

DIANE DE POLIGNAC

**JEAN CORTOT
(1925-2018)**



The French artist Jean Cortot drew on the symbiosis between writing and painting to nourish his work. He endeavoured to transpose ideas through the medium of painting as others would paint a landscape.

BIOGRAPHY

THE PAINTER JEAN CORTOT'S EARLY LIFE AND ARTISTIC TRAINING

Jean Cortot was born on 14 February 1925 in Alexandria, Egypt. Son of the pianist Alfred Cortot, he was immersed in musical, artistic and literary circles from childhood. It was through his family ties that Jean Cortot met Paul Valéry, Henri Matisse, Paul Morand, Stefan Zweig, Colette, and Georges Duhamel, among others. At the age of 17, Cortot entered the Académie de la Grande Chaumière where he studied under the painter Othon Friesz. In 1942, Cortot founded the Échelle group with the painters Geneviève Asse, Jacques Busse, Jean-Marie Calmettes, Ernest-René Collot, Daniel Dalmbert, Christiane Laran and Michel Patrix, as well as the sculptor Jacques Dufresne. The name of the group—which translates as ‘ladder’ or ‘scale’—was inspired by the artists’ shared studio, from which they could climb a ladder to access the rooftops of Paris.

During the Occupation, Cortot was employed by the French museums administration, where he made inventories of the artworks stored in the Château de Brissac in France’s Maine-et-Loire region. At the end of the Second World War, the artist moved to a studio in Montparnasse, where he would work throughout his career.

In 1948, Jean Cortot won the Galerie Drouant-David’s Prix de la Jeune Peinture with an urban composition, becoming a leading figure in the post-war figurative painting revival. Cortot participated in the Salon des Jeunes Peintres in 1950 and 1951.

JEAN CORTOT: BETWEEN ABSTRACT AND FIGURATIVE

Jean Cortot painted figurative works for about ten years—landscapes of the French Ardèche region and the Mediterranean town of La Ciotat (1947–1950), as well as still lifes (1955–1956), portraits and architectural works (1957–1958)—before gradually distancing himself from figurative painting to explore a more graphic, more schematic style of art. Cortot began work on his series *Correspondances* in 1959, which marked the first appearance of writing in the painter’s work. Symbols and characters fascinated the artist, who integrated them into his artistic language. This new direction was further reinforced by the 1967 series *Écritures*, which Cortot described as a seismograph: a recording of feelings and impressions. This was followed by the series *Poèmes épars* in 1970 and *Portes bleues* in 1972.

Jean Cortot was a highly cultured artist with a passion for literature, “a predator of texts” in his own words. “This style of a well-read gentleman manifested itself in every

moment of his conversation,” wrote Adrien Goetz, an elected member of the Académie des Beaux-Arts, “which was much like his paintings, peppered with quotations set in radiant colours, which gave the words he loved a brilliance that came from him alone.”

Prior to 1974, Jean Cortot’s symbols and characters were invented and indecipherable. In 1952, the artist had accompanied his father on a tour of Japan, which we can well imagine would have influenced him in the creation of his imaginary ideograms. It was the gestural aspect of writing that interested the artist at that time. Jean Cortot was able to transcend the distinction between figuration and abstraction by painting an internalised world.

The artist’s work was shaped by the pre-war investigations into surrealist automatism that influenced gestural painting, word collages and exquisite corpses, as well as the poem-paintings of Paul Klee. This went hand in hand with Cortot’s fascination with the origins of writing and his questions concerning the innate and the acquired.

Jean Cortot never claimed to belong to an artistic movement. He was not a member of the Lettrism movement, although he sometimes exhibited with the artists involved, for example at the Galerie Broomhead in Paris in 1985. For the Lettrists, letters were created for their intrinsic value alone, while Cortot considered the meaning of words essential, using them for their power to evoke poetic imagery. As such, the artist brought together the vocabulary of abstract painting and meaningful written texts in order to give shape to an inner thought.

JEAN CORTOT AND THE ARTS

Non-figurative art such as Jean Cortot’s work is an ideal medium for reconciling music and painting. This is particularly true when considering art based on signs and symbols. The two artistic practices represent an interpretation of characters through the artist’s sensibilities. Influenced by his father, the pianist, Cortot was a great music lover. The painter designed a ballet set in 1953.

