

Exhibition: **Fire under the Ashes. From Picasso to Basquiat**

5 May – 28 August 2005

Organized by: Institut Valencià d'Art Modern IVAM

Curator: Kosme de Barañano

The exhibition is based on the review of primitive art, or children's art, carried out by numerous artists since Surrealism, which shaped the iconography of avant-garde art, both in Europe and in America, with respect to the human figure, the face and graffiti, in Constructivism, Art Brut, Informalism and the legacy of Abstract Expressionism. The selection of works in the exhibition traces the evolution and development of that imagery – that fire – in modern art through the work of such acclaimed artists as Jean Dubuffet, Michel Haas, Germaine Richier, Gaston Chaissac, Pablo Picasso, Joaquín Torres-García and Jean-Michel Basquiat. To accompany the show, the IVAM has published a catalogue, illustrated with colour reproductions of the items exhibited, together with texts by the curator of the exhibition, Kosme de Barañano, and the poets Jaime Siles and Guillermo Carnero.

The title of the exhibition comes from some words quoted by Jan Krugier when recalling a visit to Rothko: *“Rothko struck me as having something shamanistic about him – there was a truth in him that he had to express. I remember going to see him once*

late at night in his studio in New York. And while I was looking at his paintings, he came out with a phrase that really struck me: 'If you are looking for fire, you will find it beneath the ashes.' Fashionable painters aren't looking for fire. They simply make pictures, and that's it. Rothko found this phrase in a book he had in the studio by Martin Buber. It's a very beautiful expression and I think it sums up the role that shamans play. They find fire beneath the ashes. They rediscover our truth and transmit it to us. It is a message that has to be delivered, that is absolutely vital – because, without that fire, we are nothing."

The exhibition seeks to present a recurrent option in twentieth-century painting and sculpture, the application of the supposedly naive mark, free of cultural roots. In these works, or rather in the poetics of these artists, the mechanisms of memory go back to prehistoric graffiti, to the icon. Despite the very different poetics of these artists, they have a common denominator: the primitive appearance of the mark, a schematic mark or blot. Among the artists whose work makes up this show – Pablo Picasso, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Joaquín Torres-García, Jean Dubuffet, Gaston Chaissac, Michel Haas, Germaine Richier and Louis Soutter, the last two of whom have never been exhibited before in Spain – there are common features, but the vocabulary is different; each one has a different rhythmic tension or linear precision, a different concision and constructive power. There are differences of texture, colour, phrasing and expression in all of them.

In all of them there is an economy in the mixture of colours and an economy in the marks used. They simplify the subject or lay it bare so as to give it the value of an icon. Sometimes their works look like drawing because of their simplification, their economy of style. The proposal or experiment is to master the figure with a simple construction, not expressive or connotative but formalized. One can see the recollection of certain signs or aspects of how to synthesize reality in a new image which have reappeared again and again since the palaeolithic caves. Ranging from Picasso to Basquiat, the exhibition assembles these signs or graffiti which come from prehistory and from the imagination of children. This influence on twentieth-century art of drawings done by children or the insane appeared in the work of Paul Klee or Louis Soutter, but also in the first almanac produced by the group Der Blaue Reiter in 1912 there were children's drawings, together with works of African and medieval art.

Jean Dubuffet (Le Havre, 1901 – Paris, 1985) belongs to a group of painters whose aim was to move away from the influence of tradition and explore unknown techniques in order to recapture the “ancestral spontaneity of the human hand when making marks”. His paintings of pure form, sometimes figurative, sometimes abstract, with bold colours and deliberate clumsiness, recall the expressions of the mentally ill and children, although this does not mean that their style is less elaborate. Dubuffet plays with clumsiness, doodles and raw matter in order to go back to the origins of art. In 1948, together with the writer André Breton and Antoni Tàpies, he created the *Compagnie de l’Art Brut*, which was a focus for the work of marginal individuals, an undertaking that sought to open up the art world for children and people marginalized by society. Often causing outrage with his deliberately childlike style, he sought to seduce, to celebrate deformity and materials that repel at first sight. An inventor and provoker of talent, Dubuffet succeeded in teaching how to look at the world from a new perspective.

The work of Michel Haas (1934) comes from most of the contemporary trends concerned with new figuration, such as the London School, Abstract Expressionism in America and free figuration in France. His paintings seem to belong to a time that is not ours, indicating traces of the art of cave painting or the corroded fragment of a fresco which bears the bruises of history. His technique is based on the use of simple materials such as water, charcoal and glue. His work has evolved from an initial fluidity and transparency to a form of relief which solidifies and inscribes his forms more profoundly in the thickness of the paper.

The early works of Germaine Richier (Grans, 1902 – Montpellier, 1959) are classical in appearance. During the war she devoted herself to making clay models of rather unattractive animals such as bats or toads, which she deformed so that they looked like unfinished creatures, somewhere between the birth of life and catastrophe. At the end of her career she made painted plasters and bronzes. Her work *La sauterelle* (The Locust), with a woman’s head, does not correspond to a facile Surrealism but places the act of art above the conventional world. After the war, her violent, refined, cruel contemporary sculpture revealed new expressive possibilities for figuration to Giacometti and many later sculptors.

In the early years of his activity Gaston Chaissac (Avallon, 1910 – La Roche-sur-Yon, 1964) felt the fascination of a vocabulary that emerged from prehistoric forms. In the forties his work was characterized by thick profiles in black ink, the use of light colours and isolated strokes of watercolour, presenting scenes that conjured up the imagination of the child. Chaissac was a member of the Compagnie de l'Art Brut created by Dubuffet in 1948 as an attempt to seek a new line of innovation which would escape from academic art and “fine art”. The concept of Art Brut was defined then as a new stage of art, distanced from traditional art and cultural influences.

The inclination for caricature and the grotesque of Pablo Picasso (Málaga, 1881 – Notre-Dame-de-Vie, 1973) and the sense of irony of which he himself was often a recurrent focus are revealed in the caricatures of the works of his youth, in which he animalized faces and portrayed salacious and scatological situations. The works presented in this exhibition show the importance of caricature in Picasso's art and how that unprecedented cross between caricature, children's drawings, primitivism and fragmentation of classical forms led to what has been called the “Picasso style”.

Joaquín Torres-García (Montevideo, 1874–1949) received a classical training. During the time that he spent in Paris (from 1926 to 1932) he joined leading European avant-garde movements which enabled him to develop the basis for an art that he caused to evolve in a very individual way. In 1930 he and Michel Seuphor founded the Cercle et Carré group. Although Torres-García quickly moved away from the members of the group, the pure abstraction principles of Neo-Plasticism enabled him to develop his personal style: a language based on a system of geometrical relationships and a repertoire of pictograms. His Universal Constructivism, dating from his time in Paris, was based on the assembly, on a metal grid, of universal symbols taken from ancient and modern cultures, including Pre-Hispanic cultures, in which he showed special interest.

Jean-Michel Basquiat (New York, 1960–1988) was associated with the punk movement and channelled his need for self-expression into designing jewellery and painting clothes which he then devoted himself to selling. In this way he gradually completed his training on a completely self-taught basis, inspired by Picasso, African art, jazz and children's drawings. His pictures are full of enigmas and discrete symbols which can

only be deciphered by those who knew him well. An examination of his work reveals the frequency with which he provides the possibility of escape by painting icons that refer to the primitive tradition inherited from his family, and it shows his predilection for striking, almost garish colours, as extreme as his existence.

The exhibition includes both paintings and sculptures by these artists, emphasizing the primitivism that underlies them all, making this show a visceral visual experience.