

ANDRÉ MASSON

THE MYTHOLOGY OF DESIRE:
MASTERWORKS FROM 1925 TO 1945

BLAIN|DI DONNA

981 Madison Avenue
New York, NY 10075

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*"Painful contradictions are sometimes
the source of the greatest riches."*
André Masson



André Masson, Portrait du poète Heinrich von Kleist, 1939,
Oil on canvas, 21 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 15 in (55 x 38 cm)

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Blain|Di Donna is delighted to present its second exhibition, *André Masson, The Mythology of Desire: Masterworks from 1925 to 1945*. Bringing together paintings and works on paper created during one of the most important periods of the artist's career, this is the largest and most comprehensive survey of Masson's art to be exhibited in New York since the 1976 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

André Masson was an initial component of the Surrealist movement from 1925-28 (and again in the late 1930s), closely associating with artists and writers such as André Breton, Joan Miró and Georges Bataille. From his early Cubist paintings to his late calligraphic abstract works, Masson's elusive stylistic developments situate him beyond simple categorization. The artist is best known for his contribution to automatic painting, a Surrealist practice which embraced chance and the unknown, and for his vibrant abstract compositions, bold use of line and form and innovative employment of materials, including sand and collage. His process of automatic painting went on to deeply influence the New York School of Abstract Expressionists, in particular Jackson Pollock. Recurring throughout his oeuvre is the relationship between violence and the erotic, explorations which are eloquently presented in this remarkable exhibition.

Comprising more than 30 works, the show reveals Masson's extraordinary imagination, as each canvas and drawings is imbued with poetic imagery and symbolic content. His wartime encounters with violence are evident throughout, with motifs which emblemize his time spent in the trenches of the First World War, where he was badly wounded. This experience had an enduring influence on his work, as witnessed in *Le Rêve du prisonnier* (1924). Here, a solitary man sits within a twisted matrix of Piranesian architectural fragments; a dove appears to fall from the sky while a pomegranate – a recurring form in Masson's work – explodes, the fragile and raw red flesh becoming exposed.

Among the many Surrealist masterpieces featured in this exhibition is the early work *Jeune fille soufflant sur le feu* (1927), where undulating calligraphic lines draw out a delicate profile, contrasting with heavy patches of impasto upon a near monochrome ground. Painting is dismantled and reformulated to enable abstraction to marry with the diagrammatic.

Masson's subjects, be they human, animal or vegetal, often appear in the midst of violent mythological environments. Alongside one of the exhibition's centrepieces, *Portrait du poète Heinrich von Kleist* (1939), is another work from the same year, *Métamorphoses* (1939); insects, serpents, fish and birds coexist alongside the exposed bones and organs of a decaying skeleton. Unity between man, nature and the cosmos is implied, while offering a unique visual reference for psychological or metaphysical change.

Masson was greatly influenced by his time in Spain – where he moved in 1935. He was drawn to the spectacle of the bullfight, which he brilliantly captures in *Corrida au soleil* (1936). In another work from this period, *Aube à Montserrat* (1935), blazing suns and faces hewn from rock formations evoke a Catalonia of the unconscious: "In these completely recognizable landscapes," Masson wrote, "there is always an element of fantasy, either in the sky, or on the ground, or underground."

States Di Donna: *"Attempting to fill certain voids within modern art history, our exhibition positions André Masson as a unique figure whose very output pictures the severity of some of the most cataclysmic events of the twentieth century: both world wars and the Spanish Civil War. We have on view masterworks that encapsulate the tenets of Surrealism's foregrounding of desire, violence, and myth – as well as the automatic – as its subject. Masson's art speaks, with poetry, of life and death, of beauty and horror. The universe he creates is profound, agitating and enchanting – it proved generative for Pollock, and demands our close attention today."*

For further information on the exhibition, please contact: press@blaindidonna.com

Notes to editors:

The Mythology of Desire: Masterworks from 1925 to 1945 will be accompanied by an illustrated catalogue with an essay by Mary Ann Caws, Distinguished Professor of English, French and Comparative Literature at the Graduate School of the City University of New York. An expert on Surrealism and modern English and French literature, Caws has written monographs on, among others, Pablo Picasso, Salvador Dalí, Dora Maar, Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf, Henry James and André Breton.

About André Masson:

André Masson was born in France in 1898. He spent most of his youth in Brussels, where he worked as a pattern-drawer in an embroidery studio. In 1912 he entered the École des Beaux-Arts, Paris, leaving in 1914 to fight in the First World War. In the early 1920s, he abandoned his early Cubist style after meeting key Surrealist artists, among them André Breton. From 1934 until 1936 he lived in Spain, where his work was inspired by bullfights, Spanish myths and landscapes. In 1941, he left German-occupied France with his family and moved to New York. He settled in Connecticut where his neighbours included Alexander Calder, Arthur Demp and Arshille Gorky. He returned to France in 1945 and painted continuously until his death in Paris, in 1987.

About Blain|Di Donna:

Blain|Di Donna is a secondary market gallery founded in 2010 by Emmanuel Di Donna and Harry Blain, located on the second floor of the Carlyle Hotel on Madison, in the space previously occupied by Ursus Books. The new gallery, which has been refurbished by award-winning New York design firm, Steven Learner Studio, comprises three galleries, two secure, environmentally controlled storage areas, and offices. It specializes in artworks by Impressionist, Modern and selected contemporary artists, and will stage two exhibitions a year. Di Donna, 40, is a former Vice Chairman of Sotheby's. During his 17 years with the company, he was involved in almost all the major impressionist and modern auctions in London and New York. Blain, 45, co-founded Haunch of Venison with Graham Southern in 2002. Both left Haunch of Venison in 2010 to set up Blain|Southern, which has galleries in London and Berlin and works with a roster of international artists, including Mat Collishaw, Tim Noble and Sue Webster, Yinka Shonibare and Bill Viola.