

# The enduring significance of the work of Max Ernst

Max Ernst, an exhibition at the Georges Pompidou Centre Paris, and a selection of his writings compiled in *Max Ernst: Beyond Painting*, Wittenborn, Schultz, 1948.

By Stuart Nolan  
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A recent exhibition of the works of Max Ernst at the Pompidou Centre in Paris provided valuable insight into the artist's life and works.

Ernst (1891-1976) remains a potent and influential figure in the visual arts in the twentieth century. The exhibition provided an opportunity to examine some of the themes in his work. What characterises Ernst's art, above all, are abrupt changes of direction and a rigorously self-critical attitude. Through a constant reworking of his imagery and technique he expresses the desire to visualise the tumultuous events through which he lived during the first half of this century.

The first of Ernst's works on display were his collage paintings, of which "Two Children are threatened by a Nightingale" seems the most complex. This was followed by a room devoted to his series of wall paintings recovered from the house of surrealist poet Paul Eluard, in the Eaubonne district of Paris. They were produced in 1923, after their joint poetical work, "Les Malheurs Des Immortals," (The Misfortunes of the Immortals), and included "The Birds Cannot Disappear", "At the First Clear Word" and "Friendly Advice".

The exhibition also included many of Ernst's frottage and grattage works, begun in 1925. Frottage involved placing paper over a surface and rubbing it with black lead; in grattage he applied layers of paint, the darkest last, and scraped it away to reveal the lighter paint. He would apply countless layers of dark colours, then, to create the exceptional light in his paintings, he would scratch away the paint revealing the brilliant white of the canvas beneath. Rembrandt used a similar technique.

Ernst developed these techniques in his visionary works, "Forests", "Cities", "Entire Cities" and his "Monument to the Birds". He sought to express his intense feelings about world events through his art. He captured the psychological dimensions of this period in images as intense and unforgettable as disturbing dream sequences. But his works were far from painted dreams. Of one of the paintings in the exhibition, "Fireside Angel", Ernst wrote: "One painting I did after the defeat of the Republicans in Spain was 'Fireside Angel'. Now this was naturally an ironic title for a sort of ungainly beast that tramples down and destroys everything in its path. It was the impression I had at the time of what was likely to happen in the world, and I was right."

The series of visionary paintings, known as "Europe after the Rain", was produced between 1933-42. In them Ernst sought to make his thoughts visible. He used his own version of the technique of Declomania, developed by fellow surrealist painter Dominguez. This involved applying paper or glass to a painted surface and pulling it away. Other surrealists would leave the spontaneous result untouched. Ernst advanced the

technique, and revealed hidden mutations of human and animal forms, jungles, cities and forests.

The first picture in the "Europe after the Rain" series consists of a pilot's view of a wide land- and seascape from high in the stratosphere. The landscape is covered by gathering storm clouds--a visual incarnation of the impending war, after the rise to power of Hitler in Germany.

Ernst was a soldier in the First World War and had supported the Russian Revolution. He opposed the rise of fascism and protested against Stalin's Moscow Trials. He was chased from France with the Gestapo at his heels, after being interned in France as a German national. All these experiences were translated into paintings reflecting the artist's sense that civilisation had received a near fatal blow from Stalinism and fascism.

The final version of the "Europe after the Rain" was created in 1942. It is unparalleled in its artistic portrayal of the most devastating attack on human culture in history. It is Ernst's vision of the near destruction of an ancient civilisation. Out of the terrifying landscape, life forms begin to emerge from rock and vegetation observing what has been done, or sit with numbed expression, unable to comprehend the new environment. These landscapes throughout the 1930s and 1940s came to represent his feelings on the fate of human progress. Ernst produced other paintings using the same technique that are among his most magnificent and disturbing. These are "The Robbing of the Bride", "Napoleon in the Wilderness", "The Antipope," and "The Stolen Mirror,"

## Ernst and Breton on creativity

As well as a painter, Ernst sculpted and had a talent for poetry. In his autobiographical diary "Tissue of Truth, Tissue of Lies", written in the third person, Ernst meticulously examined his own creativity. He reworked his diary until his death, seeking to extend consciousness into the regions of inspiration. He once described his work as an attempt to conquer the last great myth of civilisation, the myth surrounding the creative process.

