



LES PEUPLIERS 1939

MAX ERNST

oil on paper on wood

1939

38.5 x 28 cm

15 1/8 x 11 in.

signed lower right

Spies/Metken 2334

Provenance

Richard Feigen Gallery, Chicago

Eugene V. Klein, Sherman Oaks

Galleria Galatea, Turin

Galleria Iolas-Galatea, Rome

Galerie Levy, Hamburg

Private collection, Switzerland

Exhibited

Mayor Gallery, London 1959. Max Ernst. No. 22

Graphisches Kabinett Kunsthändel Wolfgang Werner, Bremen 1986.

Max Ernst, Werke aus den Jahren 1920-1940. No. 23, col. ill.

Museo del Corso, Rome 2002. Max Ernst e i suoi amici Surrealisti.

Fundacion Barrié, A Coruna 2004. Surrealismo. Max Ernst y sus amigos surrealistas.

Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris, Paris; Guggenheim, Bilbao 2012-2013. L'art en guerre.

Kunstsammlung NRW, Düsseldorf 2013. Unter der Erde, von Kafka bis Kippenberger.

No. 26, p. 92, col. ill.

Camp des Milles, Aix-en-Provence 2013. Bellmer, Ernst, Springer et Wols au camp des Milles. 2013.

Literature

Spies, Werner und Metken, Sigrid und Günter. Max Ernst Werke 1939-1953.

Cologne 1987. P. 16, No. 2334, col. ill.

Drost, Julia und Collombat, Sophie. Max Ernst Leben und Werk. Cologne 2005. P. 160, col. ill.



LES PEUPLIERS 1939

MAX ERNST

In 1938 Max Ernst left the Surrealist group and fled from Paris to Saint-Martin d'Ardèche, a small village in southern France about fifty kilometres north of Avignon, with his new lover, the artist Leonora Carrington. The disputes with the Surrealists and with his wife Marie-Berthe Aurenche prompted Ernst to seek a hideaway with Leonora Carrington in virtual secrecy. In the old farmhouse the couple bought there, they created a Gesamtkunstwerk adorned with sculptures and paintings, where they worked together and entertained their artist friends: Paul Eluard with his wife Nusch, Roland Penrose, Lee Miller and Man Ray were among those who visited them here.

The artists' idyll was cut short by the outbreak of war in 1939. Max Ernst was interned – part of the time with Hans Bellmer – in the notorious camp Les Milles, was released through the intervention of Paul Eluard and then detained again; he escaped twice and finally fled to the USA via Marseille, Madrid and Lisbon during 1941 and 1942. There was one more short meeting with Leonora in Lisbon, but their plans to escape together were dashed.¹

One of the murals Max Ernst painted in Saint-Martin d'Ardèche was given the title *Un peu de calme* (a little tranquillity) – a reflection on the situation in this short intermezzo.

In 1939, a year marked by extreme events, Max Ernst painted *Les peupliers*. The direct association of two poplars against the blue background of the sky, as evoked by the title of the picture, is only taken in with the first look at the work. This perception is soon shattered and overturned by the bizarre, strange and confusing forms in which the paint winds, curls and forms signs and symbols.

Nowhere does the eye succeed in focussing on a familiar shape: profiles and faces, zoomorphic figures and cloud-like formations materialise, only to disappear again. Max Ernst achieves this surface effect through the technique of decalcomania, a transfer process, in which the paint is manipulated in such a way that the streaks, bubbles and curves that are typical of Ernst's paintings of this period are formed on the surface in an unplanned manner.

Through the brown hue of the paint the structures become reminiscent of earth formations, sand dunes or cliff edges, an alienating effect that Max Ernst most certainly intended. The inclusion of such technical, experimental procedures, and of forms of appearance that flow in an unstructured way into the image, is central to the aesthetic understanding of Surrealism. The range of possible interpretations in connection with the mysteriousness of the unread-

¹ Cf., e.g. Max Ernst, *Fotografische Porträts und Dokumente, Exhib. Cat.* (Brühl: 1991) pp. 136-139; Werner Spies (Ed.), *Max Ernst, Leben und Werk* (Cologne: 2005) pp. 141-151.



