

Pierre Alechinsky, a print retrospective : an exhibition

Organized by the Museum of Modern Art, New York

Author

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PIERRE ALECHINSKY

A PRINT RETROSPECTIVE



An exhibition organized by The Museum of Modern Art,
New York

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INTRODUCTION

The following notes present Alechinsky's activities and the circumstances of his life with special reference to his career in printmaking. Fortunately the painter began as a student of book illustration and printmaking, so that this retrospective exhibition of his printed work covers his stylistic development from the beginning through nearly every phase of his career.

Alechinsky was born in Brussels, the city indelibly associated with James Ensor, on October 19, 1927. Both parents were doctors: his father, a Russian Jew, and his mother, who was part Walloon, part Lorraine. An aunt painted.

During World War II in occupied Brussels, Alechinsky studied clarinet until a rocket destroyed his teacher's house.

In 1944 he entered La Cambre, the national college of architecture and decorative arts where, in 1945, he began to study printmaking.

Between 1946 and 1948 he worked in all the print media he was to use: linoleum cut, woodcut, etching, and lithography. Forced to write with his right hand, he used his preferred left hand for drawing, printmaking, and painting. Influenced by Derain's color woodcuts for *Pantagruel*, Alechinsky created a series of color linocuts illustrating some of Aesop's fables. The series of etchings *Trades* (1948), with text by Luc de Heusch, was the first of many collaborations with a living writer.

In 1949 he married Michèle Dendal, established with friends the Ateliers du Marais in Brussels, and met the writer Christian Dotremont, who that year organized the first exhibition of the COBRA group (artists and writers from Copenhagen, Brussels, and Amsterdam), which Alechinsky joined. Alechinsky's participation in the activities of the COBRA group was primarily organizational, preparing publications and exhibitions.

When COBRA dissolved in 1951, he received a grant to study at Atelier 17 in Paris, the etching and engraving workshop of S.W. Hayter. With many Americans who had worked in the New York Atelier 17, Alechinsky contributed to the publication *21 Etchings and Poems*.

In 1953 he showed his prints in the São Paulo Bienal and the following year held his first one-man show in Paris.

His acquaintance with the Chinese artist Walasse Ting in 1954 led to interest in Oriental calligraphy, a trip to Japan to make a film on the subject, and a six-year period during which he made no prints.

In 1960 he returned to printmaking in order to illustrate a book with text by his friend Christian Dotremont. Over the next few years his lithographs and etchings often contained written remarks in the manner of cartoons.

In 1962 he learned a new form of lift-ground etching from Renato Volpini (printer for Graphico Uno, Rome) that permitted freer and more direct drawing in this medium. The sculptor Reinhold revealed to Alechinsky a new image: the spiral peelings from oranges. Ting brought Pop artists and former COBRAs together in 1964 as illustrators for his book *It's Life*.

In 1965 Alechinsky visited Mexico, where he saw Mayan friezes. He began to work in acrylic on paper, which he pasted

onto canvas. He painted Central Park in New York, the first work to be framed with marginal drawings. (The lithograph *Amsterdam* is an embryonic form of this style.) Exhibitions of his prints increased in the mid-sixties. (A memorable one in Amsterdam, for which the artist had to supply titles for most of the works, evolved into *The Test of the Title*, a series of six plates with titles by sixty-one friends and acquaintances.)

In 1967 he began printing on old deeds, later on worthless stock certificates (*Crash*) and on bank notes. (Alechinsky's interest in fine old paper had begun with a gift from Dotremont in 1958.)

Inspired by Malcolm Lowry's novel *Under the Volcano*, Alechinsky introduced the idea of volcanic activity in his prints in 1968. After viewing a real volcano in the Canary Islands in 1969 he created *Vulcanalogies* (1970) and *Vulcanalyses* (1971).

In 1972 further collaboration with Dotremont combined the poet's logograms and the artist's borders.