He shared this aim with Andre Breton, the ideological leader of surrealism. Breton called on artists to expend all their efforts in the study of what he believed to be the most complex mechanism of all, artistic inspiration. He said, "From the moment they cease thinking of it [inspiration] as something sacred, surrealism demands that, however confident they are of its extraordinary virtue, they dream only of making it shed its final ties, or even--something no one had ever dared conceive of--making it submit to them" ( The Second Manifesto of Surrealism, 1929, in *Art in Theory, 1900 - 1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*.

Blackwell, 1992).

In his artistic works, Ernst attempts to uncover the mysteries of the creative process within himself. Yet there were objective problems that neither Ernst nor Breton could resolve. First, Freud's analysis of the unconscious only "lifted the lid," as Trotsky said, on this relatively unknown universe. The science of the mind was in its exploratory stage. The tendency of the surrealists to uncritically adopt all of Freud's conclusions contributed to distorting their own work.

### **Ernst's influence on Breton and the discovery of his collage**

Ernst's collaboration with Andre Breton was once described by fellow surrealist painter Roberto Matta, as an "Odyssey" through the creative process and an "Iliad" of the mind. Despite the documented tensions between Breton and Ernst, it was one of the most intriguing artistic unions of this century. In the course of examining certain aspects of this journey a number of themes emerged. In this regard I came across a valuable book of Ernst's writings, published in 1948, entitled *Max Ernst: Beyond Painting*.

In the article "The Placing Under Whisky Marine", written to accompany his first Paris exhibition, Ernst explains the origin of the peculiar form of collage he created after the First World War. This ancient technique was reinvented by the Cubists, under modern social impulses, but its use was restricted. Ernst begins with an explanation of how his exploration of collage differed from other artists in the Dada movement that had erupted during the First World War and in which he played a leading role in Cologne. Rather than juxtaposing images merely to shock, he sought to bring together disparate images to create a new poetical manifestation.

Ernst once explained the Dada phenomena: "We young people came back from the war dazed and our disgust simply had to find an outlet. This quite naturally took the form of attacks on the foundations of the civilisation that had brought this war about--attacks on language, syntax, logic, literature, painting and so forth" ( *Max Ernst: A Retrospective*, 1991: Prestel).

A brewing artistic conflict within German Dada, between the Berlin and Cologne groups, had led to a near break in relations. Although general support for Marxist politics was common to both, Ernst expressed differences with the directly political use of collage by the Berlin Dadaists. He was concerned more with its broader implications for artistic expression.

Ernst explains the process of discovery of his collage: "One rainy day in 1919, finding myself in a village on the Rhine, I was struck by the obsession which held under my gaze the pages of an illustrated catalogue showing objects designed for anthropologic, microscopic, psychologic, mineralogic, and palaeontologic demonstration.

"These visions called themselves new planes, because of a meeting in a new unknown (the plane of non-agreement). It was enough at that time to embellish these catalogue pages, in painting or drawing, and thereby in gently reproducing only that which saw itself in me, a colour, a pencil mark, a landscape foreign to the represented objects, the desert, a tempest, a geological cross-section, a floor, a single straight line signifying the horizon ... thus I obtained a faithful fixed image of my hallucination and transformed into revealing dramas my most secret desires--from what had been before only some banal pages of advertising" ( *Max Ernst: Beyond Painting*, Wittenborn, Schultz, 1948).

