

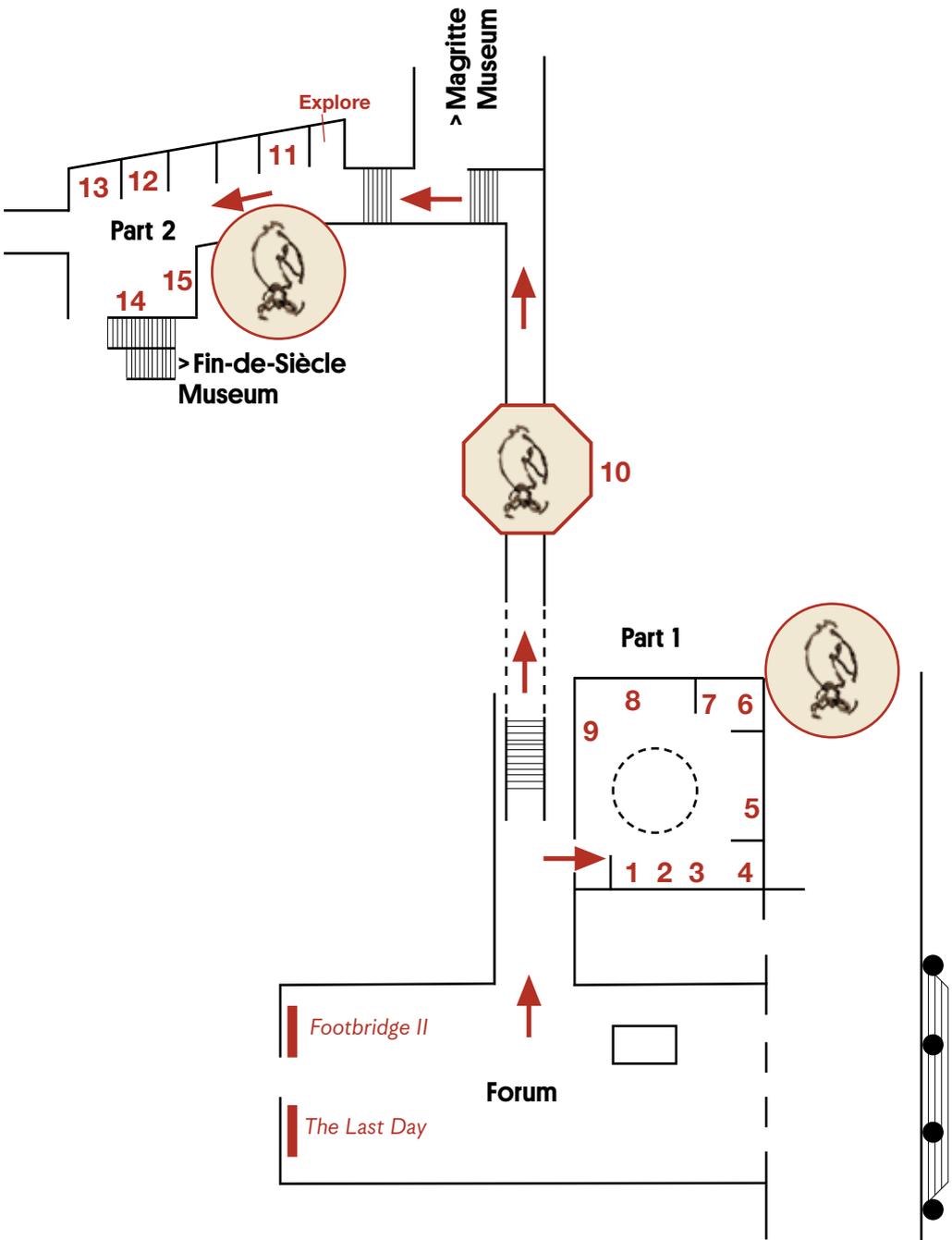
Alechinsky

CARTA
CANTA



01.04 > 01.08.2021

Visitor's
guide



The exhibition "Carta Canta" presents about 150 works on paper by Pierre Alechinsky. Paintings and drawings from the collection of the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, with new exceptional donations, honour one of the most important living Belgian artists.

INTRODUCTION

Since the acquisition in 1955 of *Migration*, Pierre Alechinsky and the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium have enjoyed an enduring friendship. The oil on canvas marks the artist's move from Brussels to Paris and the end of his involvement with CoBrA, as he embarked on a new path which the RMFAB would follow closely.

Whilst this work of a lifetime had found a safe haven on Brussels's place Royale, the artist's sheer generosity would transform the Museums into a repository of his unique artistic trajectory. Pierre has made frequent contributions of works to the federal collections. Today, more than 270 drawings, paintings, prints and books constitute a revealing collection spanning a career that began after the end of the Second World War. Alechinsky's generosity has unquestionably enhanced the international renown of our institution. His works retrace an evolution anchored in each of the narratives conveyed in drawings, prints and illustrated books. They also speak of his late friends, such as Christian Dotremont, with whom he collaborated or whom he accompanied on their last journey, by radically transforming a painting in the way he loves to do, in order to bring something else out of it. Here I think of the somber *Rein comme si de rien*, which was gifted to the RMFAB on Reinhoud's death.

