

MAIN & SOUTH GALLERIES



Livres d'artistes:
Selections from the Ritter Collection

The University of Arizona Museum of Art

JUNE 8–AUGUST 6, 2006

Unbound: The Mutable, Remarkable



The University of Arizona Museum of Art is pleased to present *Livres d'artistes: Selections from the Ritter Collection*, an exhibition showcasing a highly specialized form of artistic production, and one that may be unfamiliar to many for its relative rarity.

The *livre d'artiste* is a specific yet variable genre, so much so as to nearly defy definition. Scholars, curators and critics continue to debate its fundamental characteristics, agreeing most often (and vehemently) on what the *livre d'artiste* is not, yet remaining unable to firmly pin it down.¹ Even the term, *livre d'artiste*, complicates matters: a literal translation from the French, as “artists’ books,” misleads by implication, bringing to mind distinctly different aesthetic and material interventions by artists into the very notion of Book-ness; and the frequent substitution of “artist-illustrated books,” while accurate in a literal sense, too broadly suggests commercial intent. In other words, the *livre d'artiste* is a curiosity, an example of artistic work about which the critical fine hairs split; or, as one critic put it simply, while “every *livre d'artiste* is an artist’s book [...] not every artist’s book is a *livre d'artiste*.”² Perhaps such confusion is both inevitable and just: the *livre d'artiste* not only represents a collusion of complex interests – social, political, economic and cultural – but also the establishment of a print tradition of commissioned collaborations between visual artists and texts (an inherently mutable and unpredictable process) toward the creation of unique volumes.

A distinctive product of French modernism, the *livre d'artiste* came into being at the end of the 19th century and matured through the 20th. The genre was intrinsically eccentric in form, and its success – relatively modest, at first – was predicated on an urbane European cosmopolitanism and developing markets for avant-garde (predominantly Cubist, Surrealist, and Symbolist) experimentation. Spearheaded most significantly by gallery owners turned publishers (notably Ambroise Vollard and Henry Kahnweiler, among others) who commissioned an astonishing range of visual artists, every *livre d'artiste*

1 For a representative sample of interpretive perspectives and sources for the historical information cited here, see Riva Castleman, *A Century of Artists Books* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1995); Johanna Drucker, *The Century of Artists' Books* (New York: Granary Press, 1994); Johanna Drucker, “The Artist’s Book as Idea and Form,” (www.granarybooks.com/books/drucker2/drucker2.4.html); Robert Flynn Johnson, *Artists' Books in the Modern Era 1870-2000: The Reva and David Logan Collection of Illustrated Books* (San Francisco: Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 2002); and W.J. Strachan, *The Artist and the Book in France: The 20th Century Livre d'artiste* (New York: George Wittenborn, 1969).

