

A SEARCH FOR
THE UNIVERSAL

THE AXEL & MAY VERVOORDT FOUNDATION

MER. B&L

CONTENTS

9	<i>Prefaces</i> AXEL VERVOORDT MAY VERVOORDT
21	<i>Time Past and Time Future</i> JACQUELINE GRANDJEAN
33	PLATES
201	EXTENDED CAPTIONS
249	<i>Dialogues with History at the Palazzo Fortuny</i> EMMA CRICHTON-MILLER
269	ARTEMPO <i>Where Time Becomes Art</i>
279	ACADEMIA <i>Qui es-tu?</i>
289	IN-FINITUM
299	TRA <i>Edge of Becoming</i>
309	TÀPIES <i>Lo sguardo dell'artista (The Eye of the Artist)</i>
319	PROPORTIO
333	INTUITION
347	DIVA <i>Wonderkamer I (Room of Wonder I)</i>



PREFACE

AXEL VERVOORDT

Art is my master.

Throughout my life, art has been my most profound teacher and loyal guide.

My experiences working, studying, and living with art have allowed me to create friendships, discover parts of the world for the first time, unlock knowledge, reveal interests, and share experiences. This is a rare type of generosity.

My wife May and I wanted to make this book about our collection to share what we've learned from art and artists, as well as the lessons we've learned from friends, curators, museums, exhibitions, and our way of collecting, to give thanks to everyone who has helped along the way.

All the art in the collection has been acquired by intuition, a feeling that guides my response to an encounter with an artwork. When I see something exceptional, I feel it in my chest. I know from this physical reaction when I'm in love. There are always important questions that arise after the first sight – the artist's name, date, material, size, provenance, value, and the resources or possibilities that may be necessary to acquire something – but if I don't have a strong physical reaction and an urge to live with and learn from a work of art then the questions aren't useful to me.

At the beginning of my life and career, I was interested in antiques and old art. As a teenager, I went alone to England on scouting trips. I was looking for art, furniture, and antiques, and I brought home what I found beautiful or interesting if I could afford it. I asked questions that required me to gain the necessary knowledge to be able to understand their history. My parents' friends were the first supporters of my work, and my parents were often the voices of reason in my growth. The trips I took in search of treasures continued for several years. I've always been passionate and loved to work. But I think deep down, what I truly aspired towards was becoming a collector. I only decided to become a dealer when I was twenty-one. Early on, my father said to me, "You have to study and get a job so that you can become a collector if that's what you want." Through hard work, the opportunities to access art of great quality followed. Whenever I hesitated or had doubts, my mother encouraged me

with perhaps the greatest rule: follow your heart. “If you love it,” she said. “That’s all that matters.”

Throughout my life, thousands of art and objects have passed through my hands as part of a creative career. In my twenties, May and I made a name for ourselves by showing people how to live with art. It was a process of evolution that we were discovering for ourselves, and continues now, more than fifty years later. Over the years, we’ve aimed to search for the universal, to uncover a common essence between things that are historic and those that are contemporary. Great art is always contemporary.

Ancient art, the art of hundreds or thousands or even minutes ago, was new when it was made. Art takes time. Art makes us feel time, question time, and perceive the relativity of time. In the lifespan of a fly that survives for twenty-four hours, the concept of now is important. In the lifespan of a star in the dark sky, one hundred years is nothing and the newness of what’s created at this moment has little significance.

I realise that I was initially interested in old art, not because I wanted to live in the past, rather I wanted to be part of those who create the future. The true artist is connected – to the past, to themselves, to the present, and seeks to make a connection to the future.

It’s always been important to us to combine the art of all ages as it creates a sense of timelessness. The juxtaposition teaches viewers what we can learn from every moment in history. Art has the power to announce a new future.

Everything in our collection has an element of what I call the eternally contemporary.

May and I feel a human need to care for the art and objects that we live with, knowing that as collectors, our stewardship continues alongside our lives.

I believe that art is an ambassador of people, and art is an ambassador of culture. Art should travel and inspire other civilisations. This is a great service to our world that artists offer to us. I would like to pay this forward. It is our aim that the works in our collection are loaned to exhibitions and visitors can experience the works for themselves. We’ve always been pleased to share our artistic experiences with others. It was the spirit of sharing that allowed me to curate the series of exhibitions: *Artempo*, *Academia*, *In-Finitum*, *TRA*, *Tàpies*, *Proportio*, and *Intuition*. Each exhibition was the next step in my life. To realise the exhibitions, the curatorial teams held a series of think tanks to develop the concepts and themes. Often, our conversations started with questions or ideas about art, and this led us to deeper and more searching questions. Each theme provided a new source of knowledge. It took one year to discuss the theme. In the second year, we selected the art that reflected these ideas. Becoming a curator was a way to share knowledge. The exhibitions included work from our personal collection and

many other artists. This allowed us to see pieces through the lens of all these different themes and understand them in new ways.

What are the qualities that I look for in art? There are many descriptions that arise when I describe the works in our collection. Strength. Silence. Serenity. Harmony. Beauty. Originality. Timelessness. Light. Space. Peace. Positive energy. Art can be studied, and art can be felt deeply, and sometimes this is a long process of understanding for some people. “Do I like this?” is a fair question anyone can ask themselves when they stand before an artwork. I know personally that I have a deep feeling for art that gives life a new dimension. I also know that I’m not attracted to what can be called negative or aggressive art or certain political themes. Even when artworks may have been made by aggressive action – such as fire or explosions of paint or matter – I don’t feel aggression in the work because I see that nature was the brush. There are artworks in our collection in which you feel that the artist was like a brush of cosmic power. I’m interested in deeply spiritual qualities. This is how the artist connects to the material. What matters is the freedom of expression and the way it moves you.

