

# Bernard Buffet

## Retrospective

14 october 2016 – 26 february 2017



**Bernard Buffet (1928-1999)**

*Autoportrait sur fond noir*, 1956

129,3 x 96,8 cm, oil on canvas

Collection Pierre Bergé

© Dominique Cohas © ADAGP, Paris 2016

## PRESS KIT

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## Bernard Buffet Retrospective

14 October 2016 - 26 February 2017

Press preview: 13 October 2016 11 am – 2 pm

Opening: 13 October 6 – 9 pm

The Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris is organising a retrospective of the work of Bernard Buffet (1928–1999), one of the most famous French painters of the 20th century, but also one of the most contentious. In a choice of a hundred paintings this exhibition takes a fresh look at an oeuvre which in fact remains little known to the public at large.

The Musée d'Art Moderne being the only public museum with a large Buffet collection – thanks to the substantial Girardin bequest in 1953 and the Ida and Maurice Garnier donation in 2012 – it seemed appropriate to proceed with a project dating back to a contact initiated with the artist's long-time dealer Maurice Garnier (1920–2014) some ten years ago, but delayed by the ongoing controversy surrounding the oeuvre.

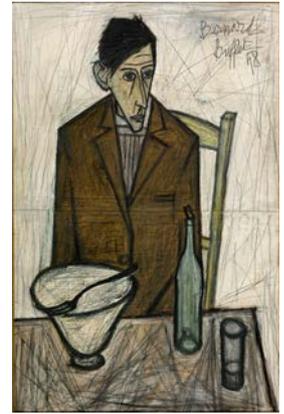
The passing of time brings greater objectivity, however, and many artists, art professionals and collectors are beginning to reconsider a body of work that has become slightly less perplexing. Given Buffet's prolific output, this overview is necessarily highly selective; nonetheless the exhibition will reveal the unsuspected quality and variety of what will perhaps live on as one of the most fascinating and most influential painterly oeuvres of the last century.

The chronologically structured retrospective opens with Buffet's beginnings, when his work was triggering a new awareness of a wide range of artistic forms and objects. Thus it covers the postwar years and their debate about realism, figuration and abstraction; and overall it highlights the paradox of an artist who was drawing on history painting in the context of the disappearance of the subject, and whose life was a blend of artistic austerity and financial ease, of public success and a rejection of the art world.

Alongside his favourite subjects – self-portraits, still lifes – the exhibition will present the other themes he worked through in his annual exhibitions at Galerie Garnier: religion (*The Passion of Christ*), literature (Dante's *Inferno*, *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*) and allegory (*The Birds*, *The Mad Women*). The emphasis will be on his enduring concern with history painting (the *Horror of War* series) and the history of painting (*The Sleepers*, after Courbet), and on his last, spectacular series, *Death*, with its references to the memento mori of medieval times.

Generously backed up with documentary material, the retrospective will also offer an insight into the mechanisms behind Buffet's fame.

The catalogue provides new studies of the artist by French and international historians, as well as articles by writers and critics of the time and interviews with Buffet's artist contemporaries.



*The drinker*, 1948,  
Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris  
© Musée d'Art moderne / Roger-Viollet  
© ADAGP, Paris, 2016

### Museum director

Fabrice Hergott

### Exhibition curator

Dominique Gagneux

### Visitor information

Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris  
11 Avenue du Président Wilson  
75116 Paris  
Tel. 01 53 67 40 00  
www.mam.paris.fr

Open Tuesday – Sunday  
10 am – 6 pm  
Open late Thursdays until 10 pm

### Admission

Full rate: 12 €

Concessions: 9 €

### Combi-ticket

Bernard Buffet / Carl Andre

Full rate: 15 €

Concessions: 10 €

Catalogue published by Paris Musées  
44.90 €

### Cultural activities

Information and bookings  
Tel. 01 53 67 40 80

### Press Officer

Maud Ohana  
maud.ohana@paris.fr  
Tel. 01 53 67 40 51

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# Artist's biography

## 1928

Bernard Buffet is born on 10 July in Paris and grows up in Batignolles, northeast Paris.

