

# GUGGENHEIM BILBAO

Press release

The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao presents on February 25

Jean Dubuffet: Ardent Celebration

Sponsored by



## *Jean Dubuffet: Ardent Celebration*

- Dates: February 25 to August 21, 2022
  - Curated by David Max Horowitz, Assistant Curator, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York
  - Sponsor: BBK
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- Throughout his career, Jean Dubuffet rejected cultural conventions and socially enforced ideas of beauty, instead exploring stimulating new perspectives. He sought to inspire his audiences to access more authentic and enriching ways of experiencing art, creativity, and the broader world around them.
  - Jean Dubuffet continually reinvented his approach to making art. He explored a host of media and compositional strategies, pursued a wide range of imaginative subjects, and moved freely between figuration and abstraction.
  - With the *Hourloupe* cycle, Dubuffet established a vocabulary that enabled him to create and explore an ever expanding, fantastical universe, unified by its shared visual expression. It also allowed him to more pointedly take on phenomenological and epistemological issues, which would remain a focus through the end of his career.

The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao presents *Jean Dubuffet: Ardent Celebration*, sponsored by BBK, an exhibition surveying the defining decades of the career of Jean Dubuffet, spanning his first years of committed artistic production in the 1940s through his final fully developed series, completed in 1984. The exhibition is drawn primarily from the rich holdings of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, and supplemented by important selections from the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice.

At the end of World War II, Jean Dubuffet (b. 1901, Le Havre, France; d. 1985, Paris) began exhibiting paintings that defied entrenched artistic values. He rejected principles of decorum and classical beauty, along with pretensions of expertise. Instead, he looked to the commonplace and the unheralded, employing crude materials, mundane subjects, and a style that spurned any outward sign of academic training. In this approach, Dubuffet was challenging norms that he believed obstructed authentic expression and devalued everyday experience. However, his goal was not only to reveal how threadbare cultural conventions were; he also wanted to illustrate the vitality of life freed from them. As he once claimed, "I would like people to see my work as a rehabilitation of scorned values and . . . make no mistake about it, a work of ardent celebration."

Dubuffet was committed to this aim throughout his career, though he continually transformed the means he used to pursue it. He tested different mediums, including painting, drawing, collage, lithography, sculpture, and performance. Meanwhile, he moved fluidly between figuration and abstraction, explored multiple compositional strategies, and periodically reinvented his palette. Throughout these changes, Dubuffet's work stayed grounded in its dedication to sharing new and revitalizing perspectives with viewers, as well as its refusal of convention. *Jean Dubuffet: Ardent Celebration* will focus on this celebratory impulse, as it offers an overview of the breadth of Dubuffet's production.

The ability to present a full survey of the artist's career largely from the collection of New York's Guggenheim Museum is thanks to the close relationship the museum established with Dubuffet. The museum hosted three major exhibitions on the artist during his lifetime, including *Jean Dubuffet 1962–66* (1966), *Jean Dubuffet: A Retrospective* (1973), and *Jean Dubuffet: A Retrospective Glance at Eighty* (1981). The institution also collected his work in depth, beginning with the acquisition of the *Door with Couch Grass (Porte au chiendent)* (1957) in 1959.

Dubuffet was born in Le Havre, France, in 1901. At seventeen, he began studies at Académie Julian, a respected art school. However, he soon became disenchanted with the curriculum's distance from real-world concerns and dropped out. In the following years, he remained engaged with the creative community in Paris, circulating with artists like Raoul Dufy, Juan Gris, Fernand Legér, André Masson, and Suzanne Valadon. In 1923, he came across the work of the visionary artist Clémentine Ripoche, and the next year, he discovered Dr. Hanz Prinzhorn's book *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*. These two encounters began Dubuffet's life-long, integral engagement with art made by psychics, children, and people experiencing mental illness—a kind of artistic production he would later term "Art Brut."

For much of the 1920s and 1930s, Dubuffet worked in his family's wine distribution business. It was not until 1942, at the age of forty-one, while living in Nazi-occupied Paris, that he decided to devote himself to being an artist. The works he made in the ensuing years were a direct challenge to commonly held ideals about beauty, skill, and the elevated status of art, as revealed in *Miss Cholera (Miss Choléra)* and *Will to Power (Volonté de Puissance)*, both made in January 1946. Dubuffet complemented this production with publications and talks in which he explicated his belief that the mechanisms of mainstream culture were moribund, stifling, and should be cast aside.

