art to African art. In support of his point of view, he argued (especially in a famous preface to the catalogue of the 'Oceania' exhibition at the André Olive gallery in Paris in 1948) that African art lacked spirituality, and accused it of having nothing more to offer than "endless variations on the external appearances of man and animals, fertility, domestic work, horned beasts..."

In short, he saw in it a kind of 'utilitarian spirituality', a magical art that, as Durkheim had already proclaimed, was necessarily inferior to truly religious art because it misappropriated the sacred for self-interested, individual ends.

Naturally, Breton, the polemicist, deliberately overstated his case, feigning to forget that the 'formal elusiveness' that he saw as the basis for the poetic superiority of Oceanic art was in no way foreign to many African works.

Just think, for example, of the Bambara people's Boli, whose form is constantly changing as the rituals around it evolve, and which therefore, despite its aesthetic power, can never be signed by any individual author.

More broadly, Breton deliberately overstated his case by reducing the arts of Africa to an exclusive type of sculpture and ritual. The power of African sculpture, its inhabited character – which was such a shock to Western artists in the early 20th century –, lies precisely in its diversity, in the interweaving of religious, magical and dynastic functions, which themselves differ greatly from one end of the continent to the other and throughout its history.

Divine, sacred, magical, an object of power, healing, curse, intercession, submission: all these dimensions intersect in the

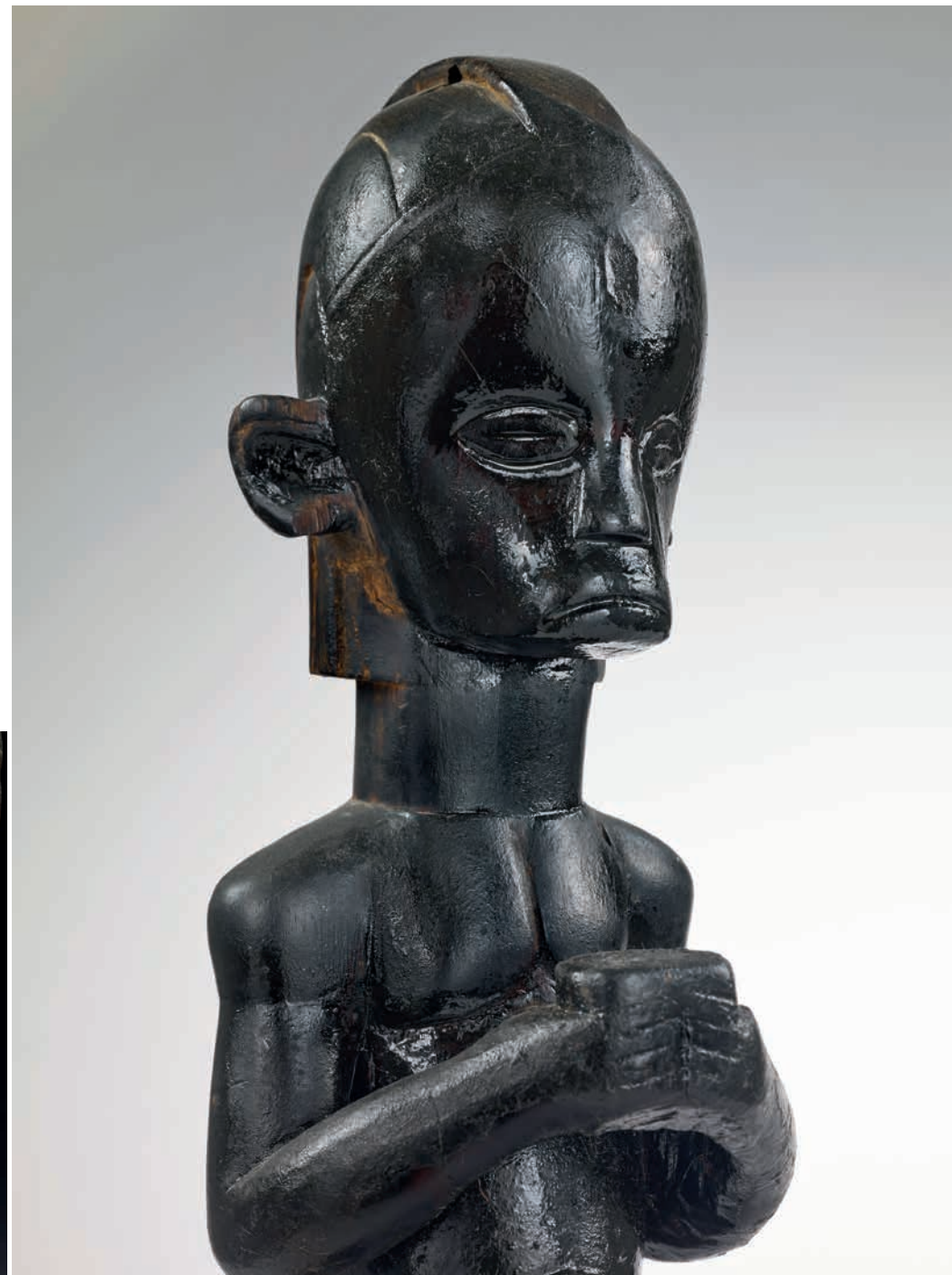


Top right: *eyema-byeri* reliquary keeper, Fang population, Betsi sub-group, Gabonese Republic, 19th century, wood, glossy black patina, 42.5 x 21 x 11 cm.

© musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac, Photo credit: Claude Germain

Left: anthropomorphic mask, Ivory Coast/Liberia, Dan population, between 1750 and 1850, wood, 24.5 x 14 x 8 cm

© musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac, Photo credit: Claude Germain



arts of Africa to degrees and in forms that are dictated by the political, religious and mystical systems they serve.

The representation of divinity itself is very present in certain African cultures: think, for example, of the Yoruba God Shango, or the God Gou, a famous representation of whom is now on display in the Louvre Museum, showing a visual logic that is ultimately very similar to that of Western religious statuary. We even know the name of its creator, Ekplékendo Akariti.

In contrast, one might say, other religious productions such as the Boli mentioned above or the Vodoun figures and shrines of Benin are conceived as simple receptacles of divinity or spirits, and do not necessarily claim to evoke their form.

The field of the sacred in African art is therefore as vast as it is fluid.

Two sculptural forms do however have a special place in it: ancestor figures and masks. Although they are found in many cultures outside the African continent, both are particularly widespread in Africa, and have moreover led to the creation of

powerful masterpieces.

In Africa, sculptors are almost always given a great deal of freedom in their treatment and interpretation of the stylistic and even functional canon of the commissioned work. The result is not only a broad variety in the artistic treatments of a set of sculptures intended to fulfil the same social or spiritual function, but also artists' choices of 'graphic solutions' – to borrow a term that was dear to the late Jacques Kerchache – which often prove to be extraordinarily bold.

Speaking of Jacques Kerchache, he preferred not to include masks in the selection of African masterpieces that he put together, at the request of President Jacques Chirac, for the Pavillon des Sessions at the Musée du Louvre. He believed that masks were all too stereotypical, too expected, when it came to African art.

For this room, he chose to focus on vertical sculptures, which could engage more immediately with the European medieval works in the adjoining rooms.

The fact remains that masks, in their infinite diversity, lie at the heart of African genius and spirituality: from the immense Dogon or Bobo masks, to the so-called 'passport' masks of certain Central African peoples, the size, function, manner of being worn, conditions to be met for it to be seen, and by whom, seem to vary infinitely.

Some masks, like those of the Poro society, are charged with medicinal value, coated in animal blood and carried at arm's length. In contrast, the famous Dan runner's masks, polished and shined like Japanese lacquer, reproduce the minute details of a human face, on which they could almost seem to have been moulded.

Works like these conjure up all the facets of the sacred: they are linked to seduction or initiation rituals, fashioned in the likeness of a canonical beauty or a forest spirit, their pure brilliance calling out to viewers from beyond their spiritual mission, whose inaccessible presence remains felt nonetheless.

The need to represent the Ancestor, the founder of the clan or royal lineage whose genealogy is carefully handed down, is undoubtedly the sacred urgency that propelled some regrettably anonymous African artists to the pinnacle of the human art of sculpture.

The Fang people and some neighbouring or related societies have commissioned admirable masters to create figures in wood and metal to watch over the chosen bones of the great ancestors. Even stolen from their native forests and the rare light that was to complement them, these works radiate a spirituality that transcends the cultural differences of the beholder.

Of course, only a small part of their truth, strength and mystery reaches us, yet man's eternal desire to transcend his time on earth shines through in these short, gleaming sculptures. Rarely in the history of art has a human sculpting wood been able to make this so palpable. ■

J.-S. BACH AND THE SACRED

By **GILLES CANTAGREL**, correspondent of the Académie des Beaux-Arts' Musical Composition Section

Here is old Goethe, a fine connoisseur of the Bible, in front of Bach's music. He confides in his dear friend Zelter that it is "as if Eternal Harmony were talking with itself, as it must have been doing in God's bosom just before the Creation".

Why then deplore the fact that Bach, unlike all his contemporaries, never wrote a fashionable opera? Simply because he gave musical treatment to the most dramatic and profound of texts, that of the Passion and death of Christ. Could it be that the libretto of the *St Matthew Passion* was no more interesting to him than those of the adventures of the Persian king *Artaxerxes* or of *Alexander in the Indies*, hastily yet brilliantly put together by the inevitable Pietro Metastasio? The Bach family owned several editions of the Bible, in Luther's splendid translation. The personal copy in the musician's possession bears his meticulous corrections and comments in black and even red ink from beginning to end. In his extensive religious library, he owned several Bibles, including one in three volumes, a large folio that he had dated and marked with his monogram. This one was his own. He had read it from beginning to end, from *Genesis* to *Revelation*, corrected typographical errors and added his own personal comments. In the Holy Scriptures, he comments on the music that was played at the consecration of the new temple in Jerusalem: "Splendid proof that, besides other arrangements of the service of worship, music too was instituted by the Spirit of God through David". Nothing would deter him from this, nothing could.

