

## Max Ernst: The Sculpture

**Exhibition** 11 August- 23 September 1990

Admission £2

One of Max Ernst's principal concerns was to depict the shifting, dream-like zone that lies on the frontier between the inner and outer worlds. A member of the Parisian surrealist circle in the twenties and well versed in Freudian theory, Ernst's work is a complex amalgam of 'real' everyday objects; of myths and 'primitive' art forms; of imagery culled from his unconscious, his dreams and childhood memories. He was one of the most technically innovative and diverse artists of this century.

Internationally acclaimed as a painter and graphic artist, Max Ernst was also a sculptor. The work in three dimensions has however, to a large extent, remained a lesser-known aspect of his prolific output, despite it being integral to his pursuits in other media.

Ernst (1891-1976) was born in Bruhl, near Cologne. His interest in the visual arts developed whilst studying philosophy at Bonn University, where his foremost activity was painting. Through his close friendship with the painter August Macke, Ernst was introduced to vanguard artistic circles in Cologne. The heroic optimism of the pre-1914 artistic movements was sharply curtailed and dissipated as a result of the carnage and destruction experienced during the First World War. Ernst was a committed member of the 'anti-art' movement, dada, born partly out of the post-war sentiment of nihilism. It is in these Dadaist activities that the origins of Ernst's sculptural activities lie, in the 'Dada object'.

With the advent of Surrealism in the twenties, the found object was to become an essential part of the creative process. Following the Surrealist canon of 'psychic automatism', the role of the artist's consciousness was to be minimised in order to create a new reality, 'Surreality'. As in his collages, Ernst's sculpture originates in the juxtaposition of everyday images and objects which fuse and are metamorphosed to create astonishing new hybrids. In the mid thirties in Paris, Ernst undertook his first phase of sculptural activity, producing, amongst others, *Oedipus I* and *Oedipus II*, *Lunar Asparagus* and *Bird Head*. A notable feature of those early works is Ernst's complicated process of assemblage, which entailed the casting and recasting in plaster of everyday objects (bowls, pails, milk bottles etc) to form fantastic entities, rich in psychological associations and open to a multiplicity of readings which are often playful, but in the same moment, challenging and disquieting.

The outbreak of World War II forced Ernst to leave Europe for the United States where, in the summer of 1944, he produced a series of sculptures, which include *Moonmad*, *Young Man with Beating Heart* and *The Kind Playing with the Queen*. As in the later wall reliefs and sculptures produced in Sedona, Arizona, Ernst's expansive knowledge of 'primitive' art is apparent in the forms of the horned, emblematic figures. The monumental family portrait, which stood as a guardian group to Ernst's house in Sedona, can be viewed as the culmination of Ernst's sculptural concerns. Encompassed by the broader symbolism of the title, *Capricorn* (1948), the piece draws on diverse 'primitive' and mythical sources associating the work with rebirth, fertility and metamorphosis. A later work, *The Spirit of the Bastille* (1960), a totemic column formed by precariously stacked wicker eel baskets and crowned by a 'bird-like' creature, testifies to Ernst's consistent approach to technique and demonstrates the totality of his artistic vision.

This major historical survey is one of the most comprehensive exhibitions of the artist's work in bronze and precious metals ever mounted. It has been originated by the Fruitmarket Gallery with the assistance of The Capricorn Trust, New York.



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