

Centre Pompidou visits

Guided audio tours through the exhibitions and permanent collection.

"Germaine Richier" exhibition

In this podcast, Ariane Coulondre, curator of the exhibition, presents a new perspective on the work of Germaine Richier, a major sculptor of the 20th century whose originality marked the history of art. Accompanied by the artist's own words, her comments take us into the world of Germaine Richier through some of the key works in the exhibition (1 March – 12 June 2023).

Colour code:

In black, the curator's words

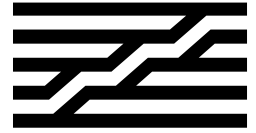
In blue, the narrating voice

In green, the quotations

In purple, the musical excerpts

In red, all the other sound indications





Podcast transcription

Reading time: 11 minutes

1 – Introduction

[jingle of the show] Hello, good evening, welcome. Open wide your eyes and ears. You'll be taken for a visit at the Centre Pompidou.

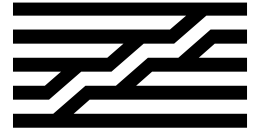
[soft music] This retrospective exhibition celebrates the art of Germaine Richier, a French artist who occupies a major place in 20th century sculpture. Its aim is to shed light on the work of this artist who marked the history of art with her originality, and still continues to speak to us today.

Germaine Richier was born into a family of wine growers and millers in Grans in Provence in 1902. She spent her childhood in the *garrigue* shrubland where she liked to play with insects. Nothing predestined her to become an artist. She was filled with wonder when she saw the statues in the cloister of St. Trophime in Arles at the age of 12, and decided to become a sculptor.

We have to imagine an extremely independent young provincial girl who succeeded through sheer determination in finding freedom. She attended the Montpellier School of Fine Arts, which had been open to women for no more than twenty years, and where she studied under Louis-Jacques Guigues, a former student of Auguste Rodin.

Then, in 1926, she moved to Paris where she enjoyed the support of a true mentor, Antoine Bourdelle, a great sculptor who accepted her as a student in his studio.

Richier's career is absolutely unique by virtue of the fact that in scarcely more than 25 years, between the 1930s and her premature death in 1959, she established herself as a profoundly original artist.



Her development is fascinating because it forms a sort of bridge between two phases in the history of sculpture, continuing with the great tradition of bronze statuary through her link with Rodin and Bourdelle and, at the same time, forging new images of men and women in the post-war period by playing with assembling and hybridising natural forms. [transitional sound]

2 – Only humans matter

From the very beginning, Germaine Richier's art focused on the human figure. Always working from a live model, Richier endeavoured to capture the intensity of her model through her expressive modelling of clay. Portraits and nudes constitute the majority of her work in the 1920s and 1930s and led to her first success.

"In the beginning I made busts by analysing the form. Scales, always scales. Busts demand more concentration than nudes. I liked their difficult aspect."
(Germaine Richier)

The sculptor never ceased to hone this skill, making some sixty heads of family and friends. The experience of exile in Switzerland during the Second World War constituted both a break in her life and a catalyst for her work, in which she abandoned realism in favour of an exacerbated expressionism. For her contemporaries, Richier's figurative humanity contained an essentially tragic dimension, reflecting the unbearable reality of the times, the Second World War.

"When you think about it, our time is full of claws." (Germaine Richier)

The illusion of life and movement comes from the mass of the sculpture, which is worked from the inside and cracks under the effect of deep conflicting tensions.

"My statues are not unfinished. I hollowed them out and tore them to make them varied on every side, so that they look alive and changing." (Germaine Richier)
[transitional sound]



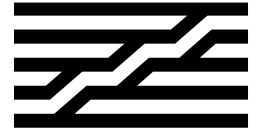
Created between 1947 and 1948 upon her return to Paris, *Storm Man* is the conclusion of Germaine Richier's research into the human figure, from *Loretto* in 1934 and *Walking Man* in 1945. Standing as if emerging from the mists of time, *Storm Man* is both an allegory of natural forces and a new image of mankind. Its material is tormented and rough.

"Resembling a rock or a tree stump as much as a tormented soul, *Storm Man* embodies the combat between the weight of the material and the force of erosion."
(André Pierre de Mandiargues, writer and art critic)

The critics immediately proclaimed the *Storm Man* sculpture to be a major and emblematic work of its time. The following year, Richier endowed *Storm Man* with a companion, *Hurricane Woman*. These two sculptures had a profound effect on visitors in her studio.

