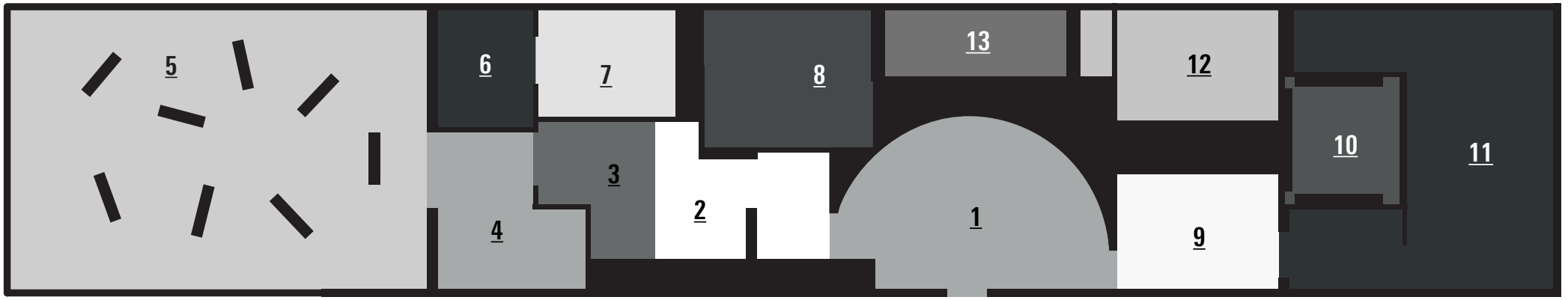
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SÉRAPHINE LOUIS
FROM SENLIS, WITHOUT RIVAL

Centre Pompidou-Metz

GALLERY 2



ENTRANCE
EXIT

Séraphine Louis. From Senlis, Without Rival

31.10.26 → 12.04.27

Exhibition curator: Elia Biezunski, Research Associate / Curator at Centre Pompidou-Metz

What do we know about Séraphine Louis, also often called Séraphine de Senlis? Relatively little remains: a handful of photographs, more than a hundred paintings in major collections, including those of the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Musée National d'Art Moderne at the Centre Pompidou, and numerous letters. These artworks and documents brought together for the first time in this nearly exhaustive exhibition, Séraphine Louis. From Senlis, Without Rival, offer a fresh perspective on the artist.

Séraphine Louis (1864-1942) created a world of plant forms and colours in motion, animated by a powerful inner life. Her pictorial vocabulary attracted the interest of the avant-garde, which looking for works free from the conventions of academic art. They sought out works by artists labelled "folks", "primitive", or "instinctive", creations that prioritised the expression of invisible and subjective worlds over the representation of tangible reality. Louis was thus classified as a "painter of the Sacred Heart" as early as 1928, a "modern primitive" in 1932 and, a few years later, one of the "popular masters of reality". These groups were successively brought to public attention for their spirituality, the supposed innocence of their approach, or their social origins, with the distinctive features of their respective artistic experiments relegated to the background.

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2. THE INVENTION OF A LANGUAGE
3. SENLIS, 1927
4. *PEINTRES DU COEUR SACRÉ* AND *PRIMITIFS MODERNES*
5. DAZZLING METAMORPHOSES
6. THE UNCANNY
7. NATURAL HISTORIES?
8. SPIRITUAL SOURCES
9. PARED DOWN
10. SÉRAPHINE LOUIS, WITHOUT RIVAL
11. "LES MAÎTRES POPULAIRES DE LA RÉALITÉ"
12. PALETTE, MATERIALS, TECHNIQUES
13. BIOGRAPHICAL TIMELINE



Anne-Marie Uhde, Séraphine Louis posing in front of her painting *Fleurs des champs* ou *Fantaisie*, c. 1927. Photo: © All rights reserved.

The artist, who proclaimed herself "without rival", left few comments on her own practice, leaving the way open to critical recognition interspersed with romanticised narratives. Today, the aim is to restore the richness and complexity of her artistic trajectory.

The exhibition traces the development of her pictorial language, her creative process, and the reception of her work, while opening new perspectives on the spiritual, medieval and botanical resonances that permeate her lush compositions.

SÉRAPHINE LOUIS: FROM SENLIS, WITHOUT RIVAL

Born into a working-class family in Arsy, in the Oise department, in 1864, Séraphine Louis was orphaned as a child. Placed in domestic service at the age of thirteen, she later entered the service of the Sisters of Charity of Providence in Clermont-de-l'Oise, where she remained for twenty years.

