




Nicolas de Staël

15 septembre 2023 – 21 janvier 2024

MAM MUSÉE
D'ART MODERNE
DE PARIS

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Nicolas de Staël

15 September 2023 - 21 January 2024



The Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris is devoting a major retrospective to Nicolas de Staël (1914-1955), a key figure on the post-war French art scene. Twenty years after the one organised by the Centre Pompidou in 2003, this exhibition offers a fresh look at the artist's work, drawing on more recent thematic exhibitions that have highlighted certain little-known aspects of his career (Antibes in 2014, Le Havre in 2014, Aix-en-Provence in 2018).

The retrospective brings together a selection of around 200 paintings, drawings, prints and notebooks from numerous public and private collections in Europe and the United States. Alongside such emblematic masterpieces as *Parc des Princes*, it presents an important group of works that have rarely, if ever, been exhibited, including around fifty shown for the first time in a French museum.

Organised chronologically, the exhibition traces the artist's successive developments, from his first figurative steps and his dark, thickly-painted canvases of the 1940s, to his paintings on the eve of his premature death in 1955. Although the bulk of his work was completed in a dozen years, Staël never ceased to renew himself and explore new avenues: his "inevitable need to break everything when the machine seems to be running too smoothly" led him to produce a remarkably rich and complex body of work, "without any a priori aesthetic". Unaffected by the fashions and quarrels of his time, his work deliberately overturns the distinction between abstraction and figuration, and appears to be the pursuit, carried out in an emergency, of an ever denser and more concise art: "Life is so sad without paintings that I go for it as long as I can," he wrote. The retrospective allows us to follow this pictorial quest of rare intensity step by step, beginning with his youthful travels and his first years in Paris, his time in the Vaucluse, his pivotal trip to Sicily in 1953, and finally his last months in Antibes, in a studio facing the sea.

PRESS RELEASE

Museum director

Fabrice Hergott

Curators

Charlotte Barat-Mabille
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Nicolas de Staël

Agrigento

1954

Oil on canvas

23 5/8 x 31 7/8 in

Private collection / Courtesy

Applicat-Prazan, Paris

© Photo Annik Wetter

© ADAGP, Paris, 2023

Visitor information

Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris

11 Avenue du Président Wilson

75116 Paris

Tel. 01 53 67 40 00

www.mam.paris.fr

Open Tuesday to Sunday, 10am to 6pm

Open late :

Thursdays, until 9:30pm and

Saturdays, until 8pm

Admission

Full rate: 15 €

Concessions: 13 €

Cultural activities, information and reservations

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International press

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Staël's biography immediately created a myth around his art: from his exile after the Russian Revolution to his tragic suicide at the age of 41, the painter's life never ceased to influence the understanding of his work. Without neglecting this mythical dimension, the retrospective intends to remain as close as possible to Staël's graphic and painterly research, in order to show above all a painter at work, whether facing the landscape or in the silence of the studio. An exiled child who became a tireless traveller, the artist is fascinated by the world's spectacles and their different lights, whether he is confronted with the sea, a football match, or a piece of fruit on a table. Constantly varying the tools, techniques and formats – from the *tableautin* to the monumental composition – Staël liked to work on several canvases in parallel, superimposing layers of paint and successively altering them. Drawing plays a major role in this exploration, and a rich selection of works on paper underlines its experimental character.

An extract from the documentary *Nicolas de Staël, la peinture à vif* by François Lévy-Kuentz, co-written with Stéphane Lambert and Stephan Lévy-Kuentz, produced by Martin Laurent, Temps Noir, and in co-production with ARTE France, will run continuously in the exhibition rooms and will be broadcast in its entirety on ARTE.

The exhibition catalogue provides a deeper understanding of the painter's work, with texts on his relationship to the masters of the past and to his contemporary Georges Braque, as well as his relationship to landscape and still life. The catalogue also contains an interview by the curators with Anne de Staël, the artist's eldest daughter, as well as the complete unpublished text of the *Diary of the Staël Years* by Pierre Lecuire, writer, editor and close friend of Staël.

The exhibition will be presented at the Fondation de l'Hermitage in Lausanne from 9 February to 9 June 2024.

With the support of ING, Linklaters and Perella Weinberg Partners.

Exhibition Texts

Introduction

"Life is so sad without paintings that I do a lot while I still can."