"When entering Germaine Richier's studio for the first time, I felt I had set foot in a strange world in the wake of the devastation wrought by nuclear war. She had just finished two moving, even tragic creatures – the culmination of her work, I think – a man and a woman: *Storm Man* and *Hurricane Woman*. Two monumental emaciated figures with frantic eyes and dangling arms, still trembling with terror, two tormented souls who had escaped by some miracle from who knows what sort of catastrophe."
(Brassaï, photographer)

Storm Man was acquired by the state as early as 1949 and exhibited in the rooms of the National Museum of Modern Art. *Hurricane Woman* was acquired a few years later, and thereafter the sculpture couple were systematically presented together. For her major retrospective at the National Museum of Modern Art in 1956, Germaine Richier had the sculptor Eugène Dodeigne hew two abstract funerary stelae, for her sculpture couple, which she entitled *The Tomb of Storm Man* and *The Shadow of Hurricane Woman*. Germaine Richier thus genuinely considered her sculptures to be living beings, given that she sculpted their tombs. [transitional sound]



3 – Nature and hybridisation

At the turning point of the war, Germaine Richier's renewal of representation involved a hybridisation between the human and natural, animal and vegetal forms. She experienced a sort of desire to return to her roots.

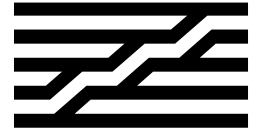
“I think I had to start out from the roots of things. But the root is the root of the tree. It may be the limb of an insect.” (Germaine Richier)

Richier's work was sustained by her close relationship with nature and her fascination for the plants and insects of her native Provence. Her studio was peopled with hybrid beings that implied a fusion of the human and other realms.

Richier focused preferably on animals generally held in contempt, all essentially female – the grasshopper, the mantis, the cicada, the bat. Endowed with long limbs or wings, these creatures seem to be about to move, spring or fly.

In 1945, Richier took a crucial turn in her sculpture by incorporating the branches of trees picked up in Switzerland. She thus created *Forest Man, Small Version*, one of the rare preserved examples of a work made of earth and wood. This primitive sculpture paved the way for a whole range of Richier's sculptures in which natural forms she collected connect her works to the places she loved. [transitional sound]

The exhibition showcases an original presentation of a selection of objects from her studio, such as a small cabinet of curiosities that enables an insight into the sources of her sculpture. In it, we can see the artist's fascination for materials, textures and forms: driftwood, seaside stones, roots and insects, an armadillo shell and a bat skeleton. Alongside these collected objects, we find tools from her studio, compasses and plumbines she used to construct her figures and which were sometimes even integrated into her works. [transitional sound]



The Grasshopper was no doubt born out of Richier's work for *The Toad*, a crouching female figure leaning forward, whose title alone evokes animality. *The Grasshopper, Small Version* appeared in 1944, when the artist was still in Switzerland.

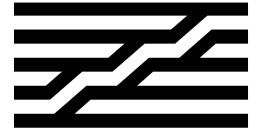
This is her first hybrid being, merging a female body and that of the insect. The title clearly states the animal nature of the creature. The position of *The Grasshopper*, crouching and leaning forward, is ambiguous in itself. Its arms raised towards the spectator and outstretched fingers form a gesture that is both threatening and defensive. This impression of movement is amplified by the growth of the creature in the enlargement process. [transitional sound]

4 – Myth and sacred

In the process of hybridisation of the animal and vegetal realms, for Germaine Richier the human joined a wider world that is beyond humanity even. Here, humans are fundamentally connected to nature, and the bronze material refers us to the elements. Hollowed out, jagged and punctured with holes, the bronze seems to be eroded by water, bad weather or time. In this sense, Germaine Richier's art is imbued with a pantheistic feeling for the world and an imagination steeped in ancient myths.

The titles of these hybrid creatures hark back to original narratives, tales and legends. *The Ogre*, *The Horse with Six Heads*, *The Hydra*, and other monsters, peopled her studio. Richier created a whole universe, peopled with these strange, alternately terrifying and grotesque creatures, but she does so in a very free manner: most of these creatures are not associated with any known iconography. *The Ogre* has the eye of a Cyclops, *The Horse* has six heads, *The Hydra* has the body of a man and a head cut into four parts.

