

WORLDS IN MINIATURE

Max Ernst and His Books

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The fact that Max Ernst was a philosophy major at the University of Bonn is a strong indication of how he saw his own future. Future—a word by the way that he couldn't bring himself to use, believing it to be not only fatuous but regimental and therefore inapplicable to himself. One could almost believe that added to his other talents he also possessed the one of clairvoyance, seeing in his private crystal the path that his own future turned out to be. Philosophy majors may be, then, people who, young and examining the world in relation to themselves, or vice versa, know they are going to need the discoveries of previous thinkers to help them deal with their already complicated existence and even to point the way to conclusions of their own. That this philosophy major was an artist can provoke no surprise, for a true artist's every picture is a search, a question, and if he is good, it may even hold an answer. An artist who titled his pictures BLIND SWIMMER,

EUCLID, DESIGN IN NATURE, THE HORDE—
to name a few of his always surprising titles—
leaves no doubt about his fundamental preoccupations. In the incredible scope of his imagery—
it was as if he raced to an impossible goal: to
translate all thought into pictures—one encounters
myriad WAYS of thinking, PROPOSITIONS for
an attitude to the seductive, ferocious, elusive
prism of life itself. It is this very scope, the vastness
of his pictorial terrain that is most daunting
for one who would understand the work of Max
Ernst. A serious scholar can soon read most
artists' work with a little effort. But a Max Ernst
picture is often an uncomfortable riddle—a question
as fraught with naked unreasonableness as
an electrical storm. What the question implies,
indeed demands, is a search, the kind of search
Max Ernst conducted all his long life, in the
pages of books as well as in his own psyche and
the world around him.

To try to enumerate these books, to separate
for our consideration the ones he read avidly from
those he merely skimmed is as impossible for me
as finding a thousand needles in as many hay-

stacks. Principally because before making off with
the needles he was likely to examine rather attentively
a few haystacks just to be sure.

In watching our itinerant bookshelves over
the years— itinerant because, like breath, they
had to move when we did (and heaven knows the
casualty list is long in lost books)— I saw the
subtle changes operated by time and place. But I
also saw the constants: the little Pléiade edition
of Baudelaire, all its gilt worn off, its title to be
found only on the inside, but its dog-eared pages
valiant as banners and still fresh with their pel-
lucid treasure. The books that graced his Amer-
ican years had followed him to the United States
in 1941. They had rocked and tumbled across the
Atlantic in a battered trunk, the only salvage of
his years in France. Jarry, Apollinaire, Villiers,
Valéry, Nerval, Mallarmé, Rimbaud, Eluard,
Crevel— his Frenchmen were the poets. There
were, to be sure, the indispensables, touchstones
of his youth, sworn companions of forever: the
giant Goethe, Novalis, Hölderlin, Schopenhauer,
Nietzsche; but something had happened which
made his reading of the German words unbearably

sad: having already survived the 1914-18 war as a hapless soldier, and having moved to France; having seen the approach of yet another German-mounted conflict; having been subsequently interned in French concentration camps, he fled this time to the United States.

These were the Hitler years, the Third Reich. In Germany books were suppressed if they did not reflect Nazi dicta. Back there poets and philosophers alike were either VERBOTEN or misunderstood. In a Nazi exhibition of "degenerate art" Der Führer posed for the propaganda detachment with Max Ernst's DIE SCHÖNE GÄRTNERIN (THE BEAUTIFUL GARDENER). "An insult to German womanhood" they headlined. All works in the exhibition were then ceremoniously burned.

There must have been some trauma here for Max Ernst. In shock and despair he nevertheless found his way to the United States, kindly Americans having wanted to "save" him. Enthusiastic at the prospect of becoming an American, he left his early book friends on the top shelf and reached instead for Thoreau and Twain. It was about

this time that messengers, sensing his love of the printed page, began bringing or sending us books (we lived in the wilds of Arizona. No electricity, no running water, nothing but nature's baubles: sun, moon and stars). These books came from Paris, New York, even Mexico (Octavio Paz) and Martinique (Aimé Césaire). Roger Caillois's MIMÉTISME, Lévi-Strauss (read and reread), Camus, Sartre, Genêt, Beckett. All took their places beside the Surrealist pantheon from Sade to Lautréamont to Fourier to Tzara, and afforded me, incidentally, an awesome peek into French syntax.