Born in St. Petersburg, Nicolas de Staël was three years old when the Russian Revolution broke out. Forced to flee with his family, and orphaned at an early age, this exiled artist would never cease looking for new horizons, new sensations, and new ways of painting. If most of his production was executed within a time frame of fifteen years, he nevertheless constantly renewed his work. His "inevitable need to break everything when the machine seemed to be running too smoothly" led him to experiment tirelessly.

His practice as a painter developed in a post-war France where the dispute between the partisans of abstraction and advocates of figuration was in full swing. Indifferent to the quarrels of his time, de Staël hated labels and refused to choose, preferring to paint "without a-priori aesthetics". The result was a free and personal work, which demonstrates the always lively sensitivity of this painter vis-à-vis his surroundings: whether confronted by the sea, a football match, or a piece of fruit placed on a table, the artist was captivated by the various spectacles of the world and its ever-changing light.

Brutally interrupted by his suicide at the age of forty-one, de Staël's trajectory appears retrospectively as the urgent pursuit of an ever denser and more concise form of art. Executed *en plein air* or in the silence of his studio, his work's successive evolutions bear witness to a pictorial quest of a rare intensity, whose power remains intact, even today.

The journey of a painter (1934-1947)

Nicolas de Staël's formative years were made up of journeys and encounters. Although he studied art in Brussels, the young painter quickly sought to broaden his horizons: after two summers spent traveling across the south of France and then Spain, he spent a year exploring Morocco, where he met Jeannine Guillou, a painter who became his companion. He worked hard, destroying much of his production, and hesitating as to the way forward. "I know that my life will be a continual voyage on an uncertain sea," he wrote, "all the more reason for me to build a solid boat."

Comprised of trips and stopovers, these years of development were at once difficult and exhilarating, against a backdrop of ambition and extreme poverty. The stateless de Staël enlisted in the Foreign Legion in November 1939 and was demobilized in September 1940. He then lived for three years in Nice before settling in Paris. In 1942, he turned to abstraction, a trend then growing in popularity. The painter explored this new language in works dominated by dark tones, which Jeannine described as "endlessly tortured, repainted, massacred, jostled."

At the end of the war, de Staël exhibited at the Galerie Jeanne Bucher: his career was launched. In 1946, Jeannine's tragic death following a therapeutic abortion marked the end of this first era.



Denise Colomb
Nicolas de Staël in his studio on rue Gauguier
Paris, 1954
Photo © Donation Denise Colomb, Ministère de la Culture, Médiathèque
du patrimoine et de la photographie, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Denise
Colomb
© RMN-Grand Palais

Rue Gauguet (1948-1949)

Located near Parc Montsouris, the rue Gauguet became the painter's anchor point in 1947: the place where de Staël, now married to Françoise Chapouton, would find a real studio and a home for his family. With its eight-metre-high ceiling, the studio was "like a well, a chapel, and a barn," wrote critic Patrick Waldberg, who described "its austere whiteness and atmosphere of intense, but reclusive activity."

Leaning his canvases against the wall, de Staël created several works at the same time, moving from oil to India ink, from canvas to paper. In the late 1940s, in this place flooded with light, his palette brightened. The obscure impulses of the previous canvases gave way to a less violent, more organic way of painting. Gradually, his compositions loosened up: the dynamic and tangled beams gave way to larger, more stable, and lighter forms.

Constantly renewing his practice, de Staël was as wary of repetition as he was of labels. Known as an abstract painter, he declared, going against the times, that “non-figurative tendencies do not exist,” affirming that “the painter will always need to have before their eyes, whether near or far, the moving source of inspiration that is the sensory world.”



Nicolas de Staël
Eau-de-vie
1948
Oil on canvas
39 3/8 x 31 7/8 in
Paris-Lisbonne, Galerie Jeanne Bucher Jaeger
© ADAGP, Paris, 2023
Courtesy Galerie Jeanne Bucher Jaeger, Paris-Lisbonne / Photo Georges Poncet

Condensation (1950)

In 1950, de Staël's work became denser: larger, more condensed masses were arranged on the surface of the canvas. From studies on paper to the painting in its final version, several different stages were involved in each piece, as the artist worked long and tirelessly on his compositions. The paintings recount their own genesis: the layers of colour are superimposed, revealing, on the edges of the enigmatic shapes, other underlying colours, like a glimpsed secret. The paintings were done by spreading, covering, and working the matter. "I handle the knife and the brush with great force," de Staël said. The ambition was clear: "to do better and better and always simpler."

Although formally abstract, his canvases seem inhabited by the physical presence of the world: de Staël mentioned the “images of life” which he received “in coloured masses,” “following a thousand vibrations.” He proudly remained at a distance from what he referred to as the “front abstraction gang”, an ironic allusion to the “Front Traction gang”, a notorious group of post-war criminals.