Alechinsky's oeuvre is not only the expression of an international career that combined Oriental tradition and American monumentality in a single perspective. It is also the expression of a way of thinking – or of “de”-thinking – inherent in the pleasure of painting, the better to “de”-paint. In this respect, the artist belongs to a tradition extending back to before Magritte to Ensor, and from Ensor back to Bruegel.

This inspired the idea of a spring season that would let us swept away by these poetic art works, from the Fin-de-Siècle to the Magritte Museum – as a moment of “un-learning” to better appreciate the richness of an imagination filled with excitement and exhilaration. We thank Minister Bénédicte Linard and the Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles for their invaluable support.

Thank you, Pierre; thank you, Micky.

Michel Draguet
General Director

ALECHINSKY OVER ALMOST 10 DECADES

Pierre Alechinsky was born in Brussels on 19 October 1927. Forced to write with his right hand at school, he used his left hand for “les menus travaux” (minor works): drawing...

From 1944 to 1948, he studies illustration and typography at the École Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture et des Arts décoratifs de La Cambre.

In 1947, he joins the group La Jeune Peinture Belge, produces oil paintings and dense “writings”. His work is exhibited at the Gallery Lou Cosyn.

In March 1949 he joins the CoBrA movement (1948-1951), created in Paris the previous year. He sets up an “Artistic Research Centre”, the “Ateliers du Marais”, in a shared house in Brussels, where the experimental and collective ideas of the CoBrA movement flourish.

Following the dissolution of CoBrA **in 1951**, Pierre Alechinsky and his wife Michèle Dendal (Micky) move to Paris, where he follows Stanley William Hayter’s engraving courses at Atelier 17. In parallel, he discovers Far Eastern calligraphy through the magazine *Bokubi*, “the pleasure of ink.” **In 1954**, the painter Walasse Ting introduces him to the “Chinese” way of working.

In 1955, Alechinsky embarks for Japan to direct a movie: *Calligraphie japonaise*. He starts painting on larger scales, developing a free narrative art where simple and monster-like figures proliferate and swarm in powerful explosions.

In 1964, he moves from Paris to Bougival, where he sets up his own engraving studio.

In 1965, in New York, he starts working on *Central Park*, a painting that proves ground-breaking in many respects, as it introduces his first “side notes” and the use of acrylic paints, which eventually leads him to abandon oil painting for paper.

In 1966, he publishes the *Idéotracés* collection, which includes 85 drawings showing his latest research and experimentations.

During the 1960s and 1970s, he begins to collaborate with artists such as Jorn, Appel, Dotremont, Ting ... From those collaborations, “four-handed paintings”, “three-brushes paintings”, and “word-drawings” start to surface. He executes monumental works, most notably for Brussels’ Anneessens metro station (later moved to Delta) together with Christian Dotremont, and initiates a series of drawings

on the old papers that he collects. Other notebooks, registers, atlases, accounting exercises, etc. soon follow.

Throughout the 1980s and the 1990s, paintings with imprints of “urban furniture” start to appear: namely manhole covers and railings taken from the streets. At the same time, Alechinsky pursues his work as a writer and works on ceramic designs, bibliophile book illustrations, and the publication of prints, engravings, and lithographs, to name but a few. In 1985, in Paris, the Ministry of Culture commissions him to paint a mural, ceiling, and carpets for the lobby in the rue de Valois, in addition to other projects for iconic venues.

From the 1960’s onward, Pierre Alechinsky enjoys international renown. Several exhibitions of his work are held from New York to Tokyo, and he is the recipient of prestigious awards, including the recent Praemium Imperiale in Tokyo in 2018 which acknowledges his prolific oeuvre.

Today, at the age of 93, Pierre Alechinsky continues to make “paper sing”. [GB]

1. THE TRADES

Later, I will be a...

"I'm a painter with a printing background."



The Trades: Garage Mechanic, 1948, inv. 12539/3



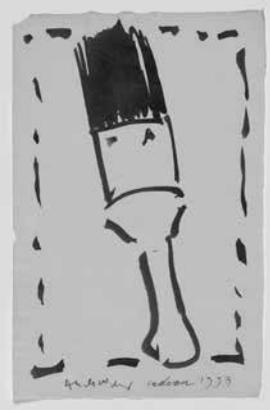
Follower of Giuseppe Arcimboldo, *Water*, inv. 8930

These nine **etchings** are the oldest works in the exhibition. Having trained in typography and illustration at the Brussels school of architecture and decorative arts, La Cambre, Pierre Alechinsky published *Les métiers* featuring short texts by Luc Zangrie (Luc de Heusch).

Did the young Brussels artist draw his inspiration from Arcimboldo's clever assemblages, which were so popular among the Surrealists? A witty juxtaposition of objects represents each character and occupation. The *Garage Mechanic*, for example, has bumpers instead of legs. His arms/body wings expose lungs/exhaust pipes. A spanner and two nuts reveal his very... "decorative hubcap" face! Sometimes, a few quicker (*Lumberjack*) or irreverent lines (*Clergyman*) clarify the anatomy just like graffiti would on a wall. The details of these man-objects are both childlike and sophisticated: Paul Klee and Pablo Picasso are never far away! But the overall impression of the series confronts us with stiff, frontal figures that look as though they were taken from a deck of cards. Be patient! Pierre Alechinsky's style will soon become more synthetic, with accelerations and dazzle. [jPTh]

2. IN THE STUDIO

Stone, paper,
paintbrush!