Max Ernst's reading habits never varied greatly. After mornings of gardening (he loved this and always succeeded: a transplanting was a matter of footwork—firmly treading the dirt around the plant. Try this.) and painting and sculpting in cement and housebuilding; after all or any of these he settled down with his book until sundown. Then the studio again and finally day's end, with more written words to pave the way for his dreams.

What, years later in Paris (1950-65),

gratified me beyond measure was that very slowly and as if by some gentle osmosis, my American and English books began appearing among his. Their rather willy-nilly translations brought him Henry James, Joyce, Faulkner, Whitman, Lewis Carroll, as earlier faraway readers from Germany to Japan had found Fenimore Cooper (they never said James), Edgar Poe (no Allan), Melville, Hawthorne, and the British giants.

Sometime around 1965, still in Paris, Max Ernst, having by now made new German friends and becoming again receptive to his homeland's intellectual adventure, began to reread the books of his youth and to see them, as one might predict, with new eyes. But in his last years it was after all Strindberg or Villiers or Lewis Carroll or Shakespeare ("He wrote to be read") who held him, or even some new text: A SEPARATE REALITY or SOLEIL HOPI.

The impulse to create, indeed its basic drive, rises from a deep need to know one's self in relation to the overwhelming mysteries, a truism that bears repeating. The artist gravely chooses the way he

will pursue his chimera; will it be in words, images, langibles: sculptures, monuments (MONUMENT TO THE BIRDS: title of an M.E. painting); song and sound, movement, mime? Whatever his choice, he keeps the door open for ALL other means of elucidation, just in case. Few artists, be they poets or painters, care to ignore their parallel paths. And from appreciation to appropriation is a very short step. Thus it is second nature for the poet to limn, for the painter to versify, for the musician to evoke visual poetry. Apollinaire, leading off the modern statement with his CALLIGRAMMES, built images out of letters. Michaux is the indisputable dichotomy of writer and artist. Marcel Duchamp was master of the emblematic riddle which for him was the essence of life. Jacques Prévert, close friend and poet, made stunning collages. Picabia, the Dada painter, wrote and edited his magazines, CANNIBALE and 391. Even André Breton made boxes of a ferocity that amazed his artist friends. And Arp, consummate sculptor, was a consummate poet. If you have come to your art along avenues lined with books you will probably, like Max Ernst, write.

Over the years without raising his voice, he spoke out in experimental automatic writing in collaboration with his poet friends— with Paul Eluard, Robert Desnos, Theodore Fraenkel, Benjamin Péret, Iliasz. He wrote ironical treatises for the seminal little magazines so necessary to the Dada and the Surrealist. He wrote autobiographical narratives that are precious revelations of at least two of his technical innovations in their synthesis with his deepest feeling: frottage and collage. (Other techniques: decalcomania from the years 1938 to 1948, accounting for his perhaps most identifiable works; and the dripping can that produced in 1940 such canvases as THE NON-EUCLIDIAN FLY and LA PLANÈTE AF-FOLÉE though not noted in writing, was at the time exuberantly explained to anyone who cared to listen.) He wrote affectionate but clear-eyed prefaces for the exhibitions of his friends. And poems to accompany the pictures in his books.

Which brings this sketch— one could call it: Lollipop, Superior of the Birds, and His Books— to its inevitable conclusion: Max Ernst, bookmaker.

One must begin by realizing the preponderant importance of bookmaking to those artists at that time and in that place. Paris in the first fifty years of our century spawned more beau livres than the rest of the world together. It was a fever, a phenomenon so peculiarly French that would-be participants in the adventure moved to Paris from Belgrade or New York. To call it mania would not have surprised or displeased anyone. Here was the paradise of the bibliophile. A long history of ornamented books was bursting into a shower of blossoms, eagerly snapped up by the collector who knew that he was one of a lucky few.