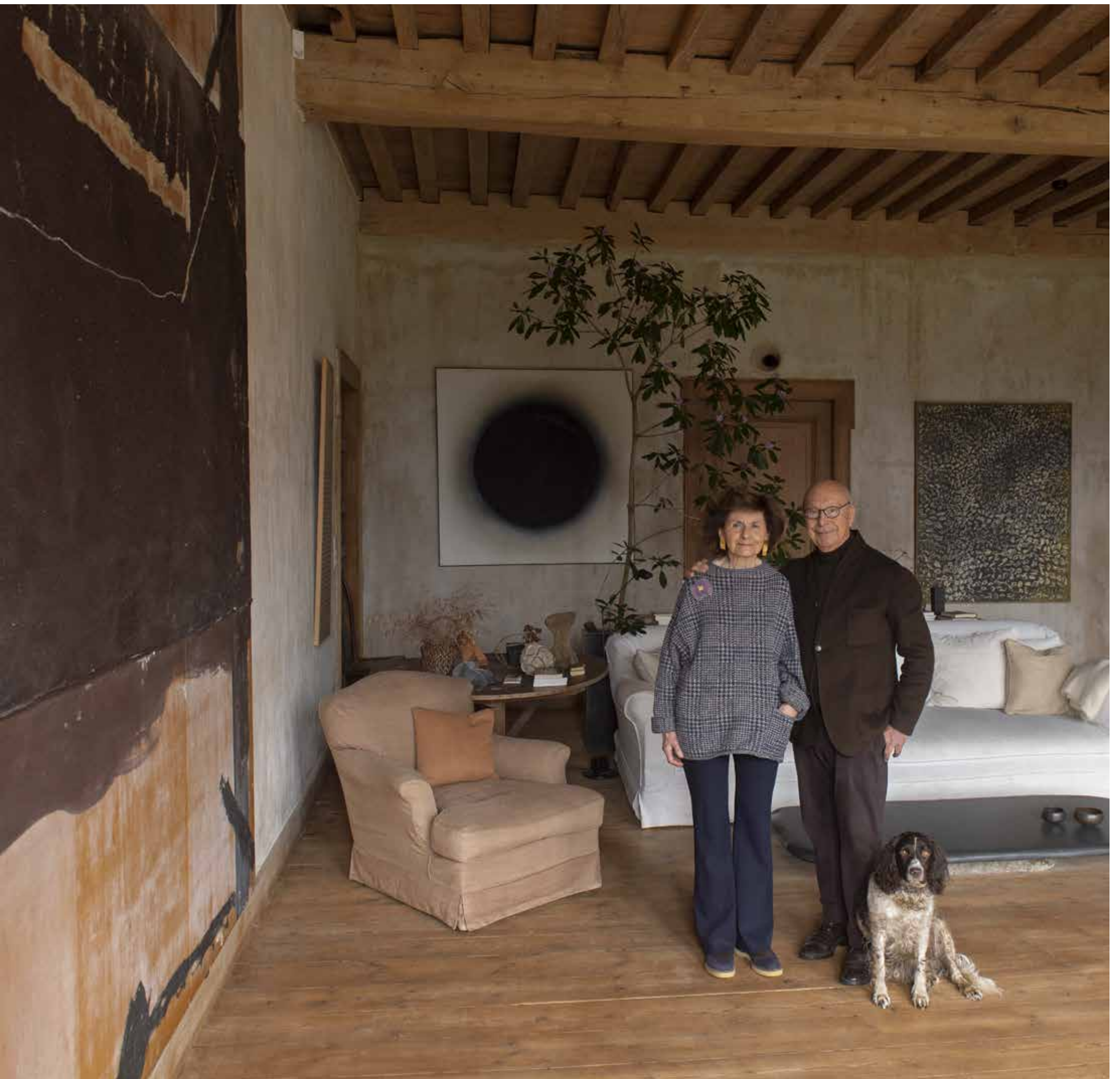
We’ve collected things that are very sophisticated, and other things that are very simple, but if there is a consistent line of thought it is that everything has a deeper meaning and universal message. A found stone can be humble, and simple, and carry with it a deep meaning at the same time. Because a stone is a living animal that lives for millions of years.

Our collection represents a way of seeing, as well as my lifelong interests in concepts of the void, sacred geometry, and the connections between East and West. All the art is also symbolic of certain encounters that May and I have had in our lives. A local Flemish collector introduced me to Asian art, and by looking at calligraphy, taught me about the differences between Japan, Korea, and China. I learned then that art should not be decorative or aesthetic but should have a philosophical message. In the 1970s, I met Jef Verheyen, who became an influential friend and mentor in our family’s journey with art. Through Jef, we met many Zero artists. Their work in pursuit of purity and new beginnings had a new dimension that I hadn’t experienced in my interactions with old art. I always connect the past to the present and East to West. This is the real contemporary style that invites us to the future. Around 2005, this led to the sudden discovery of Gutai, which offered a new vision of what art can be and became a new mission in life to share their originality and work with others. In Japanese, Gutai means concrete – it means it is what it is. It’s a love for the material itself. Material should not imitate a landscape – material itself is strong enough. In the Gutai spirit, the old Japanese traditions are present beyond the will of the artists who express themselves in total freedom.

I would like to thank many people, too countless to name, for sharing their wisdom, and I would like to especially thank our family for joining us on this journey. I am thankful

to the artists whose work has given life a profoundly new dimension. Thank you, for holding this book in your hands. We hope this book offers inspiration to discover the power of collecting and sharing the joy of art. The universe is infinite, and we may never know all its secrets, but in the search for the universal connections between us, art gives us answers.

A handwritten signature in a cursive script, appearing to read 'Axel'.





TIME PAST AND TIME FUTURE

JACQUELINE GRANDJEAN

When the sound man slowly slid the microphone shut, the conversation had far from ended. The interview had taken place in the garden, on a bench with a view of the castle. Robert Noortman and Axel Vervoordt had known one another for years; they had spoken of art, collecting, friendship, and life. I was in my late twenties and working as an editor for a television programme on art and culture. It was my first encounter with Axel Vervoordt, the castle, and the collection. As the conversation gently continued, we walked into the castle. I remember the colours inside were contemplative. Through the hallway, we reached the library. Over the fireplace hung an abstract painting, monochrome grey, with eight sharp incisions, with the title *Concetto Spaziale* by Lucio Fontana (1899–1968).^{PLATE 4} On the opposite side of it stood a little sculpture of a Japanese monk's head dating from the 15th century.^{PLATE 1} This image has never left me. The dialogue between both works of art, from different periods of time and cultures, that seemed to be in symbiosis, but at the same time stood autonomously in their own right, made a profound impression on me. The connection was not a so-called pictorial rhyme. It wasn't merely about colour or visual correspondence. There was a tangible relationship between both works, just like the conversation between the two friends that I had witnessed in the garden. The magic in that moment has remained with me. It moved me to study art history. And now, almost thirty years on, it has moved me yet again, to keep looking and to do further research in the interhistorical method, whereby artworks from different periods meet.

Using that first meeting as the starting point, in this essay I will examine the collection of Axel and May Vervoordt and the exhibitions in which parts of that collection have been presented. To what extent can these presentations and combinations of works be considered interhistorical? Central to the theme is, of course, the encounter between the *Concetto Spaziale* by Lucio Fontana and that sculpture of a Japanese monk's head of the 15th century.

THE INTERHISTORICAL METHOD

In 1996, Jan Hoet and Rudi Fuchs came up with the idea of making a joint exhibition of Flemish and Dutch paintings.¹ According to Fuchs, by then at an advanced age, this was the first exhibition that departed from traditional means of presentation. Hoet and Fuchs decided not to bring the works together in a chronological manner, but to take the role of light as the starting point for the order of the hanging. "The fundamental



























