

# The Artist Jean Fautrier

Jean Fautrier (1898-1964), one of France's notable early twentieth-century artists, remains virtually unknown in the United States. An accomplished painter, printmaker, illustrator and sculptor, he is perhaps best known for his **Otages** (Hostages) series of semi-abstract paintings from the 1940s. During his lifetime, major authors including André Malraux, Jean Paulhan and Francis Ponge wrote about his work. Fautrier is often associated with *art informel*, a European post World War II movement, which included Dubuffet, Wols and others. In 1959 he participated in Documenta II in Kassel, Germany, and in 1960 Fautrier shared the International Grand Prize of the XXX Venice Biennale with Hans Hartung. A year later Fautrier was awarded the International Grand Prize at the 7th Tokyo Biennial. In 1964, noted art critic John Ashbery described Jean Fautrier as France's answer to Jackson Pollock and the New York School.<sup>1</sup> Although widely collected and exhibited in Europe, Fautrier's success in the United States is limited to New York gallery exhibitions in the 1950s and inclusion in Museum collections such as the Menil Collection, Fogg Art Museum, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles and the Haggerty Museum of Art. He was the subject of a major retrospective exhibition in Paris shortly after his death in 1964 and again in 1989.



Jean Fautrier, *Vase de Fleurs* (Vase of Flowers), 1927  
Oil on canvas, 24 x 19 3/4 in., Haggerty Museum of Art

The present exhibition, **Jean Fautrier: 1898-1964**, organized by the Haggerty Museum of Art in conjunction with the Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia University and the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, is the first American museum exhibition of Fautrier's work. Twelve years in the making, this exhibition, was curated by Curtis L. Carter and Karen K. Butler. The exhibition introduces Fautrier to American audiences and documents his influence beyond the visual arts. It features the artist's paintings, sculpture, drawings, original multiples and illustrated books. Included in the exhibition are still lifes (*nature morte*), flower paintings, nudes and landscapes from his early period (1925-29), the **Otage** series (1942-45) and later abstractions of his *informel* period (1947-64).

In 1912 at the age of fourteen, Fautrier enrolled at the Royal Academy in London and then studied briefly at the Slade School of Fine Art. He left both schools to work independently after finding the teaching too traditional. Regular visits to the Tate Gallery, where he particularly admired paintings by Turner, helped shape his approach to landscape painting. In 1917 he returned to France to serve in the army, but was discharged in 1921 because of poor health. Throughout the 1920s Fautrier incorporated a technique known as scumbling into his still lifes and nudes. This tech-



Les Glaciers (The Glaciers), 1926  
Oil on canvas  
18 1/8 x 21 1/2 in.  
The Menil Collection, Houston, gift of Alexander Iolas

Duncan Philips, founder of the Philips Memorial Gallery in Washington, D.C. Philips purchased **Chrysanthèmes**, 1927, shown in the exhibition. Fautrier's first appearance in a museum exhibition occurred in 1930 when **Chrysanthèmes** was included in **Painting in Paris from American Collections** at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Despite inclusion in this exhibition and interest from the Alexander Iolas, Hugo and Janis galleries in the 1950s,<sup>2</sup> Fautrier's reception in America was limited, and his best supporters remained a small group of French intellectuals.

In the late 1920s Fautrier met the writer André Malraux. Author of *La condition humaine*, 1933 and *Les voix du silence*, 1951, Malraux served as the French Minister of Cultural Affairs from 1959 to 1969. Malraux encouraged Fautrier to illustrate a text of his choosing. Fautrier began work illustrating *Les Illuminations* by Rimbaud, but eventually turned to Dante's *Inferno*. He signed a contract with the publisher Gallimard on May 1, 1930 and created 34 abstract lithographs of each canto. The *Inferno* plates were never formally published, but this project marked the beginning of a series of collaborative book projects featured in the exhibition.

Fautrier moved in 1934 to the Alps, where he worked as a ski instructor and opened a jazz club. There he introduced visitors to the music of Duke Ellington and other American jazz artists. In 1940, Fautrier moved back to Paris to resume his career as an artist. At this time, Malraux introduced him to Jean Paulhan, editor and director of the *Nouvelle revue française* from 1925 until 1940. Paulhan wrote *Fautrier l'enragé* and other important texts on Fautrier's paintings. Through Paulhan, Fautrier met writers including Georges Bataille, René Char, Robert Ganzo, Paul Éluard, and Francis Ponge author of *Notes sur les Otages*, 1946, a major text on Fautrier's art. As part of an ongoing intellectual and artistic exchange, Fautrier began illustrating the work of these French writers. He illustrated more than a dozen limited edition books including Robert Ganzo's *Orénoque*, 1942, and *Lespugue*, 1942; Georges Bataille's *Madame Edwarda*, 1942, *L'Alleluiah: Catéchisme de Dianus*, 1947; Francis Ponge's *L'asparagus*, 1963, and Paulhan's *Fautrier l'enragé*, 1949.

