

Werner Spies, Sabine Rewald, eds.. *Max Ernst: A Retrospective*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005. xvii + 301 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-300-10718-0.



Reviewed by Heather Mathews

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Max Ernst's sixty-year career was the subject of this year's major summer exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, which brought together some 180 of the Surrealist's paintings, sculptures, and works on paper. The catalog essays elaborate Ernst's sources and inspirations, his place within art history, his participation in the politics of the first part of the twentieth century, and the continued resonance of his work in the scope of contemporary art.

In her introductory chapter, Sabine Rewald sketches Ernst's life in broad strokes: his youthful experiments in expressionistic painting, his friendships with Hans Arp and August Macke, his participation in the first World War, his later collaborations with friends on Dada publications and exhibitions in Cologne, his multiple marriages. Ernst's various friendships are prominent points of orientation for Rewald; the artist she describes is an outgoing person who cultivated friends and lovers throughout his life, these associations forming the basis of his intimate participation in Surrealism in Paris. Ernst's friends were the first to buy his work and the first to write about it. And

yet, as the catalog's essays make clear, in spite of his close associations with the movement and his intense alliances with its members, Ernst was often somewhat detached from the mainstream of Surrealism.

Werner Spies is responsible for much of the existing scholarship on Ernst's life and work.[1] "Nightmare and Deliverance," the first of his two contributions in this catalog, combines biographical, iconographic, and technical information to describe a complex artistic career uniquely reflective of modernist art and life. Spies relates the artist's discovery of a catalog of educational tools, a source which inspired Ernst to remove its images from their original context and to combine them in evocative, often disturbing ways using collage. Spies writes that for Ernst, "collage itself, its fragmentation and displacement of images, evokes the catastrophe" of modern life (p. 8). Ernst formed a natural bridge between Dada and Surrealism, and Spies situates him as a vital force in Surrealism from the mid-1920s, stressing the innovative character of Ernst's experiments in the chance effects made possible by the techniques of

frottage, grattage, and decalomania. Finally, Spies traces the artist's work in New York during the 1940s and his eventual return to France in 1953, taking pains to note that in spite of Surrealism's impact on the New York School, Ernst's deliberate and calculated compositions had little to do with the spirit of Abstract Expressionism.

With "Max Ernst and Politics," Ludger Derenthal provides a reading of Ernst's life in terms of the artist's political involvements, responses to the First World War and to the rise of Fascism in Germany and France. In Paris, Ernst associated with dedicated Communists but did not join the party himself. He was in France without papers, and to do so might have meant drawing attention to his illegal status. Derenthal notes, however, that over the course of the 1930s Ernst came to consider himself an artist in exile, one of many in Paris. Ernst became involved with German émigrés such as the photographer Josef Breitenbach and the artist group Freier Künstlerbund, which staged the exhibition *Freie deutsche Kunst* in Paris in 1938. Derenthal ends on the failed project, *Germany of Yesterday--Germany of Tomorrow*, a visual survey of art under German fascism developed by a group of émigré artists and intellectuals that included Max Ernst. This series of informational panels was intended for the New York World's Fair in 1939, but the German government prevented it from being shown.

Thomas Gaehtgens' chapter "Max Ernst and the Great Master" sets out to demonstrate that Ernst's work is significantly informed by the artist's knowledge of art history. Beginning with a list of Ernst's favorite poets and painters published in the Surrealist magazine *View* in 1941, Gaehtgens traces his borrowing and modification of Old Master works by Dürer, Raphael, Grünewald, and others. In each case, the artist transforms the original completely so that it is far removed from its original context, and Gaehtgens relishes tracking down the various sources, as Werner Spies has done in earlier publications.

This exhaustive study of source and iconography of Ernst's artwork, Gaehtgens asserts, is necessary because although viewers "can certainly explore the bizarre world of his pictures without knowing his models, if they do, they will fail to appreciate the exciting creative process behind his inventions" (p. 37).

