

PEGGY GUGGENHEIM COLLECTION

Press release

Cocteau: The Juggler's Revenge
Organized by Kenneth E. Silver
April 13–September 16, 2024
Peggy Guggenheim Collection

The lasting feeling that his work leaves is one of happiness; not, of course, in the sense that it excludes suffering, but because, in it, nothing is rejected, resented, or regretted. Happiness is a surer sign of wisdom than we are apt to think, and perhaps Cocteau has more of it than some others.”
– W. H. Auden

From April 13 through September 16, 2024, the Peggy Guggenheim Collection presents *Jean Cocteau: The Juggler's Revenge*, the largest retrospective ever organized in Italy dedicated to Jean Cocteau (1889–1963), the *enfant terrible* of the French twentieth-century art scene.

Organized by eminent Cocteau specialist and New York University art historian Kenneth E. Silver, the exhibition highlights the artist's versatility, the multiple juggling acts that distinguished his production, which often drew criticism from his contemporaries. Loans from prestigious institutions, such as the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, the Phoenix Art Museum, the Nouveau Musée National de Monaco, and the Musée Jean Cocteau, Collection Séverin Wunderman in Menton, as well as major private collections, including the Cartier Collection, gather over one hundred and fifty works in an impressive variety of media. These include drawings, graphics, jewelry, tapestries, historical documents, books, magazines, photographs, documentaries, and films directed by Cocteau, which trace the development of this multifaceted artist's unique and highly personal aesthetics, alongside the highlights of his tumultuous career.

Among the most influential figures of the twentieth century, Cocteau was impressively prolific. He referred to himself as a poet, but he was also a novelist, playwright, and critic whose subjects ranged from art and music to other expository forms such as travel writing and memoirs. At the same time, he was also a gifted, highly original, and innovative visual artist. This side of the artist's creative life is focus of the exhibition organized by the Peggy Guggenheim Collection: Cocteau the draftsman, graphic artist, muralist, fashion-jewelry-and-textile designer, and filmmaker. For his eclectic nature, he could easily be described as a modern-age “Renaissance man,” whose extraordinary versatility left an indelible mark on twentieth-century art. A key figure of the French art scene of his time, his circle included such artists as Josephine Baker, Coco Chanel, Sergei Diaghilev, Edith Piaf, Pablo Picasso, and Tristan Tzara. However, the frank assertion of his homosexuality and the opium addiction he never attempted to conceal, meant

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he occupied a precarious position within the avant-garde. A man of the French establishment yet subversive of it, Cocteau embodied the cultural, social, and political contradictions of his age.

The Peggy Guggenheim Collection is an especially appropriate place to host the most comprehensive exhibition ever dedicated to Jean Cocteau in Italy, not least because of his long-lasting friendship with the U.S. patron. In fact, it was with an exhibition of Cocteau's drawings, at the suggestion of Marcel Duchamp, that Peggy Guggenheim began her career in the art world at her London gallery, Guggenheim Jeune, in 1938. The show displayed numerous costume designs for characters the artist had created for his play, *The Knights of the Round Table* (1937), as well as two large-scale drawings on lined bed sheets created specifically for the exhibition. As Guggenheim recounted in her autobiography, *Out of This Century* (1979): "One was an allegorical subject called *La peur donnant ailes au Courage*, which included a portrait of the actor Jean Marais. He and two decadent looking figures appeared with pubic hairs." The work's daring subject matter caused a scandal with British customs, and it was only after strenuous negotiations that Guggenheim accepted the compromise of exhibiting the work privately in her office rather than in the exhibition gallery. Cocteau never offered an interpretation of this remarkable drawing, which may have been created in support of the antifascist republican cause during the Spanish Civil War. The work remained in Guggenheim's collection and travelled with her to Venice, before being sold to a distant American relative who in turn donated it to the Phoenix Art Museum in Arizona. Outside of Italy for the last seventy years, the drawing returns to Palazzo Venier dei Leoni in Venice as a key work reflecting the triadic relationship between Guggenheim, Duchamp, and Cocteau. What is more, Cocteau had a special relationship with Venice, which he first fell in love with and felt transformed by at the age of fifteen. In the years following World War II, he regularly visited the city, attending the Venice Film Festival, creating fanciful renditions of gondoliers, objects at Egidio Costantini's glassworks in Murano—which he helped revive and personally renamed *La Fucina degli Angeli* ("The Foundry of the Angels")—and paying visits to Palazzo Venier dei Leoni. The exhibition also includes a drawing from one of Peggy Guggenheim's guestbooks, including a letter and a caricature dedicated to her.

The exhibition explores the main themes of Cocteau's oeuvre: Orpheus and poetry, eros, classicism in art, Venice and his relationship with Peggy Guggenheim, cinema, and his interest in design, expressed in fashion and especially in jewelry and the applied arts. A surprising selection of drawings also highlights the central role of desire in Cocteau's practice, as well as his ambivalent relationship with Cubism, Dadaism, and Surrealism. A further section will also explore his relationship with the world of popular culture, advertising, and film, pointing toward his influence on later artists, including Andy Warhol, Félix González-Torres and Pedro Almodóvar. Finally, the exhibition offers a unique opportunity to admire the *Academician Sword for Jean Cocteau* (1955) designed by the artist and rendered by Cartier in gold, silver, emerald, ruby, diamond, ivory (originally), onyx, and enamel. This exquisitely refined object features a profile of Orpheus, a central figure to Cocteau's artistic identity for decades, a lyre, and a star, which are recurring symbols in his work. The sword was first unveiled on October 20, 1955, when the artist was elected as a member of the Académie Française.

"*Jean Cocteau: The Juggler's Revenge* provides an ideal opportunity to revisit the art of Cocteau, and to see him with a fresh 21st-century point of view. His astonishing artistic range—for which, in his lifetime, he was often criticized for spreading himself too thin—now looks prescient, a model for the kind of wide-ranging cultural fluidity we now expect of contemporary artists. All this, in addition to his more-or-less forthright homosexuality, as well as his very public struggles with drug addiction, make him look especially modern. Perhaps the world has finally caught up with Jean Cocteau.", says the curator Silver.

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The exhibition is accompanied by an extensive illustrated catalogue, edited by Marsilio Arte, with essays by curator Silver and Blake Oetting.

Jean Cocteau: The Juggler's Revenge is made possible by the generous support of Cartier, as main sponsor of the exhibition.

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