

NEW YORK

André Masson

BLAIN | DI DONNA

Comprising thirty-five works dating from between 1922 and 1944, this informative presentation offered important examples of André Masson's various early phases, providing a rare occasion for a reconsideration of the artist's larger contribution to modern art history, long overshadowed by his decidedly lesser postwar output.

French born, Belgian raised, and seriously wounded, mentally and physically, in World War I, Masson had, by the 1920s, entered the circle of artists drawn to theories of automatism. That is not to say that Masson's early works, such as *Le Rêve du prisonnier* (The Dream of the Prisoner), 1924, solely manifest the automatist methods of the day; quite to the contrary, the painting is sober, self-consciously hieratic, with a sibylline mixture of allegorical figure, disdain for color, and

a studious synthetic cubism (a mode the Surrealists were at pains to overthrow for its by-then marked aestheticism and decorative complacency). But Masson's automatism intensified. We all grew up with the exemplary Masson painting *Bataille de poissons* (Battle of Fishes), 1926, at the Museum of Modern Art; at Blain | Di Donna, the work's burin-like angularity, fervid with Surrealist zeal, is reprised in *Chevaux attaqués par des poissons* (Horses Attacked by Fish), 1927. Yet, in the same year, Masson also painted lyrical, stripped-down works evocative of Miró's "painting poems." Of this revelatory type, *Jeune Fille soufflant sur le feu* (Young Girl Blowing on the Fire), 1927, is extraordinary.

By 1935, Masson, fatigued by the high-handedness of André

Breton (who had by then placed Surrealism *au service de la révolution*), decamped from Paris with his new family for Spain, then on the brink of civil war. His painting began to adopt Spanish themes and the brilliant color of the bullfight poster. *Corrida au soleil* (Bullfight in the Sun), 1936, is exemplary, plangent and obvious in a way that prefigures Masson's postwar career (which ran deeply in debt to—and was thoroughly overshadowed by—Picasso's parallel thematic confluences of bull and Minotaur). The engorged windmill at the center of *Sierra Aragonaise*, 1935–36, an important Masson landscape, is both erotically obvious and droll in its reference to Louis Aragon, a leading Surrealist writer of the movement's Communist edge.

In 1938, Masson participated in the "*Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme*," the prewar last gasp of the movement, and in 1941, he managed to flee German-occupied Paris to begin an influential American sojourn. New York City at the time was unexpectedly open to Surrealism, and particularly captivated by Salvador Dalí, whose work often bears similarities to that of Masson despite the artists' opposing personalities and collision-course politics. The "another cup of coffee and another piece of pie" sensibility of the Automats echoes that susceptibility. Thus, automatism took root in the cafeteria culture of a wartime Big Apple, and the Surrealists in exile (Masson, Max Ernst, Yves Tanguy,

Roberto Matta Echaurren, Kurt Seligmann, and others) directly influenced the drip and allover of the gestural Abstract Expressionists.

Masson, for his part, remained indentured to the Minotaur iconography of Picasso. Perhaps he thought that, granting the war, the Picasso in him would not be found out—or that he would, in the end, be given greater credit for valorizing the theme—but he was no Picasso, and he painted no *Guernica*.

—Robert Pincus-Witten



André Masson, *Jeune Fille soufflant sur le feu* (Young Girl Blowing on the Fire), 1927, oil on canvas, 28 3/4 x 23 3/4".