Present, 1993
inv. 12619

Pierre Alechinsky, painter, illustrator, engraver and story teller... In his studio, this polymorphous artist indulges in experimentation and exchanges with his peers. Yet, there is one (almost) overriding principle to his work: the **ink-paper-brush** ♦ trinity (see technical glossary). Pierre Alechinsky's "Three Treasures". Water completes or unites this trilogy. Like a chemical reaction, water is – according to the artist – the element that allows the three others to interact harmoniously. *“Another drop of ink? A cloud,”* he laughs. This is what he has learned from Walasse Ting, who taught him “the way to make ink” and showed him the “Chinese way” of drawing with a brush: the paper is laid on the floor; the bowl of ink is held in the hand; the whole body is engaged in the process. A ritual, a philosophy akin to that of the Japanese **Shodō** ♦, and conducive to a full awareness of each element involved in the creative process. Thought and gesture become one, materialising and extending onto the sheet. Brushes are moved around with the left hand and dance with great agility. The ink lies down voluptuously. The instruments are carefully chosen; old or foreign papers teasing the imagination, ink of the colour of night and then... this infamous paintbrush, beloved, cherished. A present from Morita Shiryū in Kyoto. Silky goat hair on premium quality bamboo. Pierre Alechinsky pulls it from his briefcase and grabs it “by its white hair”. The ceremony can now begin! [VM]

3. ABSTRACT- TIONS IMPRESSIONS

"An artwork provoked by sensitivity, emotion, spontaneity, will never be abstract; it always represents humanity. And if we accept that a painting must incite a spontaneous emotion inside of us, we can all – painters and spectators alike – dispense with the exterior representation of the things in order to communicate."

In the early 1950s, Pierre Alechinsky occasionally covered his works with a tight weave of seemingly abstract motifs. The phosphorescent outline of the **lithography** *Neon* (1950) proliferates and fights the fear of the void. This type of research is close to that of Alechinsky's fellow artists in *La Jeune Peinture Belge* (Louis Van Lint, Marc Mendelson, Anne Bonnet...) which he joined before becoming a member of CoBrA in 1949.

In October 1951, in the final issue of the group's magazine, the painter published *Abstraction faite*. In this text, he called for a spontaneous creation that, while taking liberties with the figurative representation of reality, would never be abstract.

While walking on a beach in the south of France in 1952, Alechinsky's eye was drawn to the *Roots and Radicles* that might have been transposed in *A Bundle of Sea*. They sparked off drawings, an exercise that required sensing the substance and using the imagination rather than describing a form.



Neon, 1950
inv. 9385/4



Roots and Radicles, 1952
inv. 9451



A Bundle of Sea, 1953
inv. 9452



My Dear ... I always say that for me, all this is nothing but abstract painting..., 1961
inv. 8105

Some time later, Alechinsky joked about the “general public’s” sometimes unreceptive opinion of such evolutions in modern art. He entitles a 1961 drawing: *My Dear ... I always say that for me, all this is nothing but abstract painting...* Ink blots silhouetted by quivering lines are assailed by the profile emerging from a vague black quadrilateral on a white background. He brutally vociferates: “*ALLONS! EXPLIQUEZ-VOUS! / EXPLAIN YOURSELF!*” [jPTh]

4. THE EAST

Repercussions
of an initiatory
journey

“Do what you like with it,’ she said. The train headed for the port. Surrounded by friends I would never see again, Tōkō Shinoda gave me something I had always wanted from her country but never dreamed of possessing: her calligraphy papers concealed in a scroll. From a distance, she could see me waving them in the air.”



Orientation, 1955
inv. 9453.



Sengai Gibon (1750-1837),
□△○ or *The Universe*,
Idemitsu Museum of Arts,
Tokyo

The East captivates the artist. Encouraged by his Parisian friend the painter Walasse Ting, Pierre Alechinsky boarded a cargo ship in 1955 and arrived in Yokohama after a long journey before heading for Tokyo and Kyoto. There, he met and filmed the country’s greatest modern calligraphers, whom he had discovered in Paris through the magazine *Bokubi* (loosely translated as “Beauty of ink”). The other reason for his trip was the grant-funded documentary film *Calligraphie japonaise*.

This forever changes Alechinsky and his art. **Ink** quickly replaces oil completely, and the **paper**, laid flat on the floor of the studio, replaces the canvas on a frame and easel. The **paintbrush** becomes an extension of the body and its spontaneous jerks while imparting the focussed mind that has absorbed all forms and thoughts. Alechinsky even succumbs to an “orienTemptation”: that of likening his piece (*Orientation*, 1955) to that of the Zen Buddhist monk Sengai whose ink works – according to Sengai – “were neither calligraphy nor painting”. One of his most famous works links together – from right to left – a circle, a triangle, and a quadrilateral, shapes that Alechinsky doesn’t write or paint inside his composition. [jPTh]

5. NUIT D'ENCRE

"And the stain,
the source of the
origin, the spring
of beauty, like a
precious grain from
the depths of time."



The Polar Night, 1964
inv. 7213



Jackson Pollock,
Black and White No. 15,
1951, Museum Ludwig,
Cologne

When Pierre Alechinsky painted *The Polar Night* (1964), he had already travelled the winding road of the CoBrA movement; met the mythical creatures of Scandinavian painter Asger Jorn as they emerged from the paint; discovered Jackson Pollock's Black Paintings and shamanic "dances"; spent time in Japan, the "Land of Ink"; and crossed paths with Walasse Ting's Chinese brush...

