

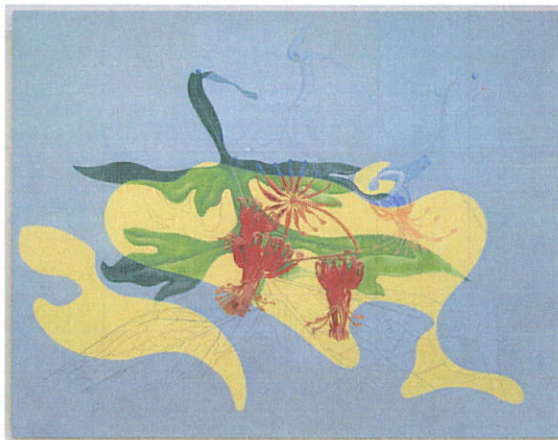
Max Ernst in the Garden of Nymph Ancolie

The Artist's Only Surviving Mural –
U.S. Unveiling of the Newly Restored Work

On view at The Menil Collection October 31, 2008 - February 15, 2009

Exhibition Preview: Thursday, October 30, 6:30 – 8:30 pm

Public Program: Tuesday, January 13, 2009, 7 pm:
A conversation with Menil director Josef Helfenstein
and art historian William A. Camfield



Pétales et jardin de la nymphe Ancolie (Mural), 1934

Houston, October 7, 2008 -- During the summer of 1934, German-born artist Max Ernst executed a mural for the Dancing Mascotte, the bar at Zürich's Corso Theatre. One of the largest painted works of the artist's seven-decade career, *Pétales et jardin de la nymphe Ancolie* (*Petals and Garden of Nymph Ancolie*) adorned a wall of the popular nightspot. Based on an illustration found in a Victorian-era botanical encyclopedia, the surrealist imagery features a dancing bird-like figure emerging from a lush backdrop of red and gold flower petals. Upon completion of the work, a writer for *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* observed: "Max Ernst has created a large fresco in the dancing area of the Corso ... Lines, curves, ornaments intertwine in multifarious ways and in an absolutely planar style ... It is an amusing, vivacious, cheerful ensemble..."

The newly restored work will form the centerpiece of the exhibition ***Max Ernst in the Garden of Nymph Ancolie***, organized by the Museum Tinguely, Basel, and supplemented in Houston by the Menil Collection's outstanding holdings of works by the artist. The only Ernst mural to have survived in its entirety, *Pétales et jardin de la nymphe Ancolie* stands today as an important example of the artist's work between the World Wars — a celebration of Europe's *joie de vivre* in an atmosphere of increasing political unrest and social hostility.

Curated by Menil director Josef Helfenstein with Assistant Curator Clare Elliott, ***Max Ernst in the Garden of Nymph Ancolie*** will showcase the mural as an essential focal point of Ernst's multifaceted body of work, while examining the artist's complex oeuvre by concentrating on themes and techniques developed during the interwar period. The exhibition will also place the Zurich mural in the context of Ernst's entire career, with special emphasis on work from the 1930s and 40s, years when he explored images of metamorphosis and nature's irreconcilable conflicts with culture and technology.

The mural's original nightclub environment took a toll on the work, which endured more than twenty years of raucous, smoky evenings -- as well as the bar's subsequent renovation. In the late 1950s the mural was cut from the wall, mounted on plywood panels, and relocated to Kunsthaus Zürich. After displaying the mural for nearly forty-five years, the museum undertook a joint effort with Basel's Museum Tinguely to return *Pétales et jardin de la nymphe Ancolie* to its original condition. For the past year, the mural has been the focus of an intensive restoration project at the Museum Tinguely (on public view in a conservation lab), then at the Kunsthaus Zürich, where the work was completed.

Opening at the Menil on October 31, the exhibition (the first the Menil has devoted to Ernst in more than 15 years) will examine nearly 120 rarely seen paintings, sculptures, prints, and drawings. While many are drawn from the Menil's extensive Ernst holdings, others are on loan from notable public and private collections, including the Art Institute of Chicago, the Museum of Modern Art, New York, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Max Ernst Museum in Bruhl, members of the de Menil family, and the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice.