The works produced during this period were different from other experiments in collage. He would take pictures from turn-of-the-century catalogues, with etchings of traditional and entirely mundane images. He would then, using scissors, separate these scenes and objects so that they were no longer recognisable as part of their original environment. These disparate elements were then rearranged in a new order that was just as "real" as the former one. The result creates a disturbance of a wide array

of traditionally held concepts of reality. Initially it throws the senses into confusion, but then exerts a peculiar attraction.

Breton, at this time, was slowly becoming disillusioned with the unfocused and pessimistic anarchy of Dadaism. These first collages by Ernst had a profound impact on his artistic notions. In May 1921 he organised an exhibition of Ernst's first collages. Breton had written to Cologne Dada because something in their work attracted his attention. He explained the impact Ernst's collages made in Paris:

"I remember very well the occasion when Tzara, Aragon, Soupault and I first discovered the collages of Max Ernst. We were all in Picabia's house when they arrived from Cologne. They moved us in a way we never experienced again. The external object was dislodged from its usual setting. Its separate parts were liberated from their relationship as objects so that they could enter totally new combinations with other elements.

"But the marvellous faculty of reaching two distant realities, without leaving the field of our experience, and, at their coming together, of drawing out a spark; of putting within reach of our senses some abstract figures carrying the same intensity, the same relief as the others; and in depriving ourselves of a system of references, of displacing ourselves in our own memory--that is what, provisionally holds us" ( *Preface to the Max Ernst Exhibition*, May 1920) .

This was Ernst's first Paris exhibition. He was unable to attend because he was denied a visa to visit Paris by the British forces occupying Germany as part of the Versailles Treaty. Ernst was involved in producing the magazine, *The Ventilator*, with communist and close friend Johannes Baargeld and artist Hans Arp. At its height the magazine had a circulation of 20,000 amongst intellectuals and factory workers in Cologne. It was closed down by British troops. Along with other important events, the Paris exhibition helped strengthen the artistic tendency reacting against the limitations of Dada.

Many of the artists had terrible experiences in the First World War. Ernst himself served as a gunner in the German army from 1914-17. He once wrote of his experiences, saying that he died in 1914 and came back to life in 1918. Breton tried to show the potential "regenerative" qualities of Ernst's collages. Ernst's work was a vital ingredient in the transition from the negative anarchism of Dada to the positive examination of the nature of man by the surrealists.

### **"Two Children Threatened by a Nightingale", 1924**

Between 1921 and 1924 Ernst developed his collage technique in the direction of collage painting. In this context it is valuable to consider one of the most challenging paintings at the Pompidou exhibition, "Two Children Threatened by a Nightingale"--valuable because in his more personal works the complex sinews of Ernst's creative process are more visible. Painted in 1924, it was the culmination of a period of Ernst's work. He regarded this technique as his greatest contribution to surrealism. His aim was to transform painting into more than a visual experience. He wanted to reveal psychic tension, psychological drama, a disturbance of perception, the complex journey of childhood memories into maturity and the manner in which life shapes and changes these processes.

Ernst's diaries present some of the images that appear in the painting. Writing in the third person, he explains the first appearance of the nightingale that descends into the painting, "First contact with hallucination. Measles. Fear of death and the annihilating powers. A fever-vision provoked by an imitation mahogany pane opposite his head, the grooves of the wood taking successfully the aspect of an eye, a nose, a bird's head, a menacing nightingale, a spinning top, and so on. Certainly little Max took pleasure in being afraid of these visions, and later delivered himself voluntarily to provoke hallucinations of the same kind in looking obstinately at wood panels, clouds, wallpapers, unplastered walls, and so on."

This is a comment that probes deeply into the mind of the artist. The nightingale is how death first manifested itself to the young Ernst. In the painting the nightingale descends into a scene. The bird appears to be small and insignificant, but it seems to send the figures in the work into a crisis. A child lies on the floor motionless; a distraught woman is running from the child with a knife in her hand, but there is no blood! She looks up nervously at the descending nightingale. A figure in a suit and tie carries away a young girl. Disconcertingly the man has no facial features. He is fleeing the scene and is on top of a small house. The child offers no resistance. Is it a rescue or kidnapping? This male figure reaches for a handle that is both attached to the painting and the surrounding frame. This is no ordinary doorknob. The handle initially leads out of the painting. But the doorknob is neither in the painting nor the picture. It is fastened to both frame and painting. It cannot logically be opened in either direction. Is it transformed from a door handle into an indefinable desire?

