

Centre Pompidou



Centre Pompidou Exhibition visits

Pathways to help visitors explore exhibitions and the permanent collection.

Exhibition « Georges Mathieu »

This is a podcast from the Centre Pompidou about the exhibition on artist Georges Mathieu “Geste, Vitesse, Mouvement” being held at the Hôtel de la Monnaie in Paris from April 11 to September 7, 2025. The exhibition's three curators, Christian Briend, Béatrice Coullaré and Éric de Chasse, present the exhibition as it unfolds.

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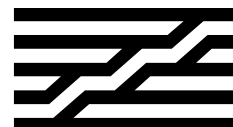
In Black, Christian Briend, curator at the Musée national d'Art Moderne **In Blue**, Béatrice Coullaré, curatorial manager at La Monnaie de Paris

In Green, Éric de Chasse, Director General of the Institut National d'Histoire de l'Art

In Violet, Manon Thibodot, research manager

In Red, les extraits musicaux





Podcast transcription

Reading time: 18 minutes

Jingle

1. Introduction

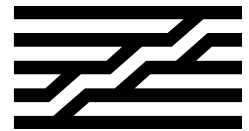
Excerpt from baroque music with violins

Hello and welcome. You're listening to a Centre Pompidou and Monnaie de Paris podcast about the Georges Mathieu exhibition entitled "Geste, Vitesse, Mouvement" (Gesture, Speed, Movement), to be held at the Hôtel de la Monnaie in Paris from 11 April to 7 September 2025.

The three curators, Christian Briend, Béatrice Coullaré and Eric de Chasse, welcome us to Monnaie de Paris and present the exhibition room by room.

I'm delighted to welcome you to this historic site right in the heart of Paris and to this very beautiful building which was built by Jacques Denis Antoine from 1770 to 1775, where we'll be celebrating the 250th anniversary this year. This history behind the Monnaie de Paris is of great significance because it really is a place which is both a historic site, a place where money has been made for hundreds of years, and a place of artistic creation. Generations of artists have crossed the courtyards here, and their footsteps still echo today. This space dedicated to Georges Mathieu, which will occupy the great historic rooms in the Monnaie de Paris from April 11 until September, is an opportunity to look back on a unique and extraordinary career.

Electro music sample with bells sound



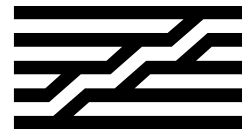
2. Visions of History

After climbing the main staircase and passing by the monumental *Nymphes de Diane*, we enter the first room of the exhibition, which contains three very large compositions by Georges Mathieu. Christian Briend, curator at the Musée national d'Art Moderne, explains how these compositions reflect Mathieu's technique.

We're in the Salon Dupré, the large, prestigious room in the Monnaie de Paris where visitors to the Georges Mathieu exhibition are immediately presented with three of his large-format works. Amongst his most famous paintings of the 1950s and 1960s, which are known for their gesturalism as well as their titles — and were inspired by often little-known episodes in French history which took place during the Ancien Régime — is a series which begins chronologically with *La Bataille de Bouvines* [The Battle of Bouvines]. This was painted for the 10th Salon de Mai, where the work was finally exhibited just a few days after completion. This element of risk was always present: a large canvas, colours, an artist armed with brushes and paintbrushes who threw himself at the canvas in the hope of producing a masterpiece — which was so often the case. What's interesting about this type of abstraction is that, contrary to what Mathieu himself sometimes said, its abstract language occasionally factors in the historical event being evoked.

For example, for *La Bataille de Bouvines*, the artist went so far as to depict how the battle unfolded through the use of certain visual elements in his painting. For instance, the broad, black stroke heading downwards on the right-hand side of *La Bataille de Bouvines* is representative of the flight of Otto IV, the Holy Roman Emperor, who was defeated by the troops of Philip II Auguste. It's interesting to see that this abstract gesturalism is not pure abstraction in that it's not completely disconnected from any figurative aspect.

This is to some extent the case with *Les Capétiens partout* [Capetians Everywhere!] which is also a large painting dating from the same year and which was exhibited very shortly after it was completed in a major exhibition devoted to the artist at the Arcade Gallery. It depicts the crowning of Hugh Capet in the 10th century. The large trails of white paint on a dark background can be seen as a sort of reflection of the festivities surrounding the coronation. The final piece is also one of the most spectacular by Mathieu. It's also incidentally one of the last battles he painted. This work has just been



added to the collection of the Centre Pompidou. As can be seen, the background work is even more refined than for the two previous paintings and the visual elements follow on from one another through the theme of the splash, a visual theme which appears in several works by the artist from the 1960s.