In the effusion of bookmaking the artist usually turned to his poet friend for a text, or the poet asked the artist, it all happened so fast and so gaily. No matter how solemn the words or how fraught the images, collaboration was light-hearted. For all concerned (and this included the impassioned editor with often not a sou to his name but enough enthusiasm to forget his debts) it was an enterprise of almost religious dedication, one that would produce a miracle: the book; a book made of rare paper, of impeccable type-

selling (you held the page to the light and lo! the lines were perfectly aligned), of numerous endpapers, of pristine margins, of informative "justification" at the end, handsomely bound and boxed, and all this finery to honor the sparkling hand-pulled etchings and the breathtaking poem. Who would not, then, be happy to identify with such a book? Yes, to see one's name there as if it were written in the stars?

Poets often found such books their only avenue to publication. Devoted editors hoped only to break even. But it was the artist who led the dance. His work, in etching, lithograph, aquatint, woodcut, pochoir, even hand coloring (a favorite way of Miró to complete his etchings, and Max Ernst's frottages in colored crayons, inserted as frontispieces for an already sumptuous book) made it an irresistible object. These last touches—bonuses you might say—were always contributed gratis by the artist to keep his editor from going under and to save them all—poet, editor, himself, printer, etcher, binder. For they formed the extra glory of a small number of copies that carried a

much higher price. These too were eagerly bought by the COLLECTIONNEUR MORDU.

One of our editors who, as often happened, was also a book dealer, once told me that there were just 120 such collectors in the world. He had their names, addresses and their confidence. They acquired each new book-creation sight unseen, after being filled in by letter on its various features (mentioned earlier in this text). Thus, alas, the fierce or tender lines of the poem, and the beautiful image that graced it, were often lost on those who collected books as some collect stamps or firearms. They lie unseen to this day in locked bookcases whose chatelains arrive from God knows where for three weeks a year. Still, I have spent some happy hours with the OTHER collector, the one who loves his book, and for whom it was made.

Text and picture formed, ideally, a marriage made in heaven. Nearly always a joint activity of friends, these projects did not require blind meetings or business-like negotiations. In his Paris days Max Ernst and the Surrealists in general gave much of their attention to writers who were

not Surrealists (Beckett, Genêt, Artaud) with whom they felt certain strong affinities. Artist and writer formed one close confrérie with mutual admiration as the basic glue that held them together. An artist, having made a series of collages (Max Ernst) might find that a writer (André Breton) had some things to say about them. He would be pleased, for he knew that such a text would only enhance the work by its marvelous syntax (preface for LA FEMME 100 TÊTES). A poet might want to see his words presented with loving care. Did Max like the poem? Indeed, he did. So soon there was a book, a collaboration. With Paul Eluard it went further: experiment in true collaboration resulted in texts by the two friends, born of germinal hours talking, scribbling, reading together. With collages by M.E. these appeared as A L'INTÉRIEUR DE LA VUE: 8 POÈMES VISIBLES, RÉPÉTITIONS, and LES MALHEURS DES IMMORTELS.

Friends, yes. But the friend could as easily be the bookmaker as in the case of Iliazd who came to Max Ernst with hardly more than an idea: a book with Max Ernst. It was a long gesta-

tion: six months. I can still see Max, leaning over his page of invented "letters" or working his special alchemy on a small copper plate. I can still see Iliazd at the Imprimerie Union where a table of typesetting had been put at his disposal, composing with steel type his astonishing arrangements. The result of this labor of love was MAXIMILIANA, by many thought to be the most extraordinary book produced in our century.

Add to these the artist's own books, some translations (German to French: Brentano, Kleist, Hölderlin), and the American ones (MR. KNIFE, MISS FORK, by Kay Boyle, published by the Black Sun Press of Caresse Crosby).

Another case in point is PARAMYTHS, put together in Arizona in 1948, published by the Copley Gallery as a catalogue for the Max Ernst exhibition in Beverly Hills, California (1949). A little book beautifully made with hard covers, colored papers and seven new collages with poems (in English!) by the artist. In 1955 a translation of PARAMYTHS into German followed. It should be noted that Max Ernst did not translate himself literally from English but rethought his poems,

refining and rebreathing them into his native German and then his almost native French. It makes a fascinating study of self-translation.