The sculptor was associated in 1951 with a controversy about sacred art, a violent dispute sparked off by the Christ figure she created in 1950 for the Church on the plateau d'Assy.



Germaine Richier was commissioned in 1950 by Canon Jean Devémy and by the Dominican priest Marie-Alain Couturier to make a Christ for the church of Notre-Dame-de-toute-Grâce on the plateau d'Assy in Haute-Savoie. She chose to merge the body of Jesus with his cross and thus approached the mystery of the incarnation with a profound feeling for the sacred. Only the knots in the wood reveal the Holy Face.

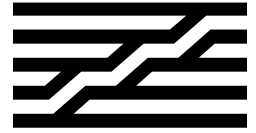
“I like what is tense, nervous, dry, olive trees dried by the wind, brittle wood. I'm more sensitive to a charred tree than to an apple tree in bloom.” (Germaine Richier)

Richier's Christ represents both what is most rich, with its golden material and brilliant radiance, and at the same time what is most poor. It's a sculpture stretched to the bone, reduced to its simplest expression: that of a dying and suffering Christ, a Christ of pain. The system of the modelling stand, a sculpture studio instrument that enables sculptors to mass fragments of matter together, ends up becoming one with the body of Christ. The body seems to be in osmosis with the instruments of its torture, which are also the sculptor's work tools: the modelling stand, the knife and the compass. The plateau d'Assy church was consecrated on the 4th of August 1950.

“The Assy church was inaugurated. It seems that the ceremony, which my niece attended, was magnificent. The press is good and I believe my conversation with the Christ of earth, wood and conviction produced a happy enough result.”
(Germaine Richier)

However, the following year, the same Christ generated violent criticism from traditionalist catholic circles. On the 4th of January 1951, at a talk given by Canon Devémy in Angers, a group of Catholics distributed a leaflet criticising the Church, particularly Germaine Richier's sculpture, which they deemed to be blasphemous.

This was the beginning of the “quarrel of sacred art”. In April 1951, the bishop of Annecy, Monsignor Cesbron, had the Christ figure removed from the Assy church.



The debate raged on in the press. Germaine Richier, herself a deeply devout Catholic, was very much affected. She asked the church's Canon to remove the Christ figure and to return it to her studio.

After being stored temporarily in the presbytery, the work was finally hung on the wall of a side chapel of the church. Germaine Richier married René de Sollier in the same church in 1954. The *Assy Christ* however was not returned to the high altar until 1969, ten years after the death of the artist. It was listed as a historic monument in 1971.

[transitional sound]

5 – Drawing in space

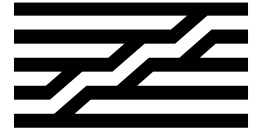
The art of Germaine Richier is innovative not only in terms of its subjects. This section showcases the artist's ideas on the very means of sculpture, particularly her work on drawing and on space. While it plays with the expressiveness of surfaces, Germaine Richier's art is based on a precise knowledge of construction.

"Sculpture hangs from geometric volumes. This geometry links and tempers things. It's a compensation for the excess." (Germaine Richier)

Subverting the academic technique of scaling, the sculptor traced networks of lines directly on the body of her models. Drawing thus lies at the heart of her creation process. These networks of interconnected triangles demonstrate that the living model was seen as a first step in a transposition into another material.

With her wire sculptures, Richier developed an approach to emptiness as early as 1946. The artist suspended *The Devil with Claws* in her studio and in her exhibition space. These metal wires resemble plumb lines, sculptors' tools she used to check the verticality of her works.

Created in 1952, *The Devil with Claws* is a very strange character. Richier took Lyrot as her model, a very skinny man who also posed for the *Assy Christ*. This work was



initially entitled *The Devil*, then renamed *The Devil with Claws* by René de Sollier, the artist's second husband, based on the eagle's talons in his right elbow and also in his hands and feet.

The Devil with Claws is much more disturbing than the *Diabolo*, which is part of the same series of wire sculptures created two years earlier. With its animal head, *The Devil with Claws* was inspired by folk belief in the Tarasque, a fantastical animal in Provençal folklore.

Richier exacerbated this magical aspect in the presentation of the sculpture suspended from the ceiling of her studio, and again hung from a height in the Kunstmuseum in Basel in 1954, where Germaine Richier exhibited along with the painter Maria Helena Vieira da Silva.