When Johann-Sebastian, a penultimate son, was about to leave his parents' home at the age of 17, never to see them again, his mother, Anna Magdalena, gave him a pocket Bible, a precious viaticum, with an inscription that was as personal as it was moving: "*In eternal memory and for his Christian edification, Anna Magdalena Bach, née Wilcke, gives her dear son this wonderful book. Your faithful and benevolent mother, Leipzig, 25 December 1749*". At this point, he was already blind and could no longer write. This 'marvellous book', or elsewhere the 'magnificent German writings of the late Dr M. Luther': he would continuously reference the Bible and Luther. He had all his writings in his library... and in memory. When he added the Gospel text from Matthew to be sung in the *Passion*, he wrote it in red ink and the commentaries in black. Because all that mattered was there.

A fervent Lutheran, Bach was something of a new Luther in his century. He lived surrounded by children and friends with whom



he sang as a family, morning and evening, loving life in all its forms. Luther is claimed to have said, "He who loves not wine, women or song, remains a fool his whole life long". Bach must have thought so, and, much like Luther, he put on a healthy amount of weight with age. Consider his portrait, his slight rosacea, the thickness of his powerful hands... But this would in no way prevent him from living in communion with the sacred. He had adopted Luther's five 'soli' – *Sola gratia*, *Soli Deo gloria*, and the others. His entire oeuvre, his whole life, followed this motto: to God alone be glory. And he signed the autographs of many of his scores with the three letters 'SDG', *Soli Deo Gloria*.

When, towards the end of his earthly existence, he put together the scattered pieces that would make up the *Mass in B minor*, he proclaimed with certainty towards the end of the *Credo* that he was awaiting the resurrection of the dead. Yet, in strangely



tortured harmonies, he confessed he was assailed by a terrible doubt: did he ask himself, as Saint Matthew had, "Have I not built upon sand?" But he answered, '*Et iterum venturus est*' – "and I await the life of the centuries to come". Perhaps he found this life of the future. We, for sure, have found it and are sharing it.

Our musician had something of a lay monk; the firm certainty of a man 'drunk with God', to borrow Novalis' word about Spinoza. Everything that happened to him, everything he composed – cantatas, but also concertos, oratorios or sonatas, and even music to dance and celebrate – were all ways of praising God in his creation. And what music it was!

In a letter recounting his sadness at the conduct of a wayward son, he confided: "Thus I must bear my cross patiently". He was inspired by medieval theologian Thomas à Kempis' *Imitation of Christ*. He sung so much in the cantata BWV 56, "*Ich will mein Kreuzstab gerne tragen*" (I will gladly carry my cross): a lament with sighing motifs, a phrase by the soloist that rises to a resolute, almost heroic profile in a deliberately ascending arpeggio, but can reach its goal only with difficulty, as if sagging under the weight of the syllable *Kreuz* (cross). Soon, the phrase falls back in a musical gesture of weariness, in descending meanders of long vocalizations. Motifs of sighs, chromaticisms of affliction. It takes until the end of this desolate aria to find the resolution to the dilemma between courage and weariness: "There, I will rid myself of all my sorrows in the grave...". And

the end of the cantata, "Come, O death, sister of sleep, come and take me away... Take the helm of my skiff, bring me safely to port". The entire musical language of the two hundred or so cantatas is a constant commentary on the Scriptures, which Bach knew word for word.

Knowing himself at death's door, he took up one of his old chorales, "When we are in great distress", and sung other words on its melody, a century-old text: "Lord, I come before your throne of grace". Serene. Grave. Profound. ■

Above: Elias Gottlob Haussmann (1695-1774), *Portrait of Johann Sebastian Bach holding a copy of his 6-part Canon BWV 1076*, 1746, oil on canvas, 78 x 61 cm. Museum of City History, Leipzig

Left page: author unknown, Johann Sebastian Bach at the harpsichord with his family for Morning Prayer, as seen through the eyes of 19th century Romanticism. Wood engraving, undated.

LES ATELIERS D'ART SACRÉ

FROM THEIR CREATION IN 1919 TO THE REBIRTH OF SACRED ART THROUGH MODERNITY, 1939-1954

By **LYDIA HARAMBOURG**, correspondent of the Académie des Beaux-Arts' Painting Section

The definition of sacred art remains ambiguous. Let us lay as groundwork the antinomy between the terms 'sacred' and 'religious', as drawing them closer together is the cornerstone of the dispute over sacred art.

When, on 15 November 1919, Maurice Denis and George Desvallières opened the Ateliers d'Art Sacré in Paul Sérusier's former studio at 7 rue Joseph Bara in Paris, before moving to 8 rue de Furstemberg, not far from Delacroix's studio, the two painters shared an artistic, societal and religious project. Both benefited from the revival of spirituality in literature (Péguy, Barrès, Claudel, Bergson). They were aware that, since the 19th century, sacred art had been trapped in devout academicism that reduced the religious message to a sclerotic thematic programme and had led to its decadence, and each of them was the architect of a revival of the sacred, following a spiritual vocation to which their work bears witness. Maurice Denis (1870-1943), a member of the Dominican Third Order who was imbued with the Franciscan spirit, was sensitive to all forms of mysticism, from theosophy to Rosicrucianism. Following in the footsteps of the Nabis, he turned to religious subjects with a classical, narrative and decorative style, reviving the spirit of the Middle Ages. George Desvallières (1861-1950) had had a religious upbringing and shared Denis' Dominican spirituality. A member of the Société de Saint-Jean, he started campaigning in 1912 for the creation of an art school under the patronage of Notre-Dame de Paris. His aim was to combat the sentimentalist aesthetic and symbolic decadence enjoyed by both the faithful and the clergy of the time.

The Ateliers d'Art Sacré were set up under the authority of ecclesiastics to revive Christian art in the spirit of companionship and the practice of a fine craft, with specialized workshops (easel painting, frescoes, modelling, chasuble) serving the liturgy and Thomist-inspired theology. In keeping with medieval tradition and the perfection of craftsmanship, particular attention was paid to frescoes, rejecting individualism as being incompatible with the will to give a collective meaning to creation.

The question of sacred art is inseparable from monumental art, which had been forgotten in favour of easel painting. It took until the 1930s for large-scale collective works to be bundled with architectural commissions. Denis, who spoke of a 'life of scaffolding', went by the motto: 'Walls, walls to decorate'. Upon being appointed Archbishop of Paris, Cardinal Verdier put the Ateliers to good use, with the creation in 1929 of the 'Chantiers du Cardinal' and the construction of new places of worship. The Church of the Holy Spirit in Paris, built by the architect Paul Tournon, involved commissions to around forty artists, including Desvallières, who created the *Way of the Cross* (1925) and Denis, who was ordered several paintings. Given the scope of its programme, this church could be seen as a manifesto for the revival of the sacred arts. Desvallières received a string of commissions (the cycle of the *Glorious Virgins*, the Meaux seminar chapel in 1937). In 1923, as a member of the jury for the International Exhibition at the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh, he was welcomed in the United States where he was seen as the renovator of religious painting in France.



Opposite: Maurice Denis (1870-1943), *Saint Georges aux rochers rouges*, oil on canvas, 75.5 x 131 cm. © Musée d'Orsay

Left: Saint-Martin church in Vienne (38), frescoes painted in 1933 by co-founder of the Ateliers d'Art Sacré Maurice Denis.
Creative Commons licence / Sashi Rolls



It was in this spirit of renewal of Christian art that Maurice Denis gave a series of lectures published in *Nouvelles théories sur l'art moderne, sur l'art sacré* (by Rouart et Watelin, Paris 1922). His reflections echoed those of Jacques Maritain, with the ethical dimension of sacred art and the notion of "truth not in a naturalistic sense but in a dynamic sense". In 1920, Maritain published *Art et Scolastique*, which gave Denis's theories a 'dogmatic authority' that would be reflected thirty years later in Father Regamey's work *Art sacré au 20^{ème} siècle*. His many murals include the Prieuré chapel in Saint-Germain-en-Laye (1915-1922), the church of Notre-Dame-de-la-Consolation in Le Raincy by the Perret brothers, and the translation of the stained-glass models by Marguerite Hué, a member of the Ateliers team. In 1924, a Sacred Art Section was created at the Salon d'Automne, which Desvallières headed. In response to the success of the Ateliers, a 'petit cours' school was opened. There, realism was forbidden (as was the academic teaching of the Beaux-Arts) in favour of "the beauty of religious works of an aesthetic, traditional and modern nature" (M. Denis). Every fortnight, pupils would present a sketch, which a master would correct: Denis, Desvallières, Pierre Couturier – a future Dominican – Souverbie, Laboulaye, Robert Boulet, and J. Hébert-Stevens and his wife P. Peugniez, who opened their own studio. In their wake came the workshops of master glassmakers: L. Barillet, in collaboration with J. Le Chavalier in 1920, and the Atelier Gaudin, which perfected the technique of the glass slab to meet

the demands of contemporary architecture. Stained glass played an essential role, as it was through it that religious circles became familiar with modern art. Master glassmakers were all students of Maurice Denis and they unwittingly helped to uphold an iconography in which sacred art would become mired. Despite their determination to break with the 'Saint-Sulpician' tradition, the outcomes were devastating. No artist emerged from this phalanstery, which fell back into a new academicism. In 1935, J. Richard founded the review *L'Art sacré*, and from 1937 it was directed by P.P. Couturier and Régamey, who revived the sacred art debate.

In 1934 an exhibition entitled *L'Art Religieux d'aujourd'hui* (Religious Art Today) was held at the Palais des Ducs de Rohan in Paris. Alongside Denis and Desvallières, the exhibition featured works by Rouault, Gromaire, Goerg and Bazaine, who pointed out in his catalogue text the condition for a true revival: "there can be no religious art unless religion merges absolutely with life". In other words, there is room for non-believing artists. As Father Couturier, who launched work on the Assy church in 1937, put it, "What does it matter if they are not religious in the first place? A deep human emotion meets the believer's attitude".

In 1947, the Ateliers d'Art Sacré's board decided to shut them down. Their failure was undoubtedly due to the absence of modernity within them, which the clergy had failed to understand was synonymous with vitality. ■

THE CHURCH OF NOTRE-DAME DE TOUTE GRÂCE IN PLATEAU D'ASSY (74) 1937-1946

By LYDIA HARAMBOURG, correspondent of the Académie des Beaux-Arts' Painting Section



Left: mosaics by Fernand Léger (1881-1955), on the façade of the church of Notre-Dame de Toute Grâce, Plateau d'Assy.
Photo credit: Christine Boymond Lasserre © Adagp, Paris, 2023

Centre: stained glass window by Marc Chagall (1887-1985).
Alamy Stock Photo. © Adagp, Paris, 2023

Below: In the choir, the *Apocalypse*, tapestry by Jean Lurçat (1892-1966) depicting the battle between Good and Evil
© René Mattes / Alamy Stock Photo © Fondation Lurçat / Adagp, Paris, 2023

When Abbot Devémy, a chaplain at the nearby Sancellemoz sanatorium, initiated this ecclesiastical project in 1937 and entrusted it to the young Savoyard architect Maurice Novarina, he made – as Father Couturier put it – a daring ‘gamble on genius’. The question of modernity and of the presence of a modern work in a religious building seemed to have resolved the debate on sacred art.