Ernst recalls in his diaries when he was six years old, experiencing the death of his younger sister. Again writing in the third person, he states, "(1897) First contact with nothingness, when his sister Maria kissed him and her sisters goodbye and died a few hours afterwards. Since this event, the feeling of nothingness and annihilating powers were predominant in his mind, in his behaviour and--later--in his work." The memory of this inconsolable and confused "nothingness" is one of the elements that constitute the oxygen of the painting. Ernst said of this work that it was the final logical outcome of the collage "for the time being".

#### **Automatic writing and automatic painting**

In 1925 Ernst, together with Andre Masson and others, began the search for the visual equivalent of "automatic writing". This came after a series of comments by surrealist poets to the effect that surrealist painting did not and could not exist. In April 1925 Pierre Naville, one of the editors of *La Révolution Surréaliste* and later a significant figure in the French Trotskyist movement, wrote, "Everybody now knows that there is no surrealist painting. Neither the pencil lines drawn by chance movements, nor the pictures reproducing dream images, nor imaginative fancies, can of course be so described." These comments were aimed at what were thought of as attempts to too literally transpose the technique of automatic writing into painting.

Disagreeing with Naville's views, Ernst wrote, "Thanks to studying enthusiastically the mechanism of inspiration, the surrealists have succeeded in discovering certain essentially poetic processes whereby the plastic work's elaboration can be freed from the sway of the so-called conscious faculties. Amounting to a bewitching of either reason, taste, or the will, these processes result in the surrealist definition being rigorously applied to drawing, painting, and even to some extent photography."

He continues, "In striving more and more to restrain my own active participation in the unfolding of the picture and, finally, by widening in this way the active part of the mind's hallucinatory faculties, I came to exist as spectator at the birth of all my works."

Ernst deepened his study of technique and its importance in the creative process, in an attempt to expose the myth of the creative genius, just as the surrealists attacked religious and political myths. But, while trying to explain the genesis of his creativity and the relationship between his technique and his thought processes, Ernst erected a new myth of the artist as a dispassionate "spectator", "excluding all conscious mental guidance, reducing to the extreme the active part of that one whom we have called, up-to now, the 'author' of the work, this procedure is revealed, by the following, to be the real equivalent of that which is already known by the term automatic writing. It is as a spectator that the author assists, indifferent or passionate, at the birth of his work and watches the phases of its development."

In the second surrealist manifesto, written in 1929, Breton described the

creative process as "the most complex mechanism of all". And in that process, the artist is neither a spectator, magician nor a spiritualist. Disdain for the "so-called conscious faculties" and the introduction of such mystical notions as "bewitching of either reason taste or will" has nothing in common with the work of Freud in which the surrealists sought inspiration and justification. Trotsky was far more critical of Freud's hypotheses than the surrealists, but he stressed that what was positive in his work was that it was rooted in a materialist approach to the understanding of the mind. Freud's aim was not to glorify the "unconscious", but to rigorously apply and extend consciousness to a region that was hitherto associated with the gods, demons and devils, and bring it under the control of reason.

#### **Surrealism and the Renaissance**

Despite Ernst's tendency to view the images he produced as unspoiled creations of his individual unconscious, his work clearly bears the imprint as well of external events of often historic magnitude--mediated through the conscious application of technique. An examination of Ernst's rediscovery of frottage and its impact on the further development of surrealism illustrates this.