## 1939

Enters the Lycée Carnot. Gains first prize in natural science, the only subject that interests him. Leaves school in the third year and takes drawing classes at the Paris municipal evening school, place des Vosges.

## 1944

At sixteen years old he passes the entrance exam for the École des beaux-arts with a special dispensation on account of his age.

## 1945

He is awarded the prize for studio work but neglects school, preferring to visit museums. At the Louvre he is fascinated by Antoine-Jean Gros's painting *Bonaparte visitant les Pestiférés de Jaffa*. His first paintings, reminiscent of Maurice Utrillo and Alphonse Quizet, are of the streets of Paris. He uses various fabrics, which he stretches on improvised frames.

He shares a studio at Massy-Palaiseau with his friend Robert Mantienne. There he paints *La Déposition de croix*. In July, during their holiday in Brittany, his mother falls ill. Her death a few months later left a lasting mark on him.

## 1946

His first painting, a self-portrait, is exhibited at the Salon des Moins de Trente Ans. After this he showed his work regularly at the Salon des Indépendants, the Salon d'Automne, the Salon de Mai, and the Salon des Tuileries.

## 1947

At the Salon d'Automne, *L'Homme accoudé* draws praise from the critics.

First solo exhibition at the bookshop 'Les Impressions d'Art'. Raymond Cogniat buys *Le Coq mort* for the French state.

## 1948

He enters *Le Buveur* for the 'Prix de la Jeune Peinture' organised by the Galerie Drouant-David. It does not win the prize, but attracts the attention of Dr. Maurice Girardin, an influential collector who buys several of his works. Emmanuel David becomes his dealer.

The same year, he shares the 'Prix de la Critique' with Bernard Lorjou. This is the beginning of his success. *La Ravaudeuse de filets* creates a sensation at the autumn Salon.

## 1949

In February, he has a solo exhibition at the Galerie Drouant-David. This becomes an annual fixture on the same dates.

His works on paper are exhibited at the Galerie Visconti, run by Maurice Garnier. Buffet signs Jean Bouret's 'Second manifeste de l'Homme témoin', which advocates a return to realism.

## 1950

He is a member of the organising committee of the first Salon des Jeunes Peintres at the Galerie des Beaux-arts (later the Salon de la Jeune Peinture) devoted to figurative painters of the younger generation.

He exhibits in galleries in New York, London, Basel, Copenhagen, Geneva ...

## 1951

He takes part in the first 'Les Peintres Témoins de leur Temps' exhibition.

He spends the summer in Provence with Pierre Bergé. Jean Giono puts them up in Manosque. They move into a house in Nanse, near Reillanne. Buffet works there until 1954.

## 1952

For his annual exhibitions first at the Galerie Drouant-David, and then at the Galerie David et Garnier and the Galerie Maurice Garnier, he begins to paint on themes. The first is 'La Passion'. His painting *La Crucifixion* is shown at the Venice Biennale.

## 1955

A poll carried out by the magazine *Connaissance des arts* places him first among the painters from the young contemporary school.

**1956**

An article in *Paris Match*, showing him living in luxury in his house Manine at Domont, near Montmorency, becomes a subject of debate.

An entire room is devoted to his work at the Venice Biennale.

**1957**

He illustrates John Cocteau's *La Voix humaine*.

On the model of Henri-Georges Clouzot's *The Mystery of Picasso*, Étienne Périer makes a film of Buffet painting *La Tête de veau*.

**1958**

His first retrospective, at the Galerie Charpentier, establishes his reputation. The theme of his February exhibition at the Galerie David et Garnier is 'Jeanne d'Arc'.

He is a member of the jury at the Cannes Festival.

He meets Annabel Schwob, a well-known figure in Saint-Germain-des-Prés. They marry in December.

**1960**

His exhibition 'Les Oiseaux' is a *succès de scandale*.

**1961**

He realises a series of paintings on the life of Christ for his chapel at the Château l'Arc.

