



## Centre Pompidou visits

Pathways to help visitors explore exhibitions and the permanent collection.

### “Art brut” Exhibition

This is a podcast from the Centre Pompidou about the “Art Brut” exhibition being held at the Grand Palais from June 11 to September 21, 2025. The exhibition's two curators and collectors Barabra Sefarova and Bruno Decharme, talk about their passion for this art form, their collection and their donation of a body of work to the Centre Pompidou. Cristina Agostinelli, associate curator, talks about the entry of these works into the collection of the Musée national d'art moderne.

#### Colours Code:

**In Black**, Bruno Decharme, exhibition curator

**In Blue**, Barbara Safarova, exhibition curator

**In Green**, Cristina Agostinelli, associate curator

**In Violet**, Delphine Coffin, voice over

**In Red**, musical extracts





# Podcast transcription

Reading time: 15 minutes

## Jingle

Hello and welcome. You are listening to a Centre Pompidou podcast. Today, we are going to talk about the Art Brut exhibition, which is on at the Grand Palais from 11 June to 21 September 2025 as part of the “Constellation” program taking place outside the walls of the Centre Pompidou during its years of metamorphosis.

The adventure of this exhibition started in 2021, when two art collectors, Bruno and Barbara Safarova, donated a thousand works to Centre Pompidou. These works have the specificity of being works of “Art Brut”, a name given in 1945 by artist Jean Dubuffet, who, bar a few psychiatrists, was one of the first to take an interest in this form of art and in these isolated, self-taught artists who were often productive, spontaneous and disinterested. Let’s try to establish, or rather find, its definition.

You could say that these are works produced by people outside of the field of what might be considered “traditional” art. Here, we’re talking more about the self-taught side of things, people who are truly on the fringes of society and who, for the most part, have absolutely no idea that they are artists and that they’re making art.

They’re all marginalised for very different reasons. There’s a whole range of works that come from psychiatric hospitals. In fact, they’re more like territories, to be more exact, because I don’t want to stick to sociological criteria. So there are works that come from psychiatric hospitals. There are also a lot of works that were found by chance, in villages, in places other than art centres, by autodidacts, plus a lot of works that you would call spirit art, produced by people who believe that they are mediums, an instrument for voices that they hear and that guide their hands.

There is a certain particularity about this art, in that it is often extremely difficult to date it or even identify its geographical origin, except, of course, when you have a Japanese work written in Japanese. Even if these artists, like everyone, are inevitably impregnated by major historical events, they interpret them in such a different way that it makes dating their works very hard in most cases. As one of our psychoanalyst friends who we worked with said: things are playing out on another stage, in psychological terms, and therefore in historic terms. It’s a kind of other place, in a radical way.



And at the same time, there is a certain amount of porosity, of course, with the world.

Art Brut is often criticised for stigmatising the artists, but that's not the idea at all. The idea is to say that we want these works to circulate, to be shown in exhibitions about a whole range of different forms of art, on very different themes, but without forgetting that there are particularities for certain artists or works that should not be ignored. So, Art Brut provides a way to recognise that there is something particular about these works, as the person who created them did not exactly live in the same environment. They were committed for 20 or 30 years in a psychiatric hospital, and this is not the same as an art studio today. So, the aim is to draw attention to these differences, but not by any means to exclude, stigmatise, or create a kind of ghetto. That's not the idea, the goal is really to circulate these works more widely, without forgetting that we are all different and saying so.

Yes, alterity is obviously what fuels Art Brut, its very essence. There are all types of difference, but differences that range from a rather wild verticality to diversity in social behaviour. It took time for all that to emerge and be recognised.

There's so much going on in society, influencing us and making our field of vision expand all of a sudden, allowing us to see things that we didn't see before. Even so, I think that it's thanks to the evolution of art in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that we were able to see certain things, thanks to "professional" artists, who made it possible to see something in Art Brut that we wouldn't have seen otherwise. For example, I think that in medical records, small sketches or writings were often kept, but very little attention was paid to other things that were made, to assemblies, clothes or ritualistic behaviour. And that is something that we started to notice from the 50s and 60s onwards, when artists realised that this was something that could be defined as art, as artistic expression. Whereas before, no-one cared, no-one gave any importance to this kind of creation, including psychiatrists.

