

Alfred Pellan

September 26, 1993



To explore the painting

of Alfred Pellan (Quebec City 1906 - Laval 1988) is to step into a world of vivid imagination, a celebration of colour and line. This artist left behind him the double legacy of his bold applications of the visual elements of painting and the concrete experience of the works themselves. Pellan was a highly prolific painter whose aesthetic practice was aimed at transmitting emotion and creating a unique poetic vision. He was passionately and wholly absorbed by his work. He sought constantly to keep his painting universal, never attaching himself to any particular school. He said: I always opted for freedom.*

After having lived for fourteen years in Paris, Pellan returned to Montreal in 1940, bringing with him over four hundred paintings and drawings. This work indicated that he had assimilated and synthesized in a profoundly personal way the innovations of painters such as Van Gogh, Bonnard, Matisse, Picasso, Léger, Ernst and Miró – all artists whom he had met, with whom he had exhibited or whose works he had seen. From this period on, his presence in Quebec became a decisive factor in the development of the art of the day, changing the face of contemporary Canadian art.

The exhibition Alfred Pellan, une rétrospective, shown in its premiere presentation at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, brings together 155 paintings that delight the eye and stimulate the imagination. This selection of works executed between 1920 and 1984 offers a striking view of the artist's approach, and provides powerful proof that Pellan's work lives on after him.

For your tour of this exhibition we have devised a circuit punctuated by fourteen exploratory stops that focus on Pellan's visual language. Our selections suggest ways of reading the many expressive techniques employed by an artist whose creativity knew no bounds. Enjoy your tour!

COVER Autoportrait (detail), 1928 Coll.: Musée du Québec Photo: Jean-Guy Kérouac

RIGHT Panier de fraises, 1942 Private collection, Montréal Photo, Jean-Guy Kérouac

^{*} The passages in colour are the words of Alfred Pellan.

1. Autoportrait, 1928 (Self-portrait)

In 1926 I left for Paris, where I discovered contemporary art; I was so bowled over that I simply started again from the beginning. In this self-portrait, Pellan is twenty-two years old. He has portrayed himself in the classical way – a bust against a plain background. However, there are already obvious breaks with tradition: rather than giving the forms the natural colours of the objects they depict (local colour), Pellan has forsaken strict realism in favour of a warm palette of oranges and reds.

2-Le Panier de fraises, about 1935 (The Basket of Strawberries)

During the twenties and thirties, Pellan painted many portraits and still lifes. While the same figurative motifs tend to recur again and again, the paintings frequently vary widely. *Le Panier de fraises* is notable for its lively use of pure colour, and for the contrast between the flat surfaces (the table and vase) and other areas of vigorous juxtaposed brushstrokes (the basket) and the impact of the undulating line, which gives the work its expressive power. Notice how the outline of the table echoes the curves of the fruit and the vase. Pellan has reduced the perspective effect: the spectator perceives the various elements from a raised viewpoint – a technique reminiscent of Cézanne (1839-1906) – which has the effect of pushing them towards the foreground, so that they seem to blend with the pictorial surface. In this way, the artist gives primacy to the painting's composition.

3. Les Pensées, about 1935 (The Pansies)

Pellan executed this work at around the same time as *Le Panier de fraises* (no. 2). Here, however, he has deconstructed the shapes of the objects included in the still life. Contrasts of light and shade have been rendered by the areas of colour that unify the composition. Observe how the red area encompasses the water jug, the table, the teapot, the tablecloth, the cup and the fruit. This work is also more graphically drawn. Inspired by the explorations of Picasso (1881-1973), Pellan has created a tension between two different forms of expression. So, one day, I decided to go and see Picasso [...] it was remarkably stimulating, a marvellous inducement, a real provocation from the work point of view.

4-Sous-terre, 1938 (Underground)

I was thinking of a shovel cutting through soil, layers of earth, maggots, things like that [...] Here, Pellan's painting technique is unequivocally gestural. Each spontaneous, impulsive stroke contributes to the fusion of figurative and abstract motifs. Much influenced by surrealism, Pellan's creative approach drew nourishment from dreams and the subconscious. The dark and warm tones are those of the earth and of the artist's inner world.

5-Panier de fraises, 1942 (Basket of Strawberries)

This work offers clear evidence of Pellan's ceaseless exploration of the formal language of painting. He has employed the same theme as that of the similarly-titled *Le Panier de fraises* (no. 2) but the forms have been geometricized and each fragmented shape has been assigned its own colour. The space is constructed vertically on the pictorial surface. In 1942, Pellan made new versions of a number of still lifes he had executed earlier in Paris. As you go round the exhibition, compare *Lampe à pétrole* (1942) with *Nature morte à la lampe* (1932), and *Nature morte aux deux couteaux* (1942) with *Nature morte à la palette* (1936).

