

Jean Dubuffet: Paysage au ciel rougeoyant

By Mathilde Gubanski



JEAN DUBUFFET
Paysage au ciel rougeoyant, 1952
Oil on panel
97 x 130 cm / 38.2 x 51.2 in.

Jean Dubuffet, a French painter and sculptor, was one of the most important artists of the 20th century. The theoretician of Art Brut, he said that, “everything is a landscape”. Looking at his many series, landscape is in fact omnipresent and protean: *Paysages grotesques* (Grotesque landscapes), *Tables paysagées* (Landscape Tables), *Lieux momentanés* (Momentary Places), *Jardins* (Gardens), *Célébration du sol* (Celebration of the Land), *Cartes* (Maps), *Arbres* (Trees), *Sites tricolores* (Tricolour Sites), *Lieux abrégés* (Abbreviated Places)... For this artist, “Landscape is the place for questioning”. This is illustrated perfectly in *Paysage au ciel rougeoyant* (Landscape with a glowing sky) presented here.

Anti-cultural landscape

Dubuffet had an ambiguous relationship with landscape as a genre of classical painting. In his work, landscape is never historical, heroic or bucolic. His landscapes are poetic and mysterious pictorial magmas.

The theoretician of Art Brut (Raw Art), Dubuffet was strongly opposed to the notion of high culture: “When the pompous platforms of high culture are erected, then flee as fast as you can: there’ll be little hope for art.”



CHAÏM SOUTINE
Les Maisons (The Houses),
c. 1920-1921
Oil on canvas, 58 x 92 cm
Musée de l'Orangerie, Paris

He began thus to break away from his own culture. He divorced and abandoned the family business to concentrate on painting. Next it was western culture in its entirety that he had to abandon. Dubuffet visited the Sahara desert three times: he wanted to make “a clean sweep” to finalize his “deconditioning”.

Dubuffet challenged all influence from art of the past and only recognized an affinity with drawings by children or the mentally ill. In collecting these, Dubuffet decided to call them Art Brut. Michel Ragon, a great advocate for this art wrote: “Is alienation not a form of dominant contestation? Many psychiatrists have assimilated genius and madness.” In his publication *Notre art dément* (Our Insane Art), François Lehel has identified madness in art, and few great artists have escaped this diagnosis.

However a certain connection exists between Dubuffet’s art and the works of Expressionists such as Oskar Kokoschka, James Ensor, Chaïm Soutine, as well as Georges Rouault, Marc Chagall and Paul Klee, whose phrase corresponds so well to Dubuffet: “What will always be absent is land and the people.”

This same ambiguity can be found in Dubuffet’s depictions of nudes. These large bodies treated like jumbles of material comparable to André Masson’s *Paysages Sexués* (Sexual landscapes), who Dubuffet met in 1920.

The frontality of these female figures is also reminiscent of tribal art which fascinated western artists in the early 20th century.

Dubuffet was no doubt marked by the African art collection of Guillaume Apollinaire who made a great contribution to the recognition of tribal art. Apollinaire shared some of Dubuffet’s convictions, such as the desire to abolish the boundary between high art and popular culture. He said about this, “It is precisely art that I would like to banish from the arts or if not art, especially the artist and those who imitate artists, who attach more worth to a diamond than to a box of matches, to a rose than to a smoked herring and to the mind than all of nature.”

One of the most important collections of tribal art at that time belonged to André Breton. His collection would inspire many artists.



JAMES ENSOR
L'Entrée du Christ à Bruxelles
(Christ's Entry into Brussels), 1888
Oil on canvas, 253 x 431 cm
J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles



André Breton's office on the rue Fontaine, now at the Centre Pompidou, Paris

The figure as landscape

In this ambiguous relationship with high culture, Dubuffet played around with the genres of painting, treating bodies and portraits like landscapes. The deformed features and telluric strata form mysterious effigies. “I feel that portraits and landscapes must join together, they're more or less the same thing. I want portraits where the description uses the same mechanisms as for describing landscape, here wrinkles and there ravines or paths, here nose, there trees, here mouths and there, house.” wrote Dubuffet.