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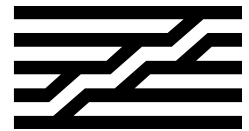
3. “Limbo”

Mathieu himself used the word “limbe” (limbo) in reference to his early years: the peculiar, immediate post-war period in the 1940s.

By the end of the 1940s, the artist was making a name for himself, particularly in exhibitions in Paris. In fact, it can certainly be said that Georges Mathieu was very much part of the Art Informel movement which was developing in Paris at that time and which would go on to spread to other art scenes in Europe and elsewhere.

It was a movement which was completely new. This informal, gestural, matter-based abstraction — however it's termed — was really a consequence of the Second World War and its traumas, and the desire for a clean break which many artists were calling for. The works on display in this room are very characteristic of this movement. It's clear that the artist has committed himself to an abstraction which is both sophisticated and brutal, since it was particularly during this period that he experimented with something which would reappear throughout his career: painting directly from the tube, squeezing the paint directly onto the canvas. This was also known as ‘tubism’.

At the end of the 1940s, the artist was making a name for himself at exhibitions in Paris, influenced at the outset by artists such as the German painter Wols, an example of whose work is presented in this room. Wols' use of stains, splashes and drips was taken up by Mathieu in the composition of his abstract paintings. In turn, the output of another artist, the American Jackson Pollock, echoes Mathieu's work.



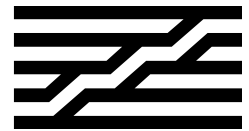
One painting attracts particular attention in this room. It's *Evanescence*, created in 1945. It's quite an extraordinary piece in the output of a very young Mathieu, since it's highly reminiscent of the famous dripping technique popularised some time later by the American Jackson Pollock, one of whose works is also on display in the exhibition. So, this method involves dropping liquid paint from a container at a height onto a painting which is laid flat on the floor or on the studio table. This link with Pollock is perhaps worth exploring, because we mustn't forget that, at that time, Georges Mathieu was employed by a transatlantic liner company which operated services between Paris and New York. As a result, Mathieu, in terms of the French art scene, was perhaps the person who was most familiar with American painting as it was being produced in New York. He was in contact with some of these artists and brought some of their work to Paris to show in exhibitions. At the time, Mathieu acted as a go-between for the Parisian and American scenes. This is why we've chosen to include a piece by Jackson Pollock.

Electro music sample with bells sound

4. Power of the sign and medieval history

In this room, which we've called 'Emprise du signe et geste médiéval' [Influence of the sign and medieval gesture], visitors can discover works from the very start of the 1950s, the moment when Georges Mathieu decided to isolate an element of his pictorial language, namely the sign inspired in particular by Japanese ideograms or Chinese characters. This period began very early in the 1950s, when the artist produced highly original illustrations for the book by one of his friends, the writer Emmanuel Looten, who came from the north of France. The book was called *La Complainte sauvage* [The Wild Lament], and is quite extraordinary as the artist draws red signs directly over his friend's text.

This book includes three large lithographs, which are large black signs, and which can be found specifically in the paintings of this period. This isn't entirely by chance because this book provided the opportunity for the artist's very first exhibition in Paris. The exhibition was very short, lasting only two days, but Georges Mathieu exhibited this book, which you can see in the display case in this room, as well as his first paintings inspired by this



sign and in particular *L'Hommage à Louis XI* [Homage to Louis IX], which you can see on the picture rail and which featured in this exhibition. What you see in this rectangular pictorial surface painted in a unified manner is indicative of the artist's development; this is something new compared to the Limbo period. The artist drew large black signs with a brush and then went back over them with paint, straight from the tube, in either red or white, which he then squeezed onto the motif. The result, as you can see, seems to float in the pictorial space in a somewhat disembodied way compared to the organic abstractions of the Limbo period.

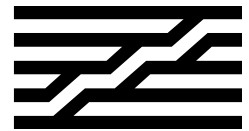
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5. Topographical imagination

In this room, we can admire a series of posters designed by Mathieu for Air France.

In an exhibition such as this one, we had to include one of the most famous works of his era, his series of advertising posters for the Air France airline company. This was an important moment in the artist's career for several reasons, the first being that the 1950s was a decade marked by a great deal of travelling for him. He exhibited his work in all the major countries in Europe, the United States and South America, each time with the same *modus operandi* and the same blasé approach. He would meet the gallery staff and create a series of paintings on the spot, which would then be exhibited immediately, so they would be fresh. This way of working was very novel at the time. It was a way of showing off his skills and letting people know what he was capable of through the sheer spectacle of watching him paint.