Alongside his clear criticality, Dubuffet was experimenting with alternate paths forward, paths that he believed would lead to more fruitful, genuine modes of expression. During the 1940s and 1950s, he invited audiences to fundamentally reconsider the concept of beauty and demonstrated how worthy of admiration ordinary things could be. His work of this era delights in the qualities of quotidian and base materials. To emphasize the physicality of his paint, he used additives like lime, cement, or sand to thicken his oil paint into a paste he called "*haute pâte*." With this medium, he could create deeply textured, complex surfaces,

and he could shape his compositions in more immediately physical ways. Dubuffet sometimes went a step further in his explorations of materials, using found objects like rocks, rope, and, later, aluminum foil in his paintings. In parallel, he sought to overthrow socially enforced notions of beauty with nontraditional choices of subjects and the inventive ways in which he depicted them. This goal is particularly apparent in his early portraits, like *Portrait of Soldier Lucien Geominne* (*Portrait du soldat Lucien Geominne*) (1950) and his series of nudes, *Ladies' Bodies* (*Corps de Dames*) (1950–51), but it extends to his depictions of frequently ignored objects, including dilapidated walls, rustic doors, soil, and rocks.

From 1962 into the 1970s, Dubuffet pursued his most extended body of work, the *Hourloupe* cycle. These paintings and sculptures are distinguished by networks of interlocked cells, many filled with parallel stripes, most often in red, blue, and white. Though this cycle marks a significant stylistic shift, it continues Dubuffet's commitment to constructively realigning his and his audiences' engagement with art and the world more broadly. With the *Hourloupe* cycle, which is represented in this exhibition with the works *Nunc Stars* (1965) and *Bidon l'Esbroufe* (1967), Dubuffet established a vocabulary that enabled him to create and explore an ever expanding, fantastical universe, unified by its shared visual expression. It also allowed him to more pointedly take on phenomenological and epistemological issues. The intricacy of the patterning can lead to visual ambiguity, especially when multiple pieces are seen together. This enigmatic quality suggests the transience of what seems permanent and the contingency of an object's supposedly defining form. Together these effects occasion a rethinking of the relationship between perception and reality, an aim that was of deep importance to the artist.

For the last decade of his life, Dubuffet continued to focus on the workings of the mind, especially as they relate to the external world. By drawing attention to these mental functions, he hoped to inspire new, liberated ways of thinking. In the *Theaters of Memory* (*Théâtres de mémoire*) series (1975–79), Dubuffet established a vocabulary for expressing how the mind mixes perception, memories, and concepts as it tries to make sense of events and surroundings. His last two series, *Sights* (*Mires*) (1983–84) and *Non-Places* (*Non-lieux*) (1984), represented in this exhibition by *Sight G 132 (Kowloon)* (*Mire G 132 [Kowloon]*) (1983), and *Given* (*Donnée*) (1984), respectively, are characterized by tangles of lines and are largely absent of recognizable imagery. With these paintings, Dubuffet considered what experience would be like if the mind did not sort the outside world into preconceived, socially defined categories—extending even to the distinction between the real and imagined. Free of such constraints, the artist believed people would be able to access new, limitless possibilities of experience and creativity.

**DIDAKTIKA. MUSIC EXPERIENCES**

As part of the Didaktika project sponsored by BBK, the Museum designs educational spaces and organizes activities that complement the exhibitions, providing tools and resources in both the galleries and online to facilitate understanding and expand the information on the artists.

The online educational section of this exhibition, *Did you know that...?*, addresses Dubuffet's musical experimentation, a lesser known aspect of his creative output. Dubuffet was interested in the sounds that result from playing popular instruments, both contemporary and archaic, in unusual ways. He would sometimes add additional layers of distortion by manipulating the recordings themselves. In 1961 he released many of these compositions, some made with his colleague Asger Jorn, as *Musical Experiences (Expériences Musicales)*.

**Complementary activities**Talk (February 23)

Introductory talk on *Jean Dubuffet: Ardent Celebration*, by the exhibition's curator, David Max Horowitz, Assistant Curator, Solomon R. Guggenheim, New York.

Shared reflections\*

In-person visits in which Guggenheim Museum Bilbao professionals offer different perspectives on the contents of the new exhibition.

- Curatorial view (March 16): Marta Blàvia, a member of the Museum's curatorial team, will host a tour focused on the main works in the show.
- Key concepts (March 23): Luz Maguregui, Education and Interpretation Coordinator of the Museum, will talk with participants in front of the works as she discusses their key ideas.