The Polar Night is a powerful testament to these artistic exchanges, discoveries, and emulations. Using minimal means, the artist reveals the very best that ink, paper, and brush can offer.

The drawing becomes more monumental. It is painting. With splashes, ink stains, and nervous cross-hatching, Pierre Alechinsky breathes life into the inert ink. And what a breath! The artist conjures up a world in gestation from this formless "magma". The ink and the paper actively take part in this birth. They act and react: apparitions, hybrid monsters, tragi-comic creatures straight out of an ice age are born into this night of ink.

[GB]

6. CENTRAL PARK

Tos and fros



Central Park, 1965, Private collection

New York, 1965: “Don’t Cross Central Park by Night.” Today, these words still echo in Pierre Alechinsky’s head. Standing on the 50th floor, he saw a “debonair monster’s mouth” rise up from the “ventral park”, ready to devour the strip of abstract and geometrical grey surrounding it.

From this vision, evidenced by a photograph later marked by the artist, as though proving the existence of the monster to himself, Pierre Alechinsky produced his first **acrylic paint** ♦ in Walasse Ting’s studio.

The following summer, in France, he embarked on a series of drawings



Central Park, 1965
inv. 8048



Sketch of *Central Park* on
the proof of a photograph
taken by John Lefebvre in
New York in 1966.

inspired by New York's "mythologies citadines": The first **side notes**♦ were born, feeding the monster with new stories while simultaneously "framing" it. Whereas the painting presents the daytime version with the shimmering acrylic, the **wash**♦ on laid paper (*Central Park*, 1965) proposes a more terrifying night-time version, bellowing a final warning: Don't cross Central Park by Night!

First side notes, first acrylic painting, first **marouflage**♦! There would be a before and after *Central Park* that would inject new momentum into his work, a signature of its own. A signature that henceforth officialises the sacred union of painting and drawing by marouflage. [GB]

"I painted my first acrylic painting in 1965 on a sheet of paper in Walasse Ting's New York studio. Later, I took this sheet of paper back to France. After pinning it to the wall, I started observing it while I drew on long strips of Japanese paper one after the other. I pinned these strips around the paper on the wall. This was my first painting with side notes: *Central Park*. I pasted the whole thing onto a canvas: my first marouflage. I would soon abandon oil paint. It had never provided me with the opportunity for such groupings, alliterations, and to-and-fro."

7. COBRA

Cobranima: the serpent's new skin

"CoBrA was my school. I was 22 when I met the author Christian Dotremont and painters Jorn, Appel and Corneille. Until 1951, my most entertaining occupations consisted of working with a team, publishing a magazine, fighting against cold abstraction on the right, against 'socialist realism' from the left"...

"There are more things in the soil of a painting than in the sky of aesthetic theory." In 1949, Pierre Alechinsky was introduced to the CoBrA movement (1948-1951). Struck by the words he read that year in Jorn and Dotremont's "Une peinture partagée", he decided to join the movement.

Founded the previous year by Belgian poets Christian Dotremont and Joseph Noiret, Dutch painters Karel Appel, Constant, Corneille, and the Dane Asger Jorn, CoBrA (Copenhagen, Brussels, Amsterdam) stands against formalism and dogmatism and advocates spontaneity and experimentation.



Cobranima, 1961
inv. 8104



New Skin, 1973
inv. 8080

Although the adventure lasted only three years, it marked the artist's career. While Pierre Alechinsky soon abandoned the oily "earth" of his canvases for the high seas of Indian ink, watercolour or acrylic paint, he continued to practice *Cobranima* (1961): the pleasure of shared paintings and studios, experimental research, the rediscovered marriage of writing and painting, the "imaginative" substance, the accidental, the spontaneity, the unrestricted movements, the flexible and immemorial forms, the universal mythologies...

In Alechinsky's eyes, the mythical serpent is not dead. It has shed his skin. It still inhabits his work today. The serpent has simply made *New Skin* (1973). [GB]

8. IDÉOTRACES

“Shall I begin?
Do I begin with
little lines, little
crosses, little
dots, with a big
thing going from
here to there,
with a big smudge
looking at me, with
an idea? Would I
begin by stroking
the canvas
that I imagine
completed?
No, I begin.”



Fine Fly, 1960
inv. 8089

In 1966, Pierre Alechinsky publishes *Idéotrases*, a collection of 85 drawings made between 1960 and 1964. These “traces of ideas” – as their name indicates – reveal a spontaneous writing style that allows the brush, the quill pen, or the stick to move freely on “obsolete” 19th century papers. These drawings have no apparent purpose other than... to trace from an ink stain, an obstacle, a fold, or any other imperfection of the paper.

Alechinsky put his hand at work; a hand raised in the Far East style; the left hand moves while the right holds the bowl of ink. He unleashes his gesture, his body in action. First comes the stain, then the trace. Or sometimes it’s the other way around.

The idea comes second. Alechinsky sets down his brush, contemplates the drawing, and gives it a title, a description, like so many new stories: the story of *Fine Fly* that, in an ample and elegant gesture, exploits a “fly’s foot” to give life to the emptiness of the paper; the story of the ominous *Melmoth*, which, as yet unfinished, seems to be disintegrating itself; or again, the story of the man who no



Melmoth, 1964
inv. 8167

longer remembers why or how he got here (*I Do Not...*, 1963)!