Fautrier, like Paulhan, was a prolific letter writer. He enjoyed discussing the arts with his literary friends and also exchanged ideas with artists Georges Braque and Jean Dubuffet. Fautrier considered Paulhan one of few people with the sensitivity and understanding to write about his paintings. Paulhan's *Fautrier l'enragé* first appeared in the catalogue *Fautrier: Œuvres (1915-1943)* produced in conjunction with the 1943 exhibition of Fautrier's work at the Galerie René Drouin, Paris.

nique of layering colors and painting with an almost dry brush softened the tones and lent gravity to the subjects he painted. Examples of early works in the exhibition done in this fashion include **Nature mort aux pigeons** (Still life with Pigeons), 1925, **Le mouton perdu** (The Hung Sheep), 1926, **Les Glaciers** (The Glaciers), 1926, and **Bouquet of Flowers**, 1927 from the Haggerty Museum of Art's permanent collection.

Fautrier's early success can be attributed to the galleries and collectors in Paris who found his fresh approach to traditional subjects compelling. In 1922 he began exhibiting at the yearly **Salon d'Automne** in Paris. In 1923 his work was shown at Galerie Fabre, where he met the art dealer Jeanne Castel and the collector Paul Guillaume who helped advance his career. His first solo exhibition was held in 1924 at Galerie Visconti, Paris. This exhibition and those that followed garnered attention from collectors such as



Jean Fautrier, *Tête d'otage, no. 20* (Head of a Hostage, no. 20), 1944  
Oil and plaster on paper mounted on canvas  
13 x 9 3/8 in., Mr. and Mrs. Jörg Rumpf, Cologne



Jean Fautrier, *Tête d'otage, no 1*, 1943  
Oil and plaster on paper mounted on canvas  
9 3/8 x 8 3/4 in. The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, The Panza Collection

## Les Otages

**Les Otages** is a series of 33 paintings and bronzes produced by Fautrier between 1943 and 1945. During this time Fautrier's studio was in Vallée-aux-Loups near Paris, where he is reputed to have overheard the cries of people tortured and executed by the Nazis. **Les Otages** are not conventional portraits of specific individuals, but are intended as universal representations of victims of war. The series is among the most powerful evocations of torture in the history of art. The artist took up this theme again in the late 1950s producing works in homage to the victims of the Soviet attack on Hungary. **Tête de partisans**, **Budapest**, 1956 and 1957, from the exhibition also illustrate Fautrier's use of literary texts. Both are inscribed with lines from Paul Éluard's famous poem *Liberté*, 1944.

To create **Les Otages** and the **Tête de partisans** paintings, Fautrier developed an *haute pâte* (high paste) technique. This involved applying a thick handmade plaster, or impasto substance to paper mounted on canvas. In a letter from 1943, Fautrier described his process to Paulhan.

The canvas is merely a support for the paper. The thick paper is covered with sometimes thick layers of a plaster—the picture is painted on this moist plaster—this plaster makes the paint adhere to the picture perfectly—it has the virtue of fixing the colors in powder, crushed pastels, gouache, ink and also oil paint—it is above all thanks to these coats of plaster that the mixture can be produced as well and the quality of the matter is achieved.<sup>3</sup>

The viscous plaster or *enduit* adopted by Fautrier is typically used in wall repair. As an artistic medium, it allowed the artist to build up the surface and add dimension to his paintings. Along with the **Otage** paintings, **Le moulin à café** (The Coffee Grinder), 1947 and **Le flacon de cristal** (The Crystal Flask), 1948 are examples of Fautrier's *haute pâte* paintings in the exhibition.

# Reproductions and Original Multiples

Throughout his career Fautrier explored and developed new techniques and methods of producing art. He traveled extensively – visiting Italy, Holland, Belgium, and the United States – investigating various means to reproduce the material effect of a painting in a print. Early in the forties he met the poet Jeanine Aeply. The two of them combined elements of printing and painting to create “original multiples”. Aeply and Fautrier married in 1943. Their collaboration on a series called *Reproductions Aeply* reproducing works of contemporary painters including Degas, Braque, and Vuillard led to Fautrier’s *Originaux multiples* shown in the exhibition.