2 Donna Stein, “When A Book is More Than A Book,” in Johnson, *Artists' Books in the Modern Era*, 17.

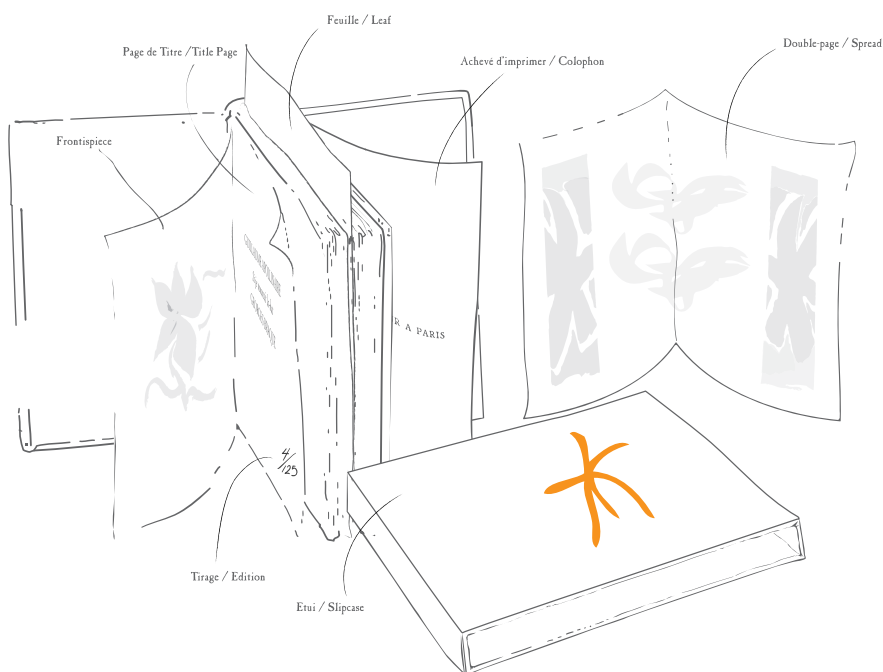
livre d'artiste



was also a team endeavor. Modern masters were enlisted along with young upstarts, and matched with poems and prose ranging from the experimental to the traditional; from there, each project required papermakers, printers, typesetters, etc. – a myriad of skilled craftsmen.

Although always inventive, *livres d'artistes* are distinguished by several elements: printed by specialty ateliers, in relatively small, limited editions, the volumes feature original images juxtaposed in relation – variably designed – to text. Commonly encased in boxes, the folios are comprised of sheets of carefully selected handmade paper, often unbound and frequently oversized, and sometimes cut and folded to unusual effect; the text is handset in distinctive typefaces, in flexible and perhaps stylized relation to the page size.³ The effect of the entirety is akin to a conversation, an exchange between text and image that transforms both.

3 For additional perspectives on the *livre d'artiste* tradition, see the essays included in *The Dialogue Between Painting and Poetry: Livres d'Artistes 1874-1999*, ed. Jean Khalifa (Cambridge, UK: Black Apollo Press, 2001); and a related New York Public Library exhibition brochure, *French Book Art / Livres d'Artistes* (New York: NYPL, 2006).





Consider, for example, *Si je mourais là-bas*, on view in the exhibition, which joins eighteen wood engravings by Georges Braque (1882–1963) with selections from a suite of poems by Guillaume Apollinaire (1880–1918).⁴ An exemplary model, it reveals the basic conventions of the *livre d'artiste* as well as the creative flexibility inherent in it. To “unpack” this book is to explicate the genre, to literally unfold its physical components in order to uncover the elemental aspects of the tradition.

Published in 1962, a year before Braque’s death, *Si je mourais là-bas* (“If I Die Over There”) is an oversized volume encased in a custom-made box, or *emboîtement*. The cover is embossed with an abstract calligraphic form reminiscent of a star burst, in bright orange, to visually announce the stylistic tone of its contents. Inside is a series of layered wrappings, each printed distinctively: the slipcase (*étui*), an inner sleeve (*chemise*), an inner cover (*couverture*), a half-title page (*faux-titre*), a frontispiece, a title page (*page de titre*) and several blank fly-leaves (*pages de garde*) for protection. The heart of the book, the relational pages of text and image, is thus introduced and enclosed. Finally, a colophon page, or *achevé d'imprimer*, lists printing and production details: in this case, the volume is number 80 of a limited edition of 150; it was printed by Marthe Fequet and Pierre Baudier, on a handmade rag paper, Moulin d’Ambert; and the text was set in Garamond, a particularly popular type choice for *livres d'artistes*.⁵ The package in its entirety brings to mind the human body, ensconced and adorned, its quintessential elements functioning in concert; unique yet recognizably of the species, it is a mystery, and reveals itself only through a process of careful consideration.

While Braque and Apollinaire were closely associated as leading contributors to the great formal revolution of Cubism, the production of *Si je mourais là-bas* dates to some forty years after the poet’s death. The volume includes a dedication, penned by Braque, that reads, “This book commemorates the eightieth birthday of the artist, the poet’s comrade in the trenches,” in reference to the World War I service (albeit in different capacities and at different times) of both men.⁶ In terms of its content and the circumstances of its production, the book resonates on multiple levels: as reminiscence on a particularly tumultuous period, marked both by a horrendous war and extraordinary artistic production; as autobiographical review, a re-encounter with the artist’s early roots and an homage to comrades in the art

4 Georges Braque/Guillaume Apollinaire, *Si je mourais là-bas* (Paris: Louis Broder Éditeur, 1962).

5 For a thorough description of the elements of the *livre d'artiste*, see Strachan, *The Artist and the Book in France*, chapter 9. For details on *Si je mourais là-bas*, see Johnson, *Artists' Books in the Modern Era*, 232.