The year 1973 brought the deaths of his father and spiritual father (Asger Jorn), and the publication of the complete catalog of his prints by Yves Rivière. Wheels, reels, and infinite circling were subjects of prints beginning in 1971 (*Rural Wheel*) and continuing with the series *Reels* (1972) and *Cerclitude* (1973-74).

Similar circular motifs, in the manner of Japanese han (seals), were introduced into his etchings in 1976. That year two American landmarks were the subject of etchings: Central Park, in an album and book documenting the pivotal painting of 1965; and Niagara Falls, in massive scroll-like compositions on tissue-thin Japanese paper.

During the seventies posters for his many exhibitions in all media and for nearly every friendly request were created in two forms: with the printed message and with a new image replacing it within the same border (*Exprmntl, Darmstadt*).

Often the laureate of international exhibitions, in 1977 Alechinsky was awarded the Andrew W. Mellon prize in Pittsburgh, perhaps the largest award (accompanied by a retrospective exhibition) given in recent history to an artist.

With his assistant of a dozen years, the artist Jean Clerté, Alechinsky continues to retrieve from his crowded past and bustling present the astonishing images that inhabit his prints. No other contemporary artist has devoted more energy, technical skill, imagination, and patience to the print media. Since his first print in 1946, Alechinsky has created nearly 950 works in the various print media. Even when the theme is prescribed by a specific occasion, the compositions formed by Alechinsky spring from an alien world that taunts and enchants. The heir of Ensor's vision entrances us with the symbols of his own past and reminds us of our own subconscious fascination with improbable terrors.

R.C.

The exhibition was organized by Riva Castleman, Director, and Audrey Isselbacher, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Prints and Illustrated Books, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1979. They gratefully acknowledge the assistance of the artist and Yves Rivière.

Illuminated Page with logogram by Christian Dotremont. 1972. Lithograph, 30 x 22 $\frac{1}{8}$ ".



CATALOG

All works are from the collection of The Museum of Modern Art and, unless otherwise noted, are gifts of the artist. Dates enclosed in parentheses do not appear on the works. Dimensions are given in inches, height preceding width, plate or composition size.