The thoughts and concerns of artists of the sixteenth century Renaissance permeate Ernst's book *Max Ernst: Beyond Painting*; a particular influence is Leonardo da Vinci and his *Treatise on Painting*. This is surprising because the surrealist's public stance included a fairly firm rejection of bourgeois rationalist traditions.

In entries dated, "10th August 1925," Ernst describes an artistic conflict involving da Vinci and the painter Sandro Botticelli, over the relationship between inspiration and artistic technique.

Ernst recalls that Botticelli held a dismissive attitude toward landscape painting. He termed it a "kind of short and mediocre investigation". To illustrate this he continued, "by throwing a sponge soaked with different colours against a wall one makes a spot in which may be seen a beautiful landscape."

Da Vinci responded with an explanation of the interconnection between inspiration and technique; "He [Botticelli] is right; in such a daub one may certainly find bizarre inventions. I mean to say that he who is disposed to gaze attentively at this spot may discern therein some human heads, various animals, a battle, some rocks, the sea, clouds, groves, and a thousand other things--it is like the tinkling of the bell which makes one hear what one imagines."

He continues, "But though this stain serves to suggest some ideas it does not teach one how to finish any part of the painting. And the above mentioned painter makes very bad landscapes. To be universal and to please varying tastes it is necessary that in the same composition may be found some very dark passages and others of a gently lighted penumbra. It is not to be despised, in my opinion, if, after gazing fixedly at the spot on the wall, the coals in the grate, the clouds, the flowing stream, if one remembers some of their aspects; and if you look at them carefully you will discover some quite admirable inventions."

"Of these the genius of the painter may take full advantage, to compose battles of animals and of men, of landscapes or monsters, of devils and other fantastic things which bring you honour. In these confused things genius becomes aware of invention, but it is necessary to know well [how to draw] all the parts that one ignores, such as the parts of animals and the aspects of landscape, rocks and vegetation" (*Treatise on Painting*, Leonardo da Vinci).

Art historians have considered da Vinci's use of this "spontaneous" technique in the dream-like landscapes that form the background to some of his most enigmatic works. A study of the "Mona Lisa" has been made in this regard. With this problem in mind, Ernst considered how it was to be resolved in his own work. He recalls an experience of his own in the rediscovery of the ancient method of frottage (rubbing) in 1925. A form

of frottage was used in ancient Greece, where rice paper would be placed over wall paintings and the rubbings would form a negative of the picture. Ernst explains how he used this technique:

"Beginning with a memory of childhood in the course of which a panel of false mahogany, situated in front of my bed, had played the role of optical provocateur of a vision of half sleep, and finding myself one rainy evening in a seaside inn, I was struck by the obsession that showed to my excited gaze the floor-boards upon which a thousand scrubblings had deepened the grooves."

"I decided then to investigate the symbolism of this obsession and, in order to aid my meditative and hallucinatory faculties, I made from the boards a series of drawings by placing on them, at random, sheets of paper which I undertook to rub with black lead. In gazing attentively at the drawings thus obtained, 'the dark passages and those of a gently lighted penumbra', I was surprised by the sudden intensification of my visionary capacities and by the hallucinatory succession of contradictory images superimposed, one upon the other, with the persistence and rapidity characteristic of amorous memories" ( Max Ernst: Beyond Painting, 1948).

Ernst published these works, entitled "Natural History," in Paris in 1926. Images would be pulled out into the open not through "hallucination", but as a result of desire, of a conscious recognition of the possibilities of the new technique. Under the impulse of new conditions and developments in all the sciences, which always influenced Ernst, he re-examined long-standing problems of artistic cognition.

Ernst cites Breton, on the broad impact of the ideas of the Renaissance on the further development of surrealism.

"Leonardo's lesson, setting his students to copy, in their pictures, that which they saw taking shape in the spots on an old wall (each according to his own lights) is far from being understood. The whole passage from subjectivity to objectivity is implicitly resolved there, and the weight of that resolution goes far beyond, in human interest, the weight of inspiration itself. Surrealism has been most particularly concerned with that part of the lesson. Surrealism did not start from there, but rediscovered it on the way, and with it, its possibilities of extension to all other domains besides painting" (Breton's Star Shaped Castle).