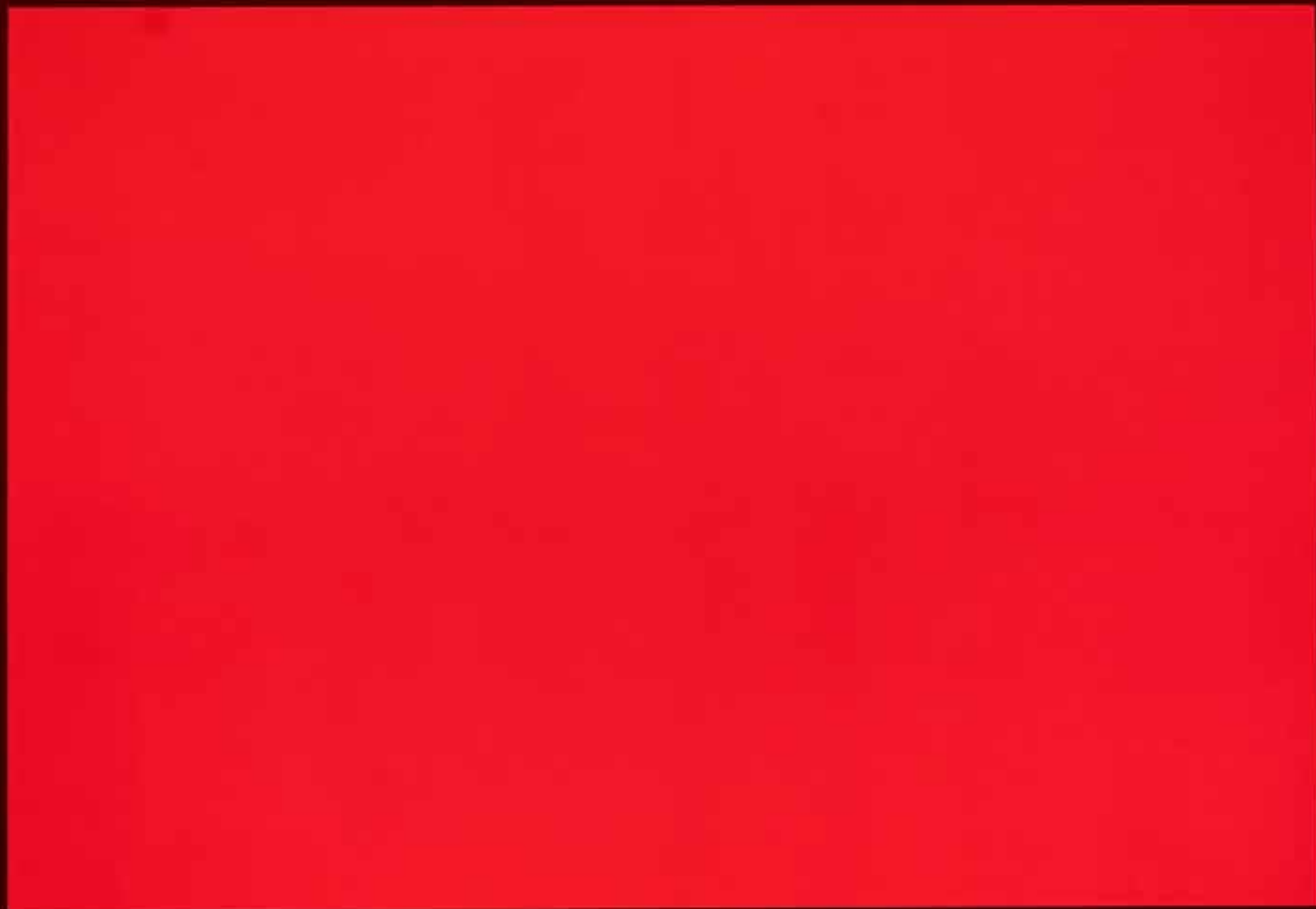












EXTENDED CAPTIONS



1
Head of Lohan
Japan, 15th–16th century

lacquered wood
14 × 16 cm

ACQUIRED IN 1977

EXHIBITIONS

- *Room of Wonder I. Axel Vervoordt*, DIVA Museum, Antwerp, Oct. 19, 2018 – April 28, 2019.
- *Artempo. Where Time Becomes Art*, Palazzo Fortuny, Venice, June 9 – Nov. 5, 2007.

This Japanese head of a Lohan was used during festivals atop a dressed puppet as a focal point for participants' meditation and prayers. It was carved with great care and detailed attention. The figure has a gentle, contemplative expression. Its mouth features a slight smile, and the oblique eyes are half open, revealing black pupils. The term "Lohan" is the Chinese translation of *Arabat*. In Theravada Buddhism, the Lohan followed the Eightfold Path and achieved deliverance from earthly existence. In him, the *asavas* – the craving for sensual pleasures, earthly existence, ignorance, and wrong views – are gone. He is subject to no more rebirths and karma. When he was about to die, Buddha entrusted his religion to sixteen great *Arabats*. These men watch over and care for the religious welfare of lay believers and protect the spiritual interests of Buddhism. Lohans are known for great wisdom, courage, and spiritual power. Buddhist temples in Japan feature two rows of statues representing the sixteen Lohan. The appearance of the figures is derived from the works of painters of the Chinese Tang dynasty (618–907). They have incense burned in front of their images, but they are not worshipped or consulted like the temple's gods. – ASD



2
Ts'ung
China, Shang dynasty,
ca. 1600–1046 B.C.

brown jade
37 × 14 cm

ACQUIRED IN 1988

EXHIBITIONS

- *Room of Wonder I. Axel Vervoordt*, DIVA Museum, Antwerp, Oct. 19, 2018 – April 28, 2019.
- *Proportio*, Palazzo Fortuny, Venice, May 9 – Nov. 22, 2015.
- *Artempo. Where Time Becomes Art*, Palazzo Fortuny, Venice, June 9 – Nov. 5, 2007.

This *Ts'ung* object is an archaic prism with a rectangular exterior and a circular interior, executed in brown jade with a warm patina. At the centre is a cylindrical tube extending downwards to form the base and rising above the flattened neck to form the neck. This contrast between the square and circular shapes represents the universal balance and cosmic power of *Ts'ung*. The square pierced tube became the symbol of earth and of terrestrial life, whereas its counterpart, the round *Pi* disc, embodies heavenly spirit.

This example is a slightly calcified jade that has a beautiful texture, showing traces of its irregular manufacturing. Jade is a dense material with a rich texture. Its vast colour range and impressive translucence have inspired many forms of purely symbolic value. Although the exact meaning of these carved jade objects is often enigmatic, the *Ts'ung* prisms and the round *Pi* discs – both represented in this collection – respectively symbolise earth and heaven, thus expressing well the primal, eternal forces. – ASD



3
Pi Disc
China, Western Zhou dynasty,
ca. 1046–771 B.C.

blue jade
36,5 cm (Ø)

ACQUIRED IN 1991

EXHIBITIONS

- *Room of Wonder I. Axel Vervoordt*, DIVA Museum, Antwerp, Oct. 19, 2018 – April 28, 2019.
- *Proportio*, Palazzo Fortuny, Venice, May 9 – Nov. 22, 2015.
- *Artempo. Where Time Becomes Art*, Palazzo Fortuny, Venice, June 9 – Nov. 5, 2007.

In Chinese philosophy, the flat, pierced roundel called *Pi* was a symbol of heaven – conveying equilibrium, symmetry, completion, and perfect beauty in the path of the sun across the sky. *Pi* is understood as the complement to the square tube called *Ts'ung*, a symbol of earth. The disc's central hole represents the eternally fixed pole star and the principle of the "absolute" (*t'ai-chi*) or "absolute oneness" (*t'ai-i*) in Chinese philosophy.

Pi discs and *Ts'ung* tubes were used together for sacrificial rites and court ceremonies. *Pi* became an emblem of noble status and high social position, often carved in jade, symbolising immortality because of its exceptional durability and luminous beauty. Over time, *Pi* was considered the most important funerary object for guiding the spirit of the deceased to heaven. It performed a ritual function in aristocratic burials, where it was placed above the head, below the feet, and on the chest of the deceased. *Pi* discs first appeared in the Neolithic Age and were very popular during the reigns of the Chinese Shang (ca. 1600–1046 B.C.) and the Zhou dynasty (ca. 1046–256 B.C.). – ASD



4

Lucio Fontana

(Rosario, 1899 – Comabbio, 1968)

Concetto Spaziale, Attese, 1959

oil on canvas
100 × 81 cm

ACQUIRED IN 1987

EXHIBITIONS

- *Zero*, Musée d'Art Moderne, Saint-Etienne Métropole, Sept. 15, 2006 – Jan. 15, 2007.
- *Zero. International avant-garde of the 50s and 60s*, Museum Kunstpalast, Düsseldorf, April 8 – July 9, 2006.

PUBLICATIONS

- Crispolti, E. *Lucio Fontana. Catalogo ragionato*, Milan, Skira and London: Thames & Hudson, 2006, vol. I, pp. 472, no. 59T141.
- Crispolti, E. *Lucio Fontana. Catalogo Generale*, Milan, Electa, 1986, inv. no. 59T141.
- Crispolti, E. *Lucio Fontana*, Brussels, La Connaissance, 1974, vol. 2, pp. 90.
- Tapié, M., *Devenir de Fontana*, Turin, Fratelli Pozzo (International Center of Aesthetic Research), 1962.

“Einstein’s discovery of the cosmos is of the dimension of the infinite, without end... [When] I puncture, Infinity passes there, light passes, there’s no need to paint... Everyone thought I wanted to destroy, but it’s not true, I’ve created.” – L.F.

