



FONDAZIONE ROMA
MUSEO

**CO
BRA** Una grande
avanguardia europea
1948 - 1951

4 dicembre 2015 - 3 aprile 2016
Fondazione Roma Museo - Palazzo Cipolla

PRESS RELEASE

CoBrA

Una grande avanguardia europea (1948-1951)

CoBrA. A great European avant-garde (1948-1951)

Rome, 4 December 2015 – 3 April 2016
Fondazione Roma Museo, Palazzo Cipolla

The Fondazione Roma Museo-Palazzo Cipolla will be presenting CoBrA (1948–1951), the first great post-war avant-garde movement of international breadth, from 4 December 2015 to 3 April 2016. Entitled **CoBrA. Una grande avanguardia europea (1948-1951)**, the exhibition is an initiative launched by the Fondazione Roma and jointly organized by the Fondazione Roma-Arte-Musei and DIE GALERIE in Frankfurt. It offers a complete overview of the production of the group founded in Paris by the artists Asger Jorn, Karel Appel, Constant and Corneille and the writers Christian Dotremont and Joseph Noiret in 1948, whose members include the most revolutionary and innovative figures on the European art scene in the vast and complex area of experimental trends in painting and sculpture. Invented by Dotremont out of the initial letters of Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam, the capitals of the artists' countries of origin, the group's striking name is both geographic and cultural, a fusion of three cities spearheading post-war modernity. The fact that the acronym is also the name of a reptile, by which the movement was also represented, gave iconic expression to its aggressive and in many respects revolutionary attitude.

As Prof. Emmanuele F.M. Emanuele, President of the Fondazione Roma, writes, «Nearly seven decades after the meeting in the café of the Hotel de Notre Dame in Paris that marked the birth of CoBrA, the museum in Palazzo

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Cipolla pays tribute to its explosive art, grounded on irrational spontaneity and free experimentation, with an extraordinary exhibition of works by its most illustrious members. The event enriches and extends the line of exhibitions devoted over the years to contemporary art – from Max Ernst and Malevič to Edward Hopper and The unrepeatable 1960s – and reaffirms the Foundation's commitment to art, to which, as Jorn put it, we can always turn for a response to life. Art does not indeed exist solely for delight in beauty but is a necessity for life and society, for individual growth».

Curated by Damiano Femfert and Francesco Poli, the exhibition comprises a broad and careful selection of paintings, sculptures, works on paper, publications, documents and photographs attesting to the activities of the movement's leading figures, including Jorn, Pedersen, Dotremont, Appel, Lucebert, Corneille, Alechinsky, Götz and Constant. The 150 works on show perfectly epitomize the freedom, daring, strength, power of colour and spontaneity of artistic form that characterize the production of CoBra. They include masterpieces like Karel Appel's *Begging Children* (1948), an evocation of the emaciated, starving children he saw during his travels through the areas most severely damaged in the Second World War; Asger Jorn's *Eine Cobra-Gruppe* (1964), a work never previously shown in Italy, which takes up the movement's recurrent animal theme; Corneille's *Habitants du Désert* (1951-1952), a work inspired by primitive art marking the transition to the post-CoBra phase; and *Ondes extrêmes* (1974-1979) by Pierre Alechinsky and Christian Dotremont, a splendid example of their joint production.

The works are on loan from 35 of the major European museums and collections in possession of the group's masterpieces, including the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, the CoBra Museum in Amstelveen, the Centre Pompidou in Paris, the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice, the Statens Museum for Kunst in Copenhagen, the Galleria civica d'arte moderna e contemporanea in Turin, the Kunstmuseum in Ravensburg, the Stedelijk

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Museum in Schiedam, DIE GALERIE in Frankfurt, the gallery historically associated with CoBrA, and the private collection and archives of Pierre Alechinsky, the last living member together with Karl Otto Götz.