Breton's comment on the importance of studying perception and reality is an area that requires a more serious and long-term study. Breton is, however, probing one of the significant threads that connect the infinite tapestry of creativity throughout human history.

### **Ernst's concept of artistic independence**

What was it that enabled Ernst to maintain his independence and freedom of creativity? For it was these qualities that retained the lifelong respect of Breton. In his main essay "Inspiration to Order" Ernst opens with an image that testifies to the dominant element in his creativity. He says, "Enter, enter, have no fear of being blinded."

Breton always retained a respect for what he described as Ernst's "profound humanity." In two essays, written in 1920 and 1927, Breton sought to explain this. He wrote, "[Ernst] projects before our eyes the most captivating film in the world and retains the grace to smile even while illuminating our interior life most profoundly and most radiantly, we do not hesitate to see in Max Ernst a man of these infinite possibilities" ( Max Ernst: Beyond Painting).

When Breton examined the significance of Ernst's collage, he considered the nature of the artist's attitude to past culture: "Max Ernst seems to have inherited the sense of culture as something extraordinary, captivating, paradoxical and priceless." In the same article Breton points to the general conceptions that influenced the freedom in his creativity. He comments that here "perhaps resides for Max Ernst the possibility of living, of living free, and this is the root of his profound humanity." These are very strong words by Breton.

Ernst's description of one of his frottage paintings, 'The Hundred Thousand Doves', provides a beautiful verbal and visual sensation of his feelings about freedom: "In a country the colour of a pigeon's breast I acclaimed the flight of 1,000,000 doves. I saw them invade the forests, black with desire, and the walls and seas without end. I saw an ivy leaf float upon the ocean and I felt a very gentle earthquake. I saw a pale, white dove, flower of the desert. She refused to understand" ( Max Ernst: Beyond Painting, 1948).

He reacted with hostility to anything that compromised his sense of independence in his art. It was because of this that Breton and Ernst retained a respect for one another, which lasted all their lives. Many of Ernst's artistic conceptions were a product of his close collaboration with Breton. Ernst took every opportunity in his own writings to acknowledge this.

Ernst explained his vision of the possibilities that surrealist concepts opened up for the future of human creativity. In a remarkable passage written in 1934, after the victory of Hitler in Germany, when he was deeply affected by the emergence of both Stalinism and fascism, he defined his attitude to art. "Every normal human being (and not merely the 'artist') has an inexhaustible store of buried images in his subconscious, it is merely a matter of courage or liberating procedures ... of voyages into the unconscious, to bring pure and unadulterated found objects to light."

This expresses Ernst's confidence that artistic creation is open to the whole of humanity. It was an important point in his development. Although it was under the influence of the surrealist movement that he drew such clear conclusions, Ernst had considered similar ideas throughout his life--his study of art and human society at Cologne University, his study of the most progressive ideas on the unconscious mind, his shattering experiences in the First World War, his refusal to tie himself to restrictive artistic schools. It is this attitude that permeates his work and goes some way towards explaining his influence upon other artists and artistic movements.

### **Ernst's influence on abstract art**

An example of Ernst's influence on abstract art appears in the preface to the Max Ernst: Beyond Painting, written by the American artist, Robert Motherwell. In it, Motherwell, one of the founders of the American abstract expressionist school, examines his own fascination with the questions posed to artists by the life and work of Max Ernst. He makes some interesting observations about Ernst and the nature of abstract art:

"The struggle of most modern painters takes place in their studios. Their structural devices are plastic means for reproducing dramas that happen within the self. Their assault on society is by indirection, through contrasting the subjectively real with the conventional. In contrast, Max Ernst is among the few consequential modern painters whose concern is directly with the external world, with the world of social events and institutions--the church, political repression, erotic enslavement. His work is filled with ironies and cruelties, sarcasms and satires" ( Max Ernst: Beyond Painting).