\*Sponsored by Fundación Vizcaína Aguirre.

More than sounds Creative Session (March 31)

This is a workshop for adults led by the artist Tunipanea (Jonathan García Lana), in which the participants will generate unusual sounds and melodies using everyday objects and will learn how Dubuffet experimented with music.

**Cover image**

Jean Dubuffet

*The Misunderstanding (La Mésestente)*, March 12, 1978

Acrylic on paper, mounted to canvas

139.4 × 241.9 cm

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, By exchange 86.3405.

© Jean Dubuffet, VEGAP, Bilbao, 2022

**For more information:**

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***Jean Dubuffet: Ardent Celebration***

Guggenheim Museum Bilbao

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**Jean Dubuffet**

*Mother and Child (Maternité)*, 1944 from *Matter and Memory (Matière et mémoire)*

Lithograph

32.4 x 24.1 cm

Edition 9/10

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Gift, Andrew Powie Fuller and Geraldine Spreckels Fuller Collection 2000.15

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**Jean Dubuffet**

*Miss Cholera (Miss Choléra)*, January 1946

Oil, sand, pebbles, and straw on canvas

54.6 x 46 cm

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Gift, Katharine Kuh 72.2007

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**Jean Dubuffet**

*Portrait of the Soldier Lucien Geominne (Portrait du soldat Lucien Geominne)*,

December 1950

Oil, sand, and pebbles on Masonite

64.8 x 61.6 cm

Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, Hannelore B. and Rudolph B. Schulhof Collection, bequest of Hannelore B. Schulhof 2012.49

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**Jean Dubuffet**

*The Knoll of Visions (La butte aux visions)*, August 23, 1952

Oil on Masonite

150 x 194.9 cm

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York 74.2077

© Jean Dubuffet, VEGAP, Bilbao, 2022



**Jean Dubuffet**

*Door with Couch Grass (Porte au chiendent)*, October 31, 1957

Oil on canvas, mounted to canvas.

189.2 x 146 cm

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York 59.1549

© Jean Dubuffet, VEGAP, Bilbao, 2022



**Jean Dubuffet**

*Substance of Stars (Substance d'astre)*, December 1959

Aluminum foil and oil paint on Masonite

150 x 195 cm

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York 74.2078

© Jean Dubuffet, VEGAP, Bilbao, 2022





**Jean Dubuffet**

*The Burning Life of the Earth (Vie ardente du sol)*, July 1959

from *Theater of the Earth (Théâtre du sol)*

Lithograph with letterpress

63.5 x 45.2 cm

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Gift, Mr. and Mrs. Morton Lloyd

Janklow in honor of the artist 82.2973.8.10

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**Jean Dubuffet**

*Figure, Black Background (Personnage fond noir)*, October 1, 1961

Ink on paper

34.3 x 25.4 cm

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Bequest, Richard S. Zeisler 2008.3.1

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**Jean Dubuffet**

*The Propitious Moment (L'instant propice)*, January 2–3, 1962

Oil on canvas

198.8 x 164.1 cm

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York 74.2080

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**Jean Dubuffet**

*Nunc Stans*, May 16–June 5, 1965

Vinyl paint on canvas

three panels 161.9 x 274 cm each; 161.9 x 821.7 cm

overall

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York 66.1818

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**Jean Dubuffet**

*Bidon l'Esbroufe*, December 11, 1967

Polyester resin and vinyl paint

167 x 76.2 x 40 cm

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Gift, the artist in honor of Mr. and Mrs.

Thomas Messer 70.1920

© Jean Dubuffet, VEGAP, Bilbao, 2022



**Jean Dubuffet**

*Parasign LXIII (Parachiffre LXIII)*, February 23, 1975

Vinyl paint on paper, mounted to canvas

64.5 x 92.1 cm

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Gift, The American Art Foundation 78.2450

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**Jean Dubuffet**

*The Misunderstanding (La Mésestente)*, March 12, 1978

Acrylic on paper, mounted to canvas

139.4 x 241.9 cm

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, By exchange 86.3405

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**Jean Dubuffet**

*Sight G 132 (Kowloon) (Mire G 132 [Kowloon])*, September 18, 1983

Acrylic on paper, mounted to canvas

201 x 301.6 cm

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York 87.3526

© Jean Dubuffet, VEGAP, Bilbao, 2022



**Jean Dubuffet**

*Given (Donnée)*, April 20, 1984

Acrylic on paper, mounted to canvas

67 x 99.7 cm

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, By exchange 86.3410

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