In reality, Assy, which, in its attempt to bring the church closer to contemporary art, was the first work of total art, was not by any means unanimously endorsed. Faced with its relative failure due to a lack of understanding and rejection by some of the clergy and fundamentalist circles, who considered its artistic and iconographic choices unacceptable, the idea took hold in progressive circles that “to keep Christian art alive, each generation must call on the masters of living art”. This was Father Couturier’s intention when, in 1945, he was put in charge of the decoration programme of the church of Assy. He enlisted the help of major artists from the first half of the 20th century: Bonnard, Matisse, Chagall, Braque for the tabernacle, and sculptors Lipchitz and Signori for the baptismal font. Léger decorated the canopy façade with a brightly coloured mosaic. Stained glass windows by Rouault for the lower windows of the façade, and others by Bazaine, Brianchon, Bercot, Bony, and Father Couturier, who had learned with Maurice Denis. Tapestries by Lurçat cover the apse. In front of the altar stands



Germaine Richier’s *Christ*, which was to spark violent controversy from 1954 onwards, all the way up to the Vatican. The tortured body of Christ was unacceptable to some. The sculpture was removed from the church (which was consecrated in 1950) and only reinstated in 1966.

The crypt was adorned with works by Kijno, Claude Mary, Strawinsky and Marguerite Huré. The Assy experience gave rise to other initiatives: the churches of Les Bréseux (1947), with Manessier, Audincourt (1951), Vence (1948-1950), with Matisse, and the Chapelle Notre-Dame du Haut in Ronchamp by Le Corbusier (1953-1955).

Since then, numerous commissions have been given to generations of artists, in keeping with the legacy of the philosopher Étienne Gilson, for whom “art is eminently religious insofar as it is art” (*Peinture et Vérité*, 1957 re.1972). ■

THE CHURCH OF LES LILAS

I created this sculpture to celebrate the construction of the new Notre-Dame du Rosaire church in the town of Les Lilas (Seine-Saint-Denis, France).

The idea was to give meaning to the main wall at the back of the church, behind the high altar. I talked with the building’s architect, Brice Piechaczyk (Agence Enia architectes), and Father Frédéric Benoist, the church’s parish priest at the time, and we chose the theme of a ‘Christ in Glory’ for the sculpture. This theme enabled me to use the representation of the folds in Christ’s garment to suggest the upward and downward movement that is generally associated with prayer.

The idea of the spirituality of light, which was dear to the Abbot Suger, of Saint-Denis, is materialized in full force here. It enabled me to define the contours and meaning of the shapes.

Member of the Académie des Beaux-Arts’ Sculpture Section CLAUDE ABEILLE



Claude Abeille, *Resurrection of Christ*, Notre-Dame du Rosaire church in Les Lilas, 2011.
Photo credit: credit: DR

THE SACRED IN THE CONSCIOUSNESS OF HUMAN HISTORY

An interview with **ERNEST PIGNON-ERNEST**,
member of the Académie des Beaux-Arts' Painting Section

by Nadine Eghels

Nadine Eghels: There is an aspect of the sacred running through your work, at least partially. How did this happen, even if it wasn't a conscious decision?

Ernest Pignon-Ernest: It all started with a rather peculiar piece of work. On my return from Havana, I devised a 'Baroque Concert' with my friends from the Uzeste festival. I was accommodated for several days in the forest and realized that I'd only ever worked in urban spaces. I came up with the idea of approaching the forest and the plant world in the same way as I do cities – by trying to grasp both what there is to see and what cannot be seen or is no longer seen. In the case of cities, this is essentially history; in the forest, it led me to the miracle of photosynthesis. After a long period of work with the biologist Claude Gudin, these sculptures were born, living as plants: plant-like bodies of men and women made up of an accumulation of plant cells immobilized in a polymer. With all the functions of chlorophyll: they had to be watered. I presented them hanging in the trees at the Jardin des Plantes in Paris and in the gardens at the Venice Biennale.

N.E.: How does this lead you to the sacred?

E. P.-E.: The sacred was there all along. But it occurred to me that, while working with a 21st century cutting-edge breakthrough in biotechnology, I was repeating one of the oldest, most universal myths: a human begot by plants – Narcissus, Daphne, Jesse, and so on. Perhaps that's when I became aware of the importance of mythology and the sacred. Working as I do on the image of man, I felt that not having a religious culture was something of a lack. This is probably what led me to choose themes that would lead me to question the foundations of my Mediterranean and Latin culture.

I had envisaged a route that would start in Greece (Kazantzákis's *Letter to El Greco*), but then, by chance, a radio programme on Neapolitan music revealed this city's extraordinary complexity to me: Gesualdo, Pergolesi, Cimarosa and at the same time, *O Sole mio*! So sophisticated and so proletarian at the same time... I decided to leave for the city that had inspired them.

Ernest Pignon-Ernest, *Extases, les Mystiques*, 2020, Église des Célestins, Avignon.

© Ernest Pignon-Ernest

N.E.: What were you looking for in Naples?

E. P.-E.: In Naples, as the *Aeneid* tells us, hell lies beneath the city. In Virgil, Laurent Gaudé and Erri de Luca, we find this hellish cavern. The sacred is there beneath the earth. The presence of death is both constant and exuberant. I set out to explore the images of death that this city, wedged between two volcanoes, has been secreting for two thousand years.

There is no erasing history in Naples; Greek, Roman and Christian mythologies are superimposed. The Pieta is already in the wounded body of Adonis, watched over by Aphrodite. I moved in 1988 and worked there until 1995. As a native of Nice, I found a sort of ancient familiarity there... a feeling, as I walked through the Sibylline lair in Cumae, of rediscovering immemorial origins.

N.E.: What did this work consist of?

E. P.-E.: I produced hundreds of images, all on poor, fragile newsprint, sometimes large drawings in black stone designed for specific locations, and other times, depending on the theme, serigraphs printed in runs of a few dozen copies that allowed me to trace symbolic routes through the city. References to the great plagues, to the eruptions of Vesuvius, to the work of Caravaggio, to the pagan and Christian cults that this sunny city plunges into darkness.

My images are born of a profound understanding of the place in which I'm going to put them; its space, its history, its light. For example, for one of my pictures referring to epidemics, a man is carrying a body on his back, and I stuck several dozen of these prints in symbolic places, all in streets paved with huge black flagstones. I knew when I made this image that these square metres of powerful black stone would be part of the drawing, that the body's fragile hand, printed on this fragile paper, would rest on these timeless black slabs carved in the lava of Vesuvius. The artistic intent was as much in this confrontation as in what these images represented. I pasted them only on the nights of Holy Thursday and Friday, so that they could be discovered and received in the context of the Resurrection celebration, which is very intense in Naples. My montage consists of organizing this heterogeneous palette of space, time, experience, history, and symbolism.

N.E.: Is this where the sacred lies?

E. P.-E.: The relationship between the images, the place, the context and the depth of the city's history produces a kind of 'secular sacredness', an awareness of what has come before us. What my images provoke when they meet their viewers must be inseparable from the history of the place, revived by this inscription in both space and time. What I'm offering is a graphic

intervention into reality and its symbolic, anthropological, social, sacred and event-related resonances.

My images reactivate or disrupt our understanding of a place, they write human history back onto it in something in-between art and life, like a ritual event. This work has led me to read the Gospels, the Bible, the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola, Saint John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila.

N.E.: Hence your work on the great mystics?

E.P.E.: Yes, it was born of these sacred texts, but also of Nerval, *The Chimeras*, "Now the sighs of the saint, now the cry of the fairy".

Jean Noël Vuarnet spoke of how ambiguous it always is to take an interest in these great mystics. How do you represent flesh that aspires to disembodiment? It's as much a quest as it is a challenge... and not just an artistic problem. I have only chosen women who have written, and I have tried to express what they have said about themselves. There is, of course, sensuality, the affirmation of the body, interspersed with references to the Passion...

They call themselves spouses of Christ. "Spiritual pain, not bodily pain, although the body does not fail to have a part in it, and even a great deal of it," says Teresa, which is what I dealt with through drawing... But how to capture the ineffable, the





Se torno... Scampia /
Naples, 2015.

© Ernest Pignon-Ernest

breath, the soul, that other something that had to be translated? The sublimation of the body and its simultaneous negation... levitation and anorexia?

N.E.: What did you come up with then?

E. P.-E.: In my urban interventions, paper isn't just a medium; the image is also shaped by what the materiality of the walls – its grain, its cracks, its memory – inflicts on the sheet. For this project on mystics even more than for my urban collages, paper has become an essential graphic element, as important as the drawing, which it interplays with, and even contradicts. Let these white sheets become a place of extreme intensity, affirming the labyrinth of folds and curls that they hold in reserve. Veils, shrouds, skin, paleness, immateriality, fluidity... like a quest for the ecstasy of space.

At the same time, I realized that water, as a sexual metaphor, appears in all these women's writings (except for Catherine of Siena, for whom it is blood). Julia Kristeva wrote of Teresa that "this woman is a constant trickle", while Madame Guyon confessed she would liquefy and become "the sea itself". Hence, my entire project is built around a body of water, a body of black water that has been the essential graphic and symbolic element of it... and was designed and shaped to suit the architecture each time.

Of course, I never considered exhibiting this project in the street. I only installed this ensemble in places of great spirituality: the Chapelle Saint-Louis de la Salpêtrière, the Cathedral of Saint Denis, the Hypogeum of Santa Maria delle Anime del Purgatorio ad Arco in Naples, the Abbey church of Saint Pons, and the

Abbey church of Bernay, among others.

In the mirror that was this body of water, I worked to make the volume of the building appear in depth, a vertiginous hole, a mysterious abyss in which the fiction of the signs that are the drawings mingled with the reflections of the place's transcended materiality.

N.E.: The sacred also runs through your work on Pasolini...