The original multiples as described by Fautrier are lithographs with gouache, pastel, and varnish added by the artist. Five of eighteen different series of original multiples including first editions of *La tranche d’orange* (The Orange Slice), ca. 1950, *La colline* (The Hill), 1950 and *Paysage flamboyant* (Blazing Landscape), 1950 are included in the exhibition. An edition of 300 was planned of each image, however, far fewer were produced. Fautrier’s first exhibition of original multiples occurred in 1950 at Galerie Billet-Caputo in Paris to mixed reviews. While the aim of the *Originaux multiples* was to make art accessible to a wider audience, they were criticized for being manufactured rather than originals. Now these limited edition works are valued by collectors. With these works, Fautrier sought to challenge ideas of originality and authenticity in art. Debates over what constitutes an original work of art, fueled by Fautrier’s experiments with serialization, have preoccupied successive generations of artists.

After World War II, Fautrier shocked critics by introducing pastels into his object paintings. Lavenders, powdery blues, and pinks as seen in *Trapèze, Tableau à 4 côté* (Trapeze, Painting with 4 sides), 1958 were a part of Fautrier’s testing the limits of conventional painting. According to Malraux, Fautrier’s new palette “does not resemble that of any contemporary painter; nor even the palette of our time.”<sup>4</sup> With this palette and his various techniques – scumbling, *haute pâte* painting, and hand painted lithography (original multiples) – Fautrier pushed painting and printmaking in new directions. Interest in Fautrier has remained strong in Europe, and with this exhibition the artist who has been so central in the twentieth century has finally received the recognition he deserves in the United States.

**The exhibition Jean Fautrier 1898-1964 was curated by Curtis L. Carter and Karen K. Butler and is accompanied by a scholarly catalogue with essays by Curtis L. Carter, Karen K. Butler, Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh and Rachel E. Perry, and distributed by Yale University Press, New Haven and London.**

1. John Ashbery, “A French Reply from Fautrier.” *New York Herald Tribune* (Paris), April 14, 1964, 5.

2. For an in-depth article on Fautrier in America, see Curtis L. Carter, “Fautrier’s Fortunes: A Paradox of Success and Failure” in *Jean Fautrier: 1898-1964*, (Haggerty Museum of Art, Marquette University; Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University; Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia University, 2002) 17-33.

3. Fautrier to Paulhan, 1943 in André Berne-Joffroy, *Jean Paulhan à travers ses peintre*, exh. cat. Grand Palais (Paris, 1974), 84-85, letter no. 81.

4. André Malraux, “Lettre à un jeune ami américain,” in *Fautrier*, exh. cat., Alexander Iolas Gallery, (New York, 1956), reprinted in *Jean Fautrier, 1898-1964*, Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (Paris, 1989) 224.

# Acknowledgments

The Haggerty Museum of Art is pleased to present the exhibition **Jean Fautrier: 1898-1964** and the accompanying exhibition catalogue distributed by Yale University press. This exhibition, the first American museum retrospective presentation of Jean Fautrier debuts at the Haggerty Museum of Art, Marquette University (September 19–December 29, 2002) before traveling to the Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia University, (January 28–March 29, 2003) and the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University (April 26–July 20, 2003).

