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, Bois and others. In 1959 he participated in Documenta II in Kassel, Germany, and in 1960 Fautrier shared the International Grand Prize of the XIX Venice Biennale with Hans Hartung. A year later Fautrier was awarded the International Grand Prize at the 7th Tokyo Biennial. In 1961, noted art critic John Ashbery described Jean Fautrier, Gallery exhibitions in the 1950s and inclusion in Museum collections such as the Menil Collection, Fogg Art Museum and the 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.

The present exhibition, Jean Fautrier: 1898-1964, organized by the Haggerty Museum of Art in conjunction with the Miriam and Iras W. 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, the artist’s paintings, sculptures, 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 Otages series (1942-45) and later abstractions of his nature morte. In the late 1920s Fautrier met the writer André Malraux. Author of La condition humaine, 1935 and Le natura morta, 1945, 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 working illustrating Le Illuminations by Rimbaud, but eventually turned to Dante’s Inferno. He signed a contract with the publisher Gallimard on May 1, 1950 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 1954 to the slp, where he worked as a ski instructor and opened a jazz club. There he introduced musicians to the music of Duke Ellington and other American jazz artists. In 1950, Fautrier moved back to Paris to pursue his career as an artist. At this time, Malraux introduced him to Jean Paulhan, editor and director of the Nouvelle revue francaise from 1925 until 1950. Paulhan wrote Fautrier’s essays and other important texts on Fautrier’s paintings. Through Paulhan, Fautrier corresponded with writers including Georges Bataille, Pierre Chare, Robert Ganzo, Paul Eluard, 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 published editions books including Robert Guillermic’s Les Otages, 1942, and Leptogigue, 1942, Georges Bataille’s Madame Edouard, 1942, L’Éveleve Galateïche de Diane, 1947, Francis Ponge’s Cagoups, 1963, and Paulhan’s Fautrier’s l’Enfer, 1949.

Fautrier, like Paulhan, was a prolific letter writer. He enjoyed discussing the arts with his literary friends and also enjoyed reading and discussing their ideas with artists Georges Braque and Jean Dubuffet. Fautrier corresponded with Paulhan and other artists during the war and after the war. In 1942, Fautrier wrote Paulhan: “I want to create Les Otages as a kind of universal representation of victims of war. The series is among the most powerful evocations of the history of the 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.

The viewer is also invited to the Fogg Art Museum’s Gallery of Modern Art to view an extensive collection of Fautrier’s work. Fautrier’s reception in America was limited, and his best supporters were teaching too traditional. Regular visits to the Tate Gallery in London, the Suer Gallery in New York and the Galerie Visconti, Paris. This exhibition and those that followed garnered attention from curators such as Elia Kazan, Director of the Haggerty Museum of Art, and director of the Museum of Modern Art, New York. In the exhibition and interest from the American collectors, Hugo and Janie galleries in the 1950s. Fautrier’s reception in America was limited, and his best supporters remained a small group of French intellectuals.

In a letter from 1943, Fautrier described his process to Paulhan. “In a second volume I will begin with a new series of the Otages. And I will also introduce ideas into my work which the artist will find difficult to accept. I am speaking of a plaster—the picture is painted on this moist plaster—this plaster makes the paint adhere to the pictures. The paint is then worked on until it is dried, but this project can be done in this fashion include Nature morte aux pigeons (Still Life with Pigeons), 1925, Le mouton pendu (The Hung Sheep), 1926, Les glaciers (The Glaciers), 1926, and Bouquet de fleurs (The Crystal Flask), 1948. Examples of Fautrier’s haute pâte paintings in the exhibition. To create Les Otages and the Tête de partisans paintings, Fautrier developed an haute pâte technique. This involved applying a thick hand-made plaster, or impasto substance to paper mounted on canvas. In a letter from 1943, Fautrier described his process to Paulhan, the canvas is merely 13 x 9 3/8 in., Mr. and Mrs. Jörg Rumpf, Cologne.

Les Otages is a series of 35 paintings and bronzes produced by Fautrier between 1943 and 1945. During this time Fautrier’s studio was in Vallée-ains-Nœuf near Paris, where he is reputed to have overheard the cries of the 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. This series is among the most powerful evocations of the history of the 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.

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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 paper adhere to the picture perfectly—it has the virtue of binding the colors in powder, crushed pastes, gouache, ink and oil paint—It is above all thanks to these coats of plaster that the picture can be produced as well and the quality of the medium is achieved. The same painter is enthralled by Fautrier is typically used with raw walnut. As an artistic medium, it allowed the artist to build up the surface and add dimension to his paintings. Along with the Otages paintings, Les Otages and Les Otages as a kind of universal representation of victims of war. The series is among the most powerful evocations of the history of the 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.
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 Jeanneau. They then combined elements of printing and painting to create “original multiples.” Aply and Fautrier married in 1943. Their collaboration on a series called Reproductions apply reproducing works of contemporary painters including Degas, Braque, and Vuillard led to Fautrier's Originaux multiples shown in the exhibition.

The originaux multiples as described by Fautrier are lithographs with gouache, pastel, and varnish added by the artist. Five of eighteen different series of originaux multiples including first edition of La Tranche d'orange (The Orange Sill) in 1939, La colline (The Hill), 1939 and Paysage flamboyant (Blaze) 1949 are included in the exhibition. An edition of 300 was planned of each image, however, far fewer were produced. Fautrier's first exhibition of originaux 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, fuelled 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, powder blues, and pinks as seen in Trafigère, Tableau à la toile (Trage, 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.” With this palette and his various techniques — scumbling, Acide julep painting, and hand painted lithography (original multiples) — Fautrier pushed painting and printing 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 was curated by Curtis L. Carter and Karen K. Butler, and is accompanied by a scholarly catalogue with essays by Curtis L. Carter, Jean Fautrier 1898-1964. The catalogue and diligently assisted with research for the exhibition. James Demetrion, 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 et des Arts Contemporains, 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 Beeverdorf, 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; Gauther Sachs, Switzerland, Michael Werner Gallery, New York; the Zamora 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, Amorahye Sawkins, the Haggerty Museum of Art, and the Haggerty Museum of Art, and the Museum of Art, Marquette University, Andrew W. Mellon Fund; Robert Ragir and the Meyer J. and Norma L. Ragir Foundation; Marquette University College of Arts and Sciences, and Wisconsin Humanities Council. Funding for the exhibition and related activities was provided by Nora and Jude Werra; Eleanor H. Boheim Memorial Fund, Robert Raje and the Musée J. and Norma L. Ragir Foundation, Marquette University College of Arts and Sciences, Andrew W. Mellon Fund, Wisconsin Arts Board, and Wisconsin Humanities Council. Curtis L. Carter Director