The exhibition develops an acute art-historical and critical analysis highlighting the extraordinary transnational European vocation of CoBrA and its ability, even though it existed as an organized movement only from 1948 to 1951, to release and radiate an extraordinary creative energy that revolutionized the substance and form of art for decades. The few years of CoBrA were in fact for its often very young members the explosive point of departure for personal trajectories of great importance that the exhibition also seeks to examine.

The event is an opportunity to discover and grasp the parallels between the works of the major European movements and those of CoBrA – whose approach was grounded on a return to the inherent spontaneity and vitality of the artistic act, creation through the freedom of colour and form, and the rejection of any academicism – thus contributing to the development of a libertarian culture capable of overcoming nationalistic barriers and exercising a strong influence on contemporary art. The revolutionary spirit that guided the movement is encapsulated in the title of Constant's emblematic work *Après Nous la Liberté: After Us, Liberty*.

In the same venue in conjunction with the exhibition, the Fondazione Roma-Arte-Musei is organizing a series of thematic educational activities aimed at children from nursery, elementary, middle and high schools as well as families. These comprise initial contact with the works on show through guided visits for the different age groups and workshops on creativity in painting and sculpture as well as the freedom of colour and form typical of children's art, a focal point and source of inspiration for CoBrA. The rich programme for adults will include a series of lectures by experts on the movement and its art.

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The bilingual (Italian and English) catalogue published by Skira includes texts by Enrico Crispolti, Hilde De Bruijn, Emmanuele Francesco Maria Emanuele, Damiano Femfert, Peter Femfert, Rissa Götz, Jean-Clarence Lambert and Francesco Poli.

Trenitalia is the exhibition's official transport partner.

The Exhibition

The exhibition's opening section provides a general introduction to the expressive dimension of CoBrA with some large-sized works by leading members. Asger Jorn's *Eine Cobra-Gruppe* (1964) presents the recurrent animal theme (with birds, cats and dogs) to be found here also in Constant's *Femme qui a blessé un oiseau avec une feuille morte* (1949); Carl-Henning Pedersen's *Venezia ofrer til havet* | *Venice Making an Offering to the Sea* dated 1950 is lively example of the CoBrA style of an artist known as the «Chagall of the north»; *Ondes extrêmes* (1974-1979) is a joint work by Pierre Alechinsky and Christian Dotremont; Karel Appel's *Begging Children* (1948) has a second layer scratched into the canvas to express the free and creative spirit of children beneath the grim hues and the desperation of the stylized figures. Lucebert's *Giant Robber* (1962) is a powerful expression of the CoBrA poet's art. While Corneille's *La Ville* (1947) is a rare example of his early work, *La grande sinfonia solare* (1964) | *Great Solar Symphony* epitomizes his post-CoBrA production. K.O. Götz's *Stördö 8.11.1957* (1957), created and exhibited at the Venice Biennial, is splendid example of the evolution of an artist who became one of the leading figures in Art Informel after his experience with CoBrA.

The show continues with rooms focusing on the founding members of CoBrA, Corneille, Jorn, Appel and Constant, through a presentation of their most significant works, a compendium of painting and sculpture that traces the movement's evolution over the years. The space devoted to Corneille follows his transition from the rigorous handling of colour in the CoBrA period through the 1950s and '60s up to the explosion of sparkling

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colours and shapes in the '70s. The selection of Jorn's work begins with the period prior to the group's formation (*Gurkalit*, 1941) and continues through the CoBra years, with three works painted in the house in Bregnerød, to arrive at the sculptural phase in Albisola and the work of the 1950s and '60s. Appel presents an evolution of forms over the years from the early to the later periods, from more static figures towards movement and abstraction. Like all the other CoBra artists, however, he never completely embraced abstract art. The space devoted to Constant instead presents an important body of works, never previously shown in Italy, concentrating on the strictly CoBra period and thus constituting an ideal introduction to the parallel exhibition focusing exclusively on his later work at the Museo Reina Sofía in Madrid.

An entire room is devoted to CoBra drawings and magazines.

