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"Janus" by Max Ernst
Modeled 1973 (cast 1975)
G. 376
Acc. #: 89.106



Questions:

- 1 What are some words you would use to describe this piece? What was your first impression of it?**
- 2. Since this is a work of Abstract Expressionism, what are some feelings that the artist might have been trying to express?**
- 3. What might have been an inspiration for its creation?**
- 4. If you could touch it, what textures would you feel? What shapes are represented?**

Gallery Label:

Max Ernst's creative impulses and active imagination were catalysts to a career of innovation and prolific output that bridged all artistic media with his interest in sculpture awakening in the 1930's. A founder of the Dada movement in Cologne, he also helped found and lead the Surrealist movement in Paris. Ernst's career-long inspiration was drawn from non-Western and natural sources that embodied what he saw as universal forms of expression. These forms often took on an impish aspect out of the artist's conscious effort to debunk the serious side of art through the introduction of playfulness. Thus, in "Janus" Ernst converted the theme of the ancient Roman god of gates and doorways (who had two faces, one looking in each direction) into a sexually bi-polar totem through a playful use of animal attributes and natural forms for faces and genitalia.

Key Points:

Janus

The Roman god of gates and doors, beginnings and endings, and hence represented with a double-faced head, each looking in opposite directions, likely meant to look at the future and the past. He was worshipped at the beginning of the harvest time, planting, marriage, birth, and other types of beginnings, especially the beginnings of important events in a person's life. Janus also represents the transition between primitive life and civilization, between the countryside and the city, peace and war, and the growing-up of young people.

Janus was represented with two faces, originally one was bearded while the other was not. (probably a symbol of the sun and the moon). Later both faces were bearded. In his right hand he holds a key. The double-faced head appears on many Roman coins.

In art, Janus is represented by two faces looking in opposite directions. Max Ernst enlarged the mythological meaning of Janus with allusions to the double meaning of male and female by using frog and turtle as sexual characteristics of the sculpture.

Dadaism

A post-WWI cultural movement in visual art as well as literature (mainly poetry), theatre and graphic design. The movement was, among other things, a protest against the barbarism of the War and what Dadaists believed was an oppressive intellectual rigidity in both art and everyday society; its works were characterized by a deliberate irrationality and the rejection of the prevailing standards of art. It influenced later movements including Surrealism.

While broad-reaching, even into sound and music, the movement was also unstable. Artists went on to other ideas and movements, including Surrealism, Socialist Realism, and other forms of modernism.

By the dawn of WWII, many of the European Dadaists who remained had fled or been forced into exile in the United States, some died in death camps under Hitler, who personally disliked the kind of radical art that dada represented. The movement became less active as post-WWII optimism led to new movements in art and literature.

Surrealism

Perhaps the most influential avant-garde movement of the century, it was founded in Paris in 1924 by a small group of writers and artists who sought to channel the unconscious as a means to unlock the power of the imagination. It grew principally out of the earlier Dada movement, which before WWI produced works of anti-art that deliberately defied reason. But Surrealism's emphasis was not on negation but on positive expression. Much influenced by Freud, they believed that the conscious mind repressed the power of the imagination. Influenced also by Marx, they hoped that the psyche had the power to reveal the contradictions in the every day world and spur on revolution.

Poet and critic Andre Breton, also a trained psychiatrist, published "Manifesto of Surrealism" which quickly led Surrealism to become an international intellectual and political movement. The visual artists who first worked with Surrealist techniques and imagery were Max Ernst, Frenchman Andre Masson, Spaniard Joan Miro, and American Man Ray. It later included Rene Magritte, Salvador Dali, Yves Tanguy, and Jean Arp.

The organized Surrealist movement in Europe dissolved with the onset of WWII. Breton, Dali, Ernst, Masson, and others left Europe for New York. The movement found renewal in the United States at Peggy Guggenheim's gallery.

Abstract Expressionism

The dominant trend in western painting throughout the 1950's began with a handful of American artists later termed Abstract Expressionists. (Their original name was the "New York School" of Artists). It didn't describe one particular style, but rather a general attitude; not all the work was abstract, nor was it all expressive. What these artists valued most of all was individuality and spontaneous improvisation.

Their paintings were often made of lines, shapes and forms not meant to depict a "reality" from the visible world. They believed that non-representational painting could express spiritual and emotional truths in the most direct way. These artists often used a spontaneous and physical process in order to present an immediate response to emotion. They found their mentors in many of the artists who fled Europe during WWII for America. Piet Mondrain and Max Ernst were both important influences representing the

revolutionary spirit of the artist and a break from traditional painting.

The artists came together in New York's Greenwich Village, and included Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Helen Frankenthaler, Willem de Koonig, Philip Guston, Lee Krasner and Robert Motherwell. A good number of the artists met through the Depression era WPA (Works Progress Administration), a government program that paid artists to paint murals on government buildings.

While other artists such as Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns concerned themselves with the everyday life of post-war America, the Abstract Expressionists addressed the great questions of human existence. The internal psychological struggle, the external struggle of man against nature, the spiritual quest for god, all were topics the artists felt needed to find expression in abstraction. Understanding the process of painting meant understanding something at the core of the human desire to express oneself. In the end, making the process of painting an existential endeavor may have been their major achievement.

Abstract Expressionists strove to uncover their most personal feelings directly through making art, and thereby achieve some transformation, or if possible, some personal redemption.