And yet it was all discovered thanks to the first psychiatrists to take an interest in their patients' creations, who realised that they were not only a way to analyse the patient's symptoms, but artworks in and of themselves. So that was really where it all began. Then, Art Brut was recognised by art history, the surrealism movements, which saw in it everything that Barbara mentioned before, i.e. spiritualism, letting the unconscious take over, you might say. Then, Dubuffet came on the scene, took this up and extended it more generally to works that were also very working-class, by people who were, as he said, "free of



artistic culture”, which is true. So it could be rural people, it could be marginalised people in the street. On the margin of everything, outside of art history, in the end.

Because during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were the surrealists, there were the dadaists, there were artists interested in these different artists. But you couldn't call it a dialogue. It wasn't really a dialogue, it was an aesthetic or philosophical or intellectual interest, but it wasn't a dialogue by any means. But nowadays, this is the first time that we can really talk about a dialogue being established, artistic collaboration, where we're not placing art brut on one side and young professional artists on the other.

Since the 1950s, thanks in particular to a professor called Professor Navratil, there were workshops in psychiatric hospitals - not art therapy because art therapy is to support the patients, in a way - but really more on the side of art, where Navratil identified artists within the hospital from his perspective as a collector and created what he called “La Maison des Artistes”, to give these artists the possibility to develop their imagination.

Numerous creation workshops have since emerged to support artists and break down the barriers associated with their disability or disorder. Among these workshops, la S, in Belgium, invites also a lot of professional artists, who come because they also need to recharge. Nowadays, there are real collaborations and that is very new as well. It didn't exist before.

Why does it interest us? Because, from that point on, we are talking about a way of functioning and imagining that it is completely outside of all the canons of art history. So, of course, it leads to aesthetic and philosophical propositions - I would almost even say philosophical first - perspectives on the world that are obviously exciting for us as we are curious about strange things.

At the beginning, there was no intention to start collecting; there were exchanges with friends. It's actually hard to tell at what point we become a collector. Then, after 15 years or so we created an association called ABCD, which aims to reflect on this subject, using works from the collection. So, we got a bunch of people together and we did our first exhibition. We worked like that for 10 or 20 years. And at one point, we realised that we had a truly exceptional body of work, with around a thousand pieces, that we absolutely wanted to protect.

So, we made the donation in 2021, with a certain number of conditions, to protect the works and to ensure they would be shown. We wanted them to be shared in the history of art, because they're part of it. But at the same time, we wanted the subject to be studied for what it is, which led to the work with the Kandinsky Library, and an exhibition at the Grand Palais.



The two institutions came up with the title: “in the intimacy of a collection”, which was exciting for us, of course, because we were able to tell our story as well as the story of Art Brut, trying to take the universal as a starting point. We think that a common thread should interest people, because it affects them: saving the world, repairing the world, we’re in the middle of it, the problem of language, of course, scientific inventions, the relationship to the beyond, the great celestial epics that you read when you’re a kid, with Jules Verne. We hope to guide people along this thread, while being very careful about the scientific content, of course, with a well-documented catalogue.

What was important for us when we made this donation was to pass on a passion for this art to young curators or assistant curators. So they will integrate it into their practice. This means that there will be confrontations between all these works of a particular kind with the rest of art history. And that is something we really want to see. I don’t know how the Centre Pompidou will evolve when it reopens, but what Barbara mentioned about exchanging practices, I think that it’s absolutely fundamental, because it’s a way for us all to learn and grow from this difference. At the same time, from a purely human perspective, it’s also a generous way of sharing with people who have been excluded in a terrible way.

### Musical transition

Cristina Agostinelli is curator at the Centre Pompidou in the contemporary collections department and associate curator of the exhibition. She explains the direct repercussions of this donation for the Centre Pompidou.

We started to work on Art Brut and the exceptional proposition of the Decharme donation at the end of 2020. I was one of the rapporteurs for the donation at the Acquisition Committee which approved the entry of this collection of Art Brut into the collections of the Musée National d’Art Moderne in June 2021.