In 1973, the artist donates these Ideotraces to the museum. The ensemble forms a rich repertoire of characters and narratives in our archives. Collectively, they foreshadow the emergence of his future **side notes** and grand narratives. [GB]



I Do Not..., 1963
inv. 8147

9. ORANGES

More than one
orange to skin
with you...



Rein comme si de rien,
2004-2007, inv. 12213



Peels on a Pedestal, 1962
inv. 8136



Orange Carnival, 1962
inv. 8126

In 1962, Pierre Alechinsky shares a studio in La Bosse (Oise) with his close friend, the sculptor Reinhoud d'Haese. Reinhoud had left one long orange peeling on a table, after “scalping” it in a single cut. The natural scrolls and serpentine lines of the orange rinds were sculptures in their own right and both artists used them as models for their work.

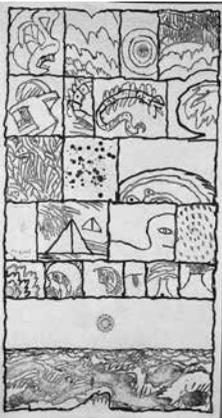
“As If Nothing” – to borrow the title of the painting honouring his sculptor friend – this “scrap” of still life is brought back to life and quickly becomes the object and subject of visual observation and experimentation. Sometimes coiled up on themselves, the orange skins become monuments (*Peels on a Pedestal; Unknown Oranges*, 1962) while at other times they deploy their full and untied forms on the paper (*Orange Carnival, The Full and the Loose*, 1962).

Traced with a pen or brush on old 19th century **paper**♦, the modest skins gain their credentials on this precious support. [GB]

10. PANEL BY PANEL



From All Sides 1982
inv.12504



Panel by Panel, 1980
inv. 9460



Covering Movement,
1980 ; inv. 9428

From the 1980s onwards, what was initially a **side note**♦ grows to the point where a complete reversal of roles operates: the coloured centre is “side-lined” to make way for black and white narratives (*From All Sides*, 1982).

Veritable short films or great epics, they also become larger, multiplying and unfolding panel by panel in a language reminiscent of comics, but maybe more akin to experimental cinema: zooms, close-ups, rushes, framing, false connections, freeze-frames... constitute this pictorial storyboard where the hero remains the “travelling brush.”

A journey through time: Bruegel and Ensor lurk nearby! In space too... the brush follows us like a voice-over, takes to the sea, crosses the elements, earth, fire, air... and seas of Indian ink... Water in all its forms, increasingly present in the bowl and the work of Pierre Alechinsky (*Blurred Ephemerides, Covering Movement*, 1980). [GB]

11. FIERY GILLES



About Binche (I), 1967
inv. 8056



Red Hat I, 1979
inv. 9297



Schisms, 1978
inv. 9391/2

In February 1946, right after the war, Pierre Alechinsky and Pol Bury discover the frenzy of the Binche carnival. Feathered snake headdresses hissing on heads, masquerades, almost tribal dances, resurrected mythologies... And the climax of the show: the tossing of blood oranges. The accelerated race of small suns that explode like hand grenades on the house fronts in the last days of winter. Volcanic sputters; orgies of oranges for the sheer pleasure of the eyes after years of deprivation!

A powerful experience for the painter. A painting to be painted! And more than once: the theme of the Gilles, with its voluptuous headdress and his oranges – the peels of which will be the focus of future artistic research – will be developed in his work and will take refuge 20 years later in another similarly inflammatory theme: the erupting volcano.

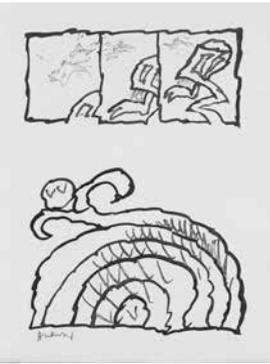


New Island, 1979
inv. 9429

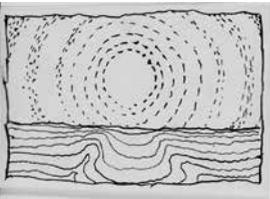
After a trip to Lanzarote in 1969, “the painter who vulcanyses” – as Henri Michaux described him – started creating his own universe (*New Island*) from the depth of his guts. Everything collides: Ensorian visions, tragi-comic masquerades, feathered serpents in volutes and circumflex rinds... Images and ideas surge, gush, emerge, explode and then collapse as they do in Cioran’s texts (*Schisms*) or like a blood orange stains the walls of a small provincial town. [GB]

12. FROM THE SPIRAL TO THE CIRCLE

A whirlwind of lines and vibrating waves



The Dream of the Ammonite, 1972-1975, inv. 9387/5 (recto)



For "*Histoire des Cronopiens et des Fameux*" of Julio Cortázar, 1968, inv. 8059/8

In Alechinsky's early work, the line is engraved or painted in oil. But in the early 1960s, his sculptor friend Reinhold makes a spiral arise out of a point expanding by concentric circles by peeling an orange. Alechinsky then reconsiders everything:

"When I was about thirty years old, I relearned how to draw, how to unfurl the line, the thread that conjures up the unseen, from which I would extract my information."