Lucio Fontana’s *tagli* (cuts) in the canvas are explorations of a new spatiality in art. Reminiscent of Christ’s wounds, Fontana’s art is the result of an aggressive action – slashing through the canvas – but it evokes endless possibility and space beyond the artwork. His slashed paintings are immersive experiences where the Byzantine concept of the painting as a portal to the “other side” is more than ever manifested. Fontana explored possibilities in the perception of space. The viewer is waiting – *attese* – in suspense, for what’s behind the painting to come forward. With all its endlessness, the void has been brought into the present through the single action of cutting into a canvas.

Fontana’s work reflects the first forms of materialisation of human ideas and the first forms of art. He derived inspiration from simplicity in the ways that the first humans depicted recognisable feelings and thoughts on cavern walls. For Fontana, it’s about aligning art with consciousness and balancing primitive impulsivity with reason. Thus, his works are profoundly natural yet meditated; balanced yet evocative of inherent human feelings. – WJDH



5

Jef Verheyen

(Itegem, 1932 – Apt, 1984)

Zwarte Ruimte (Black Space),

1959–60

oil on canvas
130 × 195 cm

ACQUIRED IN 2014

EXHIBITIONS

- *Room of Wonder I. Axel Vervoordt*, DIVA Museum, Antwerp, Oct. 19, 2018 – April 28, 2019.
- *Proportio*, Palazzo Fortuny, Venice, May 9 – Nov. 22, 2015.
- *Aufbruch ins Material*, Kunsthaus Langenthal, Switzerland, May 10 – July 1, 2007.
- *Jef Verheyen. Lux est Lex*, Axel Vervoordt Kanaal, Wijnegem, March 1 – April 17, 2004.
- *Retrospectieve Jef Verheyen*, PMMK Ostend, March 26 – June 13, 1994 / Josef Albers Museum Quadrat Bottrop, July 10 – Sept. 4, 1994.
- *Bilder aus der Sammlung von Hans und Käthi Liechti*, Kunstmuseum Solothurn, June 26 – Aug. 15, 1993.
- *Informele kunst in België en Nederland*, KMSKA, Antwerp, Feb. 4 – March 25, 1984.
- *Informele kunst in België en Nederland*, Gemeentemuseum, The Hague, Nov. 1 – Dec. 31, 1983.
- *ZERO Internationaal Antwerpen*, KMSKA, Antwerp, Nov. 24, 1979 – Feb. 24, 1980.
- *Collectie Hans & Käthi Liechti Zwitserland*, Provinciaal Hof, Bruges, Oct. 6 – Oct. 29, 1978.
- *Collection Hans et Käthi Liechti*, Musée d'art et d'histoire, Neuchâtel, June 27 – Oct. 12, 1975.
- *Kreislauf der Farben*, Kunstmuseum Düsseldorf, Sept. 28 – Nov. 11, 1973.
- *Kontrasten, 1947–1967*, KMSKA, Antwerp, Feb. 18 – May 12, 1968.
- *Ad Reinhardt, Francesco Lo Savio, Jef Verheyen*, Schloss Morsbroich, Städtisches Museum, Leverkusen, Jan. 27 – March 19, 1961.

Essentialism

Isolating oneself

Divorcing one’s senses from the power of matter

Uniting yourself completely with superior vibrations

With the essential

Red, black, blue or white

Becoming mad for a colour.

Falling, flying off into space.

– J.V.

In 1958, Jef Verheyen travelled to Italy and issued his manifesto, “Essentialism”. At that time, he was intrigued by how to visualise the non-colour black. “What is meant by colour and what is meant by representation, visualisation?” Verheyen was also fascinated by Paul Cézanne’s remark: *Le contour m’échappe* (the contour escapes me). During this period, he met Lucio Fontana at Galleria Pater in Milan. The artists developed a profound friendship resulting in ongoing, vivid correspondences together. Although Fontana was much older, he once wrote to Verheyen: “You are like my father”, referring to the numerous instructing letters Verheyen wrote about various topics. Fontana arranged for Verheyen to exhibit in Milan and introduced him to many collectors. Both artists were obsessed with infinity and infinite space, of which this work is a prime example. *Zwarte Ruimte* was painted in Antwerp in 1959 and then transported, signed, and framed by the artist in Switzerland at Galerie Bernard from Hans Liechti in 1960. – ASD



6

Torso of Buddha

Thailand, Mon-Dvaravati culture,
Angkor Borei style, 7th–8th century

sandstone
87 × 51 × 18 cm

ACQUIRED IN 1998

PROVENANCE

- Dr. Jos Macken, Antwerp

EXHIBITION

- *TRA. Edge of Becoming*, Palazzo Fortuny, Venice, June 4 – Nov. 27, 2011.



7

Torso of Buddha
Thailand, Mon-Dvaravati culture,
Angkor Borei style, 7th–8th century

sandstone
81 × 60 × 18 cm

ACQUIRED IN 1998

PROVENANCE

- Dr. Jos Macken, Antwerp

EXHIBITION

- *TR.A. Edge of Becoming*, Palazzo Fortuny, Venice, June 4 – Nov. 27, 2011.



8

Torso of Buddha
Thailand, Mon-Dvaravati culture,
Angkor Borei style, 7th–8th century

sandstone
121 × 42 × 18 cm

ACQUIRED IN 1984

EXHIBITION

- *TR.A. Edge of Becoming*, Palazzo Fortuny, Venice, June 4 – Nov. 27, 2011.



9

Torso of Buddha Shakyamuni
Thailand, Mon-Dvaravati culture,
Angkor Borei style, 7th–8th century

sandstone
114 × 43 × 19 cm

ACQUIRED IN 2003

PROVENANCE

- G. Halphen Collection

EXHIBITION

- *TR.A. Edge of Becoming*, Palazzo Fortuny, Venice, June 4 – Nov. 27, 2011.

The spare perfection of form and balanced proportions convey Buddha's benevolence, which is his greatest strength. The poised appearance describes the ideal picture of a heavenly body that's not subject to change or decay. This idea of eternal beauty was likely why these figures were usually made in stone. The entire figure is developed within a frame formed by the arms and robes, a metaphor for the restrained sensuality with which early Dvaravati works are carved. Despite the presence or absence of hands, it may be assumed that both hands were raised in *vitarkamudra*, a double teaching gesture unique to Dvaravati sculpture. The same restraint that characterises the corporeal forms is employed in the sculpture's decorative aspects, ensuring that the viewer's eye can appreciate the superb modelling of the body without diversion.

Due to the relative isolation of the Dvaravati Kingdom in present-day Thailand, a distinct and highly sophisticated art style emerged. Sculptures reduced to their essence by eliminating all superficial details endow them with an inner force that conveys the universal Buddhist ideal of peace, love, and friendship. Bodily features and other details reveal a skilfully rendered sensibility, expressing the faith of the entire population. – ASD



10

Kazuo Shiraga
(Amagasaki, 1924–2008)
Yuboku II (Playful Ink), 1989

oil on canvas
194 × 130 cm

ACQUIRED IN 2007

Kazuo Shiraga's abstract action paintings were born out of struggle. He began the process by placing a mass of paint on top of a canvas on the floor, suspending himself from ropes attached to the ceiling beams, and he proceeded to spread the paint around actively – even violently – with his feet. The opponents in the creative battle were his bare flesh and the material. The tension and strength arose from the struggle between the unconscious power of the body that threatens to jump off the canvas and the conscious power that creates a structure to bring it back inside. Dating back to his early performances, such as *Challenging Mud* at the first Gutai Open Air Exhibition in Tokyo in 1955, the artist demonstrated his language of using physical, bodily acts to force material into compositional shapes.