E.P.E.: It runs through everything Pasolini did, his work and his destiny. It was his carnal passion for people and places that revealed their sacred dimension; he turned the humblest destiny into a mythical and epic quest. He had an acute, profound vision of the state of the world, a commitment to the rawest reality, always tethered to and informed by the great voices of the past, Dante, Leopardi, the founding myths. A visionary, he foresaw, in the 50s, the anthropological, social and cultural changes heralded by the consumer capitalism that was taking hold, the commodification of the body behind a façade of hedonism. My image is a reference to these warnings, a question, something like "what have you done with my death?" Forty years after he was murdered, I drew Pasolini and his clothes, jeans, knitwear, and boots, using police documents. Anyone who has seen the photos of his broken body on the grey sand of Ostia will recognize it: a drawing of clinical realism for this 'auto-Piéta', like a Pasolinian quest to make the sacred resonate in the most prosaic reality. In other words, his 'sacralizing realism' will remain my most essential reference. ■

THE INEFFABLE

By **ÉDITH CANAT DE CHIZY**, member of the Académie des Beaux-Arts' Musical Composition Section

A few years ago, the Diocese of Ile-de-France commissioned me to write the inaugural Mass for Evry Cathedral. This prompted me to reflect on the meaning of what is commonly called 'sacred music'. In this case, I had to write a mass, so I had to pay attention to the liturgical aspect, but this is only one facet of sacred music.

At the time of its creation, I was confronted with the reactions of the clergy: I had given too much priority to the silence of listening over the need for the faithful to participate. That experience taught me to be very cautious moving on.

When this *Ascension Mass* was recorded on CD, the director of the label asked me to comment on the sacred. Here is what I had to say at the time: "The sacred moves through us, it erupts. It leaves its mark throughout the work, often unbeknownst to its creator, and no one can claim it as their own, or appropriate it. That's why I have serious reservations about the term 'sacred music'. Liturgical music, yes, as are my *Book of Hours* and the *Ascension Mass*. Approaching the sacred is a different adventure".¹

A different adventure because the sacred is not the prerogative of any religion, it is the 'Ineffable', the 'Burning Bush', the 'Separate'. It is the 'Lightning' of which René Char wrote: "I was eleven or twelve when what I called the great lightning struck me for the first time. Nothing else mattered. There is no daylight, only night and clarity, but this clarity comes from the night, it is the *grandissime éclair*. It flashes only once in a while, a few times in a lifetime, but with each flash you see a little more than with the previous one.

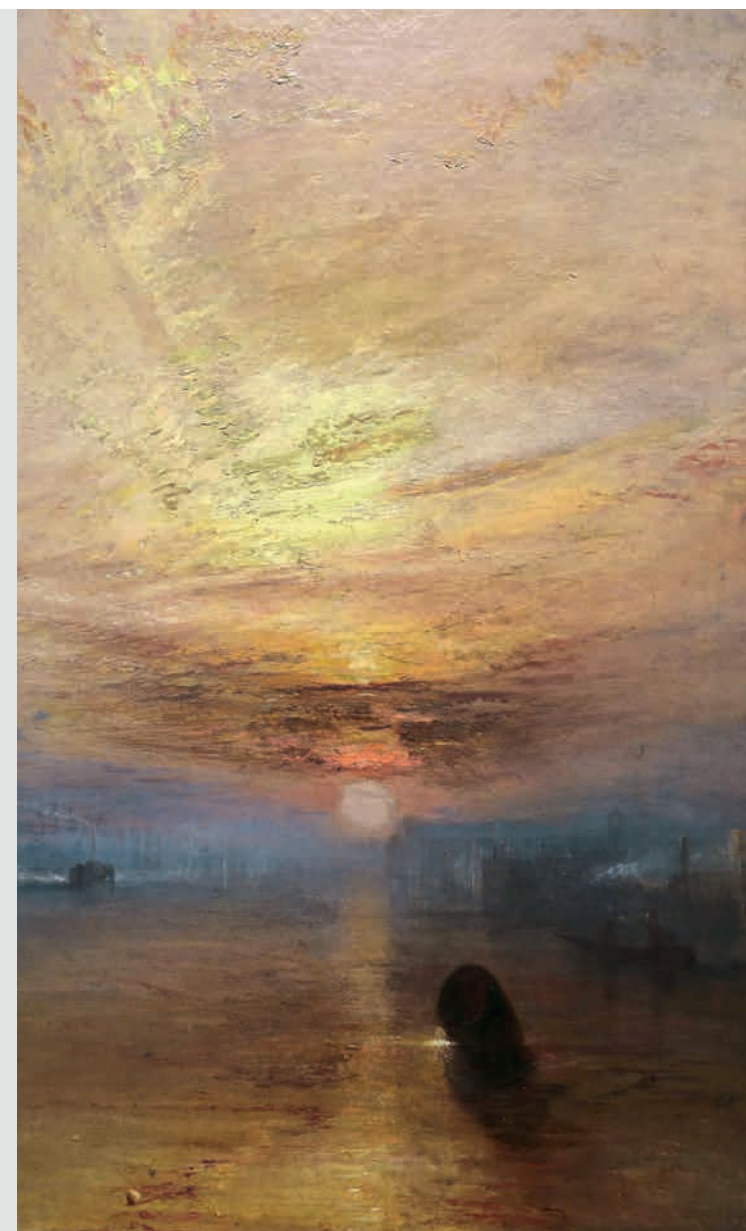
We will die without having seen everything, of course, but, in any case, we will have seen a little more than those who see only in daylight. Even though the lightning makes the darkness that follows it darker"².

This experience is echoed in *Nu perdu*:

"You who are born belong to lightning. You will be lightning stone for as long as the storm uses your bed to escape".

Nowhere else have I found such a clear expression of the sacred. The word 'stone' here evokes the violence of its irruption and impact. In 2010, I gave the title '*Pierre d'éclair*' to one of my orchestral pieces, an oxymoron that inspired in me a whole realm of timbres.

But the sacred can also be that 'close invisible' of which René Char wrote. If the sacred, as a feature, lies in transcendence and the abruptness of separation, then artistic creation is one of the places where it can be grasped.



So it's up to artists to approach it, sometimes beyond the realms of silence, so that their works can bear witness to it.

I especially have in mind the Notre-Dame du Haut chapel in Ronchamp, built between 1953 and 1955 on Le Corbusier's plans. As he wasn't a believer, Le Corbusier initially refused to work for the Church, which he called a 'dead institution'. But the members of the Diocese insisted. He eventually visited Ronchamp, where he was totally captivated by the landscape, which he immediately dubbed the 'four horizons'. This chapel is a striking space, invested with a singular presence that could be described as supernatural.

I also have in mind a certain quartet by Beethoven, a painting by Turner, or Nicolas de Staël's mysterious vertigo in front of his canvas, which he called 'too much chance'.

And to conclude, I return to Char, who summed up the creator's destiny in these lines: "Those whose endurance knows how to wear away the gnarled night that precedes and follows the lightning will bear branches". ■

1- Édith Canat de Chizy, *Livre d'Heures*, Éditions Hortus, 2007

2- René Char, *Œuvres complètes*, La Pléiade

Above: Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775-1851), *The Fighting Téméraire* (detail), 1838, oil on canvas, 91 x 122 cm. National Gallery, London, United Kingdom.

ENCLOSING THE SACRED SO THAT IT CANNOT ESCAPE

By **BERNARD DESMOULIN**, member of the Académie des Beaux-Arts' Architecture Section

Should religious architecture's metaphysical value mean that it should emancipate itself from an overly strict attachment to use value in order to access the poetic plane? Building a place of worship is a rare request for genuine architecture. It is a call to the spiritual; it requires one to go further than the mere organization of spaces, beckoning architects to a place beyond the resolution of everyday constraints, so that they can call visitors to join them there.

The Christian association of Russian students, heir to the first wave of immigration that followed the Bolshevik revolution, recently asked me to help them think about what could replace their church on rue Olivier de Serre in the 15th *arrondissement* of Paris. It had long been housed in a former workshop converted into an Orthodox church, hidden from the street on a narrow plot. With its premises now dilapidated, it needs a new location. My career had long awaited such an opportunity.

The new church, which is modest, more of a chapel in scale, will be that of a spiritual community of whose liturgy I knew nothing. Although it is intended to be integrated into a building complex

comprising a cultural centre and some housing, the building will be autonomous and have its own identity. An identity that shall be faithful to the commitment of a century-old community united around a memorial story that it wishes to pass on to new generations.

Any mysticism aside, this proposal echoed a recurring recommendation of architecture teachers to their students: "Every space should be designed like a church". Not for the religious aspect, but to rediscover one of the foundations of architecture: a symbolic dimension capable of evoking the idea of permanence. What we're talking about here is an emotion that, while it is unique to each individual, can create a bond between us all. In short, something that is difficult to define in a set of specifications.

Rather than reducing its architecture to an envelope whose materiality or expression would appropriate the codes of a culture of origin, we are opting for a pragmatic simplicity that the sacred can take hold of, without resorting to the slightest picturesque or historicizing artifice.

I am convinced that the aesthetics of contemporary architecture, with its original dogmatic minimalism, encourages this approach to the sacred. Here, the interior walls covered with icons, which are omnipresent in Orthodox places of worship and can be of great artistic value, can be counted on to revive this lost familiarity.

This discreet place, which is a community's centre of gravity, is not visible from the street. But given the narrowness of the access, which begins a sinuous symbolic path rich in plant textures – only a few trees differ from a rigid massing –, the visitor

will forget that the site is embedded in a complex with more prosaic functions.

In choosing to bring together the secular and the religious in an intimate atmosphere on the outside, and then opting for a sober and warm décor on the inside, primarily for members of the parish, we are also speaking ecumenically about the vitality of faith freed from its ideological shackles.

When designing such a site, it is important to avoid investing architecture with too great a mission, giving it a role that it cannot be sure to fulfil. By virtue of its structure, every building is a rational work of art, and as a result cannot make too much of a point about the irrational. It is difficult to escape its materiality



and, whatever its scale, its sole ambition cannot be to become its own centre of attraction.

The liturgy, on the other hand, orders and 'regulates' the religious in a traditional way. Because it makes a shared faith tangible, it is the only constraint that the architect must comply with. Therefore, the main concern here is not belief but instead a spirit of analysis and interpretation. What matters, between the faithful who are impatient to rediscover their culture in a new space, and the practice of an architect whose job it is to pronounce the Last Judgement, is the installing of the invisible in a geometric dimension.