**1964**

He paints a portrait of Mao Zedong for German magazine *Stern*.

He buys a house at Saint-Cast. He works there until 1970.

**1971**

He is appointed Chevalier de la Légion d'honneur.

He buys the Château de Villiers-le-Mahieu.

**1973**

Japanese collector Kiichiro Okano founds a Bernard Buffet museum in Japan.

**1974**

He is elected to the Académie des beauxarts, in the painting section.

**1978**

He designs a postage stamp depicting *L'Institut et le Pont des Arts*.

**1980**

He visits his museum in Japan. This country becomes a source of inspiration.

**1984**

The catalogue raisonné of his engravings is published.

**1988**

He opens the extension of the Bernard Buffet Museum in Japan.

**1991**

There is a retrospective of his work at the Pushkin Museum, Moscow, and at the Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg.

**1993**

He is promoted to the rank of Officier de la Légion d'honneur.

**1994**

An exhibition of his work takes place at the Documenta-Halle, Kassel.

**1999**

Suffering from Parkinson's disease and no longer able to work, Bernard Buffet commits suicide on 4 October in his studio at Tourtour (Var).

The theme of the posthumous exhibition at the Galerie Maurice Garnier is 'La Mort'.

# Exhibition Layout

## Section I

### Invention of a style – 1945 - 1955

#### / Dazzling Success

In the flurry of artistic activity after the Second World War, many artists decided to start from scratch again by turning towards abstraction. Others, who had been teenagers under the occupation and were glad to be alive and free, decided to purvey a humanist message, seeking to express profound reality and to depict ordinary life around them. With support from galleries and critics, these painters banded together and exhibited at the 'Salon des moins de trente ans', the 'Manifeste de l'Homme témoin', and the 'Salon de la jeune peinture'.

While studying at the *École des beaux-arts*, Bernard Buffet spent a lot of time learning in the Louvre, which was gradually reopening after the war. He painted his first still lifes in the style of Courbet and Chardin; his landscapes were reminiscent of Utrillo or Alphonse Quizet. Although for a time he took part in the *Jeune Peinture* movement, which tended towards realism, his paintings were very angular, with neither shadow nor depth, and distinguished by a style of lavish poverty. The dull tones, due to a shortage of colours, were in keeping with the themes: sober still lifes, crucifixions, deserted landscapes, and solitary figures. These paintings were noticed by critics and collectors, and at the age of nineteen, he was awarded the Critics' Prize. In the eyes of the public, this success made Bernard Buffet the natural heir to Picasso. In the wake of admiration for his triptych 'Horror of War', a poll carried out by the magazine *Connaissance des arts* in February 1955 placed him first among ten painters to have emerged since the Second World War.

## Section II

### Rage to paint – 1956- 1976

#### / Turning point

Bernard Buffet's annual exhibitions in February were always an event; people were shocked, astonished, or made uneasy by his subjects and formats. They demonstrated the whole range of processes that Buffet was able to bring to his personal style. Although the spiky manner and the stretched bodies were still there, his monochrome compositions had now given way to bright colours and thick, heavy paint, as in the series 'Les Oiseaux'. Part of one of the 'Écorché' series, with its drippings, had connections to works from gestural abstraction. The 'Femmes déshabillées' were strictly artistic in black and white. The concise, monochrome graphics of 'Les Plages' were stretched into difficult extended formats, while the hieratic and monumental paintings of the 'Corrida' series were ablaze with colour. The 'Folles' paintings combined short, sharp brushstrokes with violent colouring. Through all these subjects, Buffet continually painted the same theme, namely things that he found 'beautiful, close to death, close to life', and metaphorically representative of his situation as an artist.

During this period reproductions of the *Tête de clown* were sold all over the world. He was asked to paint scenery for ballets, to design cinema posters, and to do illustrations. However, the more well-known he became with the public at large, the more his reputation in cultural circles suffered; by 1966 he had dropped to eighteenth place in the rankings of the magazine *Connaissance des arts*. At the beginning of the 1970s, he worked alone in his studio and produced works of disconcerting placidity. Although he was decorated with the Légion d'Honneur and appointed to the Académie des Beaux-arts, he remained a controversial artist, acclaimed by some critics, castigated by others.

