Pierre Alechinsky, a print retrospective: an exhibition
Organized by the Museum of Modern Art, New York

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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 Lorainean. 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 Michele 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 Sao Paulo Bienal and the following year held his first one-man show in Paris.

His acquaintance with the Chinese artist Walasse Ting led him 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 Watteau and Auden. The sculptor Reinhoud revealed to Alechinsky a new image: the spiral peel of a potato. Alechinsky 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.)


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 Riviere. Wheels, reels, and infinite circling were subjects of prints beginning in 1971 (Rural Wheel) and continuing with the series Reels (1972) and Circumference (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 1966; 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 (Expression, Darmstadt).

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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 Clerc, 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 symphony of 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 Riviere.
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 ½ x 6 ¾".


8. Loudspeaker. 1950. Lithograph, 6 ⅜ x 6 ⅜".


10. The Shadows (1952) from the portfolio Hayterophilia (1952-53). Etching and aquatint, 8 ¼ x 10 ¾".


12. My Advice to You. 1961. Lithograph, 13 x 19 ¾".


14. Fumes. 1961. Etching, 7 ⅞ x 5 ¾".

15. Grass-Snake. (1962). Etching, 9 ¼ x 7 ½".

16. Pleasant Surrounding. 1962. Etching, 9 ⅞ x 7 ⅞".

17. A Wind of Madness. 1963. Lithograph, 18 ¼ x 23 ¼".

18. No Progress! 1964. Etching and aquatint, 17 ¼ x 13 ¾".

19. Seen in Profile, Sticking out Tongue. 1964. Etching and engraving, 9 ¾ x 13 ¾".


21. Amsterdam. 1965. Lithograph, 17 ½ x 21 ¼".

22—23. Plates V and VI from the portfolio The Test of the Title. 1966. Etchings, 15 ¼ x 19 ¼". Mr. and Mrs. E. Powis Jones Fund.


25. Three Rebels. 1967. Etching, 13 ¼ x 19 ½".

26. The Dots without the i's. 1967. Etching and drypoint, 15 ¼ x 19 ¼".

27. Rhesus Factor. 1967. Etching and aquatint, 20 ⅝ x 27 ¾".


29. Port. 1968. Lithograph, 19 x 25 ¾".

30. Starboard. 1968. Lithograph, 19 ¼ x 25 ¼".

31. Under the Volcano. 1968. Lithograph, 25 ¾ x 40 ⅞".

32. A Right to Look. 1968. Etching and aquatint, 19 ½ x 25 ¼".

33. Lookout Post. 1968. Etching, 15 ½ x 19 ½".

34. Interrogation Site. 1970. Etching and offset, 19 ½ x 25 ¾".

35. Sun Slit Throat. 1970. Etching, aquatint, and lithograph, 21 ½ x 29 ⅞".


39. Rattleless Snake. 1971. Etching and lithograph, 23 ½ x 35".
40. Plate II from the series Vulcanalyses. 1971. Etching, 15\% x 27\%".

41. Rural Wheel. 1971. Lithograph, 24\% x 18\%".

42. Illuminated Page with logogram by Christian Dotremont. 1972. Lithograph, 30 x 22\%".

43. Seismographic Brew with logogram by Christian Dotremont. 1972. Offset, 30\% x 22\%".

44—45. Plates I and IV from the series Reels. 1972. Etchings, 19\% x 15\%".

46. Precancelled Plate. 1972. Etching, 15\% x 19\%".


49. Plate from the portfolio Ceremonial Labyrinths. (1972-73). Lithograph, 29\%16 x 20\%16".

50. Plate from the portfolio With the Grain of the Wood. (1973). Woodcut, 19\%16 x 15\%16".

51. Plate I from the portfolio Crash (Krach). (1973). Etching and collage, 19\%16 x 15\%16".


56. Darmstadt. (1974). Lithograph and etching, 30\% x 22\%16".

57. Experimental. (1974). Lithograph and etching, 30\% x 22\%16".

58. Veiled Like a Young Bride. 1975. Lithograph and etching, 23\% x 30".

59. Open Letter. 1975. Lithograph, 29\% x 20\%16".

60. Full Page. 1976. Etching, 37\% x 23\%".

61. Direct Line. 1976. Etching, 19\% x 29\%16".


63. Blue Falls. 1976. Etching, 37 x 24\%16".

64. Breakwater. 1976. Etching, 25 x 36\%".

65. Eau Forte. 1976. Etching, 24\% x 36\%16".

66. Armored Hat. 1976. Etching and lithograph, 23\% x 33".

67. Monkey Business II. 1976. Etching and photo-engraving, 6\%16 x 10\%".


