

Kees Van Dongen: Forever Fauve

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KEES VAN DONGEN FOREVER FAUVE

By Dorota Kozinska



CO-PRODUCED BY THE MONTREAL MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS
AND THE NOUVEAU MUSÉE NATIONAL DE MONACO IN
COLLABORATION WITH THE MUSEU PICASSO DE BARCELONA,
THIS IS THE FIRST MAJOR RETROSPECTIVE OF THE ART OF
KEES VAN DONGEN (1877-1968) IN NORTH AMERICA.

Van Dongen in 1896
Madame Kees Van Dongen's photo album
Photo Marcel Loh

This Dutch-born painter cut a controversial and colourful figure in early twentieth-century art. The 'colourful' is a given. Van Dongen was considered one of the Fauves, at least in the years 1903-09, a movement characterized by the use of vibrant hues. It's impossible not to quote Henri Matisse here, considered together with Derain and Vlammick as the core of the group:

"Fauvism is when there's red in it."

This was a time, unlike the present, marked by a great proliferation of different artistic movements, salons, collectors and artists' colonies, and Fauvism was one of those creations, a group of artists centred around a common vision. Matisse's nonchalant comment was right on the mark, highlighting the artists' predilection for undiluted colour, a hallmark of Fauve painting.

Van Dongen was a somewhat wayward Fauve (from the French for 'wild'), and some may even say he did not belong to the group. Certainly his use of colour allays him with the Fauves, but what sets him apart was his choice of subject matter. He was the only

portraitist among them, and a sharp social commentator and moralist.

His nudes are famous, as is his distinctive, some may say mannerist way of painting.

Van Dongen, the 'forgotten Fauve', revelled in depicting famous people, from the grand salons to the demimonde, and the exhibition presents an impressive selection of these tableaux.

So did Toulouse Lautrec and others, but while Lautrec stood by as an observer, Van Dongen, the lover of women, was clearly in the fray.

Just look at his self-portrait as Neptune, adorned with plumes and flowers, and grinning from ear to ear.

Van Dongen's caustic, urban, often scandalous art is simply dazzling, at times shameless, but always in the service of art, and as such a joy to behold. The bravado way he applies colour to canvas, the red smear of lipstick, the opulent pattern of an oriental carpet, he is more at play than work. There are no harsh lines, no sharp boundaries, all is movement and dance.



Les Danseuses Ravel et Coco
C. 1909-1910
Oil on canvas
91.5 x 73 cm
Private collection
Copyright: Estate of Kees Van Dongen/SODRAC (2008)

Some 200 works have been brought together for this exhibition, including over a hundred paintings, as well as forty rare drawings, prints and other archival documents and photographs, and, for the first time, a dozen Fauvist ceramics.

The MMFA show presents, among other major pieces, the stunning *Spotted Chimera* (1895-1907) and the *Tabarin Wrestlers* (1907-1908), a spectacular painting that has not been exhibited for over fifty years. The Montreal public will also have the rare opportunity of viewing *Tango of the Archangel* (1922-1935), that created a scandal in 1913, and the already-mentioned *Self-portrait of Neptune* (1922), both works quite a scoop for the MMFA.

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EXHIBITION

Montreal Museum of Fine Arts
1379 Sherbrooke West
Montreal
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January 22 to April 19, 2009

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However, though it is a charming city, Victoria does not resonate with the wisdom that we respect and even fear in the face of a wise elder or the face of an old city. For this reason, Berman regularly escapes to New York. The drawing, *Requiem for Harlem*, is an example of the hard inner life of that urban world. The drawing is a view of old and near-derelict residential and commercial buildings along 108th Street. Berman unveils the city as a soiled skin across the face of the paper. The drawing, on ordinary craft paper, is graphite stick, oil paint and beeswax, materials that suggest metaphors of ancient grime, grease, staining, and the unexpected preservation of abandoned memory. The composition is panoramic, just high enough on the building facades to eliminate street life and the possibility of nature, such as a tree. On the other hand, the view is low enough to block out the sky; its glaring presence is evident in the sharp shadows across the buildings to the left like an intrusion on the private sadness of old urban misery.

There are no people in this drawing, an odd act of deliberate exclusion for an essentially figurative artist. However, in *Requiem for Harlem*, the city itself becomes the private body of its citizenry, and the face it reluctantly displays in the inquiring harsh light is proud, old, wise and gritty with memory. □

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The themes of the exhibition follow Van Dongen's rich and varied career from Rotterdam to Paris, where he remained a central figure of the modern era.

From North to South, from Symbolism to Neo-impressionism (1885-1904) presents early works executed in Holland, which reflect the art that inspired Van Dongen, from Rembrandt to the Neo-Impressionists; *Van Dongen Illustrator* (1895-1904) focuses on the important role graphic work played in his art; *Van Dongen Fauve* (1904-1912) shows how his style evolved under the influence of avant-garde artists of his day, and circle, like Matisse and Picasso, as well as how he became notorious after his participation in the Salon d'Automne in 1905, and his growing interest in portraiture. This section

also shows his fascination with the worlds of the cabaret and the circus and his obsession with women. *Exoticism and Orientalism* (1910-1917) looks at how his trips to Spain, Morocco and Egypt inspired van Dongen to create a new palette of colours and to explore a different purity of line. *The Artist's Studio: A Social Venue* (1914-1930) focuses on the period when the now famous, or perhaps infamous, Van Dongen frequented Paris high society and painted a gallery of portraits that represent a chronicle of the Roaring Twenties. The final section, *Landscapes* (the 1950s), is a collection of works as well as archival documents and photographs that reach for themes and styles that characterized the artist's early years.

Van Dongen was a fascinating personality, a great individualist and an unabashed explorer of art and life. Fauvism itself was shocking at the time, challenging as it did the convention within established genres, parodying the academic style, and what followed, its social function. Van Dongen took it further, both artistically and morally, subverting the Fauve style in the process.

His works are as shocking as they are titillating, and the *frisson* they evoke will stay with the viewer for a long time, and delightful it is... □

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Judy Chicago is an energetic force, disciplined and concentrated on a larger vision. *When Women Rule the World* is a title as prescient as the advancement of women's rights for the verbal obeisance paid is well deserved – the evidence is in the artwork.

Chicago in Glass is scheduled at the Musée des Maîtres et Artisans du Québec from September 15, 2010 to January 9, 2011. Virginia Eichhorn is curating *Judy Chicago: Dauntless – Fifty Years of Art Making and Other Acts of Courage*. It will be travelling to Europe, the US and Canada beginning in 2011 and is the first major travelling survey exhibition of Chicago's work. The tour is being coordinated by Exhibits Development Group (Washington, DC) in partnership with ACA Galleries (NYC). □

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