At around the age of forty-seven, having settled in her own flat in Senlis, she began painting and signed her works "S. Louis". In 1927 she exhibited under this name in Senlis. The following year, the writer, collector and art dealer Wilhelm Uhde exhibited her work in Paris, bringing "Séraphine of Senlis" to prominence—a name that would shape the reception of her art.

While institutionalised in Clermont-de-l'Oise, she signed her letters "Séraphine Louis-Maillard", reclaiming her mother's name and asserting, in a final act of defiance, that she was "without rival".

A GREAT COLOURIST

While her earliest paintings used a relatively restricted range of colours, Séraphine Louis gradually developed a palette of extraordinary richness, combining industrially produced paints sold in tins with fine artists' colours in tubes. She freely mixed zinc white and lead white, vermilion reds, alizarin crimson with bluish undertones, sharp chrome yellows and greens, ultramarine, Prussian blue and cobalt blue, emerald greens, and more. Through contrasts between light and dark tones, the interplay of complementary colours, and the effects of simultaneous contrast, she intensified the colours, setting the painted surface alight with a vibrant energy.

BALANCE AND MOVEMENT

Séraphine Louis built her compositions around a subtle balance between order and movement. The plants, often arranged around a central vertical axis, formed a framework whose rhythm was established through the repetition of motifs. Yet the exuberance of the ornamentation, the elegant arabesques, the animated arrangement of the leaves, and the slightly elevated viewpoint all disrupted any sense of rigidity. The forms seemed to proliferate in a swirling movement, without disturbing the harmony of the composition as a whole.

THE VITALITY OF PLANT LIFE AND METAMORPHOSES

The plant life seems to be animated by a life of its own. As if propelled by a creative force, the motifs spring forth, proliferate and metamorphose. Flowers become leaves, fruit and clusters; they change form or cross from one realm to another, becoming flames, feathers or eyes, adorned with strange, shimmering dots. The vases themselves, bulbous and leafy, change from objects into plants, seeming to waver between earthly shapes and subterranean forces. Through these ceaseless metamorphoses, the plant life moves beyond naturalism into an ambiguous, dreamlike world.

AN ART OF VARIATION

Variations on a single theme allowed the artist to explore ever-new combinations of motifs and colours. Forms circulated and transformed from one work to the next. While these variations may have responded to her collectors' expectations, each painting nevertheless remained autonomous and fundamentally singular.

PSYCHEDELIC EXPERIMENTS

Filling the entire surface, the motifs burst forth in concentric, multidirectional sprays. Their radiance, heightened by dizzying dark backgrounds, blurs points of reference and destabilises our sense of scale. Floating in an unanchored space, the plant forms glow like phosphorescent corollas. They might be afterimages or microscopic visions of cells proliferating. Through repetition, contrast and chromatic juxtaposition, Séraphine Louis creates a singular optical experience in which colour becomes vibration, drawing us into an indeterminate space.

MULTIPLE INSPIRATIONS

Séraphine Louis said very little about her work, which was nevertheless permeated by a wealth of visual references. Her work may have drawn on direct observation of nature and botanical books, as well as on the ornamental traditions of folk art and Far Eastern textiles, and on memories of religious imagery and architecture. In 1935 she recounted how she had painted orange trees after catching sight of a small tree growing in a tub at a woman's house. These various sources, however, were never faithfully reproduced: flowers, fruit and foliage were transformed into an array of forms, colours and signs, ultimately composing a distinctive plant world, nourished by experience but above all by inventiveness.

AN ARTIST OF RIPOLIN

In Senlis, where she lived and worked, Séraphine Louis bought her paints from the Duval hardware shop in the Place de la Halle, rather than from an artists' supplies shop, which did not yet exist in the town. Industrial paints such as Ripolin, which she combined with colours in tubes and, later, artists' paints, offered a practical and economical solution. Even when her financial circumstances improved, she continued to use them throughout her career. Their vivid palette, glossy finish and versatility may have encouraged her to continue experimenting with this material.