Isn't the spiral one of humanity's main decorative patterns since the dawn of time? Sketched by the meanders of water, a root, or the twists and turns of the Cobra serpent, it conveys its vital momentum to the artwork.

Some years later, Alechinsky engraves *The Dream of the Ammonite* to illustrate some of Michel Butor's texts. The spiral represents the voluble tongue of the prehistoric cephalopod whose spiral shell invites new coils!



Ceremonial Labyrinths V,
1973, inv. 8077/5

Spirals inspire movement and allow growth. By duplicating them, the artist creates *Ceremonial Labyrinths V* (1973). With their two openings, they are the – sometimes amplified – echoes of the fingerprints on our own fingertips. Their vitality disrupts the only geometry afforded by the division into labels or the organisation of “side notes.”



Spiral Lady, 1995
inv. 12624

And when, weary of being hopscotch or siren (*Spiral Lady*, 1995), the swirl steadies in an unbroken circle, it gains in radiance and merges with a star, an arena, or still, it traces the outline of a manhole. No standstill, there is no inclination to zero: the wheel turns, it can be free! [jPTh]

13. PRINTS

Borrowing is just a step away from printing!



Water Company, Arles,
1985, inv. 12611

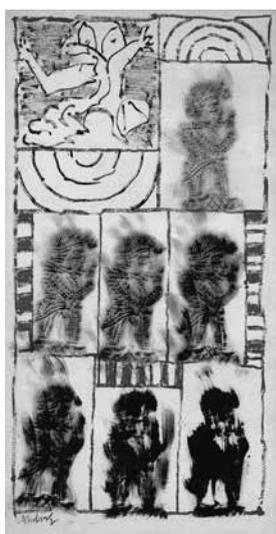
Although **frottage**♦ came later in Alechinsky’s work, this transfer and printing method – which has a long tradition in Far Eastern art – was guaranteed to appeal to the artist. Alechinsky had already admired Max Ernst’s frottages earlier on, even though – unlike Ernst – he quotes his sources literally: the printed objects are often clearly identifiable. Yet, sometimes they establish a genuine topography locating his “tos and fros” (*Water Company, Arles*, 1985) along with his travels...

For indeed, these very original shapes, these tondi, these jagged shapes, these modern typographies, these asters, these rosettes, are unassumingly manhole covers, metal grids, and other “pieces of urban furniture” as they are known in the town-planning vocabulary. Pierre Alechinsky finds their official names as “manhole covers” and “man-hole covers” highly amusing!



Footbridge II, 1986
Private collection

* *This work of art is on exceptional long-term loan and can be seen in the large Museum Forum.*



Speculoos I, 2017
inv. 12571

By capturing the imprint of these trodden objects, Alechinsky builds a footbridge – in the same way an archaeologist would in an urban jungle – towards an underground world teeming with organic images echoed in his work (*Footbridge II*, 1986).

Who knows? Someday, perhaps, these prints will be the remnants of an archaic world, like the speculoos that successive frottages are slowly nibbling away to leave only a shadow, a memory... a denomination meant to disappear? (*Speculoos I*, 2017).

[GB]

14. OLD PAPERS

The postman
always rings twice!



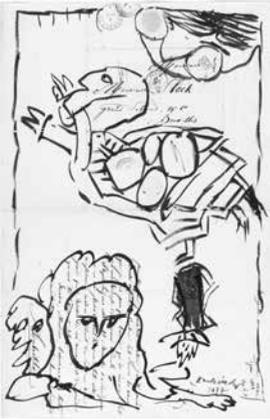
Unfolded Newspaper, 1965
inv. 8054



Hotel Chelsea, New York,
1995, inv. 12623

Pierre Alechinsky has always been passionate about **old papers**♦. He carefully selects them, collects them, presses them, folds and unfolds them (*Unfolded Newspaper*, 1965), crumples them, rubs them, and gives them a second youth. Blank or not, from China or mottled, these papers convey as many memories and stories as they bear future promises. Now, the only thing left to do is to make them sing: CARTA CANTA!

“To escape the blank page,” says Pierre Alechinsky... and indeed, his output of drawings on old documents is impressive. He uses everything! Property deeds, accounting entries, calculation lessons, geological maps, air or sea navigation maps, statements, notes, postal stationery or envelopes, various registers dating back several centuries, collapsed securities, bonds, letters... and even his own bills (*Hotel Chelsea*, 1995). These documents are a source of artistic exploration for the artist, a treasure trove of words, stains, seals, moulds, faded inks, letters, and initials, like so many triggers titillating his hungry brush. What became irrelevant matters once again: here a word (*For Receipt*, 1974), a profile there... (*Shoreline and Face*, 2018). Mr. Stock resurrects



Fully Recovered, 1977
inv. 9286



For Receipt, 1974
inv. 9276



I Still Await, 2013
inv. 12649

(*Fully Recovered*, 1977), while Mr Bataille, squinting, awaits the arrival of the postman carrying a letter that will never come (*I Still Await*, 2013). [GB]

“Forlorn letters, forgotten promises, illegible envelopes, outdated registers, wills without beneficiaries, pointless codicils, collapsed stock exchange securities, certificates for no one, minutes of past troubles, obsolete memos, out-of-date contracts, motions without purpose, eternally late and incomprehensible summonses, envelopes deprived of addresses, ancestral endorsements, and extracts: these paper survivors were found individually or in batches in flea markets in Aix-en-Provence and Saint-Ouen, at bookshops and second-hand dealers in Paris and Nantes, in the attic of a notary, and in the loft of a local police station. For the sake of a reverie of the inkwell and the brush, they are now at a further distance from their own demise.”