This series of exhibitions really turned the artist into a kind of cosmopolitan artist who went and met very different audiences, sometimes painting in the presence of musicians or dancers, as he did in Brazil, for example. And it is this, I think, which gives Mathieu a certain legitimacy to illustrate the various destinations served by Air France. What's very exceptional with this series is the absolutely astonishing technical quality. These are posters from large series, but each one involved research into materials and



photoengravings which were quite exceptional for the time. When you get up close to view these images, you even get the impression of depth, or pictorial layers, which is obviously not the case. What's interesting in this series is the fact that the artist wasn't afraid to introduce figurative elements into his compositions, which are in principle abstract. He himself used rather an astonishing turn of phrase. He explained in the very luxurious booklet published by the airline, which you can see in the display case, that he had been forced to add figurative copper to the gold of his abstractions. In this way, he used a monetary metaphor to explain the presence, in certain posters, of a Greek temple column, a Hebrew candelabrum, a Horse Guard's hat or even an ancient Egyptian mask. So it was at the expense of these compromises that the artist created this extraordinary series, which is still highly sought after by collectors today.

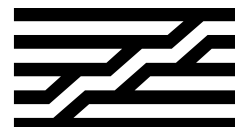
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6. The appeal of the Grand Siècle

George Mathieu was fascinated by the aesthetics and splendour of the 17th century and was a great admirer of the King Louis XIV. A series of medals produced here at the Monnaie de Paris is presented alongside the paintings which relate to this period. In 1971, Pierre Dehaye, then director of the Monnaie de Paris, invited Georges Mathieu to stage a major exhibition for which he collaborated with the workshops at La Monnaie.

Captivated by the art of medal making, he proposed a series entitled *Dix-huit moments de la conscience occidentale (Eighteen Moments of Western Consciousness)*: Béatrice Coullaré, Head of Conservation at Monnaie de Paris:

So, why 'Western consciousness'? How should this be interpreted? What do the front and back of these medals represent? Georges Mathieu didn't want to focus on the key dates in the history of France. Instead, he chose to focus on moments of emergence, either artistic movements or to highlight philosophers, historians or architects who were already making their mark in their era — great figures who had contributed something. He obviously drew on his language of Lyrical Abstraction, the movement he created in 1947. Using his aesthetic, pictorial vocabulary, he created signs on the face of each medal



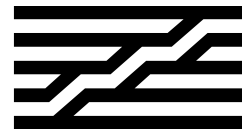
which corresponded to these dates, and on the reverse he used his very particular style of writing, finding the words to enable us to understand what he was seeking to express. The design and the inscription on each medal depict one of these *18 moments in Western consciousness*. Some medals have unusual shapes, shapes unlike anything ever seen before. Consequently, he also reworked the concept of a purely circular medal, inventing bevelled shapes. Ultimately, he was the only one with the courage to invent.

When this exhibition was held in 1971, Georges Mathieu took the time to come to the workshops at the Monnaie de Paris every day to meet the chief engraver and also to be able to pass on his vision of art and, in addition, all these men and women were able to meet him and work with him, and also pass on to him, I believe, their knowledge of the art of medal making, on a technical level. It was, therefore, genuinely a most enriching exchange. And that's really extremely interesting. Finally, it would also enable the Monnaie de Paris workshops to experiment with new techniques using the Mathieu type-setting technique. Georges Mathieu gave his name to a particular technique which enables these marks to appear on the surface of steel dies by etching the steel with acid. This experimentation also enables new skills to be developed, so to speak. So that's really very interesting.

Excerpt of electro music with bubbles

This room also contains paintings from the same period, the 17th and even 18th century, which are related to music. In fact, when Georges Mathieu was invited to hold his first exhibition at the Monnaie de Paris in 1971, he decided to complement the series of medals he'd just created with a series of paintings on the theme of baroque music, which wasn't called that at the time, but is today. It was a very original choice to focus on composers who were completely forgotten at the time, with a particular emphasis on Jean-Philippe Rameau and Jean-Baptiste Lully, who were the subject of several works on this theme.

Baroque music sample with violins



7. “Orthogonal period”

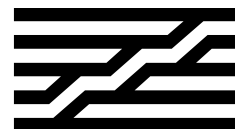
This period saw the development of a more geometrically structured vocabulary.