That same year, the Musée national d'art moderne acquired a first painting by the artist, and Jacques Dubourg became his official dealer, with canvases now beginning to sell in the United States.



Nicolas de Staël
Large Blue Composition
1950-1951
Oil on masonite
78 3/4 x 59 in
Private collection / Courtesy Applicat-Prazan, Paris
© ADAGP, Paris, 2023
Courtesy Applicat-Prazan, Paris

Fragmentation (1951)

The paintings from 1951 appear, retrospectively, as a reaction to those from 1950, with de Staël calling into play the achievements of the previous year. After condensation, came fragmentation: after the concentrated forms, came the reign of fragmented forms, consisting of coloured tesserae that seem to have been borrowed from the world of mosaics. This new vocabulary offered the artist great freedom. Sometimes he built, by accumulating these slab-like shapes, sometimes he opened his painting to a new and dynamic, almost aerial spatiality.

The references to the outside world, already there, in a latent state, in the paintings from 1950, now emerged more clearly. De Staël, despite the era and the criticism, courageously returned to figuration: at the very beginning of 1952, a simple tessera, an abstract form if ever there was one, became an apple, while the vertical spurt of small, coloured blocks suddenly evoked a bouquet of flowers. To his new friend René Char, for whom he produced an ensemble of woodcuts, he wrote: "You made me immediately rediscover the passion I had as a child for wide skies, autumn leaves, and all the nostalgia of a direct language."



Nicolas de Staël
Fugue
1951-1952
Oil on canvas
31 3/4 x 39 1/2 in
Washington, The Phillips Collection
© ADAGP, Paris, 2023
The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C. / Photo Walter Larrimore

A year in the landscape(1952)

In 1952, references to the sensory world became explicit. De Staël broadened his visual field, leaving the studio to devote himself to the landscape and to work in the open air. Between joy and urgency, “hands full of colours in the open sky,” he painted over two-hundred-and-forty works. The majority were small or medium formats on cardboard, worked directly from the landscape, in the Parisian region, Normandy, and the South. Each place or region generated its own impressions and ways of painting. In Mantes-la-Jolie and Gentilly, de Staël’s art struck a balance between observation and abstraction. In Le Lavandou, he painted on the beach and marvelled at the “voracious” and “dazzling” light of the South, which provided him with new sensations: “By dint of being blue, the sea becomes red.” In Normandy, his landscapes were more atmospheric and reflected the subtle nuances of sea and sky.

In Paris, on 26 March, de Staël attended the France-Sweden football match at the Parc des Princes stadium. The masterful painting it inspired was exhibited at the Salon de Mai and caused a sensation. May it be read as a slight anomaly in a year largely devoted to landscape? Or rather could it be seen as a deepening, as if his Parisian landscapes found their monumental destiny here?



Nicolas de Staël
Landscape
1952
Oil on cardboard
11 x 13 in
Private collection / Courtesy Applicat-Prazan, Paris
© ADAGP, Paris, 2023
Courtesy Applicat-Prazan, Paris

The spectacle of the world (1952-1953)

Nicolas de Staël's love of the landscape continued in a fascination for everything that constituted the spectacle of the world. Between a concert, ballet, and football match, there was no hierarchy, but instead a myriad of opportunities to confront life as a game of coloured, moving materials. De Staël, a passionate spectator who drew even in the darkness of cinema theatres, was an insatiable recipient of new visual, tactile, and auditory sensations. Already in 1951, he declared: "The individual that I am is made up of all the impressions received from the outside world since and before my birth [...]. Things are constantly communicating with artists as they paint, that's all I know." From his ultra-sensitive perspective, a park would take on the appearance of a theatre set, while bottles danced a ballet.

In March 1953, de Staël was in New York preparing his exhibition at the Knoedler Gallery. The exhibition was a resounding success, both critically and commercially. Upon his return, the painter completed three monumental compositions, two of which are shown in the exhibition. In June, de Staël signed a contract with the influential gallery owner Paul Rosenberg, who encouraged him to produce more to meet the demand of American collectors.