Rather than on the religious aspect, which is expressed by humans, we should therefore agree on the sacred, which is of divine inspiration. The scope of this term is sufficiently broad and uncertain that, in this contractual context, we are not required to define it.

This experiment came twenty-five years after another, equally unusual one, involving the creation of a multi-faith space in the memorial site of a necropolis in Fréjus. The idea was to create a small space for meditation shared by Christians, Jews, Muslims and Buddhists. There, facing the sea, the theme of ecumenism meets that of the sacred. The religious aspect was reduced to the symbolic representation of four representative denominational signs, each set in an individual stèle.

Covered in a texture that shows its own ageing, the stability

of these stelae placed under invasive vegetation asserts an endurance that should preserve the site from any permanent scarring.

This outdoor structure, open to the sky, freed from the confines of an outer envelope and protected from the Mediterranean light by wooden slats supporting climbing vegetation, allows visitors sitting on a bench to feel the presence of an inner force in the silence. Here, the sacred is freed from any envelope, any weight or ornamentation. Elsewhere, architecture and light should be enough to frame prayer.

The purpose of building walls is not simply to isolate or provide a hiding place to pray in. They are there above all to convince us that the sacred can be enclosed so that it cannot escape.

INVIOATE SCAFFOLDS

By **BRIGITTE TERZIEV**, member of the Sculpture Section of the Académie des Beaux-Arts

With the same religious impetus, artistic expression has succeeded in drawing out the notion of the sacred in the eyes of others. The work of art has forged its place in human society by creating this force of attraction for the individual who, by chance or despair, has become convinced of its supreme value: the sacredness of the works and the emotional impossibility of desecrating them. The obviousness of the stigma does not prevent us from deliberately sidestepping this phenomenon to emphasize what the artist himself feels about the work in gestation; making a 'work' through the sheer movement of being carried away by a vital impulse in its mysterious source of energy, without seeing its absurdity or its future quality beforehand.

To illustrate the adventure that all artists go through in their research, I'd like to draw on my own personal experience.

The Atelier des Soupîrs, which is intended to be monastic, is open early every morning. The tools are neatly arranged and everything is in place very early. The experience can begin. Blindly diving hands directly into the slippery, passive material of clay, while remaining apprehensive, worried to be misunderstanding the false softness of its texture. Besides, this reddish clay obeys only other hands; not my own, toiling away piteously at this chimera, but those with furrowed brows lurking in the depths of the studio-cavern, amid the rubble and broken sculptures. Sowers who spit out little seeds of eternity and try to bury them in this rocky terrain, in search of light. It's hard to find bright nuggets at this time of day. But I'm going to try and find them with my bare hands, despite my despair.

There are few artists who would never experience this state of abandonment before the strangeness of the creative act. This echo, this resonance, which links new figures to the deepest core of our desires. These nebulae intrinsically linked to each other by a will that escapes us and that insists on awakening... on the wall of their dreams, is the artist not always in search of a work that would make their passage sacred?

More often than not, sensory inspiration is what guides a gestating work in me, while some others follow a more intellectual project. But the result is there: 'the fruit of our womb',

to paraphrase a Christian prayer. The object of our desires is born. Sometimes a vital energy more enveloping than the work's author's escapes their tutelage to roam free. While still following the same map, the subject drifts from its trajectory towards a more spiritual, or demiurgic, vision; or perhaps it was, in the first place, the true hidden motivation of its metaphorical 'progenitor'.

Just as, in dreams, certain works reach beyond the plain reality of our aspirations, this gives birth, within us, to an attractive strangeness. Surely, it must be a butterfly stroke swim to find our soul.



That's what I want to talk about here.

It begins with a notch on the studio wall; it's not the proverbial hatchet, but the memory of the man of the first ages resonating with my call. The one who took his solitude into the crack of a rock to turn it into a place of worship.

Like him, I want to inscribe various wounds and scars on the rough surface of my wall, forcing their imprint into it. In slabs of clay, shifting forms appear: folds, holes, veins, blisters spread out in tiles of clay. As a surgeon of the unconscious, I sew the deeper tears with rope, and drive a stake into thoughts that are too soft. What, you may ask, is the connection between the luminous openness of these first men who were discovering hope, and these wall plaques, which I regard neither as ex-votos nor as vengeful graffiti? They, our distant cousins, learned exorcism to oppose the frightening world that preyed on them. They had obtained a response from the gods to capture the elusive: transferring desire towards the inaccessible, the tragic alongside the sacred.

This is where my alliance with the archaism of our ancestors differs, but I'll come back to it in a different way.

For some time, these mural plaques would remain exposed on the studio wall. Then came the desire to give these traces of life a real space; to circle around their shapes, to enter into their solitude and let their dimensions permeate me.

At this point in their construction, there was a choice to be made: either leave them as chaotic assemblages, the bearers of their memories; or, just a little above human height, here are entities whose bodies and hidden heads are modelled, dressed in wounds and trophies, transforming, as if they were on a theatre stage, the representation of their disastrous adventures into a vertical pride. Yes, I would even go so far as to say into an Effigy,

through the tragic force of their intimate scaffolding. This was the direction I took.

The growing number of entities gives this group the appearance of a brotherhood. Each one has its own flesh and blood, but all have the same emotional origin.

Now, in the morning light, their shadows raise questions. They magnetize the living space and yet seem to be only passing through. I'm still adding new members to the list of their wanderings, but I can't find out any more about their raison d'être.

They are called 'watchmen', but they could just as easily be invisible, or simply unknown, couriers.

Here or elsewhere, their position is of no importance to them. However, I don't believe in chance, as their occupation of real space proves. They seem to hold a secret. They are invulnerable, serious, motionless, and silent.

But shadows are knocking at the door, stubbornly insisting on producing meaning, on producing faith. The hands bearing morning's meddling thoughts are back.

They love the half-light and the content of silence. Any watchmen? No response from them. They continue to sow, spitting from time to time on the rocky ground and pulverizing it into gold dust. ■



SACRED/MASSACRED BODIES

By **DOMINIQUE FRÉTARD**, correspondent for the Académie des Beaux-Arts' Choreography Section

A woman walks forward with her arms stretched out in front of her. Her eyes are closed. Is she blind? A sleepwalker, perhaps. Emerging from the back of the stage, on the left, dressed in a kind of jumpsuit with a silvery sheen, this apparition seems to carry within her not only the memory of a childhood spent under the bombs, but also the burden of the collective memory of terror. Passing by again and again without seeing, she ends up, under the influence of the very repetition of her journey, calming the bodies of the dancers who are prey to disordered gestures. Like intermittent shards of light, the sacred is at work.

This creature who soothes the horror is the German choreographer Pina Bausch in her seminal 1978 work *Café Müller*. Pina Bausch and the Second World War, which she experienced in the café run by her parents south of the Ruhr. She was four years old. The war encouraged the emergence of the sacred, as Roger Caillois and Georges Bataille attest in their writings. The sacred is inseparable from violence, terror and the abject. The dancing body becomes the mirror-body, to borrow a phrase from the anthropologist and philosopher René Girard. Rather than going through the catalogue of dances that have been labelled sacred since the dawn of time, a catalogue that is certainly fascinating but widely available, I have tried to find

out what contemporary dance, in particular, tells us about the sacred. Has it, from its origins, retained the power to believe that it can transform the forces of death into those of life?

War again. In 2009, Maguy Marin, a powerful choreographer, also dealt with murderous violence in *Description d'un combat*. As they move among the dead, the dancers, like wandering souls muttering snatches of tales of epic battles, play out the groaning litany of the dying. Oversaturated lights sweep across the space, stopping there on the glint of a suddenly magnified armour, here on overly glistening blood, elsewhere on shining charred blackness. A transmutation of bodies and objects. From tainted earth to sacred earth.

When the values of the world's order are reversed, the sacred lurks and tries to break through to put an end to the chaos, to restore balance to what has been shattered. When the Fifth Commandment – Thou shalt not kill – is dead letter. When fighters and innocents die defenceless. Massacre is derived from the word 'macecre', which is also thought to be the ancestor of 'butchery'.

War, the purveyor of the sacred. But also of unpredictable and deadly epidemics. Sacred are the bodies of dancers stricken with HIV who died throughout the '80s in resounding indifference,

saved from oblivion in 1995 by *Still/Here*, by American choreographer Bill T. Jones. A black homosexual man, infected with the virus. His dance, born of furious anger, metamorphoses before our very eyes into a form of offering to the dead, and transcends the initial project by illuminating it – the dancers becoming the vehicles of a thought directed towards consolation and the possibility of healing.

While the sacred cannot be decreed, neither can it manifest itself almost simultaneously with the violent, unexpected events that provoke it. It needs a latency period, often a long one, an incubation period, before it can enter the dance and move through it. In 1998, after seven years of experimenting with body-and-mind treatments, choreographer Alain Buffard created a solo performance called *Good Boy*; a medicalized striptease in which he took a step back from this patient reconstruction, handling prostheses and dressings that sometimes swaddled and other times denuded him. Because it crystallized the irrational and stigmatizing panic unleashed by AIDS, this creation took on the value of a salvation that was as personal as it was universal.

Wars, epidemics and, sometimes, boundless commitment. Perhaps Rudolf Nureyev's body is sacred? After daring to dance

with catheters concealed under his Prince Charming costumes, he gave, abandoned, his body to dance until his last breath on the stage of the Paris Opera for an ultimate *Bayadère*, which he was determined to see through to the end, however painful it may be. On 8 October 1992, after the first performance, seated in a large armchair, the signs of his impending death from HIV plain to see, Nureyev still managed to cheat death. He died on 6 January 1993. His artistic legacy lives on.

Is it an exaggeration to speak of sacrality when the courage of a mission, in this case a choreographic one, transcends the artist to such an extent? It makes him a quasi-Nietzschean character – an individual with the courage to be himself to the very end of their life. Is it the same radical choice Pina Bausch made in 2009, when, faced with illness, she abandoned her work in progress only once there was no longer any doubt that she would die?