15. SOMETIMES, IT'S THE OTHER WAY AROUND

"I love displaying, if not the whole thing, then at least some of the mess."

In this large piece, Pierre Alechinsky raises the question of inventory, which is one that most museums are confronted with. Should the work be included in the drawing or painting section? Should there be a "Dépeinture" department, to paraphrase the title of a 1979 exhibition dedicated to the artist (*Dé-peindre*)?

"Depicting" on the top with acrylic, and "describing" on the bottom with Indian ink, before combining everything in one big marouflage... Let us depict, let us also describe this piece that concludes the visitor's journey.

Everything – or almost everything – is encapsulated in this artwork, deconfined at the top, partitioned at the bottom. Let us take one last flight over Alechinsky's key themes, techniques, grammar, and visual vocabulary:

Irruptions of exploding Gilles, spirals, cobra snakes, a Bruegelian feast, an Ensorian masquerade, stars and disasters, orange peels, stains, cross-hatching, smudges, erasures, the revealed layers of the past, the fluidity of New York acrylics, the inks of the Indian seas, the side notes lurking in the border of anachronic inks...



Sometimes it is the Other Way Around, 1970
inv. 7938

Depicting from top to bottom ...
and *Sometimes it is the Other Way Around*
Describing from right to left ...
and *Sometimes it is the Other Way Around*
Reconnecting.

What is drawing? asked Christian
Dotremont: “It is writing untied and re-
tied in another way”. [GB]

GLOSSARY

- **Acrylic paint:** Type of paint made from a mixture of coloured pigments and synthetic resins. Pierre Alechinsky made his first acrylic painting in 1965, *Central Park* (acrylic paint on paper, mounted on canvas). At the time, he was staying in New York with Walasse Ting, who taught him about the advantages of the newly-invented acrylic material, i.e., its fluidity and speed of drying. Pierre Alechinsky gradually cast aside oil paints and turned to this technique. Together with Indian ink, it became his favourite medium.

- **Etching:** An intaglio engraving technique. The metal (copper or zinc) plate is coated with a layer of wax or protective varnish. Using a steel pointed etching needle, the artist traces a drawing on this layer. The plate is immersed in an acid bath, which attacks the areas exposed by the tracings (this stage is known as "biting"). The plate is then inked and printed, and the drawing appears inverted. Using lavender oil (a process he learned from Renato Volpini in 1962), Pierre Alechinsky soaks his brush in the lavender oil and draws directly on the copper plate covered with a thin layer of bitumen-based varnish. The essence immediately releases the drawing. This technique allows freedom of movement and the possibility of additions and deletions.

- **Far Eastern calligraphy**
- **shodō** : *Shodō* ("sho" for "to write" and "do" for "the way or the path") is the Japanese word commonly translated or defined as "the art of

traditional Japanese calligraphy". The main instruments used in this technique are paper, brush, ink stick, and inkstone. More than just an art form, shodō is a way of life with its own philosophical and spiritual concepts. Moreover, its practice demands acute concentration. It strives towards a profound connection between body and mind, between movement and thought. In 1955, Pierre Alechinsky and his wife Micky travelled to the "Land of Ink", from which he returned with the visual content for his only film: *Calligraphie japonaise*.

- **Ink:** A liquid substance with a very high concentration of pigments, used for marking paper or other printable supports. Indian ink is an essential part of Pierre Alechinsky's graphic vocabulary. It combines a carbon black pigment (or lampblack) with an aqueous binder. It is one of the "Four Treasures of a Scholar's Studio" in Japanese calligraphy, where it is traditionally prepared by rubbing a stick of ink (charcoal mixed with animal glue) with a little water on an inkstone. Its high fluidity attracted Pierre Alechinsky, who made it dance on the surface of the paper with his paintbrush, pen, or his stick. In the 1950s, he began corresponding with Morita Shiryū, the Kyoto director of the magazine *Bokubi* (the title of which could be translated as "Beauty of ink").

- **Lithography:** flat printing process based on the principle of mutual repulsion between water and oil. Originally, the technique refers

to the use of porous limestone (from the Greek "lithos" for "stone" and "graphia" for "writing"). Using a pencil or greasy ink, the artist draws on this stone. The drawing is fixed and then the support is rinsed. The stone left blank absorbs the water, while the greasy lines are impermeable. Only the drawn (greasy) areas retain the ink and can thus be printed. Prints made using a similar process on specially treated metal plates (zinc or aluminium) are also known as lithographs. Pierre Alechinsky uses this method, which allows for great flexibility in the drawing (which is not engraved but freely drawn). Additionally, this method allows for the production of several copies and the use of colour.

- **Marouflage:** The technique of pasting one support onto another. Pierre Alechinsky first used this process in 1965 when making *Central Park*. On the one hand, he painted acrylic on paper (which would become the centre of his composition) and then applies Indian ink on strips of Japanese paper (which would become his first "side notes") before pasting the whole onto a large canvas (162 x 193 cm). This process allows the artist to fully enjoy the pleasure of the medium sliding on the paper, and to experiment with new composition effects.