The donation is made up of a thousand works encompassing graphic art, with a large number of drawings and sketchbooks, and plastic art, with paintings, sculptures, objects and installations. The ensemble dates from the second half of the 19th century through to the present day, with exceptional works scattered throughout remarkably evenly: historic pieces by key artists, the same ones that were selected by Jean Dubuffet, through to major pieces by contemporary artists, chosen with the same rigour.

Once added to the public collections of the Musée d’Art Moderne, the works were inventoried and allocated to different sectors of the collection, depending on their



nature: sketches, photographs, sculptures, paintings and installations are not placed in the same sectors of the collection. This allocation is important to carry out the various missions that Centre Pompidou must perform, as a public institution, with regard to the works in its collection: exhibiting them, analysing them in a spirit of research, but before

all that, conserving them and thus potentially restoring them. This is the first stage in the process of works entering the collection.

Detailed reports are drawn up for the works, and some are restored. Sometimes, ethical questions are involved in the field of restoration. One example is André Robillard's work, *Fusil*, which required significant restoration. We had to consider not only the eclectic and perishable nature of the materials used, but also the work process which, for the artist, that is to say Robillard, is above all a creative investment in the present, without worrying too much about the future of the work. In the end, thanks to the professional expertise of the restorers, it was possible to endow the work with greater solidity while respecting the artist's spirit and process. We explored the idea of DIY, a process found throughout Art Brut, which highlights the relationship between the artist and the materials in their immediate environment as one of the elements that sparks creation.

The conditions set by Bruno Decharme and Barbara Safarova stipulate that the works be exhibited in the museum. The wealth of the donation makes it possible to explore a number of themes, all of which can be found in the exhibition at the Grand Palais and have been explored in several rooms of the museum since 2021:

One display showed the fantastical dimension of these works, which often became vectors for their isolated or reclusive creators to reach other worlds in both space and time. Significant work was carried out around writing in Art Brut, bringing together works where text occupies a major position. In certain works, you can see the invention of new languages, where writing is often the transcription of a higher power; in other pieces, elements fuse for a fertile alliance between text and image.

The room with the evocative title "Dissident Writings", was chosen by Bruno and Barbara to mark the subversive character of Art Brut in transgressing norms imposed by the dominant culture.

The aim is, in certain cases, to fill any gaps within a single production and try to represent multiple phases and working periods, for example. It is also important to demonstrate multiple techniques used by an artist, for example, if they work in both painting and graphic art.



Another axis of research concerns certain artists who, despite their historic and contemporary importance, are missing from our collection. In this way, the field of research opens the path to new additions to the collection according to criteria in line with the museum's requirements.

The Centre Pompidou collection already contained works of Art Brut, thanks to the Daniel Cordier donation in 1989. 30 years later, the arrival of these 1,000 works has opened up the field of research. Discovering them shakes up our habits in looking at things, our knowledge of art history and the notion of art in general. What is the future of this art, which has been called "out of the ordinary", "neuve intention", "art singulier", "marginal art", and "outsider art"?

I would say that while Art Brut is now historically recognised and accepted, that does not mean it has lost its ability to question, nor its power to engage the gaze with a critical lens.

As the expression of urgent desire and creation in action, Art Brut escapes anything that could normalise it, and keeps the emancipatory function of art in a state of alert.

In short, Art Brut reveals the flip side of the dominant culture, allowing the keen forces of critical impulse to emerge, activated by difference. Referring to it means returning to the very source of the subversive nature of creation and reconsidering art through the lens of an approach in which the contemplative becomes dialectic.

As we observe, the evolution of the criteria used to understand Art Brut always seems to be in movement. Dubuffet himself reviewed his categories multiple times, but without ever forgetting "to follow other paths than that of approved art", because, as he said, "real art is always found where you don't expect it".

This was a Centre Pompidou podcast about Art Brut exhibition, which is on at the Grand Palais until 21 September 2025. You can find all our podcasts on the Centre Pompidou web site. Good bye and see you soon.

Jingle