1. *The Cat and the Rooster* from the portfolio *Aesop's Fables*. 1946. Monoprint linoleum cut, $5\frac{1}{2} \times 6\frac{7}{8}$ ".
- 2—7. *Trades*. Brussels, l'Ecole Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture et des Arts, 1948. Text, "Exercice de lecture," by Luc de Heusch (Zangrie). Six etchings, aquatints, and drypoints; title page: $3\frac{7}{8} \times 3\frac{7}{8}$ ", plates: $5\frac{5}{16} \times 4$ ".
8. *Loudspeaker*. 1950. Lithograph, $6\frac{7}{16} \times 6\frac{3}{16}$ ".
9. "Was It Snowing?" with poem by Christian Dotremont (1952) from *21 Etchings and Poems*. New York, The Morris Gallery, 1960. Etching and aquatint, $13\frac{11}{16} \times 9\frac{11}{16}$ ". Gift of Mrs. Jacquelynn Shlaes.
10. *The Shadows* (1952) from the portfolio *Hayterophilia* (1952-53). Etching and aquatint, $8\frac{3}{4} \times 10\frac{3}{8}$ ".
11. *Something of a World*. (1952). Etching and engraving, $9\frac{3}{4} \times 13\frac{3}{4}$ ".
12. *My Advice to You*. 1961. Lithograph, $13 \times 19\frac{1}{8}$ ".
13. *Where Was I?* 1961. Etching and aquatint, $5\frac{7}{8} \times 4\frac{7}{16}$ ".
14. *Fumes*. 1961. Etching, $7\frac{7}{8} \times 5\frac{13}{16}$ ".
15. *Grass-Snake*. (1962). Etching, $9\frac{3}{8} \times 7$ ".
16. *Pleasant Surrounding*. 1962. Etching, $9\frac{7}{16} \times 7\frac{1}{8}$ ".
17. *A Wind of Madness*. 1963. Lithograph, $18\frac{1}{16} \times 23\frac{1}{4}$ ".
18. *No Progress!* 1964. Etching and aquatint, $17\frac{7}{16} \times 13\frac{9}{16}$ ".
19. *Seen in Profile, Sticking out Tongue*. 1964. Lithograph, $8\frac{3}{16} \times 15\frac{3}{8}$ ".
20. Untitled V from *I & Life* by Walasse Ting. Zürich, Kornfeld, 1964. Lithograph, $14\frac{9}{16} \times 21\frac{5}{16}$ ". Gift of Walasse Ting.
21. *Amsterdam*. 1965. Lithograph, $17\frac{5}{8} \times 21\frac{3}{4}$ ".
- 22—23. Plates V and VI from the portfolio *The Test of the Title*. 1966. Etchings, $15\frac{1}{4} \times 19$ ". Mr. and Mrs. E. Powis Jones Fund.
24. *One Stone, Two Passes*. (1967). Lithograph, $18\frac{3}{8} \times 24\frac{1}{2}$ ". Martha Dickinson Fund.
25. *Three Rebels*. 1967. Etching, $13\frac{1}{4} \times 19\frac{3}{16}$ ".
26. *The Dots without the i's*. 1967. Etching and drypoint, $15\frac{3}{8} \times 19\frac{1}{4}$ ".
27. *Rhesus Factor*. 1967. Etching and aquatint, $20\frac{5}{8} \times 27\frac{3}{16}$ ".
28. *Optical Illusion*. 1967. Lithograph, $19\frac{9}{16} \times 25\frac{7}{8}$ ".
29. *Port*. 1968. Lithograph, $19 \times 25\frac{9}{16}$ ".
30. *Starboard*. 1968. Lithograph, $19\frac{1}{4} \times 25\frac{13}{16}$ ".
31. *Under the Volcano*. 1968. Lithograph, $25\frac{3}{8} \times 40\frac{5}{8}$ ".
32. *A Right to Look*. 1968. Etching and aquatint, $19\frac{3}{8} \times 25\frac{3}{4}$ ".
33. *Lookout Post*. 1968. Etching, $15\frac{5}{8} \times 19\frac{1}{2}$ ".
34. *Interrogation Site*. 1970. Etching and offset, $19\frac{11}{16} \times 25\frac{7}{16}$ ".
35. *Sun Slit Throat*. 1970. Etching, aquatint, and lithograph, $21\frac{1}{2} \times 29\frac{11}{16}$ ".
- 36—38. Plates I, III, and IV from the portfolio *Vulcanalogies*. 1970. Lithographs, I: $22\frac{3}{16} \times 17$ ", III: $21\frac{7}{8} \times 16\frac{3}{4}$ ", IV: $22 \times 16\frac{15}{16}$ ".
39. *Rattleless Snake*. 1971. Etching and lithograph, $23\frac{15}{16} \times 35$ ".

