

Jean Hélion

The Prose of the World

22 March - 18 August 2024



The Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris is presenting a retrospective of the painter and intellectual Jean Hélion (1904–1987), whose oeuvre spans the whole of the 20th century. Hélion was one of the pioneers of abstraction, which he brought to America in the 1930s before moving on to a personal form of figuration just prior to the Second World War.

He returned to France after the War and was hailed in the 1960s by the new generation of Narrative Figuration painters, among them Gilles Aillaud and Eduardo Arroyo. His career was marked by numerous exhibitions in French and international galleries and museums, including MAM in 1977 and 1984–85, with the most recent retrospective held at the Centre Pompidou in 2004. Despite its sweep and its singularity, his oeuvre remains little known.

Chronologically presented, The Prose of the World brings together over 150 rarely shown works – 103 paintings, 50 drawings, notebooks and a mass of documentary material – from major French and international museums and many private collections.

Born in Normandy in 1904, Hélion initially opted for architectural studies in Paris. After a brief spell as a painter in Montmartre in 1929, he joined Théo van Doesburg and Piet Mondrian in a move towards geometric abstraction. A member of the Art Concret group, he also helped found the Abstraction-Création collective, home to the leading abstractionists of the interwar period. A friend of Calder, Arp and Giacometti, he was also close to Max Ernst, Marcel Duchamp and Victor Brauner.

In 1929 he began his series of Notebooks, reflections on painting that he kept up until 1984. He was also close to the writers of his time: Francis Ponge, Raymond Queneau, René Char, André du Bouchet and others, who remained part of his artistic vocation.

In 1934 Hélion moved to the United States, where he became friends with Duchamp and one of the country's foremost abstractionists. A leading figure on the American art scene, he also served as an advisor to America's most eminent collectors.

PRESS RELEASE

Museum Director

Fabrice Hergott

Curators

Sophie Krebs

Guest curator

Henry-Claude Cousseau

assisted by Adélaïde Lacotte

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Jean Hélion
L'homme à la joue rouge/
Man with Red Cheek
1943
Oil on canvas 65 x 49.5 cm
Claudine Hélion–Altmann, Paris
© ADAGP, Paris, 2024

Visitor information

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

Open Tuesday–Sunday 10 am–6 pm

Late closing Thursday 9:30 pm

Ticketing

Admission: 15 € Concessions: 13 €

Cultural activities

Information and bookings Tel. 01 53 67 40 80

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Even so, in the mid-1930s the growing liveliness of his forms presaged a return to the human figure. And in 1939, just when abstraction was beginning to dominate the international scene, his intuition led him increasingly towards figuration and "the real".

Alerted to the fragility of things by the outbreak of the Second World War, he set about applying his abstract language to a reconstruction of the image, the result being everyday street scenes stripped of all sentimentality.

Calling a temporary halt to his career as a painter, Hélion joined the French army, but was taken prisoner in 1940. Initially published in 1943, They Shall Not Have Me, his account of his escape, was recently translated into French and became a best seller.

Back in France in 1946 and married to Pegeen Vail, Peggy Guggenheim's daughter, he struggled to find his place on the Paris scene, but came up with a new form of figuration via a range of styles and subjects: the nude (*Nu renversé*, 1946), the landscape (*Le Grand Brabant*, 1957), the still life (*Nature morte à la citrouille*, 1946 and *Citrouillerie*, 1952), allegory (*À rebours*,1947, *Jugement dernier des choses*, 1978–79), history painting (*Choses vues en mai*, 1969) and studio views (L'atelier, 1953 recently acquired by MAM with the aid of the Amis du Musée d'Art Moderne and the Fonds du Patrimoine). Paris, street life and minglings of dream elements proved an inexhaustible source for his "prose of the world".

Late in life, with his sight failing, his work became a deliberate miscellany of the motifs that had always haunted him. His painting oscillated between derision and gravity (*Le Peintre piétiné par son modèle*, 1983) and between dreams and joyful dazzlement.

The exhibition catalogue has been edited by the curators, SophieKrebs and Henry Claude Cousseau, with a preface by Fabrice Hergott and contributions by Vincent Broqua, Pierre Brullé,Éric de Chassey,Céline Chicha-Castex, Oliver Koerner Von Gustorf, Brigitte Léal,Guitemie Maldonado, François-RenéMartin and Emmanuel Pernoud.

The exhibition has been created with the backing of the Jean Hélion Association, the Bibliothèque Nationale de France and IMEC.