- **Paper:** A medium for writing and drawing; thin support of thin leaves made from vegetable fibres. Although it may seem trivial, paper plays a crucial role in the work of Pierre Alechinsky. While the

artist uses many varieties, such as paper from the Far East (Japanese paper, Chinese paper, Taiwanese paper), he prefers working with thin paper for its flexibility. Each paper has its own specific characteristics and responds to the needs of the particular instrument selected; vellum paper is used for its smoothness and silkiness, laid paper for its textured appearance and Arches paper for its absorption properties. Sometimes the artist intentionally crumples the papers to lend them a new aspect. As a bibliophile, Alechinsky also collects pages from old manuscripts, old geographical or air navigation maps, letters, accounts, memoirs and postal stationery... The possibilities are infinite!

- **Paintbrush:** A tool consisting of a type of brush with more or less flexible bristles. It is used to deposit a quantity of material on a support. In the case of Pierre Alechinsky, the brush is a prolongation of the hand, of the gesture. In 1954, Walasse Ting taught him the "Chinese way" of drawing with a brush: the paper is laid down on the ground, the bowl of ink held in the hand, and the whole body is mobilised. Alechinsky swirls his brush on the paper. The artist confided: *"I may have many brushes, but I will always use the same two or three: they are getting old, but I look after them like an angler looks after his rods. The restoration of the chosen instrument is very important."* Generally, he uses the same Japanese brush for painting, drawing, and printmaking. This paintbrush is made

of silky goat hair attached to a top-quality bamboo handle. It was given to him by Morita Shiryū in Kyoto and he does not hesitate to compare it to a talisman or describe it as his "Stradivarius".

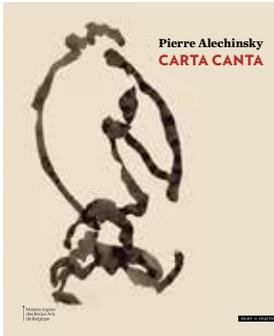
- **"side notes":** This expression – which is borrowed from the field of printing – refers to the small sketches made by the artist on the edge of the print before the final print run. Pierre Alechinsky appropriated this concept by establishing it as one of his trademarks. In 1965, he used this system of centre and periphery for the first time in *Central Park*. His side notes refer to the borders surrounding his compositions. He sometimes arranges them in a system of small frames within the frame, like cartoon labels or storyboards. In *Central Park*, a coloured acrylic is framed by a series of Chinese inks on strips of Japanese paper. As the story unfolds, the patterns interact and complement each other, while the colours echo the black and white. In some cases, the side notes only form the lower part of the composition, like a predella (the lower part of an altarpiece, which completes the main story with small scenes).

- **Stamping - frottage:** An artistic technique intended to capture the imprint of a relief. The imprint is made by placing a support over the relief and then rubbing it with a tool. Unlike printing processes, the resulting image is not reversed. Using paper, ink, and a hard brush, Pierre Alechinsky made his first stampings in the 1980s. The initial idea stemmed from a metal grid, the trace of which he wanted to

capture. Subsequently, he stamped various pieces of urban furniture, mainly round manholes (also known as “manhole covers” or “man-hole covers”).

● **Wash:** An artistic technique whereby different shades of a single colour are obtained by diluting it to a greater or lesser extent. It is employed, for example, with watercolour or with Indian ink. Pierre Alechinsky uses water to create harmony between his primary tools: the brush, the ink, and the paper. In his words, water is “the binder that unties”. It allows for the other three components to work together a little better. Once again, this is the teaching of Walasse Ting. Misty clouds, swift sprays, and scrapes, nuances, and dilutions are now all part of Pierre Alechinsky’s palette. Wash is also used in engraving – particularly in etching – by partially corroding copper or zinc plates with acid to produce halftones. [VM]

CONTINUE THE EXPERIENCE...



Pierre Alechinsky. Carta canta, by Michel Draguet, Ed. MRBAB / Mare & Martin, 2021, hard cover, 192 p., 200 ill.

This accompanies the exhibition and presents the works on paper of Pierre Alechinsky conserved in the RMFAB. Sinds 12th April 2021.

Other drawings of Pierre Alechinsky are temporarily presented

- in the Fin-de-Siècle Museum (dialogue with James Ensor's works)
- and in the Magritte Museum (links with René Magritte, Marcel Lecomte and André Breton).

Draw and explore

The entire Museum's collection of Alechinsky drawings can be discovered through the 'drawn line', which plays a central role in the artist's work. This search engine is the fruit of recent innovations in machine learning. It uses artificial intelligence techniques to better understand the images of the collection in tandem with the user's actions and foreshadows the future of data mining systems. As a result of an interdisciplinary collaboration between the Museum and the academic world (computer vision, natural language processing, image processing), this type of experiment is in line with our Institution's aim to provide new ways of accessing its collections. Through its links with cutting-edge technology, the Museum is exploring the digital innovations that can enhance the visitor experience. The prototype (Deepsketch) was developed by the University of Mons's Numediart Institute. The RMFAB would like to thank Thierry Dutoit and his team, Stéphane Dupont, Fabien Grisard, Omar Seddati and Virginie Vandenbulcke for their collaboration.



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[u: up / m: middle / b: bottom]

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