The drawings. CoBra regarded the immediate spontaneity of the expressive act and a direct relationship between physical and mental effort as the basis of creativity. In this sense, to a greater extent even than painting, it was drawing in various forms, including automatism, that offered the artists the most suitable medium to capture their visual ideas and the primal energy of the imagination with the utmost freshness and fluidity. The exhibition presents 23 works by different artists including the earthen hues of Corneille, Götz's *gouache*, a rare example of Jorn's *décollage* and Lucebert's lightness of touch.

The magazines. CoBra attached fundamental importance to publishing as regards the development of aesthetic and programmatic theories, the dissemination of literary and scientific texts, documentation for artists, above all of an iconographic nature, and the circulation of information on the group's shows and cultural activities. While the movement's major periodical was *Cobra*, the most important ventures include the «Bibliothèque CoBra» (1950), a series of monographic studies on members of the movement. The complete set of fifteen is on show here.

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The show ends with a simultaneously artistic and geographical section examining the movement's European ramifications.

Denmark with Carl-Henning Pedersen, the first to use the fantastic images of animals that were to become a hallmark of CoBrA, and Henry Heerup, whose sculptures display powerful primitive vigour. **The Netherlands** with Lucebert, who took part in the group above all as a poet, collaborated also on the creation of *pentures-mots* or «word paintings», and developed some of the graphic and pictorial work most closely linked to the CoBrA spirit. **Belgium** with Christian Dotremont – a writer, poet, artist, theorist and organizer of the CoBrA group together with Jorn – and Pierre Alechinsky, the major surviving painter of the Belgian group. **France** with the artists Jean-Michel Atlan and Jacques Doucet. **Germany** with Karl Otto Götz, the most important German figure in CoBrA and subsequently in Art Informel. **Britain** with Stephen Gilbert and William Gear. **Iceland** with Svavar Gudnason, described by Dotremont as the «most northern» member of CoBrA. **Italy** with Baj, Jorn and Gallizio. While there were, strictly speaking, no actual Italian members of CoBrA, great importance attaches to the relations established by Jorn during his long stays in Italy in the 1950s, especially in Albisola and Alba. It was together with Enrico Baj, the founder with Sergio Dangelo of the Gruppo dei Nucleari (1951), that he founded the Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus (1953). Equally significant is his collaboration with Giuseppe 'Pinot' Gallizio, with whom he created the Experimental Laboratory for an Imaginist Bauhaus in Alba, which then became a workshop for the Situationist International.

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CoBrA rejected any precise definition of style, from the rationality of geometric abstraction to the rhetoric of socialist realism, from the toned-down, formalistic modernism of the post-Cubism to the 'lyrical abstraction' of the Paris art scene. The artists attached crucial importance to direct immediacy and creative spontaneity, regarding automatism in writing and painting, free expression of the drives of desire and a focus on the energies of the imagination as the best weapons in the utopian battle of the avant-garde for liberation. Like the Surrealists but in a new and original way, they took a passionate interest in the primal forms and creative expressions of primitive peoples, children and outsiders, and were fascinated by the most authentic iconography of northern folklore and mythology. While the direct gestural tension and non-formal vitality of physical layers are fundamental components of their compositions, the CoBrA artists were never abstract. Their works gave birth to a world of grotesque and fabulous, violent and joyful, ironic and poetic, symbolic and imaginative primordial images. A world with explosions of bright colour and challenging forms populated by strange figures, distorted faces and fantastic animals such as threatening dogs, cats and birds. With their explosive vitality, the works of the CoBrA movement are always modern – suffice it to consider their continuing influence on numerous artists of the latest generations – but at the same time 'classical', the expression of an extraordinary creative period in 20th-century art.

While Jorn was a master of colour, which Dotremont described as a «scream on the painter's hand ... a cry of matter», the CoBrA artists succeeded in combining its impetuosity with the discovery of new materials such as acrylics, enamels, stucco, sand and mud worked with new tools like knives, spatulas and scrapers as well as brushes of up to a metre in size.

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Opening hours

Tuesday to Sunday: 11 a.m. to 8 p.m.

Closed on Mondays

Admission

Full price €12

Reduced price €10

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