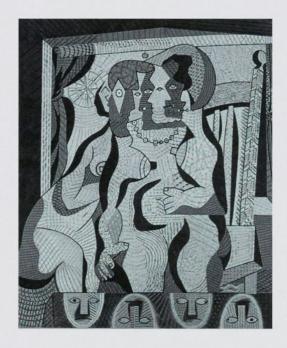
6 - Calme obscur, 1944-1947 (Dark Calm)

In Montréal during the mid-forties, the surrealist movement was at the heart of a number of debates and controversies. From this period on, Pellan's aesthetic practice moved towards a form of figurative painting that took as its starting point the spontaneous gesture, chance, the random brushstroke on the surface of the canvas. If one works with abstract forms, one has to humanize them [...] In this large work, Pellan has combined sleeping figures, architectural forms, plant motifs and a wealth of other images. Every fragment of my paintings is very detailed, one of my

Calme obscur (details), 1944-1947 Coll.: Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal Photo: Patrick Altman







Conciliabule, about 1945 Coll.: Musée du Québec Photo: Jean-Guy Kérouac

works can represent ten or twenty paintings. The extraordinarily rich texture of *Calme obscur* is achieved through a blend of oil, silica and scoria. Pellan laid stress on the physical aspect of his work: I'm always experimenting [...] I make tools to create certain materials and I combine the whole with drawing and colour. The material, its variety, is very important, the possibilities are infinite.

7-Conciliabule, about 1945 (Secret Conversation)

This work shows female figures who appear to be whispering to one another, sharing secrets. In Pellan's highly erotic treatment of the theme, the canons of classical beauty have no place and the visual vocabulary is drawn entirely from the imagination. The artist has created a marked contrast between the forms that stand out in space and the various networks of lines. Our eyes constantly compose and recompose the different elements of each figure: we see them alternately face on, in profile, in space or flattened onto the pictorial surface. The painting, highlighted throughout with brilliant points of colour, seems to blaze up before our eyes.

8. Citrons ultra-violets, 1947 (Ultraviolet Lemons)

Pellan said of this painting that it is both surrealist and formalist and that the subject is entirely secondary. Complete mastery of the tools of the art and the employment of the most contemporary pictorial devices were constant features of his work, [...] otherwise nature becomes too powerful and dominates you entirely. This painting is particularly inventive and imaginative. Pellan's dazzling technique brings together a collection of natural elements and enigmatic symbols. Large areas of colour float across the surface, quite independent of the drawn motifs. The spectator's eye becomes involved in the struggle between line and colour, finally taking refuge in the shimmering surface that results.

9. La Chouette, 1954 (The Owl)

At the time he made this painting, Pellan was re-examining various craft techniques. He saw what he called good painting as a combination of drawing, colour and texture. In *La Chouette*, there is a complex chromatic interplay between the central figure and the rest of the painting. The importance of the drawn line and the richness of texture are particularly evident here.

10 - Jardin orange, 1958 (Orange Garden) In 1958 Pellan executed his Jardins series, using the basic colours of the prism. In these diverse scenes – aquatic, terrestrial, magical – he revitalized his pictorial vocabulary. However, he remained faithful to his technique of applying brushstrokes almost randomly across the canvas and then developing the relationship between line, pure colour and texture: The main problem is achieving visual truth. Pellan created landscapes that are abstract, lyrical. Here, nature is interpreted through a vital force dominated by the pervasive presence of colour. The series prefigures to some extent the luxuriant plant motifs and endlessly diverse elements from an imaginary organic world that characterize the work from the sixties and seventies (see nos. 11 and 12).



11-Jardin mécanique, 1965 (Mechanical Garden)

Jardin mécanique is a fine example of Pellan's experimentations with relief painting. The light is either caught or not by the surface depending on the quality of the impasto and texture. The mechanical flowers thrust skyward: they seem almost to have roots, to bloom, to perfume the air.

12. Série noire-C, 1971 (Black Series C)

Here, Pellan has radically simplified the graphic elements and the palette has become almost luminous. The reds, blues, greens and oranges sing a symbolic hymn to nature, to life. The plants stand out against three separate fields of colour, linked by narrow bands that echo the areas opposite and by the dark, semi-transparent shape that occupies the centre of the painting. Pellan said that the composing of a painting is like instinctive mathematics [...] it is boundless imagination.

13. Bestiaire 5e, 1974 (Bestiary 5)

Pellan began his series entitled *Les Bestiaires* in 1974 and continued working on the theme until his very last painting, *Bestiaire* 26° executed in 1984. In this work, the fifth of the series, notice how the forms are created by areas of colour outlined in India ink. The artist has invented an imaginary world in which real and fantastic creatures share the pictorial space.

14-Bestiaire 24°, 1981 (Bestiary 24)

If art is the outward expression of an inner world, Pellan's seems to have been marked by inventiveness, curiosity, fantasy and freedom. The artist was motivated by discipline and the need to create. In this work, *Bestiaire 24*°, the rich texture is arrived at through a mixture of oil and silica. The composition includes a group of bizarre animals on the left, three skulls muzzled by flowers in the centre, and a flight of birds, a female figure and a house on the right. The combined use of warm and cool colours makes the whole composition vibrate.

We invite you now to visit our permanent collection galleries. Among the works currently on display are paintings by artists from Quebec, elsewhere in Canada and abroad who were contemporaries of Pellan. Observe the wide variety of pictorial approaches, and steep yourself in the atmosphere of an extraordinarily complex and exciting period.

Michel Huard



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