This period is particularly interesting for the visual system he used, which makes some of his paintings resemble musical scores on which he places elements which bring to mind the urban or industrial world. These include drilling rigs, cranes and signal towers. None of this is formally mentioned in the titles, but there are still titles which refer to architecture, such as *Megapolis 2*, which is on display in this room: a painting with a red background and beautiful gold pattern.

This new language made Mathieu an ideal choice for public commissions such as the new 10-franc coin.

The iconic ten-franc coin is an object, like all coins, which you can hold in your hand and explore by touch, through its reliefs. Georges Mathieu, a true artist, worked with the pictorial layer and could flatten it on the canvas, but here you can also feel the matter on the coin. You can make out the outline of the map of France, and at the centre of it, there are letters in 18th-century script spelling out ‘République Française’. And then, above it all, there is a radiant star which, with its rays, illuminates the heart of France. It’s exuberant. So, really very, very beautiful. And then, of course, you have the inscription which unfurls around the design, and then the date and the year. The date is also very important, as every year we mint new coins to put into circulation. When you turn the coin over, you see cranes, you see activity, an industrious France, a France which is under construction. Then, there’s a horizontal band which cuts across the design and the inscription ‘dix francs’, because the face value of the coin must still appear on the reverse.

That’s really very important. No artist before had ever decided to represent France within its borders and therefore a France which is radiant, a France which shines throughout the world. Then on the reverse, you have an industrious France with depictions of cranes. Things are moving. France is being developed, France is modernising, France is moving forward. I think we are all familiar with Georges Mathieu's interest in modernity, movement, action and speed. He consequently created completely new, revolutionary models on the front and back. He really came up with something new, innovative and



modern. The coins which people had in their pockets were a legacy of the French Revolution, with figures who were really outdated for him. This ten-franc coin, which circulated until 1986 and was then demonetised in 1987, remains to this day, I'd say, an absolutely iconic coin. It is absolutely worth finding out about as archive documents and drawings show the artist's thought process when creating this new coin.

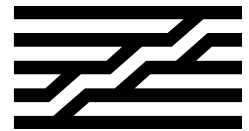
Baroque music sample with violins

8. A Sequel in White

In this room, we wanted to do justice to the ceramic work of Georges Mathieu, who worked in many fields, including the applied arts, the decorative arts — especially tapestry, which he worked on extensively — and ceramics. In fact, the Sèvres factory commissioned several services from him. The first were linked to the great World Fairs of the era, the first in Montreal in 1967 and the second in Osaka in 1970. For these exhibitions, Mathieu designed a white porcelain service with designs which echo the outline of the French pavilions built for the exhibitions. The design of the ‘

Montreal plate is a clear reference to the pavilion designed by the architect Jean Fauteron. To complement these extremely elegant ceramics, we've decided to display paintings in this room where the artist has decided to abandon his highly diverse colour palette, although, as we know, Georges Mathieu avoided using green paint. His palette is extremely varied and very vibrant, with reds and blues contrasting sharply with the blacks. In this room, we've chosen to focus on some of his pieces which use the minimum of colour, with white-on-white images, sometimes enhanced with very pale blue or pink, as in the beautiful painting *Guermantes* from 1964. This is a lesser-known aspect of the artist's work which we wanted to showcase in this room. It was Georges Mathieu himself who used the term ‘Zen work’ for some of his pieces, which are among the most economical in his gestural repertoire.

Baroque music sample with violins



9. Television, the “art of our time”

Mathieu's originality lies in his determination to disseminate his style and his work as widely as possible, using the new means of communication of his time.

He was quick to see the need to create in public, using different channels, from film to television to performance art, and it is these different facets that this exhibition reveals.

As early as 1954, he painted *La Bataille de Bouvines* in the Pathé Frères studios, in front of Robert Descharnes' camera. Then, on April 24, 1959, he performed *Le Massacre de la Saint-Barthélémy* in 23 minutes in the French television studios, accompanied by American jazz drummer Kenny Clarke.

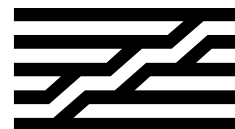
He continued to paint in front of filmed newsreels, because he felt he had to make the most of the “live” aspect of television.

A milestone in his career came in 1971, when director Frédéric Rossif shot the documentary *Georges Mathieu ou la fureur d'être*. Alongside Greek composer Vangelis, Mathieu performed three works for the cameras: *Karaté*, *l'Election de Charles Quint* and *La Nécessité de l'espérance*.