Cortot created sketches for tapestries and carpets, as well as various objects such as telephone boards, a piano and earthenware dinnerware designs. He also created stained glass windows for the Chapel of Castels in Valence d’Agen, France, in 2005, as well as wall decorations. Through these different projects, we can see the artist’s real desire to break down the barriers between different artistic disciplines, in which respect he can be likened to his friend the artist Guy de Rougemont.

JEAN CORTOT AND THE WRITERS

Jean Cortot became friends with the writers Raymond Queneau, Jean Tardieu, Henri Michaux and Michel Butor, composing paintings in homage to his favourite authors. He created his first illustrated book in 1964: *La Charge du roi* by Jean Giono, which was published by the Galerie Maeght. He also illustrated texts by René Char, Jean Tardieu and Henri Michaux. Over the years, Cortot produced more than seventy works, including handwritten books, painted, printed and engraved manuscripts. The authors that inspired Cortot's work were often his contemporaries. He also used, much more rarely, his own writings in his pictorial works. Indeed, the large volume of texts and poems that he wrote was an autonomous body of work, intended for books.

Jean Cortot took part in the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles from 1972 onwards. The painter's participation in the Salon, which was devoted to abstract art, showed that he had moved away from the more figurative painting style of his early career. From 1974 onwards, the writing within Cortot's paintings became legible, as shown in the series *Tableaux-poèmes* and *Poèmes épars*. With this new approach, the artist invited the spectator-reader to contemplate and decipher his works, which were intended to be appreciated over time. Cortot would sometimes use different tools and different types of writing within the same work, creating deliberately irregular writing that would slow down its interpretation, requiring extra effort to decipher the content.

Cortot covered his painted works with philosophical and poetic texts. From the 1980s onwards, the artist's work evolved into "painted scripts" that paid tribute to the writers he admired. They were works to be read and seen. The period from 1980 to 2000 was marked by Cortot's prolific creation of artist's books, of which he created more than two hundred during that period.

During the 1980s and 1990s, Cortot also created his *Onomagrammes* series in which he shattered sentences and words. Letters assumed their independence as the atoms of language—a common source for all writers, they evoked possible future creations. Language was then recomposed with the series *Tableaux poèmes* and *Tableaux dédiés*.

In 1999, the warehouse in which a large part of Cortot's works were stored was consumed by fire. About 180 paintings were destroyed. The artist created new *Tableaux dédiés* works that combined literary extracts, photographs and drawings to replace the lost works. Some series were entirely devoted to poets, including William Blake and Jean Giono. Dedicated to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the last series completed by the artist included 140 paintings created from 2005 onwards.

JEAN CORTOT AND THE ARTISTS

Jean Cortot also worked with his artist friends to create collaborative works, partnering with Julius Baltazar, Anne Walker, Bertrand Dorny and Gérard Garouste, among others. The resulting works were ambiguous, somewhere between paintings and books. Examples include the 1980 work *Anthologie Jean Tardieu*, and *Peintures manuscrites* and *Rencontres écrites*, which were created in collaboration with Julius Baltazar and Mehdi Qotbi respectively. The works were exhibited in museums, libraries, bibliophile and painting salons—locations that bear witness to their ambiguous nature.

Jean Cortot drew inspiration from two main sources: poetry and philosophy. One appeals to the imagination, while the other structures thought; together, they gave birth to an individual voice, both sensory and cerebral. Cortot's paintings are therefore intellectual, while also underlining the irrational nature of human beings. His work is not a discourse on art, but a personal response to painting in the midst of its revival.

Jean Cortot was elected a member of the Académie des Beaux-Arts on 28 November 2001, to the seat of his friend the painter Olivier Debré. He was received by the artist Guy de Rougemont. Jean Cortot died in Paris in 2018.

© Galerie Diane de Polignac / Mathilde Gubanski

SELECTED COLLECTIONS

Alès, Musée Pierre-André Benoit
Brussels, Bibliothèque Wittrockiana
Cambridge (MA), Houghton Library, Harvard University
New York, (NY) Musée d'Art moderne
Marseille, Musée Cantini
Miami (FL), The Ruth and Marvin Sackner Archive of concrete and visual poetry
Paris, Centre national des arts plastiques
Paris, Musée national d'art moderne – Centre Pompidou
Paris, Musée d'Art moderne de Paris
Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale
Washington (DC), Library of Congress