Max Ernst and Leonora Carrington,
St Martin d'Ardeche, France 1939

Max Ernst's House
St. Martin d'Ardeche
France 1939

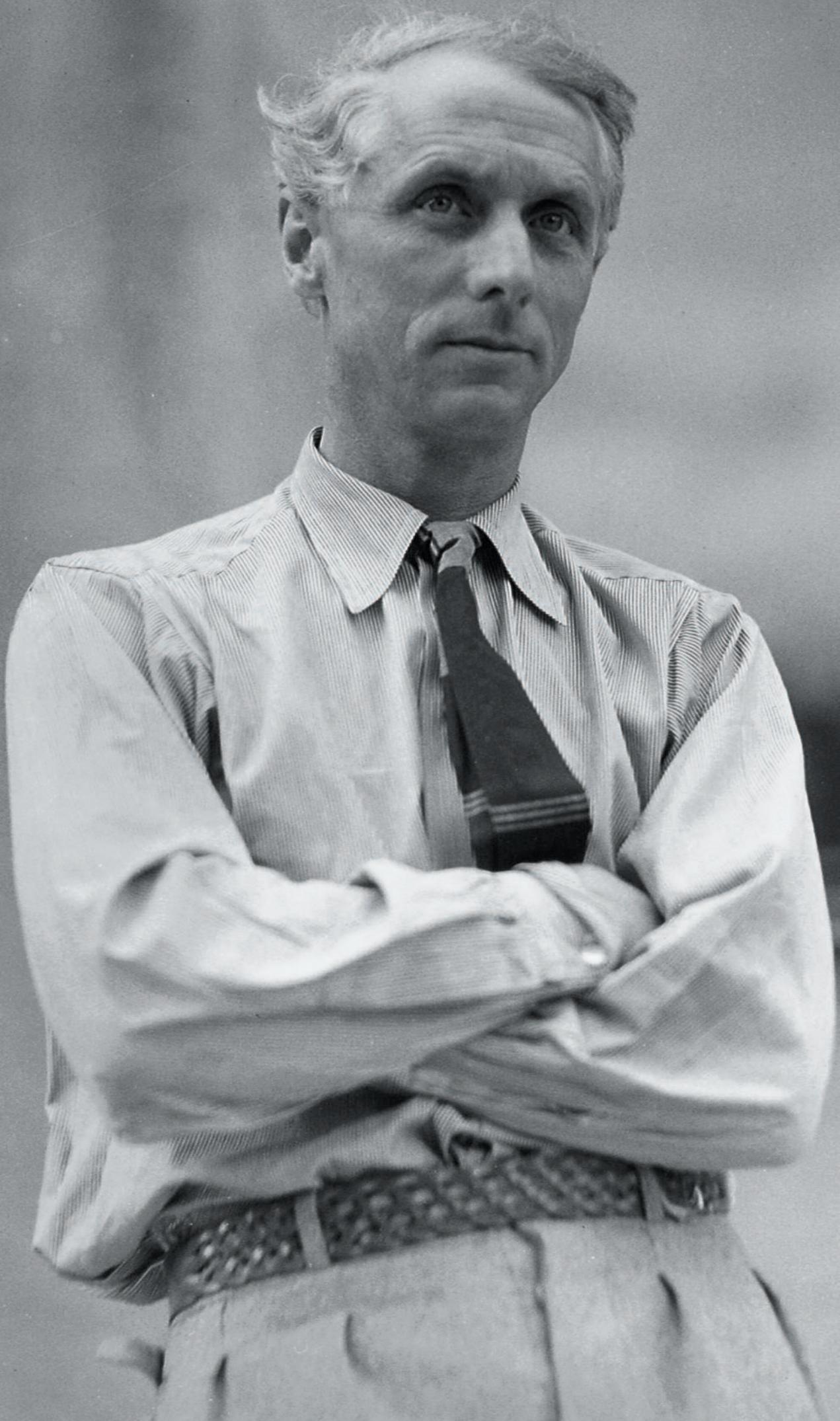
able – yet seemingly most meticulously planned and highly meaningful depiction, sets in motion the perception located between dream and reality that makes the expansion of consciousness as sought by the Surrealists possible in the first place.

Les Peupliers is one of a whole group of paintings in Max Ernst's oeuvre that contain rather similar stele-shaped structures and forms, created using the technique of decalcomania, and blend these structures into whole landscapes. The most important work in this group, of which *Les Peupliers* is one of the immediate forerunners, is without doubt the second version of *Europe After the Rain*, painted by Max Ernst between 1940 and 1942. Here the vertical forms and porous sections of landscape appear as a direct commentary on the events of war: a dreadfully changed Europe is presented to the eye of the observer, replacing the cheerful mood of the summer of 1939 at the Ardèche. The fact that Max Ernst is able to depict two completely conflicting perceptions using one and the same style, the same elements and an analogous iconography – if the imagery can

even be described as such – proves, on the one hand, the effectiveness of the surrealist concept and, on the other, the latent ambiguity and ambivalence of the art of Surrealism.

While the painterly surface in *Europe After the Rain II* has been transmuted into a metaphor for menace, destruction and violence, in *Les Peupliers* it still stood for the bucolic existence in Ernst and Carrington's hideaway in southern France. In both pictures, however, Max Ernst also successfully integrates the pre-sentiment of the 'other' in each case – the menace as well as the hope.





MAX ERNST

BRÜHL 1891 – 1976 PARIS

THE YEAR 1939

After leaving the group of Surrealists, his wife and Paris in 1938, Max Ernst lived with Leonora Carrington in Saint-Martin-d'Ardèche, in a farm house that had been redecorated by the two artists. His break with the Surrealist movement is blamed on André Breton's feud with Paul Éluard, to whom Max Ernst remained a loyal friend. Breton's exhortation to sabotage Éluard's poem "using all available means," infuriated Ernst. Paul Éluard and his wife Nusch visited Ernst and Leonora Carrington at the refuge in the South of France, but this brief respite – Max Ernst painted his biggest mural *Un peu de calme* (a little calm) at his house on the Ardèche – was to be short lived. The outbreak of the Second World War would turn 1939 into a year of extremes.

Following a year that was artistically fertile at first – with the creation of important works such as *Attirement of the Bride* or *Fascinating Cypress*, not to mention the sculptures and murals in St-Martin – Max Ernst was interned as a citizen of the German Reich. First he was detained in the L'Argentière camp, where he shared a room with Hans Bellmer. The camp commander required him to paint a view of the camp and Max Ernst yielded to the wish. Many years after the war, the former commander implored his now famous (and pricey) ex-prisoner Ernst, who was living in Paris again, to authenticate the painting as a "genuine Max Ernst". Ernst decisively rejected the appeal in an elegantly formulated, sarcastic reply to "Mon Capitaine".

In 1939, however, Max Ernst was still a prisoner in the notorious Les Milles camp. Only the intervention of his friend Paul Éluard, who championed Ernst, achieved his temporary release. Shortly afterwards, he was denounced and arrested again. In the following year, Ernst could be found on board the 'ghost train', which could evacuate the prisoners to Marseilles ahead of the German troops. This provided an opportunity for Max Ernst to escape and, with the help of Peggy Guggenheim, to reach New York by perilous means. By then the contact with Leonora Carrington had already broken off.

Max Ernst
1933