Throughout his long oeuvre, he demonstrated remarkable consistency in his process and technique. He co-founded the Gutai Art Association in 1954 and became a prominent member. The group dissolved in 1972, but for many of the artists, their pursuit of originality remained. In 1971, Shiraga entered the Buddhist priesthood at Enryaku Temple, Mount Hiei. His Buddhist name was Sodo Shiraga. Equally strong in his later years, Shiraga continued to challenge the canvas creating a dynamic effect resembling the violent movements of a massive beast with an intriguing power and celestial lyricism. – ASD



11

Shōzō Shimamoto

(Osaka, 1928–2013)

Hole, 1951

oil on paper

41 × 32 cm

ACQUIRED FROM THE ARTIST IN 2005

EXHIBITIONS

- *Le ciel comme atelier. Yves Klein et ses contemporains*, Centre Pompidou, Metz, July 18, 2020 – March 15, 2021.
- *Destroy the Picture: Painting the Void, 1949–1962*, MCA, Chicago, Feb. 9 – May 12, 2013; MOCA, Los Angeles, Oct. 6, 2012 – Jan. 14, 2013.
- *Artempo. Where Time Becomes Art*, Palazzo Fortuny, Venice, June 9 – Nov. 5, 2007.
- *Zero*, Musée d'Art Moderne, Saint-Etienne Métropole, Sept. 19, 2006 – Jan. 15, 2007.
- *Zero. International avant-garde of the 50s and 60s*, Museum Kunstpalast, Düsseldorf, April 8 – July 9, 2006.
- Ashiya Museum, Ashiya, Japan, 1954.

Remarkably coinciding with Lucio Fontana's artistic experiments in Europe, Shōzō Shimamoto created pioneering collage paintings in Japan, known as the *Holes* series (ca. 1949–1952). Shimamoto began by tentatively and modestly gluing layer upon layer of newspaper together. This process bore some resemblance to Japanese paper-stretching traditions by which shoji screens are constructed. After painting and then drawing onto the delicate, papered surfaces, Shimamoto made dozens of holes, first accidentally, and then with greater authority. Like many chance experiments, the accident was repeated until it became a formal device that eroded the picture plane and left a record of the artist's physical action. Though not as gestural as Fontana's works, Shimamoto's cracked and fissured surfaces exhibit certain affinities. By his own account, he was unaware of parallel trends in European art at that time. In fact, he stated that he didn't discover Fontana's work until a decade later. The dates of the newspapers he used, which preceded Fontana's *Tagli e Bucchi* (Holes and Cuts), are still visible in some of the works giving credence to this assertion. A few years after this series, together with Jiro Yoshihara, Shimamoto founded the avant-garde Gutai Art Association for which he proposed its name, meaning

“embodiment” and “concreteness”. Shimamoto remained one of the group's prominent members until the group disbanded after Yoshihara's death. – ASD



12

Fujiko Shiraga

(Osaka, 1928–2015)

Untitled, 1955

traditional Japanese Washi paper (rice paper)

211 × 154 cm

ACQUIRED IN 2010

EXHIBITIONS

- *Explosion! Painting as Action*, Moderna Museet, Stockholm, June 2 – Sept. 9, 2012; Fundació Joan Miró, Barcelona, Oct. 25 – Feb. 24, 2013.
- *TRA. Edge of Becoming*, Palazzo Fortuny, Venice, June 6 – Nov. 27, 2011.
- *Gutai. Painting with Time and Space*, Museo Cantonale d'Arte, Lugano, Oct. 23, 2010 – Feb. 20, 2011.
- *Japon des avant-gardes 1910–1970*, Centre Pompidou, Paris, Dec. 11, 1986 – March 2, 1987.

Fujiko Shiraga (née Uemura) graduated from Osaka Prefectural Otemae High School in 1946 and married Kazuo Shiraga in 1948. She became a member of the Gutai Art Association in 1955 and withdrew in 1961 when she stopped making her own art. From then on, she poured her energy into assisting her husband with his foot paintings and was an indispensable partner in that enterprise, choosing the placement and sequencing of colours in his work. Despite her short artistic career, Fujiko Shiraga was an important Gutai member, creating works that were conceptually challenging and poetic. She is perhaps best known for her works using paper, like this one. These works, which consisted of heavy sheets of Japanese paper with only the slightest interventions, took the Gutai principle of “the human spirit and the material shak[ing] hands” to its logical limit. Over time, the paper has deteriorated, crackled, and crumbled in places, making her emphasis on the material as a living partner even more evident. – ASD



13

Tan'yū Kanō

(Japan, 1602–1674)

six-panel screen featuring a dragon
within clouds, 17th century

ink on paper

171 × 372 cm

ACQUIRED IN CA. 1981

EXHIBITIONS

- *Encounters*, Museum aan de Stroom (MAS), Antwerp, May 19 – Aug. 20, 2017.

The ink painting represents a dragon, its reptilian body twisting and spinning through the tempestuous sky. Because he is associated with the yang elements of water and the heavens, the dragon is thought to possess the power to send rain for a good harvest or to create devastating storms and floods. Full of active energy, the dragon is never totally visible in Japanese art because its form is so terrifying that “no mortal may look upon its entire body and live”.

An artist employed by the Tokugawa shogunate (1603–1868), Tan'yū Kanō decorated the interiors of some of Japan's most prestigious buildings, such as Nyōgo Palace, Nijō Castle, and Nagoya Castle. The artist played a significant role in the creation of the Tokugawa public image and became the most successful painter of the celebrated Kanō school. To this day, his work is displayed in renowned museums all over the world, including New York's Metropolitan Museum and London's British Museum.

For over 300 years, the Kanō school was the most influential school of painting in Japan. The school was founded by Masanobu Kanō (1434–1530) and was characterised by a continuing sense of innovation and evolution. Masanobu Kanō adopted the Chinese *kanga* style of ink painting from Zen monks, who placed a strong emphasis on brushwork and a distinct predominance of ink with little or no use of pigments. His son and successor, Motonobu Kanō, merged the fashionable *kanga* with the somewhat outmoded *Wakan* style, introducing a Japanese colour scheme and more native motifs to Kanō's painting. – ASD



14

Fujiko Shiraga
(Osaka, 1928–2015)
Untitled, 1960

traditional Japanese Washi paper
220 × 132 cm

ACQUIRED FROM THE ARTIST IN 2005

EXHIBITIONS

- *Le ciel comme atelier. Yves Klein et ses contemporains*, Centre Pompidou, Metz, July 18, 2020 – March 15, 2021.
- *Gutai. Painting with Time and Space*, Museo Cantonale d'Arte, Lugano, Oct. 23, 2010 – Feb. 20, 2011.
- *Artempo. Where Time Becomes Art*, Palazzo Fortuny, Venice, June 9 – Nov. 5, 2007.
- *Zero*, Musée d'Art Moderne, Saint-Etienne Métropole, Sept. 19, 2006 – Jan. 15, 2007.
- *Zero. International avant-garde of the 50s and 60s*, Museum Kunstpalast, Düsseldorf, April 8 – July 9, 2006.

“I loved Washi, that materiality, that texture. It’s white, but not pure white. With a shade of beige, it’s never pure white. This appealed to me. Its texture differs from crisp Western paper, too. Washi is soft. If you want, you can easily tear it.” – F.S.

Fujiko Shiraga was one of the only female Gutai artists who joined the group from the start and her work has been included in every major Gutai survey including The National Museum of Art, Osaka and the Nakanoshima Museum of Art, Osaka (2022–23), Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (2013); New National Museum, Tokyo (2012); and Museo Cantonale d'Arte, Lugano (2010). Her work was included in the Venice Biennale in 1993. Like many artists from the avant-garde collective, she was self-taught through action and experimentation and guided by the group’s founder and mentor Jirō Yoshihara. However, after a few years, she stopped her artistic career to support her husband’s work following his commercial success, particularly in Europe. In his studio, Kazuo

Painted using the oil paints that she supplied while advising on the colours to be used. This decision was her way of being an artist. Ever humble and modest, she said in an interview in 2007: “I just liked to go my way, straight on, straight all the way to the sky. I want to keep doing that until I die.” – ASD



15

Head of Buddha
Java, Borobudur style, 9th century

volcanic stone
28 × 19 × 35 cm

ACQUIRED IN CA. 1981

EXHIBITIONS

- *Room of Wonder I. Axel Verwoordt*, DIVA Museum, Antwerp, Oct. 19, 2018 – April 28, 2019.
- *Proportio*, Palazzo Fortuny, Venice, May 9 – Nov. 22, 2015.

