André Masson is a most prolific artist whose work spans a series of periods, movements, and techniques, including Cubism, Surrealism, and Abstract Expressionism. As such, Masson eludes classification and is considered one of the most versatile artists of the 20th century. Also deeply influenced by his violent experience in World War I, Masson’s trauma is ever present in his art throughout his career.

His early works in the 1920s in Paris exhibit elements of Cubism, the 20th century’s avant-garde and most influential movement. His interest in understanding the deeper reality of man’s behavior, however, drew him to Surrealism, during which he also engaged in automatic drawing and writing, which involved the free movement of the pen and ink with no planning or thought, allowing for the expression of the subconscious to the degree possible. To achieve the same result in painting, Masson used glue to draw lines on a canvas, scattering over them sand of different colors. Masson eventually abandoned automatic writing as he found it too limiting and restraining. By 1929, he abandoned the Surrealist movement altogether, finding it too intolerant and contentious.

During his four years in the United States, his work was extensively exhibited in New York, and his ideas strongly influenced the Abstract Expressionists, especially Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and William Baziotes. This period is also said to be among his most productive, as he discovered Native American history and lore, incorporating relevant motifs and themes in his work. He was also influenced by the collections of Asiatic art at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts, and was introduced to Buddhist philosophy, which permeated his art in the mid-1950s when he began to incorporate forms resembling Chinese and Japanese calligraphy into his art.

The influence and impact of such exposure revealed itself in the mid-1950s, known as his période asiatique, when Masson began incorporating in his works calligraphic forms derived from Chinese and Japanese ideograms, that is written characters that symbolize the idea of a thing, a sort of Platonic spelling, one might say, that makes for an abstract work.
Standing halfway between his most and least abstract calligraphy works, the Les Migrations series and its Asiatic forms are simplest in form. In Migration I, they are set in entrenched clusters, zig zags mostly askew and in waves, with the baring of stick figures lined up and encroaching upon one another. As William Rubin and Carolyn Lachner write in “Andre Masson” quoting Masson himself, that “the myriads of men who in the twentieth century, have known migration less seasoned and more brutal than those of the animals.”

Migrations and other series refer at least indirectly to these wartime experiences. The calligraphic lines and complex linear forms are executed in a manner that seem to suggest action, as if the lines indeed represent biomorphic forms engaged in a frenzied dance throughout.

About the Artist

André Masson, painter, sculptor, illustrator, designer, and writer was born in Balagny, a small town in northern France, where he spent his childhood close to nature, an element that figures prominently in his work. When Masson was eight, his father’s work took the family to Brussels, where at the age of 11, he began his studies at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts. At the same time, he also worked in an embroidery studio, drawing patterns on embroidery material. At 16, he was awarded the Grand Prix de l’Académie for painting, and that same year, moved to Paris, where he trained at the École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts.

Masson volunteered and served in the French army during the World War I, wanting to feel the experience of war and death. After three years of fighting under horrific conditions, he was gravely wounded in the chest while fighting at Chemin des Dames in April 1917, where he was left on the field overnight, witnessing the horror of the battle laying on his back. His wounds, both physical and psychological, were so extensive that he was confined to various hospitals and even a mental ward over a period of two years, remaining severely traumatized for the rest of his life. In his essay “Surrealism and His Discontents,” author Martin Ries describes Masson as one of the most erudite artists, who emerged from the war as “shattered and subject to fits of rage. . .”

In the 1930s, after witnessing fascist riots in Paris, Masson moved to Spain for two years, leaving when the Spanish Civil War broke out. While in Spain, he incorporated Spanish themes and myths, including bullfighting, into his work. In 1939, when Paris came under German occupation, Masson and his family fled the country, fearing persecution since his work had been condemned by the Nazis as “degenerate” and his wife was Jewish. Finding his way to the United States, Masson first lived in Manhattan and later at a farmhouse in New Preston, Connecticut. During his four years in the US, his Surrealist ideas found fertile ground and his influence on American painting was strong. There were many exhibitions of his work in New York, and he is said to have significantly influenced the Abstract Expressionists, especially Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and William Baziotes.

Masson returned to France after the end of the war, continuing to work until the late 1970s. Masson’s first major retrospective took place at the Baltimore Museum of Art in 1941. In 1958, he participated in the Venice Biennale, which dedicated an entire room to his work. Masson also produced designs for the stage, while his most significant postwar commission took place in 1965 when the novelist and Minister of Cultural Affairs André Malraux invited him to paint the ceiling of the Théâtre de l’Odéon in Paris.

Masson’s work can be found in numerous prestigious museums including the Guggenheim Museum in New York, the Reina Sofía National Museum in Madrid, and the Tate Gallery in London. He had major solo exhibitions throughout the US and Europe, including in Berlin; Amsterdam; the Museum of Modern Art in New York; the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, Texas; the Musée d’art moderne de la Ville de Paris and Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris; and the Hayward Gallery, London. He died in Paris on October 28, 1987 at the age of ninety-one.