

## Exhibition

# CELESTIAL EPICS Art Brut in the Decharme Collection

March 1 to May 19, 2024

Curators: Bruno Decharme, Barbara Safarova,  
Caroline Courrioux, Sam Stourdzé



Mose Tolliver, *Untitled*, Circa 1970  
Glycero paint on plywood, 38 x 47 cm  
© Collection Bruno Decharme

From March 1 to May 19, 2024, the French Academy in Rome – Villa Medici will be presenting the exhibition *CELESTIAL EPICS. Art Brut in the Decharme Collection* featuring a selection of **180 works** from **Bruno Decharme's** collection, offering a veritable panorama of art brut.

The concept of art brut is attributed to the French painter **Jean Dubuffet** (Le Havre, 1901 - Paris, 1985), who from 1945 onwards built up a collection of objects and productions made by psychiatric hospital patients, prisoners, marginalized people, loners, and other individuals "outside the system." These **self-taught creators** produce without concern about others' opinions, thereby helping to shape new languages, inventions, and techniques.

# VILLA MÉDICIS

In his essay, *L'Art Brut préféré aux arts culturels (Art Brut Preferred to the Cultural Arts)*. Paris, Galerie René Drouin, 1949), Jean Dubuffet defines art brut as "works executed by people untouched by artistic culture, in which mimicry, contrary to what happens with intellectuals, has little or no part, so that their authors draw everything (...) from their own background, and not from the clichés of classical or fashionable art. Here we are witnessing a pure, raw, artistic operation, reinvented in all its phases by its creator, based solely on their own impulses."

Art brut has never ceased to shake up the history of art and nourish minds resistant to norms as it questions classic notions of art and creation as well as those relating to the normal and the pathological. But who are they, these artists of a special kind, witnesses to another world, strangers to stylistic trends and influences? They stay—or are kept—away from the culture of fine art as well as the codes and places that constitute it such as schools, academies, museums, art fairs, etc.

While art brut's domain is that of "the common man at work," as Dubuffet put it, it can also be said that the fate of the latter is uncommon, characterized by a knot made between history and the artist's private life, where one can no longer distinguish one from the other.

Works considered to be art brut, or **outsider art** in the English-speaking world, employ highly creative abilities that are directly in touch with the anomalies of the contemporary world such as war, destruction, social and economic injustice, child abuse (Henry Darger), propaganda images, and oppressive regimes (Ramon Losa, Lázaro Antonio Martínez Durán, Alexander Lobanov).

Isolation, confinement, or exile sometimes drive the artist to escape into a fictional exploration of the universe (Adolf Wölfli), reinvent a parallel world (Aloïse Corbaz), or summon spirits, ghosts, hybrid creatures, and monstrous beasts that have always inhabited our collective unconscious.

Anthropomorphic figures, intimate geographies, talismanic drawings, mental cartographies, Indian temples, and Baroque architecture are all encountered on this journey between the margins. On the farthest fringes of the imagination, lost in reality, splashed with stars, the "outsiders" are constantly redrawing the contours of a universe they invent as they go along. With freedom and otherness as their only compasses, they gather, collect, fill in, decipher, blacken, distort, amplify, organize, and build. Without filters, they embark on great celestial epics.

The obsession and perseverance of collector Bruno Decharme, who has devoted his life to building up one of the world's most important collections of art brut, invites us to question our convictions and take a

benevolent look at the very notion of creation, putting forward the idea that to create a world is to create art.

The exhibition catalog is co-published by **Empire** and **Villa Medici**.

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## **Gustavo Giacosa, *Notes on a History of Art Brut in Italy* Excerpt from the exhibition catalogue**

"As the history of Italian art has been marked by its artists of genius, it's hardly surprising that the quasi-religious devotion to the beauty of their works has prevented us from turning our gaze to art from the margins, radically foreign to these aesthetic canons. Among the possible readings, we might choose one that links art brut to the context of Italian history through two key moments: the establishment of psychiatric institutions, then their challenging and repeal. [...] The 'art of the insane' collected by Jean Dubuffet had its Italian equivalent in *arte pazzesca*, so named by the criminal anthropologist Cesare Lombroso. Throughout the 19th century, he collected objects and documents from Turin's prisons and psychiatric hospitals that helped him consolidate his thesis on criminals and innate deviance. [...]