This introspective and serene head is characterised by a narrow face with half-closed eyes and sensual lips frozen in an enigmatic smile. Large, circular-shaped curls cover the head. Its features have been executed in accordance with the standard of harmony and proportion practiced in Central Java during the 9th century. Several standard symbols indicating a Buddha’s superhuman nature or lakshana (Sanskrit) are present. A round tuft of hair, known as the *Urna*, is set in the middle of the forehead, symbolising the third eye and the wisdom it conveys. The fragmentary head protuberance indicates the loose connection between the mind and the body of a Buddha or Bodhisattva. The elongated earlobes are vestiges of his life as a prince, a result of the extravagant jewelry worn in his youth. – ASD



16

Günther Uecker
(Wendorf, 1930)
Pfeilbild (Pfeilschiessen)
(Shooting arrow),
1962; remake 1971

wooden arrows on canvas
149,5 × 149,5 cm

ACQUIRED IN 2012

EXHIBITIONS

- *Wirklich? Réellement? ZERO, Nouveau Réalisme und die Befragung der Realität*, Stiftung Ahlers Pro Arte, Hannover, Feb. 25 – June 26, 2016.
- *ZERO. Let Us Explore the Stars*, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, July 4 – Nov. 8, 2015.
- *ZERO. Countdown to Tomorrow*, Martin-Gropius-Bau Berlin, March 21 – June 8, 2015.

PUBLICATIONS

- Honisch, D. (ed.), *Uecker*, New York, Abrams, 1986, pp. 64–65.

In 1960, Günther Uecker met the Zero group with Heinz Mack and Otto Piene, artists who propagated a new beginning of art in opposition to Art Informel. He occupied himself with the medium of light and studied optical phenomena and the realms of oscillation which actively integrate the viewer and enable him to influence the visual process by kinetic or manual interference. The Zero group separated in 1966 after a final joint exhibition in Bonn. Since that time, Uecker increasingly used nails as an artistic means of expression – a material which, until the present day, stands in the centre of his oeuvre. Uecker considers *Pfeilbild* to be one of his seminal works. The action of shooting arrows (*Aktion Pfeilschiessen*) was repeatedly executed over a longer period, between 1960 and 1972. The artist considers the bombarding of the canvas as a spontaneous and irreversible activity, related to language. He stresses that this non-verbal activity creates signs that could be read like his handwriting.

– ASD



DIALOGUES WITH HISTORY AT THE PALAZZO FORTUNY

EMMA CRICHTON-MILLER

The Venice Biennale is the international art world's greatest biennial celebration of contemporary art. While the primary focus is on the curated, theme-setting exhibitions in the purpose-built Giardini (with its national pavilions) and the former shipyards and armouries at the Arsenale, for seven months the entire city becomes a dazzling platform for contemporary art and artists. Part of the appeal, for visitors and artists alike, is the uniquely beautiful, historic setting; part is the palpable sense of continuity between the great art of the past – the Carpaccios, Bellinis, Titians, Tintoretos, Canalettos, and Tiepolos filling the churches and museums – and the best and most urgent work of the present day.

In 2007, there was a newcomer to the jamboree. In the 15th century Palazzo Fortuny, on the northern edge of the San Marco *sestiere*, a team of curators under the inspirational lead of collector, art dealer, and designer Axel Vervoordt, mounted the first of what would become a series of six conceptually ambitious, immersive exhibitions. The name of this first exhibition was *Artempo. Where Time Becomes Art*. The Gothic palace, once the home of the multitalented Spanish artist, inventor, and designer, Mariano Fortuny y Madrazo (1871–1949), and, since 1956, a museum dedicated to his work and inspirations, was filled from top to bottom with artworks gathered from museums and private collections, from across eras and cultural traditions, from antiquity to newly commissioned work, alongside curious natural and manmade objects. Music and performance were added to the mix, as critical components, not as entertaining adjuncts. This was no randomly gathered plethora but a precisely orchestrated display, with each exhibit reflecting the others around it whilst making its specific contribution to the show's overall theme: how time creates art. But if the exhibition was partly about time's creative power – how it shapes and perfects it, whether from a worn tabletop or a painting by Francis Bacon (1909–1992) – it was also about how great art eludes time's dominion. As Vervoordt said in an interview, “Artempo is about the *intemporal*: the absence of time, the sense of the void, and the empty source of all things, the work of art that belongs to all time.”

The exhibition was conceived by Vervoordt and developed in discussion with Mattijs Visser, head of exhibitions at Museum Kunstpalast in Düsseldorf. The organisation was handled by the *Musei Civici di Venezia*, under the direction of Giandomenico Romanelli. The co-curators were Jean-Hubert Martin, general director of Museum Kunstpalast in Düsseldorf and Daniela Ferretti, director of the Palazzo Fortuny, architect and

exhibition designer, who oversaw the complex choreography of the display. The key to the originality of the show, however, was the depth and intensity of its gestation. The theme had been teased out of a much broader research project, conducted among many friends and colleagues of Vervoordt, through a series of think tanks with scientists, architects, art critics, and musicians. From these discussions, an initial trio of exhibition ideas emerged, *Artempo*, *Academia*, and *In-Finitum*. Once the theme had been set, the synopsis was then sent out to a list of artists, who were invited to create new work, and also to private collectors of African art, Ancient art, and museums, to ask for loans. This approach of building a show around an abstract idea, reflected through multiple perspectives was highly original – as was the way of then animating the theme. Far from academically conceived (there were no wall labels, although notes on all the artworks, for the curious, could be found in an accompanying booklet), this was to be a live demonstration of what art can mean when let loose from prescriptive, pedagogical curatorial direction and allowed to communicate with its audience directly through every faculty – physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual. In this, the exhibition (and the others that would follow), was driven above all by Vervoordt’s own approach to art and collecting. This holds as its central principle the idea that art is revelatory and the encounter with art transformative, with truths not static but in a perpetual and ongoing process of becoming, in the interaction between viewer and object.



The location could not have been more apt. The Palazzo Fortuny was originally built by the powerful Pesaro family in the 15th century, in the gorgeous, delicate, late Gothic style, on a scale befitting the commander in chief of the Venetian fleets, Benedetto Pesaro. One elegant façade overlooks the Campo San Beneto, another rises up above the Rio di Ca’Michiel. Adopted as the headquarters of the *Accademia degli Orfei* in 1786, and then, from 1835, the *Società Apollinea*, two music societies in Venice, music is embedded in the history of the palace. By the end of the 19th century, however, the building had become a warren of workshops and crowded habitations, accommodating over 350 tenants. It was with this alarming, though beautiful, wreck that Fortuny fell in love in 1898, taking over the attic of the building, and establishing his own studio in the loft. Piecemeal, he acquired other parts of the palace, slowly stripping back the building to its former impressive proportions. In 1902, he moved here permanently with his future wife and creative collaborator, Henriette Negrin (1877–1965), and the building became a labyrinth of the imagination, encompassing his own atelier of photography, stage design, textile design, and painting as well as workshops for the artisans who created his fabrics.

