

# GUGGENHEIM BILBAO

Press release



The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao presents on February 2, 2018

## **Henri Michaux: The Other Side**

## *Henri Michaux: The Other Side*

- Dates: February 2 to May 13, 2018
  - Curator: Manuel Cirauqui
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- Via more than 200 pieces, documents, and artist's objects, the show offers an overview divided into three major thematic areas: the human figure, the alphabet, and the altered psyche.
  - Fundamental series like black backgrounds, *frottages*, movements, and mescaline-induced drawings are broadly represented in this show, including works that have never before been exhibited.
  - The exhibition underscores the artist's unflagging interest in the sciences, musicology, and ethnography.
  - Michaux experimented with hallucinogenic substances in an ascetic, systematic spirit in order to observe the way the mind behaves under experimental conditions.
  - Both his graphic and his literary works ensconced Michaux as an early doyen of the dawning psychedelic culture and underground mysticism.

The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao presents *Henri Michaux: The Other Side*, an exhibition which brings together a prominent set of works by an unclassifiable figure of the arts and literature of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Over the course of his long life, Henri Michaux (Namur, Belgium, 1899–Paris, France, 1984) greatly influenced the artists and writers of his time, both as a “poets’ poet” and a “painters’ painter”, lionized by figures in both fields like André Gide and Francis Bacon.

Michaux feverishly produced thousands of works on paper whose full extent is only now becoming apparent. This exhibition, organized in collaboration with the Michaux Archives in Paris, covers sixty years of Michaux's creative activity, focusing on his most important periods and series. Bringing together some 230 of the artist's pieces, documents and objects, *Henri Michaux: The Other Side* is organized around three principal themes, offering a panoramic view of each: the human figure, the alphabet and the altered psyche.

While highlighting the parallels and convergences among these three themes, the exhibition underscores this artist's unflagging interest in science, musicology, and ethnography. Some of Michaux's fundamental series, like the *fonds noirs* (black backgrounds), the *frottages* (rubblings), the *mouvements* (movements), and the *dessins mescaliniens* (mescaline drawings), are amply represented in this show, which includes works never exhibited before. The exhibition will be accompanied by a catalogue which includes heretofore unpublished

texts in Spanish and Basque by Henri Michaux and the neurologist from Bilbao, Julián de Ajuriaguerra, the artist's associate in the 1950's and a key Basque figure in psychiatry who died 25 years ago.

### **Gallery 305: Apparitions and "phantomism"**

An indefatigable experimenter and traveler, Michaux entered the world of painting thanks to the works of Paul Klee and Max Ernst, with whom he first came into contact in the early 1920s. The writer's tools, ink and paper, were his first resources in the pictorial adventure, but he soon developed techniques that are now regarded as characteristic of his work, such as gouache on a black background and the use of frottage. In his later period he worked in oil and acrylic. He also made singular use of watercolor and ink on many different types of paper. These techniques had the common feature of fluidity and a propensity for accidents and overflowing, both desirable for an artist who always sought the intervention of chance in his works as a way of collaborating with unknown forces. With an ascetic and systematic spirit, the same impulse prompted Michaux to try hallucinogenic substances in order to observe the behavior of the conscience in experimental conditions. In this way, he took the principles of his painting to the senses themselves. For Michaux, painting is that other side of which the artist draws an infinite map.

To use his own words, Michaux always painted "to surprise himself." He never believed in predefined results, but rather sought to provoke indefinable events in his material, causing the emergence of ambiguous and unexpected figures, signs, and landscapes. In a celebrated statement on "the phenomenon of painting" in which he denied affiliation to any school or tendency, he admitted that the only movement he might be ascribed to would be *fantomisme* ('phantomism'): an art of ghosts and apparitions. Undefined beings thus appear throughout all his work, with a special abundance of imaginary portraits. Focusing on this classic genre, this gallery contains a wide selection of works in which Michaux's figures come out of the infinite depth of the paper to meet the artist and the viewer.

### **Gallery 306: The life of signs**

Calligraphic experimentation accounts for a vast portion of Michaux's graphic output. Fascinated by Eastern scripts, and above all by Chinese ideograms, the artist worked from the beginning on the creation of invented alphabets with no phonetic or semantic correlation. These signs, Michaux said, are an always incomplete poetry, a literature of gesture and impulse, and the dance of the penstroke. At the same time, the flurry of strokes follows a continuous rhythmic principle: each drawing is at once an explosion and a current, a "journey" in many different directions. Michaux cultivated his interest in pictographic scripts at the same time as he developed his passion for sound rhythms and patterns. Although he was a keen amateur musician, no document remains of his musical practice except for his drawings, which sometimes look like scores. In these works we find an abstract and intimate literature where the signs are figures in constant mutation. On many occasions these signs appear as separate letters, while at other times they develop animal or totemic features; in still further cases, like the period of experimentation with psychoactive substances in the 1950s and 1960s, the lines multiply over large areas of paper, acquiring connotations that align them with the practices of Abstract Expressionism.