The sacred is frightening. It cannot be controlled. It bursts in. And dancers of the very highest calibre, who are better than others at sensing danger, find a thousand stratagems to escape it, aware that through their excellence they are transmitting something that is beyond them, and which, if it overwhelms them too much, could be their downfall. Is this why, whenever he was offstage, as if to protect himself and keep out of reach, Nureyev



Café Müller, choreography by Pina Bausch, 1978, Tanztheater Wuppertal. Photo credit: DR

Description d'un combat, choreography by Maguy Marin, created in 2009, Gymnase Aubanel as part of the Avignon Festival

© Didier Grappe



chose to overexpose his private life: nightclubs, backrooms, Jackie Kennedy and Dom Pérignon? By contrast, Sylvie Guillem, whose admirers say they can't help but cry when they see her dance, opts to disappear. Once she has left the stage, she wants no one to see her, to watch her.

Overexposure and disappearance are symptoms of the same refusal to be full-time idols, unknowingly sacralized. Human, just human. That's more than enough.

The sacred – a death sentence?

Nijinsky, who was called a 'god of dance' during his lifetime, a legendary performer with the Ballets Russes, who protected himself from nothing and no-one, saw the trap of the sacred closing in on him, to the point that his only escape was insanity. Why, as soon as Diaghilev, his mentor, opened his gilded cage and allowed him to choreograph, would Nijinsky butcher the

classical ballet of which he was the hero? What was he a survivor of, what were the wounds that led him to act like this?

Nijinsky mistreated ballet because he himself had been mistreated from an early age. He was relentlessly bullied by his rich classmates at the famous Mariinsky School in Saint Petersburg, who mocked his Polish accent and his poverty. He was left for dead after one of his classmates, enraged by his genius, tried to kill him during a high jump competition. Nijinsky spent months in hospital. As soon as he came back to his senses, aged about 13, he scribbled on a piece of paper that he forgave his tormentor.

Was Nijinsky too good, too docile? Then Diaghilev, who made him his young lover, jealously kept him under his thumb when he realized that his Ballets Russes enterprise was now centred around the peerless dancer. Kept constantly on the verge of implosion, Nijinsky, finally left to his own devices, as he immersed himself in choreography, simultaneously trampled on the codes of ballet and freed himself from his chains of love.

This revolt, which looks like choreographic revenge and is also a brutal personality split, explodes in *Le Sacre du Printemps*. All it speaks of is his mistreatment. And of accumulated pain as a possible source of the sacred. He is the Chosen One of the *Rite*. He is the young virgin hunted to death by old men bent on rekindling their libido with the arrival of spring. Nijinsky knows what he wants. Feet and knees turned inward, legs bent and heavy, steps that pound the earth until it shatters, while Stravinsky's music sounds the death knell.

On 29 May 1913, at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, Nijinsky created anti-ballet. He invented '*j'amaï vu*', 'something never seen before', in a sense of feverish urgency. In this respect, he has a place in the search for the sacred in contemporary dance, as his work is its matrix in many ways. In the same year, 1913, he married a dancer, Romola de Pulska, in Buenos Aires. Diaghilev immediately dismissed him. The abuse continued. From 1919 onwards, Nijinsky gradually sank into schizophrenia.

The sacred is scandal, in life and in death. Or it is not. ■

THE SACRED NECESSITY OF ART

By **JEAN ANGUERA**, member of the Académie des Beaux-Arts' Sculpture Section

From the confused and boundless mass of reality, from its thickness and substance, the artist strives to extract some existence. They try to make its presence perceptible. They see, smell, hear, and feel what had not been felt before, either by drawing a face, modelling a figure, or more modestly by asserting a line, a direction, or by insisting on an aspect, a colour, a sound, a movement...

Art makes things appear, and through this appearance it points to the unknown. It points to the unknown yet is not the unknown. It makes things appear without being their appearance. Its role is to bring that which appears closer by placing it within reach of the eye, within reach of the ear.

In this way, it gives a face to man, an outline to his presence.

While this face is, nonetheless, but a clumsy sketch, a lifeless evocation, and the presence remains a shadow, an approximate silhouette, this effort is fundamental if we are to emerge from the unknown and from brutality, if we are to see each other and enter the intimacy of seeing.

When it is directed towards an outside existence, designation manifests the need to make things appear and, when it is directed towards an internal existence, the need to gain lucidity and prevent erasure. In short, to attune thought with being.

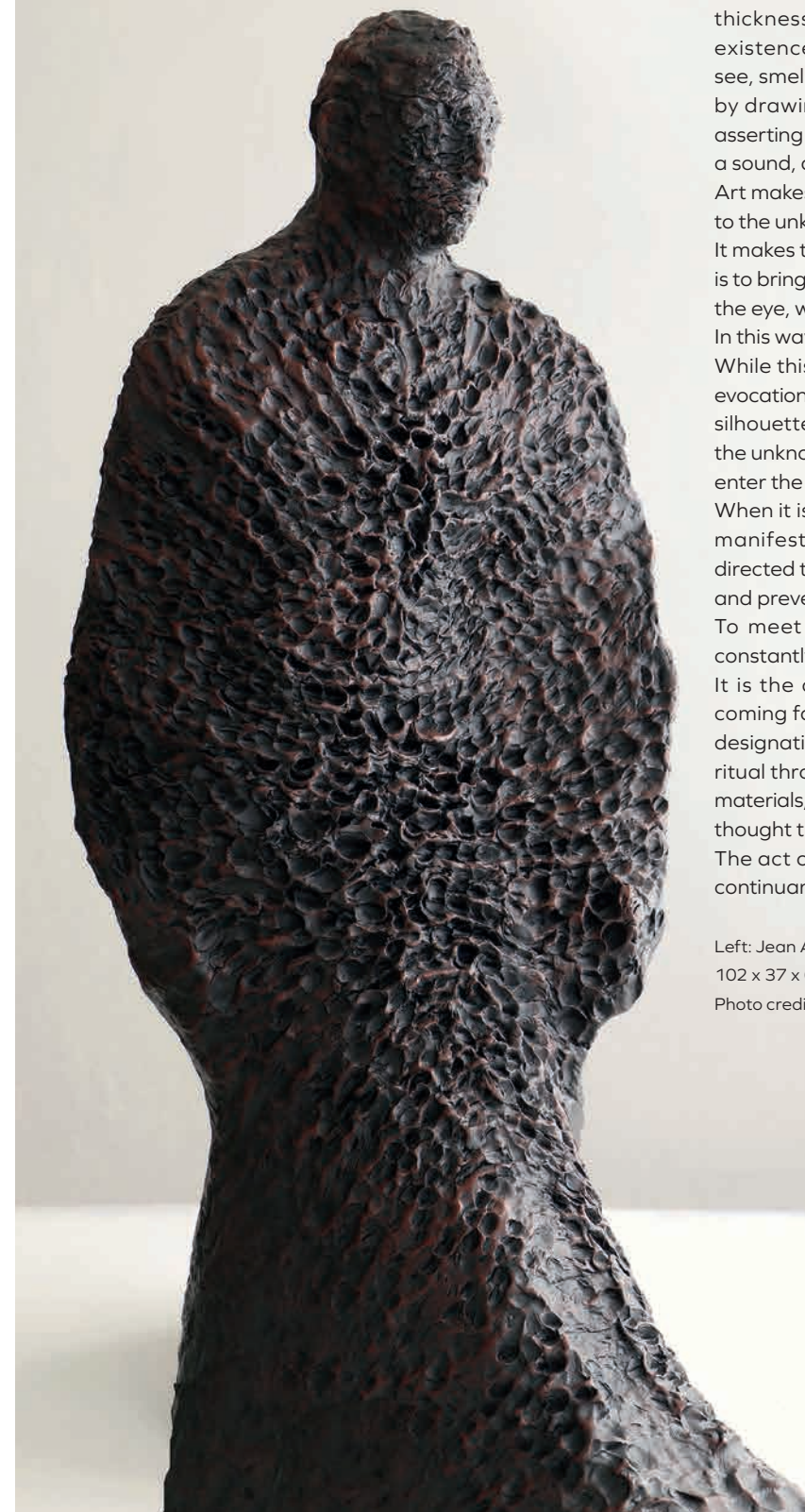
To meet the need for appearance and the obligation to constantly renew it, designation must be sustained.

It is the artistic act, the whole work of representation, of coming face to face, of making oneself double, that gives this designation a lasting character. Whether it is oriented towards ritual through repetition, as is dance, or towards the solidity of materials, as with sculpture, it is always a movement of body and thought that resembles begetting.

The act of designation is, in itself, sacred. It is crowned by its continuance over time. ■

Left: Jean Anguera, *La terre jusqu'à l'homme*, 2022, composite material, 102 x 37 x 69 cm.

Photo credit: DR



Above: *Still / Here*, designed, choreographed and directed by Bill T. Jones, programmed as part of the Festival d'Automne à Paris 1995.

Photo credit: © Michael O'Neill © Adapp, Paris, 2023

LA PASSION SELON TRÉMOIS

Par **LYDIA HARAMBOURG**, correspondante de la section de peinture de l'Académie des beaux-arts

In 2011, Pierre-Yves Trémois (1921-2020) began a series of canvases 23.50 metres long and 90 cm high on the theme of the *Passion*. This monumental cycle was exhibited at the Réfectoire des Cordeliers in Paris in 2013. The artist took up the principle of a Way of the Cross with its stations whose illustrations alternate with texts taken from the Gospel according to Saint John. He had made the body his matrix, recognizing both its beauty and its vulnerability, having examined it for decades, scrutinizing its avatars in ecstasy and suffering, love and violence, rapture and pain. For the Son of Man, the path of truth is long and irreversible, sublimated to the point of self-sacrifice. It is the path of Christ's Passion. Trémois had always studied anatomy, in both his physical and moral intimacy. *Genesis* meets *Passion*. "Everything had now been finished". And with this, the Gospel of John (Jn 19:25-30) conveys the final words of Jesus. "Father, into Your hands I commend my spirit". From the cot to the cross, Jesus had accomplished his earthly mission. This is a story that summons up Trémois' infallible touch, generating a discomfort bordering on vertigo. "The anguish of endings naturally led me to confront the drama in the Passion". His self-imposed, ambitious and demanding confrontation with the Gospel led his hand to question the body once again.