"I WANT TO RESUME MY CAREER AS AN ARTIST"

Following a mental health crisis in 1932, Séraphine Louis was committed to the psychiatric hospital in Clermont-de-l'Oise for the final ten years of her life. She stopped painting there and wrote numerous letters. In them, she expressed her desire to think about her exhibitions and resume her career as an artist, despite the conditions of her confinement, which made this prospect impossible: "This is not a place where one can work at Art. And besides, I lack everything I need to work here . . . As for food, I am left without the means to sustain myself; I do not have the freedom I need . . . One needs peace and quiet; here, everything stands in the way of that, in every respect . . . and always.' In one of her letters, written in 1937, she lamented her situation, by which time two of her paintings had been brought to her to complete.

"TRUE ART IS ALWAYS TO BE FOUND WHERE ONE LEAST EXPECTS IT" (JEAN DUBUFFET)

In 1949 Jean Dubuffet defined art brut as a form of creation that was "entirely pure, raw, invented in its entirety . . . by its author", free from the "stereotypes of classical art or fashionable art". This conception presupposed artists who were "untouched by artistic culture" and impervious to the circulation of forms and ideas. This definition hardly suited Séraphine Louis. Although she had received no formal academic training, her connections with several artists and intellectuals living in Senlis testified to a more open cultural environment. Dubuffet himself took an interest in her work as early as 1946, although he neither included it in his collection nor exhibited it at the Foyer de l'Art Brut.

A SURREALIST VIEW OF SÉRAPHINE LOUIS

In his seminal work *L'Art magique*, published in 1957, André Breton revisited the "precursors" of surrealism. He associated Séraphine Louis with a movement that, in his view, sought to "bear witness against official European art": "the art of naive artists, madmen, children and mediums. . . the 'dictated' paintings of Séraphine and Crépin, all this inspired amateurism." By presenting Louis as a precursor, Breton helped situate her work within a retrospectively constructed surrealist lineage, at the cost of an interpretation that privileged a mediumistic reading over the supernatural dimension of her painting.

PRIMITIVE? POPULAR? NAIVE?

Beginning in 1928, Wilhelm Uhde exhibited Séraphine Louis alongside other artists considered self-taught, first under the label "painters of the Sacred Heart" and subsequently as "modern primitives", labels that suggested an innocence supposedly untainted by conventions or the art market. Interest in these artists from working-class backgrounds subsequently grew with the emergence of the "popular masters of reality", before the category of "naive art' gained prominence in the post-war period. Louis had received no formal artistic training and came from a working-class background, but her approach was far from naive. On the contrary, her letters reveal a keen awareness of her position as an artist, determined to exhibit her work, sell her paintings and achieve fame.

MODERNE

In 1945 the curator Bernard Dorival commented on the acquisition of two works by Séraphine Louis for the collections of the Musée National d'Art Moderne. He placed them alongside contemporary acquisitions of works by Pierre Bonnard, Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso, seeing in her painting the same desire to move beyond the mere imitation of nature. In his view, her compositions, their decorative quality, their poetry and their "unrealism" were integral to the experiments of modern art.

WILHELM UHDE

The German writer, critic and art dealer Wilhelm Uhde settled in Paris in 1905 and became involved with the artistic avant-garde. One of the earliest buyers of works by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, he also championed Robert Delaunay, Marie Laurencin and Henri Rousseau, whose first biography he published. Openly homosexual within Parisian artistic circles, he entered into a marriage of convenience with Sonia Terk, later known as Sonia Delaunay, in 1908. After the war, he resumed his activities as an art dealer and writer. In the 1920s, he developed an interest in self-taught artists and helped bring Séraphine Louis to wider attention from 1928 onwards.

COLLECTORS

From the 1920s, several collectors in the Oise department took an interest in Séraphine Louis' work, which was still little known. They included Comte Arnauld Doria, an art historian; the artist Charles-Jean Hallo; and the Duflos family, who employed her as a cleaner. A close associate of Wilhelm Uhde, Richard Möring, a German writer and translator, helped promote her work in Germany, acting as an intermediary in the sale of her paintings to private individuals and museums alike. Later, Jean Cassou, Jean Cocteau and Albert Marquet also acquired works by the artist. Louis' enduring reputation also owes much to the gallery owners Dina Vierny and Charlotte Zander, who put together substantial collections of her work.

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

OPENING HOURS
Every day, except Tuesdays and 1st May

SCHEDULE
1st november to 31 march
Monday → Sunday: 10-18:00

1st april to 31 october
Monday → Thursday: 10-18:00
Friday → Sunday: 10-19:00

TICKETS
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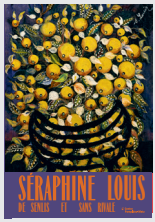
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