6 See Johnson, *Op. Cit.*, who notes this point about military service.



wars, so to speak, lost along the way; and as testament to the artist's enduring inventiveness through time, for the liveliness and crisp precision of his images are rendered very much in the present-tense.

W.J. Strachan, who was possessed of a life-long passion for the *livre d'artiste*, reports that “when the publisher Louis Broder asked him if he would illustrate Apollinaire’s *poèmes à Lou* he consented with enthusiasm...” and, in Strachan’s view, Braque “pulled out all the stops” to realize the project. Writing in 1969, Strachan assessed it as “one of the best books of the present decade” and was so moved by the volume as to write: “Looking through it and at the generous use of space to set off Braque’s designs and his subtle evocations of the poetry calls to mind de Staël’s observation apropos illustration: ‘breathe... breathe... never think of the definite apart from the ephemeral...’”⁷

It may be that the *livre d'artiste*, as a genre, so confounds expectations because it exists in a poetic space where the “definite” and the “ephemeral” overlap. Each book, with its often unpaginated sheets, provides a series of encounters; looking becomes an act of meandering, rather than of reading in the more linear sense. This holds equally true for the contemporary examples presented in the exhibition, which expand upon the *livre d'artiste* tradition in new and surprising ways. In every case, the experience of looking, first intended for the collector/connoisseur’s eye, shifts again through exhibition, as volumes produced for private pleasure literally open up to public view.

While *Livres d'artistes: Selections from the Ritter Collection* demonstrates the originality and diversity of a lesser-known mode of creative collaboration, it is also a testament to the important and enduring relationship between museums and private collectors. Mel and Robin Ritter, for example, are guided by their passionate interest in *livres d'artistes* to ensure that these rare objects remain safe and intact for posterity. It is only through their generosity that the University of Arizona Museum of Art has this opportunity to present such an exceptional selection.

Dr. Lisa Fischman
Chief Curator
May 2006

Exhibition Checklist

1. **Albert Ayme/Stéphane Mallarmé**
L'après-midi d'une faune
Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1913
2. **Arman**
Passe Temps
Genève: Jean Petit, 1971
3. **Enrico Baj/Benjamin Péret,
André Breton**
Dames et Généraux
Paris: Imprimerie Union, 1964
4. **Hans Bellmer/Mgr. Bouvier**
Les Mystères du Confessionnal
Paris: Éditions Art & Valeur, 1973
5. **Georges Braque/Guillaume
Apollinaire**
Si je mourais là-bas
Paris: Louis Broder Éditeur, 1962
6. **Alexander Calder/e.e. cummings**
Santa Claus
Paris: Éditions de l'Herne, 1974
7. **Alexander Calder/Jaques Prévert**
Fêtes
Paris: Meaght Éditeur, 1971
8. **Marc Chagall/Paul Éluard**
Le Dur Désir de durer
Paris: Arnold-Bordas, 1946
9. **Antoni Clavé/(Jean François Marie
Arouet de) Voltaire**
Candide ou l'Optimisme
Paris: Chez Jean Porson, 1946
10. **Antoni Clavé/François Rabelais**
Gargantua
Paris: Les Bibliophiles de Provence,
1955
11. **Francesco Clemente/Alberto Savinio**
The Departure of the Argonaut
New York: Petersburg, 1986
12. **Salvador Dali/Lewis Carroll**
Alice's Adventures in Wonderland
New York: Maecenas Press-
Random House, 1969
13. **Jim Dine/Bible, New Testament**
*The Apocalypse: The Revelation of
Saint John the Divine*
San Francisco: Arion Press, 1982
14. **Jim Dine/Frank O'Hara,
Bill Berkson**
Biotherm
San Francisco: Arion Pres, 1990
15. **Jim Dine/Various Authors**
The Temple of Flora
San Francisco: Arion Press, 1984
16. **Jean DuBuffet**
La Botte à nique
Genève: Editions d'Art Albert Skira,
1973
17. **Fritz Eichenberg/Desiderius Erasmus**
In Praise of Folly
New York and Baltimore: Aquarius
Press, 1972
18. **Max Ernst/Benjamin Péret**
La Brebis galante
Paris: Les Éditions Premières, 1949
19. **Helen Frankenthaler/William Carlos
Williams**
Valentine for Mr. Wonderful
New York: Tyler Graphics, 1995
20. **Ernst Fuchs/Bible, Old Testament**
Samson
Monaco: Jospard, Polus & Cie, 1967
21. **Gunther Gerzo/Octavio Paz**
Palabras Grabadas (Graven Words)
San Francisco: Limestone Press, 1990
22. **Jasper Johns/Samuel Beckett**
Foirades/Fizzles
London and New York: Petersburg Press
S.A., 1976
23. **R.B. Kitaj/Robert Creeley**
A Day Book
Berlin: Graphis, 1972