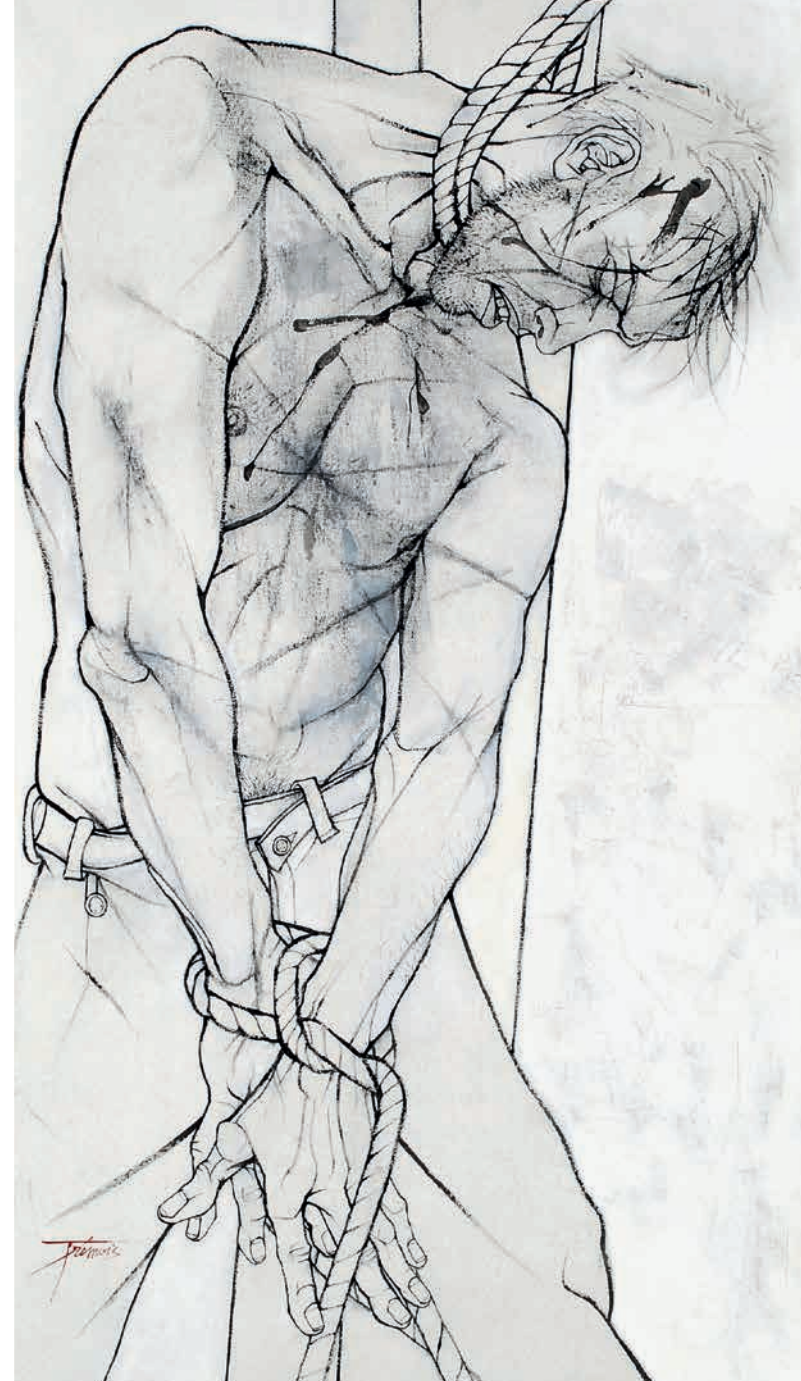
"Do your Passion with a stroke that pierces, and at full speed, with no pentimento" he wrote on the wall of his studio. The studio became a sanctuary.

Line for line. In the unlimited depth of the medium, reflecting the abyssal mystery of the Christ's message, Trémois wrote his vision of Christ. Thus, visible and tangible as that of the Pharisees, the Romans and the disciples was, in the "horror of all that is more than what is", to quote Georges Bataille, the vision took the form of an image faithful to the Scriptures, unchanging in its transmission through time and space. The painter spins the line, keeps it uninterrupted to its completion. His graphic continuum, whose closed contours tell of the fulfilment of Christ, is the bearer of a twofold evidence: that of graphic accuracy based on a classical heritage used to transmit an iconographic testimony in addition to that of the Incarnation.

From the scourging of Christ to his ascent to Golgotha, the narrative is part of a dereliction of suffering. The clinical precision of the plot is matched by the unconsolable desolation that engulfs the universe.

Trémois faces the void. Silence.

In an ultimate gesture of tension, the tip of the brush with black acrylic meets space and time. As much as it claims to confront *mimesis* through drawing, the form takes up the story of the



Gospel. His graphic expression adapts to the scenes of the Passion. It serves them with humility, to the point of unbearable modesty.

The graphic completion shows its tear. In its indecent reality, the line has its credibility. And the sacred provides all the light.

It illuminates Mary, who embraces her son's feet, mutilated by the nails, stiffened and bloody. Hands and toes embrace. The line continues a dissection that becomes an act of love. A gesture of absolute love, an absolute gift of self.

Trémois' sovereign profession led him to use drawing as the irreplaceable medium for questioning life.

Between the two thieves, this Jesus of Nazareth expires. Who recognized Christ?

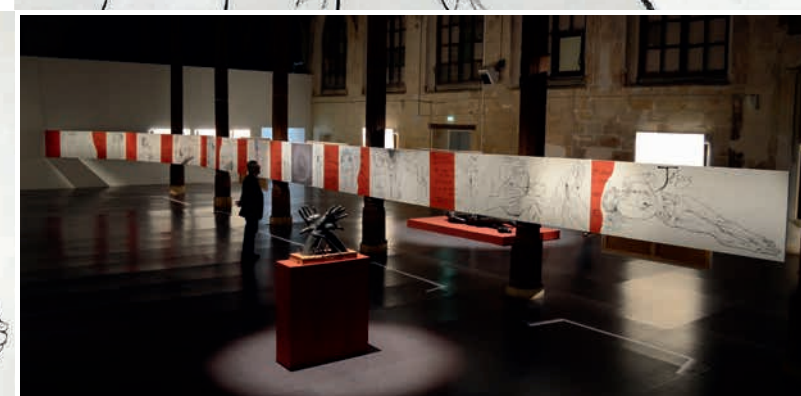
The line has come to a standstill. It has led the form from its beginning to its end. The alpha and the omega.

All is done.

The supreme act of love is in this embrace of Mary and Jesus. An inviolable and sacred mystery.

Trémois expresses this through a unique and singular approach that conjures up an inimitable line, a line born of the perpetual emergence of the visible world.

His drawing ends where the end is cancelled in the premise of a mystery foretold. There, eternity is sealed. One can catch a glimpse of emergence of the kingdom foretold by Christ in the fixity of the outline and its graphics, which reveal what the Gospel of John endorses in its sacred message. ■



Passion for itself. As a companion to the line that punishes, that eliminates any narrative complacency out of a need to go to the heart of the matter, the incisive, scandalous line speaks of the madness of man, the line that suffers resonates with the modalities of black and white in a greyness that is self-sufficient. No colour, no shadow. When red appears, it is the metaphorical transcendence of birth and death.

"Do the long black lines drawn on the pure white canvas give more intensity to the drama than if they had been done with colours, materials and shadows that would have given more depth of feeling?"

Trémois shows the sequences that are eternally inscribed in the memorial of this unique Friday. The kiss of Judas, the arrest of Jesus, the carrying of the Cross, the sharing of the weight of the Cross with Simon of Cyrene, the meeting with Veronica, the holy women, the meeting of Mary with her son who follows the path of Calvary to the raised Cross, absolute scandal. Trémois' line is at the service of this unspeakable journey. "Given the dramatic simplicity of the Gospel text of the Passion, I had to be simple, and in art simplicity is fearsome".

Trémois, a 'line maniac', induces a vertigo that is all the more pervasive as he draws on the sources of the crudely transcribed

Trémois (1921-2020), member of the Engraving Section, elected in 1978.

Above: *Jésus et Marie*, et *Simon de Cyrène aidant à porter la croix de Jésus*, 2011, acrylic and collage on canvas, 90 x 315 cm.

Right: *Jésus flagellé I*, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 133 x 78 cm.

Centre: view of the exhibition 'Trémois, Traits de Passion', 2013, Réfectoire des Cordeliers, Faculté de Médecine de Paris.

© CmPezon

I. "DIS-MOI TON NOM..." [NAGRANNI SĀMAKA]

Ploisance du Gers
 Chantade: Bourdon 46'
 Bécit: Petit Plein-Jeu en 8', Trompette 8', Violoncelle 8'
 Grand Orgue: Grand Plein-Jeu 8'
 Positif: Grand Plein-Jeu 8'
 Pédalier: Principal 8', 16', 32', 64', 128', 256', 512', 1024', 2048', 4096', 8192', 16384', 32768', 65536', 131072', 262144', 524288', 1048576', 2097152', 4194304', 8388608', 16777216', 33554432', 67108864', 134217728', 268435456', 536870912', 1073741824', 2147483648', 4294967296', 8589934592', 17179869184', 34359738368', 68719476736', 137438953472', 274877906944', 549755813888', 1099511627776', 2199023255552', 4398046511104', 8796093022208', 17592186044416', 35184372088832', 70368744177664', 140737488355328', 281474976710656', 562949953421312', 1125899906842624', 2251799813685248', 4503599627370496', 9007199254740992', 18014398509481984', 36028797018963968', 72057594037927936', 144115188075855872', 288230376151711744', 576460752303423488', 1152921504606846976', 2305843009213693952', 4611686018427387904', 9223372036854775808', 18446744073709551616', 36893488147419103232', 73786976294838206464', 147573952589676412928', 295147905179352825856', 590295810358705651712', 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New artist residency programme at Villa Dufraine

The Académie des Beaux-Arts has owned the Villa Dufraine in the village of Chars (Val d'Oise) since 1937, and has used it to host artists in residence since the 1950s. Jean-Michel Othoniel was appointed to head it on 22 September 2021, and has now proposed an original residency model, in keeping with the Villa's spirit and geographical location, which consists in hosting a group of no more than ten artists and a curator every year to work on an exhibition project.

The jury, made up of members and correspondents of the Académie des Beaux-Arts, met on 2 and 6 March 2023, and selected the collective led by Lou-Justin Tailhades, who holds a Master's degree in curatorial studies from the Faculté des Lettres de la Sorbonne Paris IV, along with eight artists from a range of disciplines and backgrounds: Mathilde Albouy, Maxime Bagni, Sarah Konté, Hatice Pinarbaşı, Jordan Roger, Pierre-Alexandre Savriacouty, Christophe Tabet and Halveig

Villand. They are graduates from six different art schools and have widely diverse techniques and approaches. The research and exhibition project proposed by Lou-Justin Tailhades looks at the circulation of language in the age of hyper-communication, and its consequences on creation. The 9th studio has been allocated to Agathe Bourrée, a graphic designer, and the last studio has been left vacant to accommodate guest artists throughout the eight-month residency. ■

Above: the buildings and workshops of Villa Dufraine, in Chars, Val d'Oise, France.