Nicolas de Staël
Parc des Princes Stadium
1952
Oil on canvas
78 3/4 x 137 3/4 in
Private collection
© Adagp, Paris, 2023 / Photo Christie's

The studio in the South (1953)

"All departures are wonderful for work," wrote de Staël in May 1953. On René Char's advice, that summer, the painter and his family settled in Lagnes, a village close to Avignon. This stay in Provence generated two upheavals: first, that of the dazzling light, and second, that of the meeting with a young woman, Jeanne Polge. To describe this dual case of love at first sight, the painter wrote to Char, who had introduced him to both this woman and the landscape: "What a girl, the earth trembles with emotion, what a unique cadence in the sovereign order. Up there in the cabin, every movement of stone, every blade of grass waver[s] [...] at her step. What a place, what a girl." A passionate relationship was forged from the autumn onwards.

The painter, whose palette became as dazzling as the Provençal light, painted increasing numbers of studio themes: a portrait of his daughter Anne, “nudes in the clouds”, and still lifes. The carnal intensity of the sensations experienced by de Staël infused everything, even the texture of a pink tablecloth draped over a table.



Nicolas de Staël
Seated Woman
1953
Oil on canvas
44 7/8 x 63 3/4 in
Private collection
© Adagp, Paris, 2023
© Photo Jean-Louis Losi

Light (1953)

The painter, like so many others before him, was subjugated by the South and its light: to him, Provence was a “paradise, quite simply, with limitless horizons.” He dreamed of transforming his time in Provence into something more permanent, and in November 1953, he bought an austere and dilapidated residence in Ménerbes: Le Castelet.

In Provence, the painter put his art back into play while reconnecting with the small format and the joys of painting outdoors—what he referred to as his “walking landscapes.” The paintings from the South of France demanded a reinvention: the dazzling light implied a new look, and therefore a new way of doing things. As close as possible to the world, de Staël painted the aligned silhouettes of cypresses, ploughed fields, the facade of a house, the dazzling sun above the horizon. Sculpted by the wind, his *Arbre rouge* became a luminous explosion. De Staël tried cautiously to feel his way forward, as a painter for whom work was the only possible recourse: “I am in a constant fog, not knowing where to go, what to do [...], eating these landscapes all day long to the point of nausea, yet moved in spite of everything every time.”



Nicolas de Staël
Red Tree
1953
Oil on canvas
18 1/8 x 24 in
Private collection
© ADAGP, Paris, 2023 / Photo Christie's

Sicily (1953-1954)

In August 1953, Nicolas de Staël, who had bought a van, brought his family on a trip to Italy, heading for Sicily. With him, was his wife Françoise, pregnant with Gustave, his children, Anne, Laurence, and Jérôme, but also Jeanne Polge and Ciska Grillet, a friend of René Char.

In Sicily, he drew the ancient ruins of Agrigento and Syracuse with a felt pen: "Apart from swimming in every sea, I do nothing, except for a few sketches," he wrote at that time. Painting would come later, as a delayed echo of this lived experience. In 1951, already, he had claimed: "One never paints what one sees or thinks one sees, one paints following a thousand vibrations, the blow received." It was therefore in Provence, where he returned alone, after Italy, that de Staël executed his Sicilian paintings.

To Jacques Dubourg, his Parisian dealer, he confided: "As atrocious as solitude is, I will keep it because I [must] *take a distance* that I no longer have in Paris today and which I want for tomorrow." The landscapes of Agrigento and Syracuse were the result of this distancing. A radicalization of the palette and contrasts, and a construction reduced to the elementary were the other markers of this newly invented landscape by de Staël.



Nicolas de Staël
Sicily
1954
Oil on canvas
44 7/8 x 57 1/2 in
Musée de Grenoble
© ADAGP, Paris, 2023
© Ville de Grenoble / Musée de Grenoble / photo J.-L. Lacroix

On the road (1954)

The year 1954 was one of constant travel: always in search of new sensations, de Staël moved ceaselessly. While he had just settled in Ménerbes, his daily life was punctuated by various incursions to Uzès, Marseille, and even Martigues, on the banks of the Etang de Berre (lagoon). These various and frequent detours generated plenty of drawings and paintings. He also returned to the rue Gauguet: "I started working in the South," he wrote, "but I come to my Parisian studio regularly, it offers a change of light and renews my conception of things a little." He also enjoyed drawing on the banks of the Seine, and painting Parisian landscapes. He spent some time at the North Sea, drawing outdoors before painting several works that evoked the lighthouse at Gravelines and the beach at Calais.

De Staël worked “more than ever”: the exhibition at Paul Rosenberg’s gallery in New York in February 1954 was a success, and the artist continued to prepare for a new Parisian exhibition at the Galerie Jacques Dubourg in June, his first in three years. In this urgency, his painting became lighter, renouncing thickness in favour of fluidity. In his drawings, numerous with his constant travels, the artist veered towards purity, always giving increasing importance, and presence, to the white of the paper.