24. **Robert Mapplethorpe/Arthur Rimbaud**
A Season in Hell
New York: LEC, 1986
25. **Henri Matisse/Charles d'Orléans**
Poèmes de Charles d'Orléans
Paris: Tériade Éditeur, 1950
26. **Matta**
Le Coeur est un Oeil
Paris: Jean Hugue Bernard, 1981
27. **Matta and Pierre Alechinsky/Joyce Mansour**
Le grand jamais
Paris: Maeght Éditeur, 1981
28. **Joan Miró/Robert Desnos**
Les pénalités de l'enfer ou Les Nouvelles-Hébrides
Paris: Maeght Éditeur, 1974
29. **Joan Miró/Alfred Jarry**
Ubu Roi
Paris: Tériade Éditeur, 1966
30. **Joan Mitchell/Nathan Kernan**
Poems
New York: Tyler Graphics, 1992
31. **Henry Moore/Various Authors**
La Poésie—Les Poètes
Paris: Art et Poésie, 1976
32. **Robert Motherwell/Rafael Alberti**
El Negro
New York: Tyler Graphics, Ltd., 1983
33. **Alice Neel/Edgar Allan Poe**
The Fall of the House of Usher
New York: Anthoensen Press, 1985
34. **Louise Nevelson**
Façade
New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc. / Pace Gallery, 1966
35. **Pablo Picasso/Pierre Reverdy**
Sable mouvant
Paris: Louis Broder, 1966
36. **Robert Rauschenberg**
Opal Gospel, 9 American Indian Poems
New York: Racolin Press, 1971
37. **Odilon Redon/Gustave Flaubert**
La Tentation de Saint Antoine
Paris: Les Amis de Redon, 1935
38. **Lucas Samaras**
Book
New York: Pace Gallery, 1968
39. **Fritz Scholder and Leonard Baskin**
Poets & Artists: A Book of Plains Indians
Massachusetts: Gehenna Press, 1994
40. **Ben Shahn/Rainer Maria Rilke**
For the Sake of a Single Verse
New York: Atelier Mourlot, 1968
41. **Donald Sultan/David Mamet**
Warm and Cold
New York: Fawbush Editions / Solo Press, Inc., 1985
42. **Rufino Tamayo/Bible, New Testament**
Apocalypse de Saint Jean
Monaco: Club International de Bibliophilie Jaspard, Palis e Cie, 1959
43. **Antoni Tàpies/Octavio Paz**
Petrificada Petrificante
Paris: Maeght Éditeur, 1978
44. **Various Artists**
1¢ Life
Bern: E.W. Kornfield, 1964
45. **Andy Warhol**
The Index Book
New York and Toronto: Random House, 1967
46. **Paul Wunderlich**
The Song of Songs
Paris: Aquarius Press, 1970

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