So, Abstract Expressionism's physicality comes from exploration of inner turmoil and anxiety. Some of this distress came from exposure to the horrors and pain endured during WWII. Some came from the threat of a nuclear holocaust as the Cold War heated up. For these aspiring artists, noncompliance with any art rules separated them from the sins of their parents, who had unleashed untold madness into the world of their youth.

It can be divided into two tendencies: **Action Painting**. Jackson Pollock, de Kooning, Mark Tobey, Lee Krassner, Grace Hartigan, and Joan Mitchell, among many others. And **Color Field Painting**, with Rothko, Frankenthaler, Kenneth Noland, and so forth.

The key characteristics of Abstract Expressionism are:

- Unconventional application of paint, usually without a recognizable subject that tends towards amorphous shapes in brilliant colors.

Dripping, smearing, slathering and flinging lots of paint on to the canvas.

Sometimes “gestural” writing in a loosely calligraphic manner.

In the case of Color Field artists: carefully filling the picture plane with zones of color that create tension between the shapes and hues.

The Artist:

Max Ernst was a German-born Surrealist. He helped shape the emergence of *Abstract Expressionism* in America post-WWII. His work relied on spontaneity and subjectivity, two creative ideals that came to define *Abstract Expressionism*. Although his works are predominantly figurative, his unique artistic techniques inject a measure of abstractness into the texture of his work.

He was born in 1891 in Bruhl, Germany into a middle class family of nine children. His father, Philipp Ernst, was a teacher of the deaf and dumb with an avid interest in academic painting and Max first learned painting from him. Phillip was a devout Catholic and strict disciplinarian and this helped inspire Max to defy authority.

He never received any formal training in the arts and learned his own artistic techniques in a self-taught way. He studied philosophy and psychology at the Univ. of Bonn and while in college he visited asylums and became fascinated with the art of mentally ill patients. In 1914, he was drafted and spent four years in the German army, serving in both the Western and Eastern fronts.

The horrors of World War I had a profound and lasting impact on his subject matter as he mined his personal experiences to depict absurd and apocalyptic scenes. This subversive tendency remained strong throughout his career. He soon married Luise Straus, an art history student. In 1919 Ernst and a number of his friends founded

the Cologne Dada group. Ernst's son Ulrich (Jimmy) was born in 1920 and went on to become a well-known Abstract Expressionist painter himself. But his marriage to Luise was short-lived. In 1921 he met Paul Eluard, who remained a close lifelong friend. In 1922, Ernst entered France illegally , living with the Eluards in Paris, leaving behind his wife and son. He took odd jobs and continued with his painting of collages..

Constantly experimenting, in 1925 he invented a graphic art technique called *frottage* which uses pencil rubbings of objects as sources of images. He also created another technique called *grattage* in which paint is scraped across canvas to reveal the imprints of the objects placed beneath it. (He used this technique in his famous painting "Forest and Dove" at the Tate Modern).

Birds were often prevalent in his work. An alter ego called Loplop was a bird. He suggested this alter ego was an extension of himself . During WWII he was interned , , declared an "enemy-alien" but was discharged thanks to the help of Paul Eluard and other friends with influence. He was arrested by the Gestapo after the Nazi occupation of France and called a "degenerate" by the Third Reich and sent to internment camps three times. During his time in Paris, he threw himself into sculpture, print-making, and film as well as painting. He married the flamboyant socialite and patron of the arts, Peggy Guggenheim who helped him to flee to America., He left behind his lover Leonora Carrington who suffered a major mental breakdown. He married Guggenheim in 1942 but the marriage did not last. She did provide him with prime access to the art scene of New York City. In 1946 he was married to Dorothea Tanning , an American painter. The couple made their first home in Sedona, Arizona but moved to Paris in 1953 , where Ernst worked until his death in 1976.

Max Ernst's arrival in New York during WWII, along with other European avant-garde painters such as Marcel Duchamp, electrified a generation of American artists. Ernst's rejection of traditional painting (as symbolized by the classical style of his father's work) in favor of his own unique techniques (collage, frottage, grattage) captivated young American painters, who similarly sought to forge a fresh and unorthodox approach to painting. He had a particularly strong effect on the direction of Jackson Pollock's painting.

Max Ernst achieved a rare feat in the life of an artist, which is to establish a glowing reputation and critical following in three

countries (Germany, France, U.S.) in the span of his career. Although he is an artist better known by art historians and academics than by the general public today, his influence in shaping the direction of mid-century American art is easily recognizable. After Franco's victory in the Spanish Civil War, Ernst painted *L'Ange du foyer* or *Fireside Angel*, an apocalyptic monster bursting with destructive energy.

Ernst said: "The painting which I did after the defeat of the Republicans was *L'Ange du foyer*. This is, of course, an ironic title for a clumsy figure devastating everything that gets in its way. At the time, this was my impression of what was happening in the world, and I think I was right."

Resources:

**"Art History : Eighteenth to Twenty-first Century Art"
Marilyn Stokstad**

Theartstory.org/artist-ernst-max.htm

"The Illustrated Timeline of Art History" by Carol Strickland

**"Paintings That Changed the World" by Klaus Reichold and
Bernard Graf**

www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/abstractexpressionism.html



L'Ange du Foyer
Oil on canvas
1937



**Max Ernst Self-Portrait
1919 Dada Movement**