In [the] first decades of the 20th century, in addition to the inmates of asylums and prisons, other creators [such as Simon Rodia] expressed themselves, indifferent to official recognition by the art world. (...) In 1959, an exhibition at the Galleria d'Arte Moderna in Verona presented works by Adolf Wölfli and Aloïse Corbaz for the first time in Italy, alongside others from the workshop of the San Giacomo alla Tomba psychiatric hospital. [...] The great interest in the link between *artistic expression* and *psychiatric therapy* manifested itself from 1950 to 1970 in a proliferation of workshops offering a variety of activities with a clear curative and rehabilitative aim. It was within this realm of respectful attention to the expression of others that Carlo Zinelli, the first Italian artist represented in the *Collection de l'Art Brut* in Lausanne, was able to express himself fully. From 1978 onwards, with the promulgation of Law 180 and the transformation of former psychiatric hospitals into open facilities, creative workshops began to multiply. [...]

[Today], there is a growing awareness of art brut in Italy, thanks to major exhibitions such as *The Museum of Everything* at Turin's Pinacoteca Agnelli in 2010 and the *Palazzo enciclopedico (The Encyclopedic Palace)* at the 2014 Venice Biennale, as well as research in the field. [...] Without waiting for recognition from cultural institutions, two major private collections have recently opened exhibition and study spaces: the Casa dell'Art Brut, in Mairano di Casteggio, and SIC12 artstudio, in Rome. [...] The exhibition *Épopées célestes (Celestial Epics)*

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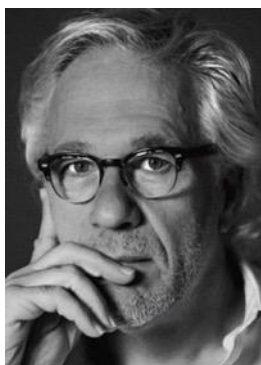
at Villa Medici is further proof of this. It helps to create broader horizons and shows us free, clear, and disinterested paths, always at odds with the commodification of globalized art."

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## **The Decharme Collection**

This collection, which began in the late 1970s, has now become a benchmark, bringing together four hundred major artists of art brut from the 18th century to the present day. In 1999, Bruno Decharme founded the association abcd (art brut connaissance & diffusion), a research laboratory directed by Barbara Safarova, whose work is expressed through exhibitions, book publications, and film productions. Part of this collection, held by his family, is presented in the exhibition *Épopées célestes (Celestial Epics)*.

[www.abcd-artbrut.net](http://www.abcd-artbrut.net)



### **Bruno Decharme**

After studying philosophy and art history, Bruno Decharme became a film director. In the mid-1970s, his encounter with Jean Dubuffet's art brut collection proved decisive. Since then, he has divided his time between cinema and his collection. In 2021, he donated nearly a thousand works to the Musée National d'Art Moderne - Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. He is a member of the Art Brut Steering Committee at the Bibliothèque Kandinsky - Centre

Pompidou.



### **Barbara Safarova**

Barbara Safarova is a film producer, holds a Ph.D. in literature and aesthetics, is president of the abcd association, and was program director at the Collège international de philosophie in Paris. She has published extensively on art brut and co-curated several exhibitions in France and abroad. She has just completed an anthology devoted to texts by American authors on art brut (to be published by JRP Éditions). She is a member of the Art Brut Steering Committee at the Bibliothèque Kandinsky -

Centre Pompidou and teaches a seminar on art brut at the École du Louvre.

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## Events and Family Visits:

Immersive concert in the exhibition rooms

"I am honored to have been born in your head"

Wednesday, March 20, 2024, 6 pm to 7 pm

By Séverine Ballon, Villa Médicis Fellow

With : Séverine Ballon; Joris Rühl, bass clarinet; Lê Quan Ninh, percussion; Édith Proust, actress; Babouillec, author

Prices and detailed information on the Villa Médicis website

Family visits with children aged 5 to 10

Every Sunday at 3pm in French and 4:30pm in Italian

Duration: 1h30

A fun tour across the exhibition rooms, led by a Villa Medici mediator.

[Tickets](#)

## Practical Information:

Access to the exhibition, hours and admission at:

<https://www.villamedici.it/en/individual-visits/>

## About the French Academy in Rome – Villa Medici:

Founded in 1666 by King Louis XIV, it is a French institution that has been housed since 1803 at the Villa Medici, a 16th-century villa surrounded by a seven-hectare park on Mount Pincio in the heart of Rome. A national public institution under the authority of the French Ministry of Culture, it fulfills three complementary missions: to welcome artists, creators, and art historians of the highest caliber in residence for long stays of one year or more; to set up a cultural and artistic program that integrates all fields of the arts and creation aimed at a broad public; to conserve, restore, study, and make its built and landscape heritage, as well as its collections, known to the public.

French Academy in Rome – Villa Medici is directed by Sam Stourdzé.

# VILLA MÉDICIS

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