Motherwell comments on the influence Ernst had on American artists. He was exiled in New York 1941, having been chased across Europe by the Gestapo. Before he escaped from the southern French port of Marseilles, he met with Andre Breton. They resolved differences that had resulted in Ernst and fellow artist Man Ray leaving the surrealist movement in 1938. Ernst had been interned in France and on his arrival in America was initially restricted to New York City.

While there, Ernst held an exhibition at the Wakefield bookshop. A group of young American artists were in attendance. He was displaying a new technique to them, which he described as "child's play". It consisted of a canister on a string with a whole punctured in the bottom. Paint was then poured in and it was set in motion above a canvas. One of the young

artists was Jackson Pollock; Pollock transformed this technique into his "drip" paintings. Pollock's fascination with this technique later inspired Ernst to produce "Young Man Intrigued by the Flight of a Non-Euclidean Fly". The painting was initially called, "Abstract Art, Concrete Art". This unusual title anticipated a conflict that would emerge after the war between different artistic schools.

In his preface, Motherwell touches on what he believed was the essential difference between surrealist and abstract art. He sees Ernst as a commentator on political events as they unfold. But Ernst, in his discussion of his collage technique, makes it clear that this use of art for direct political ends was alien to his entire life, his artistic concepts and his ideas on liberty.

Motherwell assesses the dynamics of Ernst's life and work and shows how they are inseparable from one another: "I for one am not in the least disturbed by the fact that modes of expression that mean much to me ... minimisation of the role of objects, tactility, flatness, abstract plasticity ... are ignored or even undermined by Ernst's painting. His subject matter is contemporary history, for him man is essentially a historical creature; Ernst has to employ images, objects, paraphernalia of the external world; he warns, criticises, jeers, prophesies, lays bare suppressed fantasies. His vision is that 'nothing is in order', that the order out there has nothing to do with a truly human order, that we are victims of history" ( Max Ernst: Beyond Painting, preface).

Even though he understands this, Ernst refuses to retreat into incomprehensibility. He does not turn from expressing this disorder, or attempt to resolve this conflict by harmonising his own art. This would signify a retreat from complex relations between his art and social life, a retreat from the tension that drove his work.

Motherwell finishes his preface by explaining his peculiar interest in the universe of Max Ernst. He explains the power of Ernst's "freedom in action" and his "liberating manner" and concludes, "But even one not acquainted with him, and committed, as I am, to quite another vision in painting, would inevitably be brought, some time or other, to contemplate his message. His work represents the assault of his poetics on the conventional, including many of the conventions of modern plasticity" (Ibid).

It is not only an interest in his concept of freedom in creativity that attracted abstract artists to Ernst, nor his continual subversion of attempts to restrict artistic freedom whether by totalitarian states or restrictive artistic schools. Breton made a comment that sheds another light on this unusual attraction between artists of the "concrete" and abstract schools; he said that surrealist art, "lent the mask of the concrete to the abstract and vice versa."

Passing through an exhibition of Max Ernst's work one witnesses the unfolding of a social and psychological drama, the essential themes of which are bound to the events of the twentieth century. The one constant in Ernst remains his untarnished adherence to artistic independence and freedom of creativity. The majority of his work retains such immediacy because the problems he grappled with have only grown in depth and complexity. His life casts an uncompromising shadow over the present crisis in the visual arts.

In the last entry in his diary, Ernst explains his life's work in the following way: "This is the last phrase Max Ernst noted.... A precise, illuminating definition, behind which he retires and which he presents to us as a question. It is no coincidence that, to sum up his life and activity, he offers not a definition or a manifesto-style statement, but a question." It is up to a new generation of artists to grapple with this fundamental artistic question and to penetrate, without fear, the problems of artistic cognition.

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