On the porch, Jean-Michel Othoniel, director of the Villa, is surrounded by the members of the artists' collective chosen for this first edition.

Photo credit: DR and © H&K - Victor Point



Concert in honour of our Foreign Associate members

Since 2019, at the initiative of Laurent Petitgirard, the Académie des Beaux-Arts has been paying tribute to its past and present composers by organizing the 'concerts d'un fauteuil'.

Since then, six concerts have been organized in the André and Liliane Bettencourt auditorium at the Institut de France, presenting the Institution's and France's musical heritage dating back to 1795. This journey now continues with a cycle dedicated to the foreign Associate Members of our Compagnie. There are 16 of them, elected from among foreign artists or personalities who have contributed, through their work, to promoting artistic creation around the world. The Académie has welcomed such illustrious composers as Antonio Salieri, Pietro Guglielmi, Giovanni Paisiello, Gioacchino Rossini, Niccolò Zingarelli, Saverio Mercadante, Johannes Brahms, Giuseppe Verdi, Ignacy Paderewski, Arthur Honegger, Dmitri Chostakovitch, Benjamin Britten, Witold Lutoslawski, György Ligeti and the recently deceased Kaija Saariaho (see next page).

The first of these concerts was held on Wednesday 24 May 2023. It was a tribute to Giuseppe Verdi, Johannes Brahms and Dmitri Shostakovich, performed by the Orchestre Colonne conducted by Laurent Petitgirard and solo cellist Henri Demarquette. ■



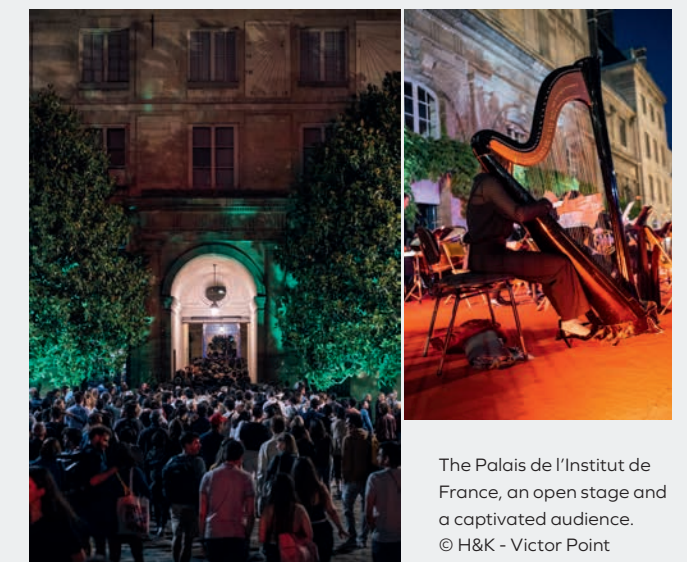
Laurent Petitgirard, seen here with solo cellist Henri Demarquette, conducted the Orchestre Colonne. Photo credit: Patrick Rimond



Nuit Blanche 2023... Musique maestro !

As part of the Nuit Blanche celebration, the Institut de France opened its doors wide on Saturday 3 June for a Symphonic Night.

The Orchestre Colonne, conducted by Permanent Secretary Laurent Petitgirard, took a large and fascinated audience on a musical trip around Europe. They headed for Italy and Germany with the great Romantic composers and Foreign Associate members of the Académie des Beaux-Arts Giuseppe Verdi and Johannes Brahms, with interludes played by saxophonist Olga Amelchenko, in collaboration with the Jazz à Saint-Germain-des-Prés Festival. ■



The Palais de l'Institut de France, an open stage and a captivated audience. © H&K - Victor Point

Tribute

Kaija Saariaho

The Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho died on 2 June at the age of 70. She had been elected as a Foreign Associate member of the Académie des Beaux-Arts on 18 May 2022.

Kaija Saariaho, born in 1952, first studied visual arts at the University of Industrial Arts in Helsinki and then began composing music at the Sibelius Academy in 1976. In 1982 she studied computer music at IRCAM (Paris), where she worked on computer-assisted music. The use of these new technologies is an important component of her compositional technique. Her work, inspired by spectral music, illustrates her reflection on the very matter of sound. Thus, many of her works were created by combining electronic music and live music.

She gained international recognition with her works *Verblendungen* (1982-1984) and *Nymphéa* (1987), for string quartet and electronic tools. Her repertoire includes pieces for ensemble and orchestra, the five operas *L'Amour de Loin* (2000), *Adriana Mater* (2006), *Émilie* (2010), *Only the sound remains* (2016) and *Innocence* (2021), as well as vocal works including *Château de l'âme* (1996), *Oltra mar* (1999) and the song cycle *Quatre instants* (2002).

Kaija Saariaho was awarded major accolades, including the Grawemeyer Award (2003), the Léonie Sonning Music Prize (2011), the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale Musica (2021), and the Victoire de la Musique Classique (2022). She used to say that, for her, 'Composing is not a profession, it's a way of life'. ■

Photo credit: Maarit Kytöharju

At its plenary sessions on Wednesday 10 May, Wednesday 7 June and Wednesday 28 June 2023, the Académie des Beaux-Arts elected **Emmanuel Pernoud** as correspondent for the Engraving and Drawing Section, **Chris Younès** as correspondent for the Architecture Section, and **Guy Boyer** as correspondent for the Painting Section.

Prix et concours

Creation of the Grands Prix de l'Académie des Beaux-Art

At the suggestion of Permanent Secretary Laurent Petitgirard, the Académie des Beaux-Arts decided to create nine 'Grands Prix de l'Académie des Beaux-Arts'.

These nine 'Grand Prizes' awarded by the Académie – one for each of its nine Sections – will honour artists of French or foreign nationality who have distinguished themselves through the excellence of their career or the particularly remarkable nature of a recent work or action.

There will be no call for applications for these Grand Prix. They will be awarded by the Académie, meeting in plenary session, on the recommendation of each Section. Each Grand Prix will be endowed with 30,000 euros, drawn from the Académie's own funds. This sum will be at the free disposal of the winner, who may divide it between several artists as they see fit. Each Grand Prix will be awarded at a ceremony under the Palais de l'Institut de France's Cupola. On this occasion, the artists whom the winner has decided to support will also be honoured.

Every year, the Académie will award three of these new Grands Prix according to the following timetable: in 2023, 2026, 2029, and so on, Choreography, Film and Audiovisual, and Free members; in 2024, 2027, 2030, etc.: Painting, Engraving and Drawing, and Musical Composition; in 2025, 2028, 2031, etc.: Architecture, Sculpture, Photography. The names of the 2023 winners of the first three Grands Prix de l'Académie des Beaux-Arts will be announced in September, and the award ceremonies will take place in October, November and December 2023.

There will be more on these new Grand Prizes in issue 100 of the *Lettre de l'Académie*, which will focus on the many initiatives to which the Académie is committing to support artists – prizes, of course, but also residencies, which enable them to pursue their creative work in an appropriate setting. ■

Photo credit: Juliette Agnel

Travaux académiques

Public communications

Every year, the Académie des Beaux-Arts organizes a series of public lectures, inviting leading figures to speak on various topics relating to artistic issues in the Palais de l'Institut de France's Grande Salle des Séances.

Plural paintings: a journey through the polyptychs of the past and present

By former Prime Minister **Laurent Fabius**,
Wednesday 19 April 2023

Aside from his public responsibilities, Laurent Fabius is also an art enthusiast. Here, he takes a close look at polyptychs which, while they are most famously exemplified by the Issenheim Altarpiece, are also part of the works of many contemporary artists, such as Francis Bacon, Joan Mitchell, Zao Wou-Ki, Fabienne Verdier and Pierre Soulages. He argues that these 'plural paintings' possess a particular form and power, which he sets out to analyse and describe in an erudite historical, emotional, and pictorial journey across the world. ■

Marie Taglioni, a romantic ballerina, public figure, and businesswoman

By contemporary dance teacher and doctoral student in dance and performance history, **Chloé d'Arcy**
Wednesday 3 May 2023, in collaboration with the Thierry Malandain Endowment Fund for Dance.

Tracing the European career of the famous dancer Marie Taglioni, whose name is associated with the role of *The Sylph* (1832), the advent of the pointe technique and the era of Romantic ballet, Chloé d'Arcy analyses the myths that developed around her, from child prodigy to unsurpassed role model. ■

En haut : Zao Wou-Ki, *Le vent pousse la mer*, 2004, huile sur toile, 194,5 x 390 cm, communication de Laurent Fabius, le mercredi 19 avril dernier. Collection particulière / © Denis Bouchard © ADAGP, Paris, 2023

A new field of investigation: the spoliation of musical instruments, scores, and manuscripts orchestrated by the Third Reich (1939-1945)

By President of the association Musique et spoliations, **Pascale Bernheim**,
Wednesday 7 June 2023

For several years now, Pascale Bernheim has been dedicated to the search for looted musical goods. In 2017, she set up the association Musique et spoliations, whose main missions she will present in this lecture, evoking the well-documented examples of the spoliation of harpsichordist Wanda Landovska's goods and Léon Blum's piano. ■

Marcel Marceau, the poetics of gesture

By writer and theatre journalist, **Patrizia Iovine**
Wednesday 28 June 2023, as part of the centenary of the birth of member of the Académie Marcel Marceau (1923-2007).

Patrizia Iovine, author of the essay *Marcel Marceau, la poétique du geste*, traces the history of the French master's astonishing career and reveals the nuances of his training as a poet of body and gesture, accompanied by violinist Adalberto Muzzi. ■

Above: Zao Wou-Ki, *Le vent pousse la mer*, 2004, oil on canvas, 194.5 x 390 cm, presented by Laurent Fabius on Wednesday 19 April. Private collection / © Denis Bouchard © ADAGP, Paris, 2023



Watch these lectures on the Académie des Beaux-Arts' YouTube channel

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Page 1 and opposite:
Benoît Dutour,
monumental installation
of 'tears of joy' in the
heart of the Madeleine
church, Paris, 2023.
Photo Loïc Lagarde



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