

FEMMES TRAVERSANT UNE RIVIÈRE EN CRIANT 1927

MAX ERNST

oil on canvas

1927

81 x 60 cm / 31 7/8 x 23 5/8 in.

signed upper right

Spies/Metken 1111

It was Max Ernst who said, "Art has nothing to do with taste, art is not there to be 'tasted'". And indeed, many of his contemporaries did not find his art to their 'taste' at all.

They regarded his bizarre, at times irrational and mysterious creations as a provocation – which of course is exactly what they were intended to be. Ernst rebelled against social convention and saw his work as an act of revolt and critique. Not by chance did he say elsewhere: "If art is a mirror of the times, they must be crazy."

The artist who these days counts as a leading exponent of Dadaism and Surrealism was born in Brühl near Cologne in 1891. He came into contact with art through his father, a self-taught painter. At the age of eighteen he went to university to study philosophy but soon dropped out again in order to devote himself entirely to art. His fascination with pictures produced by the mentally ill even at this early stage can be read as presaging his later interest in the subconscious. He got to know August Macke in 1911 and joined the group of Rheinische Expressionisten. The decisive turn came in 1919, when he became a co-founder of the Cologne-based Dada Group. Three years later, in 1922, he settled in Paris and henceforth belonged to the circle of the Surrealists.

Andre Breton, the Father of Surrealism, was fascinated by the writings of Sigmund Freud. Profoundly influenced by Freud's theories of the subconscious and how it governs the individual, Breton strove for art with the capacity to open the door on the human soul. And to his mind, the artist most likely to have access to such realms was Max Ernst – Ernst the magician, the 'man of limitless possibilities'.

Ernst invented completely new techniques for bringing chance into play and for putting his own conscious will as an artist on hold. The frottage, which he developed in 1924, was one such method. Frottage entails transferring the surface texture of an object onto paper or canvas by rubbing it with pencil or charcoal. This gives rise to a pattern which the artist cannot define in advance. To adapt frottage to the conditions of painting, Ernst also applied decalcomania and grattage. For the latter technique, several layers of paint are applied to the canvas and then scraped away again so as to bring the layers underneath back to light. Decalcomania, meanwhile, is essentially a form of counterproofing. Here, paint is applied to a surface more or less at random, a canvas laid on top of it, pressed down and then removed again. The outcome in all three cases is a structure shaped solely by the material, and it was these structures that served Ernst as a source of inspiration for the carefully calibrated development of the work.

Whereas the collages of his early period are full of wit, the worlds that Ernst created became increasingly menacing. He recalled and reflected on the war and used his art to lend expression to his image of the human species. His dark forests and landscapes overgrown with climbing, creeping plants, seem to negate all claims to civilization. Scarcely any light at all penetrates these empty plains. The wild hordes and fantastical creatures are not steered by any rational power. They come across as monsters, symbolizing the animalistic aspects and brute force latent in all humans. Like all the Surrealists, Ernst believed that all living creatures are inclined to belligerence. Hence his sceptical view of humanizing social and political structures as a force for good.

Max Ernst combines fantasy, critique, sarcasm and protest with high art as does almost no other painter of his generation.

As a last superstition, as a sad remnant of the creation myth in Western culture, the fairy tale of the artist's creativity remained. It is one of the first revolutionary acts of Surrealism to have attacked this myth in a matter-of-fact manner and in the sharpest form and probably destroyed it forever by insisting emphatically on the purely passive role of the 'author' in the mechanism of poetic inspiration and exposing all 'active' control through reason, morality or aesthetic considerations as worthy of inspiration. He can attend the creation of the work as a spectator and follow the degrees of its development with indifference or passion.

As the poet listens to his automatic thought processes and notes them, the painter projects on paper or canvas, what his visual imagination supplies him with.

– Max Ernst