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

Galerie Jacques Blot, Paris, 1943
Group show, *L'Échelle*, Galerie Jean Dufresne, Paris, 1946
Group show, *L'Échelle*, Galerie Drouant-David, Paris, 1947-48
Salon de Mai, Paris, from 1946 to 1968
Galerie Ariel, Paris, 1949
Group show, *Étapes*, Galerie Visconti, Paris, 1949, 1956
Group show, Galerie Galanis-Hentschel, Paris, 1950, 1951
Salon des jeunes peintres, Paris, 1950 & 1951
Galerie Valloton, Lausanne, 1951, 1954
Galerie de l'Étoile scellée, Paris, 1953
Group show, Galerie Apollo, Brussels, 1954
Group show, *Giovanni Pittori*, National art Gallery, Roma, 1955
Group show, *Dix ans de peinture française*, Musée de Grenoble, Grenoble, 1956
Galerie Jacques Massol, Paris, 1958, 1959, 1960, 1962, 1963, 1969, 1973, 1983
Group show, *Cinq peintres français*, Birch Gallery, Copenhagen, 1958
Jeunes Peintres d'Allemagne et de France (École de Paris), Kunstmuseum, Lucerne, 1958
Group show, *L'École de Paris*, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Kyoto, 1960
Group show, *L'École de Paris*, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Kamura, 1960
Nihonbashi Gallery, Tokyo, 1961
Group show, *Five painters*, Molton Gallery, London, 1961
Group show, *De la rive droite à la rive gauche*, Musée de Verviers, Verviers, 1962
Group show, *Irish Exhibition of living art*, National College of Art, Dublin, 1964
La Charge du roi, Galerie Adrien Maeght, Paris, 1965
La Charge du roi, Gabinetto Vieusseux, Florence, 1965
Group show, Alexandria Biennale, Alexandria, 1965
Group show, Biennale de Menton, Menton, 1966
Group show, Isogaya Gallery, Tokyo, 1967
Écritures, gouaches, Galerie Messine, Paris, 1968

Group show, Studio A & B, Parly II, Saint-Germain-en Laye, 1969, 1972
Écritures, Galerie Mélisa, Lausanne, 1971
Group show, *Connaissance de l'art abstrait*, Maison de la culture de Montluçon, Montluçon, 1971
Group show, *Exposition du dessin français en Pologne*, Warsaw Museum, Warsaw, 1972
Group show, *Exposition du dessin français en Pologne*, Krakow Museum, Krakow, 1972
Salon des Réalités nouvelles, Paris, 1972
Group show, *Alechinsky, Louttre, Iscan, Cortot*, Galerie de la Licorne, Martel, 1973
Group show, *Le Regard de Georges-Emmanuel Clancier*, Musée de Céret, Maison de la Culture, Rennes, 1975
Fusions, Galerie 22, Paris, 1976
Group show, *Autour d'André Frénaud*, Maison de la culture d'Amiens, Amiens, 1977
Group show, *Signes, Espaces, Ensemble de signes*, Maison de la culture des Hauts-de-Belleville, Paris, 1977
Group show, *Autour d'André Frénaud*, Centre Georges-Pompidou, Paris, 1977
Group show, Collegio Cairoli, Pavia, 1978
Group show, Cologno Monzese, Pavia, 1978
Group show, *L'Autoroute*, Centre Georges-Pompidou, Paris, 1979
Group show, Piove di Sacco, Padua, 1980
Group show, *Acquisitions récentes*, Musée Cantini, Marseille, 1980
Galerie Tecno, Paris, 1981, 1985
Anthologie Jean Tardieu, Galerie Lucien Durand, Paris, 1981
Anthologie Jean Tardieu, Centre Georges-Pompidou, Paris, 1982
Group show, *Participation à l'Hommage à Jean Tardieu*, Maison de la poésie, Paris, 1982-83
Bibliothèque municipale Louis Aragon, Martigues, 1983
Tableaux-poèmes, Poèmes épars, Livres peints, Maison de la poésie, Paris, 1984
Group show, *Sur invitation*, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, 1984
Group show, *Re-création*, Centre Culturel Pablo Neruda, Corbeil-Essonnes, 1984
Group show, *Signes, Écritures dans l'art actuel*, Grand Palais, Paris, 1985
Group show, *Écritures + papiers*, Galerie Broomhead, Paris, 1985
Group show, *Les Années 50*, Galerie Guiol, Paris, 1985
Group show, *Saint-John Perse et l'art*, Ambassade de France, Washington, 1985
Écritures-Cultures, Cortot, Qotbi, Sarduy, Xenakis, Palais des Arts & Artothèque, Toulouse, 1986
Group show, *Inécritures*, Galerie Joncqy, Paris, 1986
Group show, *Décodages*, Salon du Vieux-Colombier, Paris, 1987
Group show, *Masques d'artistes*, La Malmaison, Cannes, 1987
Group show, *Hommage à André Frénaud*, Bibliothèque municipale, Avignon, 1987
Group show, *Cortot, Qotbi, Sarduy, Xenakis*, Galerie Ouverte, Paris, 1987