The artist combined figure and landscape, sometimes like beings existing in a space, and sometimes, with a lot of humour and poetry, Dubuffet suggests figures with simple signs or lines, like imprints or graffiti left by someone passing by. The artist thus creates an enigma between “nature and creature”.

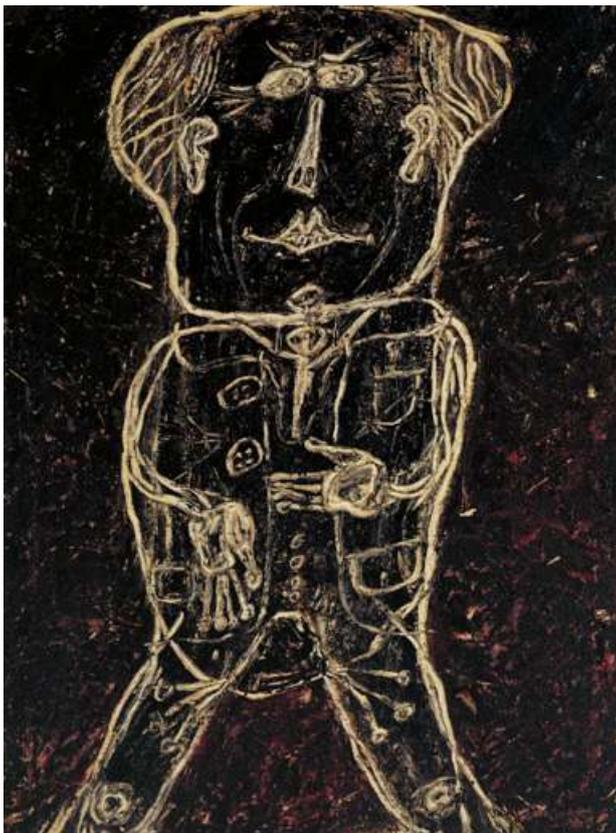


JEAN DUBUFFET
Gymnosophie, 1950
Oil on canvas, 96 x 145 cm
Musée d'Art moderne et contemporain de Saint-Étienne

Between *Paysage concret* and *Paysage mental*

Paysage au ciel rougeoyant (Landscape with a glowing sky) presented at the gallery belongs to the series of the *Paysages du mental*, or *Paysages mentaux* (Landscapes of the Mind), a series that Jean Dubuffet began in 1951.

He explained “I had the impression that some of these paintings resulted in images that can strike the mind like a transposition of the mind at work (...). This is why I have called them *Paysages mentaux* (Landscapes of the Mind). In many paintings from this group, subsequently I swung continually between concrete landscape and mental landscape, moving closer either to one or the other.”



JEAN DUBUFFET

Monsieur Plume plis au pantalon (*Portrait d'Henri Michaux*), (Monsieur Plume with Creases in his Trousers (Portrait of Henri Michaux)), 1946
Oil on canvas, 130 × 97 cm
Tate Modern, London

In all of his art, the artist combined material world and mental world. Creating new mental places was to give more space to his thoughts, allowing them to grow. To do this, Dubuffet wanted to paint everything.

The art critic Michel Ragon underlines the artist's interest in “the sensuality of ordinary things: dust, mud, tar, stones. But also the cosmos. Physics and metaphysics.”



Views of Guillaume Apollinaire's collection of African art in his apartment at 202 boulevard Saint-Germain, photographs by René-Jacques, 1954



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***Paysage au ciel rougeoyant* (Landscape with a glowing sky) is made of thick areas of painting in a restrained palette using a telluric tones. The artwork is divided into two zones: the sky and the earth. These two spaces are made dynamic by lines and hieroglyphic signs. It is not an abstract painting, as Dubuffet was against abstraction, but the geological vision of a mental space.**



JEAN DUBUFFET
Lever de lune aux fantômes
(Moonrise with ghosts), 1951
Oil on hardboard, 60 x 73 cm
Fondation Dubuffet, Paris