

Fig. 4

that skip daintily on the page: "My stars have until now helped me [,] I hope that they will help again." [Fig. 4]

Max Ernst died in 1976, almost six decades after World War I, where he was killed and re-born, as he once said. Whether Western civilization is still bankrupt remains a matter of opinion and more so, whether surrealism did anything to save it. But this much seems true: the exuberant, beautifully mad world seen by Ernst and his peers may have been buried inside us all along, waiting to be disinterred by them.

Fig. 1

HISTOIRE NATURELLE

[Natural History]

La roue de la lumière

[The Wheel of Light] (plate XXIX)

1926

Reproduction of pencil frottage, 25 x 42 cm

Fig. 2

...sous mon blanc vêtement, venez avec moi, très insensibles rats mitrés. Et vous, les coléoptères, qui faites le service des environs des villes, suivez-moi, les clochettes à la main et...

[...under my white robe, come with me, you highly insensitive mitred rats. And you, the Coleoptera, who service the suburbs, follow me, little bells in hand, and...]

1929-1930

Collage, 24.7 x 19.7 cm

Fig. 3

UNE SEMAINE DE BONTÉ OU LES SEPT ÉLÉMENTS CAPITAUX

[A Week of Kindness or The Seven Deadly Elements].

Premier cahier. Dimanche. Élément: La boue. Exemple: "Le lion de Belfort"

[First Book. Sunday. Element: Mud. Example: "The Lion of Belfort"]

(booklet 1, chap. 1, plate 28)

1934

Reproduction of collage, 18.5 x 14.7 cm

Fig. 4

MAXIMILIANA OU L'EXERCISE ILLÉGAL DE L'ASTRONOMIE

[Maximiliana or The Illegal Practice of Astronomy] (plate 28)

1964

Aquatint etching in ochre on Japanese ancient paper, 31.8 x 17 cm

Cover (detail):

Lee Miller, *Max Ernst, Sedona, 1946*

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Tuesday to Thursday, 10 am to 8 pm

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24 and 31 December, 10 am to 3 pm

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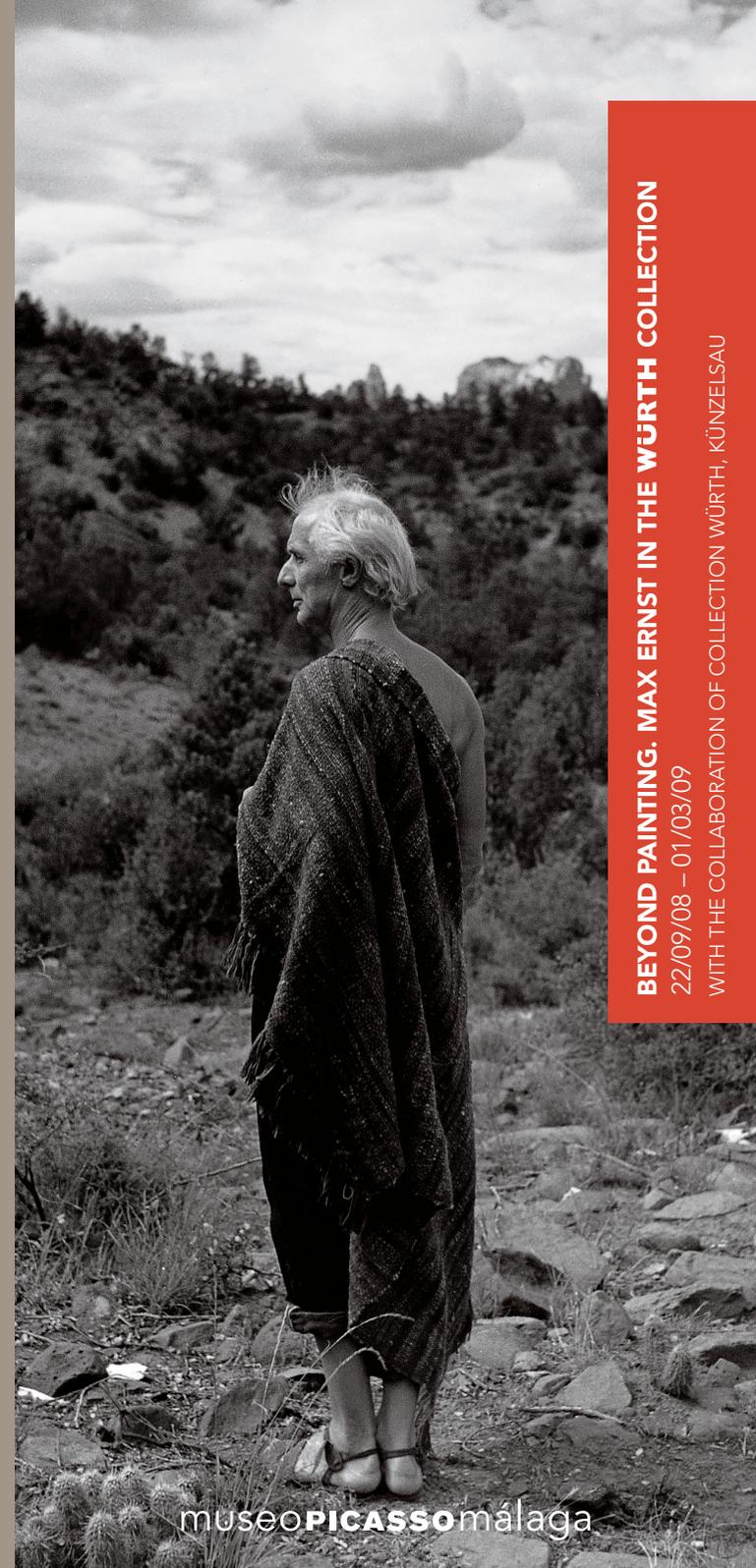
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Max Ernst's work invites us into the strange world of surrealism, a world at once whimsical and nightmarish, elegant and grotesque.