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40. Plate II from the series *Vulcanalyses*. 1971. Etching, 15 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 27 $\frac{1}{8}$ ".
 41. *Rural Wheel*. 1971. Lithograph, 24 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 18 $\frac{1}{4}$ ".
 42. *Illuminated Page* with logogram by Christian Dotremont. 1972. Lithograph, 30 x 22 $\frac{7}{8}$ ".
 43. *Seismographic Brew* with logogram by Christian Dotremont. 1972. Offset, 30 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 22 $\frac{1}{4}$ ".
 - 44—45. Plates I and IV from the series *Reels*. 1972. Etchings, 19 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 15 $\frac{5}{8}$ ".
 46. *Precanceled Plate*. 1972. Etching, 15 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 19 $\frac{5}{8}$ ".
 - 47—48. Plates V and IX from *L'Avenir de la Propriété* by Pierre Alechinsky. Geneva, Centre de Gravure Contemporaine, 1972. Etchings and lithographs, 11 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 9 $\frac{1}{2}$ ".
 49. Plate from the portfolio *Ceremonial Labyrinths*. (1972-73). Lithograph, 29 $\frac{7}{16}$ x 20 $\frac{11}{16}$ ".
 50. Plate from the portfolio *With the Grain of the Wood*. (1973). Woodcut, 19 $\frac{13}{16}$ x 23 $\frac{5}{8}$ ".
 51. Plate I from the portfolio *Crash* (Krach). (1973). Etching and collage, 19 $\frac{11}{16}$ x 15 $\frac{13}{16}$ ".
 - 52—54. Plates III, IX, and X from *Cerclitude* by Pierre Alechinsky. Rome, 2RC, 1973-74. Etchings, 11 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 7 $\frac{7}{8}$ ".
 55. *Düsseldorf*. (1974). Lithograph and etching, 28 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 19 $\frac{11}{16}$ ".
 56. *Darmstadt*. (1974). Lithograph and etching, 30 $\frac{11}{16}$ x 22 $\frac{5}{16}$ ".
 57. *Exprmntl.* (1974). Lithograph and etching, 30 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 22 $\frac{3}{16}$ ".
 58. *Veiled Like a Young Bride*. 1975. Lithograph and etching, 23 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 30".
 59. *Open Letter*. 1975. Lithograph, 29 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 20 $\frac{1}{2}$ ".
 60. *Full Page*. 1976. Etching, 37 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 23 $\frac{1}{8}$ ".
 61. *Direct Line*. 1976. Etching, 19 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 29 $\frac{5}{16}$ ".
 62. *Natural Border*. (1976). Etching, 28 $\frac{15}{16}$ x 19 $\frac{3}{4}$ ".
 63. *Blue Falls*. 1976. Etching, 37 x 24 $\frac{1}{2}$ ".
 64. *Breakwater*. 1976. Etching, 25 x 36 $\frac{5}{8}$ ".
 65. *Eau Forte*. 1976. Etching, 24 $\frac{5}{16}$ x 36 $\frac{11}{16}$ ".
 66. *Armored Hat*. 1976. Etching and lithograph, 23 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 33".
 67. *Monkey Business II*. 1976. Etching and photo-engraving, 6 $\frac{11}{16}$ x 10 $\frac{5}{8}$ ".
 - 68—70. Plates II, III, and IV from the series *Boreality*. 1976. Lithographs and etchings, II: 28 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 21 $\frac{5}{16}$ ", III: 29 x 21 $\frac{1}{4}$ ", IV: 29 $\frac{5}{16}$ x 21 $\frac{5}{16}$ ".
 - 71—74. *Central Park* by Jean-Clarence Lambert. Paris, Yves Rivière Editeur, 1976. Four etchings and lithographs, I: 19 $\frac{7}{16}$ x 25 $\frac{7}{8}$ ", II: 18 $\frac{15}{16}$ x 25 $\frac{13}{16}$ ", III: 18 $\frac{15}{16}$ x 25 $\frac{1}{16}$ ", IV: 18 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 25 $\frac{3}{16}$ ".
 - 75—77. *Par Expérience* by Yves Bonnefoy. Paris, Editions F.B., 1976. Three hand-colored collotypes, I: 14 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 10 $\frac{9}{16}$ ", II: 14 $\frac{5}{16}$ x 10 $\frac{1}{4}$ ", III: 14 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 10 $\frac{7}{8}$ ".
 - 78—79. Plates V and VI from the series *Windows*. 1977. Lithographs and etchings, V: 38 $\frac{7}{16}$ x 24 $\frac{1}{4}$ ", VI: 38 $\frac{5}{16}$ x 24".
 80. *Parapet-walk*. 1977. Lithograph and linoleum cut, 23 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 35 $\frac{3}{8}$ ".
 81. *Under the Volcano*. 1977. Lithograph, 28 $\frac{9}{16}$ x 21 $\frac{1}{8}$ ".
 82. *Parapet*. 1977. Etching, 38 x 23 $\frac{9}{16}$ ".
 83. *Continued Articles*. 1978. Etching, 20 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 27 $\frac{7}{16}$ ".
 84. *With Two Brushes*, collaboration with Karel Appel. 1978. Etching, 22 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 29 $\frac{3}{4}$ ".