Nicolas de Staël
Marseille
1954
Oil on canvas
31 3/4 x 23 5/8 in
Courtesy Catherine et Nicolas Kairis / Courtesy Applicat-Prazan, Paris
© ADAGP, Paris, 2023
Courtesy Applicat-Prazan, Paris

Antibes (1954-1955)

In September 1954, to be closer to Jeanne Polge, Nicolas de Staël moved into a house on the ramparts of Antibes, facing the sea. He lived there alone. Life was organized around his studio and this passionate, overwhelming affair. While Jeanne gradually distanced herself, de Staël worked relentlessly: "The paintings come quickly," he wrote, "I will have to give them everything I have, the rest is odious to me now."

Seeking fluidity and transparency, the painter used cotton and gauze pads to spread colour. Seascapes and still lifes followed one another, de Staël alternately painted the boats sailing on the Mediterranean and the objects in the studio. His paintings were full of life: its ordinariness, intimacy, and immensity. If the man was desperate for an impossible love, the artist remained, in his work, intact despite everything. The paintings from Antibes bear witness to his ongoing sense of wonder at the world.

On 16 March 1955, de Staël killed himself by jumping from the roof terrace of his studio, leaving behind many paintings in progress. In the letter addressed to his art dealer, Jacques Dubourg, he wrote: "I do not have the strength to complete my paintings."



Nicolas de Staël
Seascape at Night
1954
Oil on canvas
35 x 51 1/8 in
Private collection
© ADAGP, Paris, 2023
© Photo Thomas Hennocque

Sponsors

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For five years, ING commits, thanks to different mechanisms such as yearly patronage, toward an exhibition dedicated to an artist part of the french cultural legacy. This year, ING France is proud to support the first retrospective, for twenty years, in France, on Nicolas de Staël's art, at the Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris. ING France is proud to contribute to the rediscovery of Nicolas de Staël's pieces by its clients and the general public.



Linklaters

About Linklaters

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Present in Paris since 1973, Linklaters has been involved for 50 years in the major phases of French economic history by assisting its clients with their complex transactions in all their financial, corporate or litigation aspects at national, European and global level.

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Perella Weinberg Partners

Access to arts and cultural heritage is an essential condition behind part of any society and key for reading and understanding the world we live in. This is why Perella Weinberg Partners is happy to renew its partnership with Paris Musées for the third successive year.

The retrospective on Nicolas de Staël in the Musée d'art moderne de Paris, is the first in France for 20 years. It is the opportunity to meet a tremendous artist and rediscover his work, through a valuable selection of pieces never or hardly shown to the public.

Founded in 2006, simultaneously in London and New York, Perella Weinberg Partners opened its Parisian offices in 2018. The bank distinguishes itself with a unique, developed model of independence. The bank offers to its clients financial advice based on interpersonal relationship between the advisor and his clients. Partners and associates work to cultivate close and durable relationships with the management team of the company they advise and support during all development phases.

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Visitor information

MUSÉE D'ART MODERNE DE PARIS

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11, avenue du Président Wilson, 75116 Paris

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www.mam.paris.fr

Public transport

- Metro : Alma-Marceau ou Léna (ligne 9)
- Bus : 32/42/63/72/80/
- Vélib's bike station : 4 rue de Longchamp ; 4 avenue Marceau ; place de la reine Astrid ; 45 avenue Marceau or 3 avenue Bosquet
- Bike : Bicycle parking spaces are available in front of the museum entrance.
- RER C : Pont de l'Alma (ligne C)

Opening hours

- Tuesday-Sunday, 10am - 6pm (last entry 5:15pm)
- Closed on Monday and on some public holidays
- Open late: Thursday until 9.30pm and Saturday until 8pm

Admission

Full rate: 15 €

Reduced rate: 13 €

Free for visitors under 18

Combined ticket with Dana Schutz exhibition full price: 17 €

Combined ticket with Dana Schutz exhibition reduced rate : 15 €

The exhibition is accessible to people with motor disabilities and reduce mobility.

No-queue tickets: www.mam.paris.fr

International press

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Paris Musées

THE NETWORK OF MUSEUMS OF THE CITY OF PARIS

United since 2013 under the Paris Musées banner, the City of Paris museums and heritage sites are home to collections as remarkable for their diversity as for their quality. In a gesture of outreach visitor services have been upgraded, more attractive entrance fees introduced for temporary exhibitions, and special provision made for visitors unfamiliar with this kind of cultural context.

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