Les Phénomènes de la nature de Jean Tardieu, livre et peinture, Galerie Maeght, Paris, 1988
Group show, *Masques d'artistes*, Collégiale Saint-André, Chartres, 1988
Group show, *Les Reliquaires de Jean Clerté*, Galerie Erval, Paris, 1988
Group show, *Rencontres écritures avec Mehdi Qotbi*, Institut du monde Arabe, Paris, 1988
Les Paroles de la main, École des beaux-arts, Casablanca, 1989
Les Paroles de la main, Centre culturel français de Marrakech, Marrakech, 1989
Les Paroles de la main, Centre culturel français de Fez, Fez, 1989
Tableaux dédiés, Maison des écrivains, Paris, 1989
Group show, *Tablettes, Dorny*, Galerie La Hune, Paris, 1989
Group show, *Peintures comme ça*, Espace Victor Hugo, Lisieux, 1989
Group show, *Face à Face*, Abbaye de Saint-Savin, Saint-Savin sur Gartempe, 1989
Jean Cortot: Livres peints, Tableaux-Poèmes, Bibliothèque nationale, Paris, 1990
Group show, *Les Voisinages de René Char*, Galerie La Poésie dans un jardin, Avignon, 1990
Group show, *À l'écoute de Jean Tardieu*, Centre d'action culturelle de Saint Cyr l'École, Saint-Cyr-L'École, 1990
L'Écriture est un dessin, Bibliotheca Wittrockiana, Brussels, 1991
L'Écriture est un dessin, Espace Croix-Baragon, Toulouse, 1991
Petit Bestiaire de la dévoration, Jean Tardieu et Jean Cortot, Galerie Maeght, Paris, 1991
Livres peints et Peintures, Musée Pierre-André Benoit, Alès, 1992
Jean Cortot, peintre, Musée des beaux-arts de Nancy, Nancy, 2014
Jean Cortot, Musée d'Art moderne de Paris, Paris, 2021
Jean Cortot, peintre des mots, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, 2021

Jorge Semprun, *La Seconde Mort de Ramon Mercader*, Paris, Éditions Gallimard, 1969
Jean Tardieu, *Obscurité du jour*, Les Sentiers de la création, Albert Skira, 1974
André Frénaud, *Esprit*, avril, « Les Portes bleues », 1981
Jean Tardieu, *Adresse aux parvis poétiques*, Martigues, 1983
Gérard Xuriguera, *Les Années 50*, Paris, Arted, 1985
Severo Sarduy, *Jean Cortot*, monography, Montrouge, Maeght Éditeur, 1992
Jean Cortot Tableaux dédiés, Musée de l'Évêché Limoges, Montrouge, Maeght Éditeur, 1993
Jean Cortot, Livres, Montrouge, Maeght Éditeur, 1995
Hortense Longequeue, *L'éloquence du pinceau : écritures peintes et livres d'artiste dans l'œuvre de Jean Cortot*, Paris, École nationale des Chartes, 2013
Various, edited by Charles Villeneuve de Janti, *Jean Cortot, peintre / Erik Desmazières, graveur*, Paris, Broché, 2014
Delphine Duchêne, *Conversations avec Jean Cortot*, Paris, Le Passage, 2019

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Emmanuel Bénézit, *Dictionnaire des peintres*, tome 2, Paris, Gründ, 1949
René Huygues, *Les Contemporains*, Paris, Tisné, 1949
Preuves, « Tendances de la Jeune Peinture », october, 1956
Bernard Dorival, *La Peinture française au XX^e siècle*, Paris, Tisné, 1958
Herta Wescher, *Quadrum* n°6, « Jeunes Artistes », 1959
Cimaise n°4, juin, Paris, 1959
Cimaise n°91-92, avril, Paris, 1960
Jean Grenier, *Preuves*, juin, « Les Expositions », 1960
Jean-Clarence Lambert, *La Peinture abstraite*, Lausanne, Éditions Rencontres, 1960
Bernard Dorival, *L'École de Paris au Musée national d'Art moderne*, Éditions Aimery Somogy, Paris, 1961
Guy Marester, *XX^e siècle* n°32, « Les Écritures de Jean Cortot », 1969