American editions of his collage books *UNE SEMAINE DE BONTÉ*, *LA FEMME 100 TÊTES*, and *RÊVE D'UNE PETITE FILLE* have at last brought these works to the American "reader." Quotes, because one "reads" the pictures.

Late in his life Max Ernst was persuaded to bring together all of his writings into one volume under the title *ÉCRITURES*, published in Paris by Gallimard (1970), and I can only say that my fervent hope is to see it some day in English.

Thus, bookmaking went along with painting for Max Ernst who from his first statements in *FIAT MODES*, an album published on a shoestring in Cologne, the shoestring being a veteran's allocation earned by risking his life as a soldier in World War I, to the last album of etchings, *OISEAUX EN PÉRIL* in 1974, lavished nearly as much inspiration on books as on painting. The medium was stunningly suitable to his gifts and to his temperament. Here he could create whole worlds in miniature and play with words and

titles. A little book of poems accompanied by tiny decalcomania of Arizona inspiration he called *SEPT MICROBES, VUS A TRAVERS UN TEMPÉRAMENT: Where had he read Walter Pater?* Another album with a Jacques Prévert text was *LES CHIENS ONT SOIF*, Max's title. *Shades of Anatole France, so despised by the Surrealists! Paintings, TOTEM AND TABOO, THE BIRTH OF COMEDY, in step with Nietzsche.*

In an epoch where painting tends to the physically gigantic canvas, Max Ernst's modest formats speak eloquently for his preoccupation with idea rather than the retinal knock-out demanded by great size. His canvases, collages, frottages, panels, sculptures, assemblages, all spoke clearly, without hollow overlapping echoes. They are the works we know: freighted rectangles that address the mind with the help of the eye, not the other way around. Five or six times in his life he needed a large format. But he knew that a picture does not become valuable by its measurements. He knew that Monet's *NYPHÉAS* and Picasso's *GUERNICA* justified their great size, but that many yards of canvas do not a *GUERNICA* make.

It is not surprising then that during his entire artist's life he produced, along with more imposing works, countless small pictures— they cannot be called "illustrations"— that became the images that graced more than a hundred books, pamphlets, magazines, posters. They became logos for editors, publishers. They were turned into rubber stamps; they became emblems for secret caucuses among schoolboys and truants alike. They were adopted as ex libri. They seemed to be everywhere.

Questions may be raised about the bindings that envelope most of Max Ernst's books now in the Beinecke Library. It is very simple: exasperated by the way precious books had of disappearing never to be seen again, and owed a sum of money by his art dealer, he elected to use it to have everything of real interest that remained bound by a master binder. And so for three years the binding went on.

You never tell a master binder how you want your book. Not even the color. No more than you would tell the artist how to paint his picture. If you do he may hand it back to you with a gentle

suggestion that you look elsewhere. For he is the artist in his domain and assumes your faith in his work. I saw Max Ernst pull books off the shelf rather negligently and hand them to Monsieur Leroux, who would come out to the house a month later carrying a big suitcase laden with his treasures. We oh'ed and ah'ed. Indeed, his treatments were always apt, the spirit of each book uncannily reflected in its binding. One day Max grabbed the Sears Christmas catalogue. Rebound by Leroux, it is now a perfect delight to see, all glistening with thousands of tiny colored beads, a very sly comment on its innocent, foolish contents.

"Why did you have them bound?" he was asked. "They won't be so easy to carry off that way" was his reason.

Perhaps he was right. Because here they are.

I cannot better comment on this patchy summary than to tell of Max Ernst's question addressed to a visitor, his friend Robert Lebel, just a few hours before he died:

«Robert, qu'est-ce que tu penses de la lettre?»

Robert: «Quelle lettre?»

*Max: «Tu sais bien, Robert. LA LETTRE
DU VOYANT.»*

*This enigmatic letter that Rimbaud wrote to
his friend Izambard in 1871 has never, to this
day, been satisfactorily explained. On his last
day Max Ernst was still thinking of it, perhaps
on the point of solving its riddle.*

FIVE HUNDRED COPIES
OF WORLDS IN MINIATURE
HAVE BEEN PRINTED
AND ENCLOSED IN UNIQUE WRAPPERS
TO CELEBRATE THE
EXHIBITION OF THE BOOKS
OF MAX ERNST