Christian Karel Appel’s art was strongly inspired by the spontaneity found in the art of children and the mentally challenged, as well as tribal and primitive creations. As most of CoBrA artists, Appel was preoccupied with the impact of World War II, and hoped that his whimsical creations would alleviate some of the hopelessness brought on by the horrors that took place at the heart of “civilized” Europe.

Especially sensitive to the suffering of children, Appel used bright and bold colors, both intuitive and calculated brushstrokes, creating highly expressive art fraught with joy and mischief, hoping to exude optimism and mitigate the darkness and disillusionment that prevailed in Europe.

A multifaceted artist, Appel worked with painting, sculpture, stained glass, and poetry. In the US, he collaborated with Allen Ginsberg, one of the most respected American poets of the Beat Movement, incorporating his poetry into his art. He also created hand-woven wool and silk tapestries, a media that allows depth and scale, weaving images and stories through a symbolic use of threads that run through all humanity.

About the Artist

This major Dutch artist was born in Amsterdam, the capital city of The Netherlands, and began painting at a very young age. From 1940 to 1943, he studied at the State Academy of Fine Arts, while his country and most of Europe were under Nazi occupation, an experience that left an indelible mark on both the artist and the man.
In 1948, Appel co-founded the CoBrA art movement along with artists Asger Jorn, Constant Nieuwenhuys, and Ernest Mancoba, South Africa’s first Black modern artist and CoBrA’s only African member. Named for Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam, the three capital cities in which the co-founding artists either came from or lived in, CoBrA is considered one of the 20th century’s most important artistic movements, despite the fact that it was shortlived and dissolved in 1951.

The group’s work was marked by a sense of spontaneity and rejected traditionally and narrowly defined art structures. As a result, it was not especially well received in The Netherlands. When the CoBrA artists exhibited their work in Amsterdam in 1949, it caused great controversy, resulting in Appel’s frescos created for Amsterdam’s city hall to remain covered up for ten years. In 1950, unable to work under such restrictions, Appel moved to Paris, where he felt liberated enough to go even farther in intensifying his colors and his imaginary creatures.

Appel was widely acclaimed in many countries, receiving the UNESCO Prize at the 1954 Venice Biennale. Traveling extensively, he worked in the United States, Mexico, Brazil, Italy, Yugoslavia, Japan, and Switzerland, exhibiting his art in many museums, including the Museum of Modern Art in New York. He was finally acknowledged and became popular in his homeland in the 1990s and had several large exhibitions in Amsterdam. Remaining the most famous member of the CoBrA group, Appel died on May 3, 2006, at his home in Zurich, Switzerland, and is buried in Paris, France.