As its predecessor, Dada, Surrealism is the response of a generation of young European artists to World War I—arguably, the most devastating war in modern history—which they saw as proof of the utter bankruptcy of Western civilization and of its cult of progress and reason. The surrealists mined the realm of the irrational and the unconscious for an alternative, searching their fantasies and dreams for a vital beauty and a deeper truth—a force that their culture's false values had robbed them of.

Max Ernst was one of these young men. He was born in Germany in 1891, the son of an amateur artist who was also a teacher of the deaf. So, one imagines that early in life, he was exposed to the complex workings of the inner world and the capacity to express oneself outside the norm. The coincidence of his bird pet's death with the birth of his sister when he was a teenager became part of his personal mythology, suggesting a source for his singular themes—his half-human animals, his women's amorous innuendos with beasts, and those situations where the morbid and the erotic are confounded.

One can call his works a form of cultivated hallucination. By his own account, the character of his art was marked very early on from an ordinary experience, as he stared at a mahogany bed rest and let himself fantasize on the sinuous configurations on its surface and see them transform—something not unlike what happens to us when we let our imagination fly while looking at the drifting clouds or the shadows on a wall. Later on, when he became an artist, Ernst was driven to invent ways to produce such effects—to be surprised, as if were, by the forms in his own works.

Consider one of the prints from his *Histoire naturelle* [Natural History], which is based on an original made with a technique he called frottage—a drawing created by

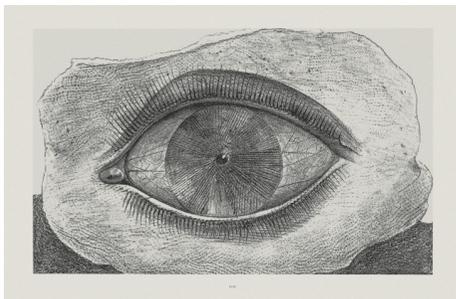


Fig. 1



Fig. 2

rubbing charcoal on a sheet of paper placed over objects he chose on the basis of their suggestive textures. A blood-shot eye stares at us from what looks like a piece of bark or maybe a coarse stone. It seems immense, since it stands against a low horizon. Looking closely we notice that the "landscape", the object, the iris and the white of the eye, are created by objects that have been pressed under the paper and revealed by the charcoal—a leaf, a stone, a fish scale, and so on. Then Ernst added some of the details with pencil, thus "locking in" these foreign, borrowed marks. [Fig. 1]

Innovative as frottage is, it was not entirely without traditional antecedents. Leonardo da Vinci himself advised artists to sketch the stains and cracks they saw on the walls in order to trigger fresh ideas and avoid conventions when launching on a new work.

Collage, the idea of creating artworks with already existing materials, was to Ernst another way to escape the trappings of traditional art-making and to let the mind and the eye go into unexpected places. The technique was not new (think of the piece of newspaper or the cigarette wrapping of Cubism). But Ernst's collages don't look like collages; actually, they don't even look modern. They are scenes, as vivid as nightmares and erotic dreams.

In the collage "... sous mon blanc vêtement, venez avec moi, très insensibles rats mitrés. Et vous, les coléoptères, qui faites le service des environs de villes, suivez-moi, les clochettes à la main et..." [... under my white robe, come with me, you highly insensitive mitred rats. And you, the Coleoptera, who service the suburbs, follow me, little bells in hand, and...] we witness a terrifying scene, where people and the remains of a shipwreck are tossed about in a wild storm at high seas. An army of rats swim to what's left of the vessel and scurry up the collapsed mast, as a man hangs

for his life, caught it seems, between being devoured by them and drowning. In the midst of all this, a huge butterfly flutters prettily over the rat-infested waters and the head of a young woman emerges quietly from the waves, gazing indifferently at the drama. [Fig. 2]

The work was made from cutouts taken from popular Victorian illustrations. Like all such works by Ernst, one imagines that the original story could not have been more different from this, and yet Ernst takes full advantage of the borrowed medium's aesthetic—the melodrama, the attention to detail, the affected elegance.

Think of the eerie glamour of this other collage from the first volume of *Une semaine de bonté ou Les sept éléments capitaux* [A Week of Kindness or The Seven Deadly Elements], a good example of the pregnant ambiguities that come from the combination of fragments of ready-made images. We meet again the generic, lost-in-thought Victorian beauty, this time wearing a dainty seashell for a hat. In one hand she holds a nest full of chicks. A dandy, actually, an impeccably dressed lion, addresses her seductively, while she looks out with such an empty gaze that she may as well be blind. And yet, she stretches her other hand to receive his enticing offer, a glove—or is it a severed hand? [Fig. 3]

Many of the works in this exhibition are related to publications, prints meant as illustrations of literary works, including some of Ernst's own poetry. That is the case with *Maximiliana*, a book inspired by an eccentric eighteenth-century amateur astrologist.

Though nearly abstract, the web-like form looks to be both organic and man-made: a primal, one-eyed creature, either microscopic or gigantic; a strange mechanical construction or the most delicate piece of lace. The image accompanies words written by Ernst in Italian and spelled out in letters



Fig. 3