This gestural abstraction, based on personal expression, was also to be deployed in everyday French life. First in 1974, when he won the design competition for the 10-Franc coin. The artist explains that “after the gigantic surfaces painted to the rhythm of the body and the arm”, he wanted to “discipline his lyricism”. His art found its way into every Frenchman's pocket, as more than 673 million copies of the coin were minted.

Then, in 1975, when the ORTF was divided into four independent channels, Marcel Jullian, president of the new Antenne 2 TV channel, commissioned him to design the logo, which was used until 1983.

Electro music sample with bells sound



10. Zen works

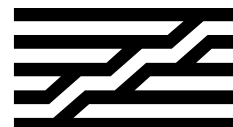
In this room, it's worth admiring *Anneau de la princesse Honora* [Princess Honora's Ring] in particular. Painted in 1961, it has a very quick, delicate sign traced on a uniform white background, and refers to the Byzantine princess who had tried to form an alliance with the tyrant Attila. Another piece in this room which is particularly striking is *Karaté* [Karate], painted in 1971. It's a reminder that Georges Mathieu made an important trip to Japan back in 1957, where he painted very large compositions in public, in department stores. In the 1960s, he also illustrated *Le judo de l'esprit* [Judo of the Spirit], a book about judo written by Robert Godet in 1964.

This explains his interest in the subject. *Karaté* is a painting which has the distinction of appearing in Frédéric Rossif's film *The Fury of Being*. Also, *Karaté* was the subject of a very spectacular set-up, with Mathieu painting in front of two karate practioners, one Japanese and the other French, with one dressed in red and the other in a black kimono. And these are the colours which we find in this painting, executed at the very moment when the two combatants emit a battle cry as they face one another. So, this is a performance painting, the creation of which we're fortunate enough to have preserved in film. To illustrate the final phase of Georges Mathieu's creative period, we're displaying an almost figurative painting: *La libération d'Orléans par Jeanne d'Arc* [The Liberation of Orléans by Joan of Arc], painted in 1982. This painting was commissioned by the City of Orléans for its town hall.

Electro music sample with bells sound

11. The Future of a Style

In a very surprising way, Georges Mathieu decided to get as close as possible to figuration, as we can make out the hindquarters of horses, shafts, lances and even the towers of Orléans cathedral. It's as if, at the end of his life, Mathieu revealed the underlying plan behind *La Bataille de Bouvines*, for example, which was presented as an abstraction, but which at the same time alluded to real moments in the battle. To complement this painting, there are two fully abstract works from the 1980s. One of them



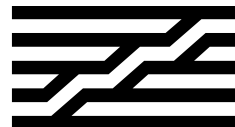
was shown by Mathieu in his last exhibition in the United States in 1987. This is *L'heure sans nuit* [The Hour Without Night]. We've shown it alongside this painting, which is called *Rêves desséchés* [Dried-up Dreams], and which was probably painted in the same period, even though it's not dated. What's also striking in this series of paintings, which is not quite the final series, is that the titles now show a certain disenchantment. This is a time when Mathieu's work was becoming perhaps less recognised. It was starting to enter a kind of purgatory, from which we hope this exhibition will extract it once and for all. These titles of a psychological nature show the artist's relative isolation, despite having been accepted to the Académie des Beaux-Arts, and despite regularly engaging in polemics against the cultural policy of the time, but who would ultimately be the very last representative of the movement he'd created — Lyrical Abstraction. This term, which is still sometimes used in the market, refers above all to the masterful work of Georges Mathieu.

Electro music sample with bells sound

12. Graffiti

Echoing the Mathieu exhibition, graffiti artists are presented.

Mathieu's idea is to place a trace representing his subjectivity in the public space as directly and quickly as possible. He has an obsession with speed. What's very striking is that these two notions are found among graffiti artists from the 1970s and 1980s onwards. These are graffiti artists who want their name to be in the public space in an aestheticized form. The important thing is not that non-specialists recognize or vocalize their name, it's just like a brand, and that everything is done as quickly as possible, a kind of feat found among graffiti artists. Hence the idea of continuing Mathieu's exhibition by confronting him with historic graffiti artists, such as Futura 2000 or John One, and much younger artists. The idea is to show several generations of graffiti artists confronting Mathieu's work by displaying Mathieu's drawings in the space.



This was a Centre Pompidou and Monnaie de Paris podcast, which can be found on the Centre Pompidou website and on the Monnaie de Paris webapp. Goodbye and see you soon.

Jingle