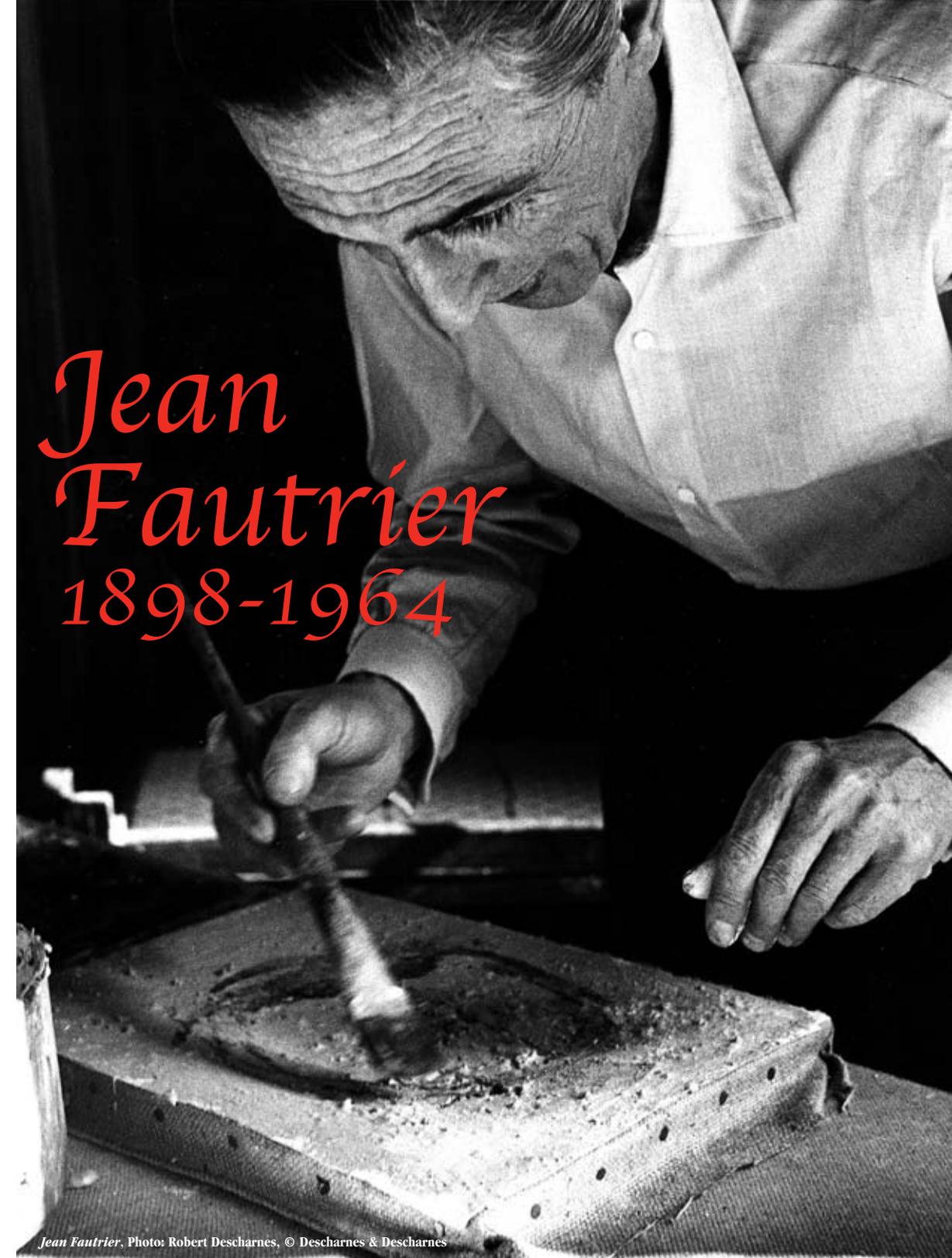
For making this exhibition possible, special thanks is due to the directors, curators and staff of the participating museums, and the private lenders who have generously provided art work from their collections.

Above all, I am grateful to those who agreed to lend their precious works of art to the exhibition, particularly James Demetron, acting director of the Menil Collection in Houston; Jay Gates, director of The Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C.; Jeremy Strick, director of The Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles; Alfred Pacquement, director of the Musée national d’art moderne in Paris; and James Cuno, director of the Harvard University Art Museums. Given the dispersal of Fautrier’s works, private lenders were especially important to the exhibition. They include Mr. and Mrs. Eric Beyersdorf, Paris; Nicolas Descharnes, Paris; Marie-José Lefort, Geneva; Galerie Daniel Malingue/Galerie DiMeo, Paris; Jean Paul Ledeur, Paris; Madeleine Malraux, Paris; Mr. and Mrs. Gerd Schmitz-Morkramer, Munich; Jean-Marie Rossi, Paris; Mr. and Mrs. Jörg Rumpf, Cologne; Gunter Sachs, Switzerland; Michael Werner Gallery, New York; the Zenner Family, Stuttgart; and anonymous private lenders from France, Switzerland, and the United States. Without their trust and generosity, the exhibition would not have been possible.

Many individuals at all three institutions helped make this exhibition a reality. At Marquette, Annemarie Sawkins, the Haggerty Museum’s associate curator, prepared the artist’s biography, exhibition history, and bibliography for the catalogue and diligently assisted with research for the exhibition. James Kieselburg, the museum’s registrar, ably handled the loan documents, coordinated shipping and insurance for all three venues with the aid of Charl Burke, director of risk management, and secured reproduction rights and catalogue illustrations. Lynne Shumow, curator of education, developed creative educational programming for the exhibition. Andrew Nordin, chief preparator, assisted by Tim Dykes, thoughtfully designed and installed the exhibition. Jerome Fortier prepared effective promotional materials and John Gardner arranged important media publicity. Lee Coppennoll, assistant director, with administrative assistant Mary Wagner, prepared funding grants and provided administrative support essential to the exhibition. Their contributions have greatly enhanced the project.

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**Curtis L. Carter**  
Director



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Jean Fautrier. Photo: Robert Descharnes, © Descharnes & Descharnes