## Section III

### Mythologies – 1977-1999

#### / Exile

In 1977, after three years of landscape paintings, Bernard Buffet surprised the public by returning to grand themes with Dante's *Inferno*. He was quite consciously taking up the defence of narrative in painting. Through monumental sequences inspired by his boyhood reading, he interwove myths, autobiographical elements, and art history in the paintings of a number of series. The heroes he

depicted—Dante, the exile, or Nemo, the voluntary recluse—were self-portraits. Taking inspiration from Caspar David Friedrich, Eugène Delacroix, François Clouet, or Leonardo da Vinci, he renewed his style at every annual exhibition. 'Dante's Inferno' revisits the graphic style of his early work; '20,000 Leagues under the Sea' looks back towards 19<sup>th</sup> century illustration. A tension emerges from the paradox between this 'quotational' painting and an anti-intellectualism that is often comparable to the American 'Bad Painting' artists. This was a period of great retrospectives abroad: in Kassel, St Petersburg, Moscow, and, especially, in Japan, which was like a second home to him now that a museum had been founded entirely devoted to his work. By the age of forty-eight, he was a member of the Académie des Beaux-arts, and he was beating all records in public sales. In 1999, the magazine *Paris Match* named him as one of the figures who had left a mark on the century. Yet, in spite of all that, the press hardly mentioned his exhibitions, and none of the large French museums bought his works or exhibited them. Although Buffet was compared in various places to the pop artists or the narrative figuration artists, and Warhol considered him to be a great painter, he still remained an artist who was impossible to situate in the history of art as it was evolving during this period.

# Practical information

## **Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris**

11, avenue du Président Wilson

75116 Paris

Tel: +33 (0)1 53 67 40 00 / Fax : +33 (0)1 47 23 35 98

[www.mam.paris.fr](http://www.mam.paris.fr)

## **Transportations**

Subway : Alma-Marceau or Léna

RER : Pont de l'Alma (line C)

Bus : 32/42/63/72/80/92

Station Vélib' : 3 av. Montaigne or 2 rue Marceau

Station Autolib' : 24 av. d'Iéna, 33 av. Pierre 1<sup>er</sup> de Serbie or 1 av. Marceau

## **Opening hours**

Tuesday to Sunday from 10am to 6pm (ticket desk closes at 5:15pm)

Late opening on Thursdays until 10pm only for special exhibitions (ticket desk closes at 9:15pm)

Closed on Mondays and during bank holidays



The exhibition is accessible to people with motor and reduced mobility disabilities

## **Admission**

Full rate €12

Concessions €9

## **Combi-ticket Bernard Buffet / Carl Andre**

Full rate €15

Concessions €10

## **Ticket desk**

No-queue tickets available on [www.mam.paris.fr](http://www.mam.paris.fr)

## **The museum also presents**

**Benjamin Katz** in the collection from september 30<sup>th</sup> to december 31<sup>th</sup> 2016

**EVA & ADELE** in the collection from september 30<sup>th</sup> 2016 to february 26<sup>th</sup> 2017

**Carl Andre, Sculpture as place, 1958-2010\* (\*La sculpture comme lieu, 1958-2010)** at the ARC from october 18<sup>th</sup> 2016 to february 12<sup>th</sup> 2017

## **Upcoming exhibitions**

**Karel Appel** (24 february - 20 august 2017)

**Medusa, Bijoux et Tabous** (19 may - 5 november 2017)

**Derain, Balthus, Giacometti** (2 june - 29 october 2017)

## **Press officers**

**Maud Ohana**

Tel: +33 (0)1 53 67 40 51

E-mail [maud.ohana@paris.fr](mailto:maud.ohana@paris.fr)

**Morgane Barraud**

Tel : +33 (0)1 53 67 40 76

E-mail [morgane.barraud@paris.fr](mailto:morgane.barraud@paris.fr)