Fortuny’s sensibility for the past, however, meant that, in the words of Giandomenico Romanelli, he recognised “that the splendour is the decay itself.” Though space was cleared and sumptuously filled with fine printed fabrics, silk lampshades, books, and artworks, “the work of time,” as Romanelli puts it, “and the indefatigable work of men is all there to be read, in signs at once unequivocal and wretched, haughty and brilliant, mendacious and cursed: fragments of paintings, ragged screens, an abundance

of pipes, false cornices and ungrammatical *trompe l'oeil*, memories of fireless fireplaces and unwanted lethal fires.” It was into these already vocal spaces, no white cube, that Vervoordt chose to introduce his exhibition, demonstrably in conversation with a kindred spirit. For he, too, is a connoisseur of dilapidation. He says, “I appreciate an old wall as much as an abstract painting.” And he is drawn to artists who reuse old materials, many of whom appeared in this exhibition, such as Pablo Picasso (1881–1973), Antoni Tàpies (1923–2012), Alberto Burri (1915–1995), Louise Nevelson (1899–1988), and Louise Bourgeois (1911–2010).

The show’s spirit was signaled even before you entered by the breathtaking display, across the Palazzo’s front façade, of a vast draped hanging, constructed from recycled metal liquor bottle tops, by the Ghanaian artist, El Anatsui (°1944). The sculpture was called *Fresh and Fading Memories (Part I-IV)*. Besides El Anatsui’s memories, the sculpture holds within it the memories of the people who had handled those particular bottles, as well as all those who help El Anatsui, based in Nigeria, construct these hangings, (whose hands, Anatsui has said, leave “their individual charge”). Its gold and red surface, hoiked and draped, with ragged holes within it, speaking of frailty and beauty across time, through use, made a perfect marriage with the historic façade, itself a worn textile of bricks and stone, made by many hands. The sculpture had been commissioned especially for the exhibition. Anatsui has said, “The theme of the project, which had to do with art and time, was very attractive to me because as a sculptor I think about time as probably the most effective shaper of things, physical, mental, and spiritual.”

This first exhibition proved a runaway success. Roberta Smith, an art critic of *The New York Times*, remarked that this was “among the most strange and powerful exhibitions I have seen.” Word spread. The experience had been revelatory also for Vervoordt. As he has explained about the unfolding series of exhibitions that grew out of this first endeavour: “Every exhibition was a next step in my life and for our company. The curatorial team’s conversations often started with a question or idea. This process led us to deeper and more searching questions. Each theme gave us a new source of knowledge. Becoming a curator was a way to share knowledge with others.” In parallel development, the process of producing *Artempo* gave rise to the formation of the *Axel & May Vervoordt Foundation* in 2008. Established over five decades, the foundation’s collection includes over 700 works, ranging from ancient archaeology to contemporary art. It became the seedbed for all subsequent exhibitions.

A central thread in that collection is the Vervoordts’ engagement with art and artists of a very particular kind, who share their preoccupations with the concept of the void and who question our fundamental understanding of space and time. Most espouse highly gestural artistic practices and materiality, or its absence, is fundamental. The concept of wabi-sabi, with its embrace of imperfection and incompleteness, is also key. Important artistic figures for Vervoordt, almost inevitably, are Lucio Fontana (1899–1968), Yves



Palazzo Fortuny's second floor during *Artempo. Where Time Becomes Art*, 2007.
View towards Mariano Fortuny's study. Alberto Burri (1915–1995), *Sacco*, 1953; Antoni Tàpies (1923–2012), *La Tôle (Slammer)*, 1972.



Klein (1828–1962), German artists from the Zero movement, Belgian artist Jef Verheyen (1932–1984), British artist Anish Kapoor (°1954), Colour field Abstract Expressionist painters from the USA, like Barnett Newman (1905–1970) and Ad Reinhardt (1913–1967), Gutai artists, above all Kazuo Shiraga (1924–2008) and Jirō Yoshihara (1905–1972), and Italian figures of the avant-garde such as Piero Manzoni (1933–1963), Alberto Burri, Jannis Kounellis (1936–2017) and Giovanni Anselmo (°1934). Marina Abramović (°1946) has become an important collaborator. These artists mark out a voyage of understanding for Vervoordt, an exploration of ideas that begins in the West but journeys far into the East.

They also provided the springboard for the second exhibition in the first triptych, *Academia: Qui es-tu?*. This did not take place in Venice. Instead, it found its exemplary setting in the chapel of *l'École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts* in Paris. This former chapel, attached to the venerable national art school in Paris, is filled with casts of significant historical sculptures and architecture. It embodies inherited academic knowledge and canonical ideas of beauty passed down through centuries. The show itself, a series of artworks displayed within a steel grid, placed in front of the plaster casts, focussed on the dynamic interplay between this history of art and the creative individual who transforms and transmits that tradition through the making of new artworks. Striking juxtapositions included a *Concetto Spaziale* from 1962 by Lucio Fontana placed in front of a copy of Lorenzo Ghiberti's (1378–1455) *Gates of Paradise* from Florence; and the placement in the centre of the chapel, of Louise Bourgeois' terrifying *Cell XXVI*, 2003, where, within a steel cage, a life-sized stuffed figure, from the waist up entirely wrapped in a knotted, snake-like textile sausage, hangs in front of a mirror. An ultimate expression of the artist's sense of selfhood, this work reverberated powerfully with the portrait busts and statues around it. Under an arched vault, in darkness, hidden by a linen curtain, Anish Kapoor's *Whiteout*, 2004, created a charged epicentre for the exhibition, this emblem of the paradoxical void – the place, where, in the words of the connoisseur Alain R. Truong, “all questions are condensed in a white so intense that it becomes invisible.”



Chapel of L'École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris during *Academia*, 2008. Installation of Anish Kapoor (°1954), *Whiteout*, 2004, surrounded by plaster replicas.



255

Overview of the main room of *Academia*, 2008, with works by Berlinde De Bruyckere (°1964); Rineke Dijkstra (°1959), Christian Boltanski (1944–2021), Yves Klein (1928–1962), Thomas Houseago (°1972), Louise Bourgeois (1911–2010), a.o.

ARTEMPO
Where Time Becomes Art

09.06 – 05.11.2007
Palazzo Fortuny, Venice

Organised by Musei Civici Veneziani and Axel Vervoordt
in collaboration with Museum Kunstpalast, Düsseldorf

Concept

AXEL VERVOORDT AND MATTIJS VISSER

Curatorial team

DANIELA FERRETTI, JEAN-HUBERT MARTIN, GIANDOMENICO ROMANELLI

Contributing artists

MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ, EL ANATSUI, ARMAN, ANTONIN ARTAUD, FRANCIS BACON, ERZSÉBET BAERVELDT, HANS BELLMER, ALIGHIERO BOETTI, CHRISTIAN BOLTANSKI, MICHAËL BORREMANS, LOUISE BOURGEOIS, ANDRÉ BRETON, PETER BUGGENHOUT, ALBERTO BURRI, ENRICO CASTELLANI, LORIS CECCHINI, CAI GUO-QIANG, TONY CRAGG, Yael DAVIDS, BERLINDE DE BRUYCKERE, GIORGIO DE CHIRICO, JEAN DUBUFFET, MARCEL DUCHAMP, MARLENE DUMAS, JAN FABRE, ROBERT FILLIOU, FISCHLI & WEISS, LUCIO FONTANA, MARIANO FORTUNY, ALBERTO GIACOMETTI, GOTTHARD GRAUBNER, THOMAS GRÜNFELD, ANISH KAPOOR, ON KAWARA, WILLIAM KENTRIDGE, KIMSOOJA, YVES KLEIN, BERTRAND LAVIER, JEAN-JACQUES LEBEL, MAN RAY, PIERO MANZONI, GORDON MATTA-CLARK, MARISA MERZ, SABRINA MEZZAQUI, TATSUO MIYAJIMA, JORGE MOLDER, SADAMASA MOTONAGA, KLAUS MÜNCH, SABURO MURAKAMI, ROMAN OPALKA, ORLAN, PABLO PICASSO, OTTO PIENE, MARKUS RAETZ, ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG, CHARLES ROSS, MEDARDO ROSSO, THOMAS RUFF, CLAUDE RUTAULT, THOMAS SCHÜTTE, RICHARD SERRA, SHOZO SHIMAMOTO, FUJIKO SHIRAGA, CURT STENVERT, KAZUO SHIRAGA, DOMINIQUE STROOBANT, SHIRO TSUJIMURA, ANTONI TÀPIES, JAMES TURRELL, GÜNTHER UECKER, EMILIO VEDOVA, JEF VERHEYEN, ANDY WARHOL, ADOLFO WILDT, TSURUKO YAMAZAKI