In perhaps the most engaging of the catalog's essays, "Present Conditional," Robert Storr meditates on *Une Semaine de Bonté*, originally published in 1934. By focusing on this volume, a parody of the Gothic novel told in anti-narrative collages, Storr is able to investigate the seamless transgressions of Ernst's imagery as well as the characteristics of the book as art. It is an intimate medium and, Storr argues, in the case of Ernst's books, all the more subversive in its tactics. To frame his study Storr pairs Ernst with Walter Benjamin, developing complementary themes relevant to both men: a skeptical view of the past, an intimate knowledge of and scorn for bourgeois culture, and, most significantly for Storr, a covetous love of books. What separates them, for the author, is humor. Where Ernst's work is fueled by a "cherubic mischief," Benjamin's—"even though it encompasses irony"—is "fundamentally humorless" (p. 55). This extended comparison allows Storr to create an evocative picture of the Surrealist moment.

Werner Spies's second essay, "Max Ernst in America: 'Vox Angelica,'" is a review of Ernst's time in the United States using the painting *Vox Angelica* (1943) as a touchstone. The painting is a multi-part composition, four canvases divided up into 51 separate rectangles, which Spies ties to a Parisian medium's prediction that Ernst would live 51 years. The author proposes Grünewald's Isenheim altarpiece as a possible inspiration for the title and emotional charge of this complex painting, and he traces the iconography and style of the various panels, finding links to earlier works by the artist in each one. *Vox Angelica* becomes an index of Max Ernst's work up to 1943. At

the same time, Spies writes that it offers multiple readings, as in a Gothic painting in which "the eye follows a winding trail without end, never able to find a fixed vanishing point, and as in them everything is presented with equal clarity and precision" (p. 73). In this way, too, the painting becomes a record of the artist's own life of movement across borders as a traveler and as an exile.

To trace the influence of Max Ernst on the art of the last twenty years, Pepe Karmel's article, "Terrors of the Encyclopedia: Max Ernst and Contemporary Art," first positions Ernst's fascination with the catalog of educational tools he acquired while still in Cologne within the history of the encyclopedia as a means towards the dissemination of knowledge. Where the encyclopedia orders things in neat categories, Ernst's collages break down those original classifications and, in doing so, create new meaning while disrupting the old. Karmel posits the photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher as Ernst's closest heirs in this regard. The Bechers's typologies of industrial buildings, homes, and other structures remove the subject from its surroundings, a strategy which Karmel suggests "make[s] their pictures more impressive but less informative" (p. 86) and thus, in the spirit of Ernst's work, undermines attempts at total apprehension. Karmel then tracks Ernst's deconstruction of beauty and the body, finding echoes of Ernst's "shattered fetish" (p. 99) in the work of Cindy Sherman, Robert Gober, and Kiki Smith, and concludes with a consideration of the effects of Ernst's technical innovations.

The writings collected in this catalog provide a broad sample of the complexities of Max Ernst's career, and the volume is illustrated with nearly all of the objects included in the exhibition. While it is a thorough and thoughtful record of Ernst's oeuvre, the quality of the reproductions is inconsistent and does not always do justice to the exquisite, often unsettling works themselves. Pictures in which Ernst applied frottage, for example, appear flattened so that the unique visual tex-

ture is unclear, and some illustrations are simply blurry, a disappointment in a catalog of this scope and documentary importance. This is especially true given the minute attention that painting and collage receive in the essays. Ernst's sculpture, by contrast, is nicely reproduced but is barely mentioned by the catalog's contributors. *Max Ernst: A Retrospective* is nevertheless an insightful documentation of one of the twentieth century's most compelling artists.

Note

[1]. See for example Werner Spies, *Max Ernst, Frottage* (Stuttgart: Hatje, 1986); *Max Ernst, Collagen: Inventar und Widerspruch* (Cologne: Dumont, 1988); Werner Spies and Karin von Maur, eds., *Max Ernst: A Retrospective* (Munich: Tate Gallery in association with Prestel, 1991); *Max Ernst: Sculptures, Maisons, Paysages* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou / Cologne: Dumont, 1998).

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