

Jean Dubuffet (1901 – 1985)

Jean Dubuffet was born in Le Havre to a family of wine merchants, and the first forty years of his life were marked by abortive attempts to study art. It was during the Occupation of Paris that he finally found his way and began his career as an artist at the age of 41. From then on, his career continued uninterrupted, and can be divided into three major periods based on successive series, in which he pursued new forms of art, consistently disconcerting the critics.

1. 1942 – 1962 : first twenty years of research

While he was still an unknown artist, the exhibition of his work at the Galerie René-Drouin (Paris) in October 1945 caused a genuine scandal: Dubuffet championed a style lying outside regular cultural structures, which he named “art brut” (literally “raw art” but known as “outsider art” in English), and showed a certain predilection for awkward outlines, naïve drawing and subjects drawn from everyday life in its most immediate sense. He oscillated between a deliberately childish style close to graffiti and the development of textures and experiments. He used new industrial materials, in turn discovering the qualities of collage, assemblage and lithography. During this first period, he nevertheless retained a traditional approach in his techniques and forms (gouache, watercolour, stretched canvas), and in his choice of subjects (landscapes, cities, portraits, etc.). His palette was generally fairly dull, particularly in the *Texturologies* and *Matériologies* series (1957 – 1960).



Jean Dubuffet; *Texturology*
XXXVII, 1958, oil on canvas

2. 1962 – 1974 : the Hourloupe cycle



Jean Dubuffet, *L'Hourloupe*.
Figure Walking, 1962, gouache
on paper

In 1962, Jean Dubuffet produced a little book containing biro drawings, cut out and glued to a black background, with a text in jargon. Its enigmatic title was *L'Hourloupe*, an invented word he associated by assonance with “hurler” (to shout), “hululer” (to hoot), “loup” (wolf), “Riquet à la Houppe” (the fairy-tale of a clever but ugly prince), and Maupassant’s short story about mental illness, *Le Horla*. This marked the beginning of a new cycle, in which he moved away from investigations of material in favour of the cerebral aspect: automatic drawing became pure writing, an imaginary alphabet that proliferated in a game of unlimited combinations. The busy little world of the *Hourloupe* formed a simplistic universe with its own people, objects and intersecting cellular forms. The obsessional extension of this creative process made his work much more arbitrary and irrational than before.

From then on, Dubuffet stopped using oil paints, gouache and lithographic ink, turning instead to vinyl paints, markers, felt tips or ballpoint pens. The colours were bold, with a predilection for the three-coloured system of blue, white and red, in combination with black and white. The fundamental role of the outline was to differentiate the tangled elements, whilst the use of hatching restored continuity and uniformity.

His discovery in 1966 of expanded polystyrene and the way it could be cut with a hot wire meant that he could work with the same ease of improvisation as in his two-dimensional art. The new material determined the unexpected development of his work into reliefs, sculptures and architectural creations. His universe of industrial colours and materials was now totally artificial, even more light-hearted, more playful and simpler than before. As in each of his cycles, Dubuffet explored every possibility: the molecules of the *Hourloupe* formed a genetic code run wild, invading the whole planet and creating a space in which the viewer was inside the image, rather than looking at it, directly integrated into the hourloupian writing.

3. 1974 – 1984 : final period



Jean Dubuffet, *Mire G 142 (Kowloon)*, 1983, acrylic paint on paper applied to canvas

At the age of 73 and suffering from back pain, Dubuffet produced doodles in an even more childlike and liberated style, as well as simplified references to his earlier periods. His funny little figures continued to proliferate on his checker-board surfaces up until the final series: his *Mires* (1983) and *Non-lieux* (1984) were unrestrained, indefinable scribbles on a yellow, white or black background, in which all his previous series are cancelled out and seem to dissolve through a process of a return to nothingness. Forced by his health to work on small

formats, he decided to stop making art in late 1984, but wrote his famous autobiography, *Biographie au pas de course* (“biography on the run”), before he died in May 1985.