Palazzo Fortuny's ground floor during *Artempo*.
From left to right: Hans Bellmer (1902–1975),
Untitled, from the series: *Les jeux de poupées*, 1949;
Berlinde De Bruyckere (c.1964), *Robin V.*, 2007;
Francis Bacon (1909–1992), *Study from the Human
Body*, 1986.

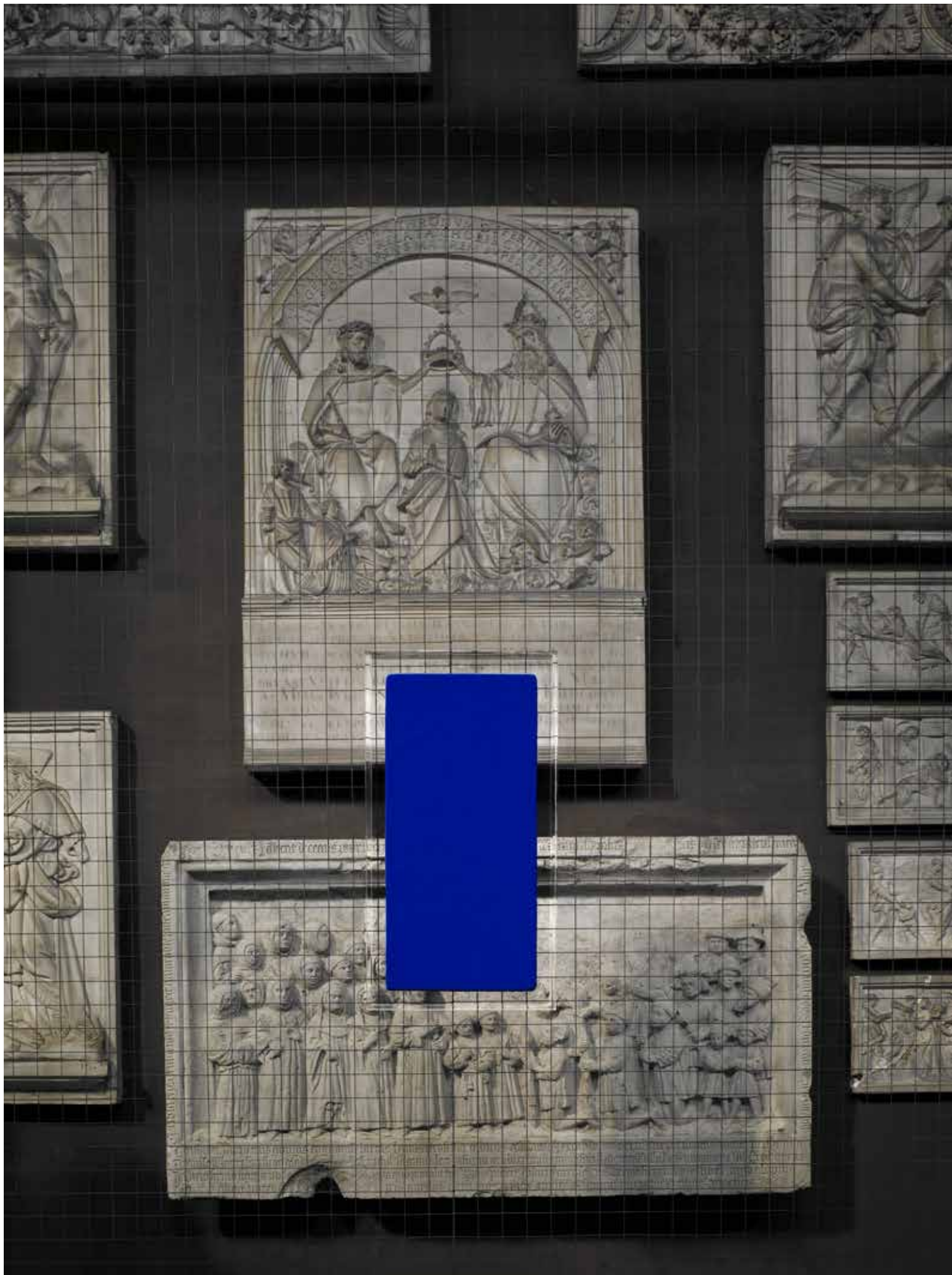
right page:
Anish Kapoor (c.1954), *S-Curve*, 2006, which was
commissioned for *Artempo*.

overleaf:
Piano nobile presenting a selection of paintings by
Mariano Fortuny (1971–1949); *Concetto Spaziale*,
1962 by Lucio Fontana (1899–1967) and a large
elephant ear, a.o.









Yves Klein (1928–1962), *IKB-115*, 1959 installed in *Academia* on a grid in front of the historical bas-reliefs in plaster.

right page:
Overview of the Chapelle des Beaux-Arts during *Academia*; principal works by Lucio Fontana (1899–1968), Erszébet Baerveldt (°1968), Berlinde De Bruyckere (°1964), Tony Cragg (°1949), Antony Gormley (°1950), Louise Bourgeois (1911–2010), and El Anatsui (°1944), a.o.









Palazzo Fortuny's top floor during *TRA* with installations by Günther Uecker (°1930), *Schwebend Schweben*, 1995–2011; back wall: Sadaharu Horio (1939–2018) *Scroll Landscape after the earthquake – NAGATA*, 1995; back right: Peter Buggenhout (°1963), *Gorgo 22*, 2010.



Wabi pavilion on the third floor of *TRA*: Dvaravati Torso of Buddha, Thailand, 7th–8th century;
Fujiko Shiraga (1928–2015), *Untitled*, 1955.





Above, from left to right: Antoni Tàpies, *Cap, i creu*, 1995; Jannis Kounellis (1936–2017), *Untitled*, 1980 from the collection of the artist.

left page:
Second floor of Palazzo Fortuny during Tàpies. *Lo sguardo dell'artista*. Homage to Tàpies by Günther Uecker (°1930), *Trees and Nails – A Tribute to Tàpies*, 2008–2013. Painting: Antoni Tàpies, *Grand Torç*, 1996.



First room of DIVA's *Wonderkamer*. From left to right:
Ida Barbarigo (1920–2018), *Passeggiata spericolata*, 1963; Shiro Tsujimura (°1947), large vase with accrued kiln shards, 2010; studio-paper used during performance in 1994 by Kazuo Shiraga (1924–2008);
A.F. Vandevorst (°1968 and °1971), *Parachute Dress*, Collection Spring/Summer 2015.



Overview of the second room at DIVA. Above the slate table: a large Narwhal skeleton; in the back: paintings by Jan II Breughel (1601–1678), Lanceloot Blondeel (1498–1561), Federico Zuccaro (1542–1609), Jef Verheyen (1932–1984), Corneille de Lyon (1500–1575) and Hans Maler (1485–1529). On the table: Jan Fabre (°1958), *Heilige pillendraaier met wandelstok*, 2012.