### **Gallery 307: Manipulating the psyche**

In 1955, at a mature age, Michaux took part for the first time in an experiment with mescaline, an alkaloid extracted from the Mexican cactus known as *peyote*. Michaux was assisted for the purpose by doctors and scientists close to the literary world, including a neurologist from Bilbao, Julián de Ajuriaguerra. Dazzled by the psychic and sensorial mutations caused by this and other psychoactive substances, such as psilocybin and LSD 25, Michaux underwent numerous sessions up to the early 1960s, reflecting them in such well-known literary works as *Miserable Miracle* and *Infinite Turbulence*. At the same time, he produced a large number of minute drawings following a graphic matrix already intuited in previous years. This was a pattern of furrows and arborescences, often ascending, saturated with symmetries and micrographs.

Both these graphic works and his literary output brought Michaux to prominence as a doyen of the incipient psychedelic culture and the underground mystique, although he always insisted on defining himself as a sober “water drinker” with no interest whatsoever in artificial paradises. In the years after he stopped experimenting with chemicals, Michaux continued to develop a “mescaline” style while working at the same time on his other series and his great artistic obsessions. In all of them he found fertile ground for the cartography of the imagination.

### **Didaktika**

As part of the Didaktika project, sponsored by BBK, the Museum designs didactic spaces and special activities that complement each exhibition and provide tools and resources that help enhance viewers’ appreciation and understanding of the works displayed.

### **Experiences that stimulate body and mind. The long journey towards self-knowledge**

From a young age, Henri Michaux strived to understand his own nature and the nature of the world that surrounded him. His life and work were based on a constant process of self-exploration. Therefore, this didactic space offers a survey of some of the stimuli that guided the artist along his journey towards self-knowledge. Visitors can experiment with language and words, and they can also improvise with musical instruments like the ones Michaux collected—such as the tam-tam and the kalimba—while listening to background melodies similar to the ones Michaux discovered on his journeys.

In a complementary fashion, an audiovisual screening recalls Michaux’s experiments with mescaline, and a major section is devoted to reading, where visitors can peruse a selection of writings by Michaux himself—poetry, travel journals, and short stories—as well as a selection of texts by other authors associated with his work, including Jorge Luis Borges and Octavio Paz.

## Activities

- Lecture on Julián de Ajuriaguerra and Henri Michaux (February 22)

Joseba Mikel Aguirre Oar, disciple of Julián de Ajuriaguerra, will talk about the psychiatrist's relationship with Henri Michaux. Ajuriaguerra, who was born in Bilbao, helped Michaux take mescaline in a controlled fashion for his poetic experiments, which he later recounted in his book *Miserable Miracle*.

- Recital of texts by Henri Michaux (April 26)

Michaux's written oeuvre played a major role in his artistic career. A literary evening with the poetry reciters from *Poetalia*, who will delight us with their readings of a selection of travel journals, poetry, and short stories by Michaux.

- Creative process: Marie Chouinard and dance in Henri Michaux (May 4)

The renowned Canadian choreographer Marie Chouinard will share the secrets of the contemporary dance piece that she created for her Montreal-based dance company, inspired by the Henri Michaux series *Movements* (1952).

- Shared reflections

Unique tours by Museum professionals on the exhibitions, the behind-the-scenes setup process, and other curiosities.

- Curatorial vision: Henri Michaux (February 14)

With Manuel Cirauqui, curator of the exhibition

- Key concepts: Henri Michaux (February 21)

With Luz Maguregui, Education Coordinator of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao

\*Sponsored by the Fundación Vizcaína Aguirre.

## Catalogue

The exhibition is accompanied by an illustrated catalogue featuring an essay by the exhibition curator, as well as selected writings by Henri Michaux, and an essay by prestigious neurologist from Bilbao Julián de Ajuriaguerra, who collaborated with the artist in key moments of the latter's career. With a high historical value, these texts will be published for the first time in Spanish and Basque.

## Cover image:

Henri Michaux

*Untitled*, 1981

Acrylic, India ink and pencil on paper

500x650 mm

Private collection

**For more information:**

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Complete information about the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao is available at [www.guggenheim-bilbao.es](http://www.guggenheim-bilbao.es)  
(press room).

Images for press usage  
*Henri Michaux: The Other Side*  
Guggenheim Museum Bilbao

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For further information, please contact the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao Press Department: tel. +34 944 35 90 08 and email: [media@guggenheim-bilbao.es](mailto:media@guggenheim-bilbao.es)

1. Henri Michaux

*Untitled*, 1938

Watercolor and gouache on black paper

230 x 305 mm

Private collection



2. Henri Michaux

*Untitled*, 1944

India ink on paper

240 x 320 mm

Private collection



3. Henri Michaux

*Untitled*, 1950

India ink on paper (honeycomb)

320 x 240 mm

Private collection



4. Henri Michaux

*Untitled*, 1956

India ink and pencil on paper

240 x 162 mm

Private collection



5. Henri Michaux

*Untitled*, 1970

Watercolor and acrylic on paper

560 x 375 mm

Private collection



6. Henri Michaux

*Untitled*, 1980

India ink on Japanese paper

207 x 702 mm

Private collection



7. Henri Michaux

*Untitled*, 1981

Acrylic, India ink and pencil on paper

500 x 650 mm

Private collection



8. Henri Michaux

*Untitled*, 1981

Watercolor on paper

367 x 270 mm

Private collection

