

JEAN CORTOT

*Writing and drawing are essentially the same*¹

By Mathilde Gubanski



Jean CORTOT
Écrit, 1985

Collage and ink on canvas laid down on panel
31 x 39 cm / 12.2 x 15.3 in.
Diane de Polignac Gallery, Paris

Jean Cortot constructed his work based on the symbiosis between painting and writing. Passionate about literature, he described himself as a “predator of texts”. Cortot was born in 1925 in Alexandria, his birthplace providing an early foreshadowing of a life among books.

1 - Paul Klee

THE PAINTER JEAN CORTOT'S ARTISTIC TRAINING

In 1942, Jean Cortot entered the Académie de la Grande Chaumière, where he founded the *Échelle* group with the painters Geneviève Asse, Jacques Busse, Jean-Marie Calmettes, Ernest-René Collot, Daniel Dalmbert, Christiane Laran and Michel Patric, 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. 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 was awarded the Galerie Drouant-David's *Prix de la Jeune Peinture* for an urban composition, winning the prize against competition from the artist Bernard Buffet. Created in 1946, the prize was awarded each year to an artist under 30 years of age. The jury was composed of painters and art critics. Cortot became a leading figure in the figurative painting movement, painting landscapes of the French Ardèche region and the Mediterranean town of La Ciotat, as well as still lifes, portraits, and other subjects.



Jean CORTOT
Chantier naval à La Ciotat, 1949
Oil on canvas
89 x 130 cm
Musée national d'art moderne - Centre Pompidou, Paris



Bernard BUFFET
Nature morte au revolver, 1949
Oil on canvas
60 x 81 cm
Musée d'Art moderne, Paris

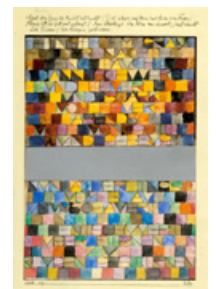
THE CORRESPONDANCES SERIES

Cortot's already geometric style became increasingly abstract, marked by graphic, broken-up forms. The line became the subject of his works.

In 1952, Jean Cortot accompanied his father Alfred Cortot, a famous pianist, on a tour of Japan. The trip left a deep impression on the artist and inspired him in the creation of his imaginary ideograms. The *Correspondances* series, which the artist began work on in 1959, signalled the important role that writing would play in his subsequent work. Symbols and characters fascinated the artist, who integrated them into his artistic language, creating an indecipherable, imaginary alphabet. It was the gestural aspect of writing that interested the artist. Jean Cortot was interested in Surrealism and the movement's collages of words and exquisite corpses. The artist was also familiar with the poem-paintings of Paul Klee.



Jean CORTOT
Untitled, 1959
Oil on canvas
33 x 19 cm.
Diane de Polignac Gallery, Paris

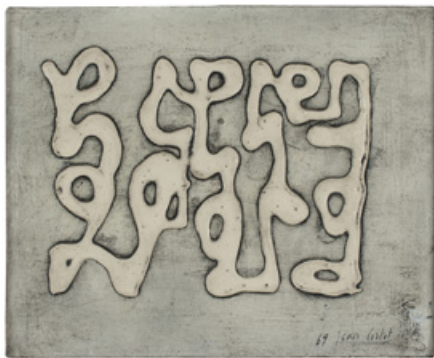


Paul KLEE
Jadis surgi du gris de la nuit, 1918
Watercolour, pen and pencil on paper mounted on card
23 x 16 cm
Kunstmuseum, Bern

THE ÉCRITURES SERIES

In 1967, Jean Cortot began work on the series *Écritures*, which he described as a seismograph: a recording of feelings and impressions. The characters in his works were as fantastical and mysterious as ever. The Spanish writer Jorge Semprún stated that: “Jean Cortot had shown us some of the *Écritures* that he was soon going to exhibit (...) this incomprehensible but obvious language, carrying within it the limpid mastery of a communicable meaning, but whose transcription would have been, perhaps temporarily, rendered impossible, because one would have lost the keys, the alphabet, the syntax of these writings, crying and opaque, transparent and obscure, heartrending like the traces of an I love you on a steamed-up window pane.”

1 - Jorge Semprún, *La Seconde Mort de Ramon Mercader* [The Second Death of Ramon Mercader], Gallimard



Jean CORTOT
Écriture, 1969
Oil on canvas, 22 x 26,5 cm
Diane de Polignac Gallery, Paris



Jean FAUTRIER
Écriture sur fond bleu, 1963
Etching, aquatint and embossing in colour, 76 x 57 cm
Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva

POETRY & PHILOSOPHY

The letters in Jean Cortot's works became legible starting in 1974, as the artist took texts directly from literature to construct his paintings. He turned to his contemporaries and became friends with the writers Raymond

Queneau, Jean Tardieu, Henri Michaux and Michel Butor, composing paintings in homage to his favourite authors. Cortot invited the spectator-reader to contemplate and decipher his works, which were made to be appreciated over time.

In 1978, Cortot began 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.



Jean CORTOT
La Lune change de jardin, 1983
Ink and gouache on paper pasted on canvas laid down on panel, 46 x 27 cm
Diane de Polignac Gallery, Paris

“Anyone who knows L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue immediately knows, on looking at *La Lune change de jardin*, that this painting refers to René Char. Blue on a background of saturated blue, with a touch of indigo, the words floating without a fixed line, unstable, fleeing. Or, as they emerge from a fluvial background, they are like the shadows of light fish that are returning to the depths of the bed. This unstable nature of the letters can also represent the instability of the night sky or reason. This sense of disequilibrium in Jean Cortot's work – mixed upper and lower case letters, various typographies, no apparent plan, disorder or hypertrophy of the central N – is also the imbalance of a thought without a master, left to itself, to its inherent folly.”

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.

1 - Translated from the French, Severo Sarduy, *Jean Cortot*, Montrouge, Maeght Editions, 1992



Jean CORTOT
Les Fleurs du papier, 1984
 Collage and ink on panel
 34 x 25 cm
 Diane de Polignac Gallery, Paris

Jean TARDIEU (1903 – 1995)

Les Fleurs du papier

Je t'avais dit tu m'avais dit
 je t'avais dit je t'avais dit tu m'avais dit
 je t'avais dit tu m'avais dit je t'avais dit tu m'avais
 dit je t'avais dit

– Oh comme les maisons étaient hautes !
 Oh comme le vieil appartement sentait la poussière !
 Oh comme il était impossible a retrouver
 le temps du soleil le temps du futur, des fleurs du
 papier !

Je t'avais dit tu m'avais dit
 je t'avais dit je t'avais dit tu m'avais dit.