The mural will focus attention on the subjects Ernst conceived during his militant 1920s Dada period in Cologne and developed through his surrealist endeavors in Paris. Echoing many of the anxiety-ridden sentiments of the era, Ernst's work continuously

puts humankind, nature, and the mechanized world at odds, often juxtaposing soft natural forms with the harshness of the modern age. In Ernst's 1935 series *Jardin gobe-avion*, for example, clusters of prehistoric vegetation consume airplane parts. In paintings such as *Éloge de la liberté (In Praise of Freedom)* and *Forêt (Forest)*, thick jungles of tree trunks nearly block out the sky and leave barely enough room on the canvas for a small isolated bird.

Central to the exhibition's narrative is Ernst's technical acumen. One of the great innovators of modern art, Ernst delighted in manipulating meaning through formal experimentation and adaptation of traditional and new artistic practices. Among these experiments were the autonomist and chance-based methods, such as rubbing techniques (like frottage) that Ernst developed in the mid 1920s and would use until his death in 1976. Included in the exhibition will be one of the artist's early publications, *Histoire Naturelle* (1926) -- a series of 34 colotype prints after frottage drawings that transform elements of the natural world into otherworldly shapes and forms.

Given the Menil's preeminent Ernst holdings – the result of a lifelong friendship between the artist and John and Dominique de Menil – the Houston museum is the ideal venue for the debut of the fully restored *Pétales et jardin de la nymphe Ancolie*. The de Menils met the artist for the first time, in Paris, in 1934 – the year Ernst completed the Zürich mural. That same year Ernst painted *Portrait of Dominique*, a work also included in the exhibition. The de Menils went on to host, in 1952, Ernst's first solo museum exhibition in the United States (at Houston's Contemporary Arts Association) and a retrospective exhibition in Paris in 1971. They also sponsored the ongoing catalogue raisonné of his work. In 1993, the Menil presented *Max Ernst: Dada and the Dawn of Surrealism*, conceived and organized by William A. Camfield, who joins Josef Helfenstein in a public program at the Menil on January 13 (details below). Said Helfenstein: "Shown along with some of the Menil's most important works by Max Ernst, the unveiling of the newly restored mural constitutes an art event of historical significance. It also marks a particularly exciting moment for the Menil, and for Houston, where this artist has always held a special place. We are very pleased to be the only U.S. venue for this extraordinary exhibition."

Max Ernst in the Garden of Nymph Ancolie will be on view at The Menil Collection until February 15, 2009. The exhibition was organized by Annja Müller Alsbach, curator, in collaboration with Werner Spies for the Museum Tinguely Basel, where it was presented from September 12, 2007—January 27, 2008.

PUBLIC PROGRAM

Tuesday, January 13, 2009, 7 pm
The Menil Collection, 1515 Sul Ross

ILLUSTRATED CONVERSATION

William A. Camfield and Josef Helfenstein

William A. Camfield, professor emeritus of art history at Rice University, has written extensively on Dada and Surrealism. His books include the critical biography *Francis Picabia* and the catalogue *Max Ernst: Dada and the Dawn of Surrealism*, which accompanied the 1993 exhibition at The Menil Collection and The Museum of Modern Art, New York. He and Josef Helfenstein, director of The Menil Collection, discuss Ernst's newly restored mural *Pétales et jardin de la nymphe Ancolie*, 1934, within the context of the artist's career.

This exhibition is generously supported by The Brown Foundation, Inc., The Eleanor and Frank Freed Foundation, Consulate General of the Federal Republic of Germany at Houston, Favez Sarofim & Company, HOK and by the City of Houston.

Photo Caption:

Max Ernst

Pétales et jardin de la nymphe Ancolie (Mural),
1934

Oil on plaster transferred to block board panels
163 ½ x 209 inches

Credit Line: Kunsthaus Zürich,
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