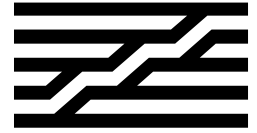
Leaning forward, hanging in the air, *The Devil with Claws* is both threatening and fragile. The artist had a whole set of associations around the idea of flight and weightlessness, which may not be unrelated to her admiration for her older cousin, Charles Amans, a pioneering aviator who took her on her first flight while she was still very young. The wires outline a virtual volume, creating a tension between the outside and the inside, emptiness and fullness, and truly anchor the work in our space.

[transitional sound]

6 – Materials and colours

Germaine Richier's sculpture is characterised by an amazing inventiveness that translates into a free experimentation with materials. Richier recounted how, as a child, she made figures out of stone and poured cement into the bark of plane trees on her family's estate in Castelnaud-le-Lez.

The artist cultivated a sensual relationship with materials, the oiliness of moist earth, the softness of wax and the dryness of wood. At the same time as she worked with clay, transposed into plaster and then cast in bronze, Germaine Richier conducted very varied research with different materials.



In 1952 she began working with lead, a malleable metal that she herself melted in her studio and which she used in very much the same way as clay, setting pieces of coloured glass in it in a baroque subversion of the stained-glass technique.

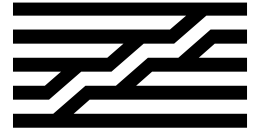
In 1953 Richier salvaged wax sheets and waste wax from her foundry. She used the wax, a soft and malleable material, to create small bronzes in a much more abstract vein. The wax was heated, softened and torn thus giving personality and movement to the body of each character.

Colour is secondary in Richier's work. Her sculpture is not unrelated to the lyrical abstraction of her painter friends, Maria Helena Vieira da Silva and Zao Wou-Ki, whom Richier entrusted with the bases of some large figures, *The City* or *The Ladder*. Through her collaborations, Richier brought painting into sculpture and created a space for her figures.

Although illness had limited her strength, the artist herself would begin to paint and enamel some of her bronzes and plasters in 1956. She even made some small paintings with vivid colours in 1958. Colour corresponded to her constant desire to bring her sculptures to life. It also enabled her to bring life and joy into her works.

"The purpose of sculpture, is first of all the joy of the person who makes it. We should feel their hand, their passion. That's why I use very few instruments. My characters – *The Ant*, *The Sheperd of the Land* for instance – are beings in their own rights: separate, independent. For me, that is what sculpture should be. In these conditions, it cannot act as ornament." (Germaine Richier) [transitional sound]

A few months before her death in 1959, a much-weakened Germaine Richier wrote: "I painted a great chessboard with colours I liked. It is a great work that brought joy to my heart. A happy time when everything was going well!" (Germaine Richier)



Perched on large pedestals at eye level, the five traditional pieces from the game of chess were metamorphosed by the artist. We recognise the King with his fishbone head and the sculptor's compass he holds raised upright in the air. The Queen raises her arms that are transformed into branches. The Bishop, with his ovoid belly, is endowed with horns and a small tail. The Knight has the face of a sea horse and his body is pierced with holes. The Rook seems to be perched on a tripod.

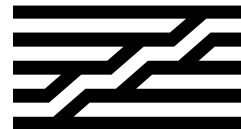
Chessboard, Large Version is the artist's last major work. In retrospect, it seems to be a true synthesis of her creation. In this work we thus find the process of enlargement, the artist having made a small version of the *Chessboard* in 1955. Here we also find the fantastical emerging into everyday life, the hybridisation of the human with the animal and vegetal world, and the integration of objects with the sculptor's compass held by the King.

These five pieces can be positioned freely. Germaine Richier plays with possible movement and the integration of her works into the spectator's space. In conclusion, *Chessboard, Large Version* illustrates the importance of colour for the artist, who always accorded a very special importance to the patina of her bronzes.

“Sculpture is serious, colour is gay. I want my statues to be gay, active. Usually, colour on sculpture is a distraction, but after all, why not?” (Germaine Richier)

[transitional sound]

[jingle of the show] It was a Centre Pompidou podcast. You can find all our podcasts on the Centre Pompidou website, its listening platforms and social networks. See you soon with the next podcast!



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Directed by Clara Gouraud

Voices: Claire Olivier, Marianne Bergès, Darrell Di Fiore

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