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A Russian Mystery at the Fondation Jan Michalski

05.06.2026.

Catherine Schischkoff, Untitled, December 1938 Graphite and coloured pencils on paper (notebook) © ProLitteris, Zurich / Collection de l'Art Brut, Lausanne Photo: Claudina Garcia, Atelier de numérisation – Ville de Lausanne

The Lausanne Collection de l'Art Brut, founded by Jean Dubuffet, is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year. To mark the occasion, part of the collection is currently on display at the Fondation Jan Michalski in Montricher.

The French painter and sculptor Jean Dubuffet (1901-1985) not only lived a long life, but was also extraordinarily prolific: in total, he created nearly 10,000 works, many of which are held in the world's leading museums. What is perhaps less widely known is that he did not find his vocation immediately. After completing his studies at the Académie Julian in Paris,

Dubuffet returned to his native Le Havre and spent seventeen years immersed in the family wine business.

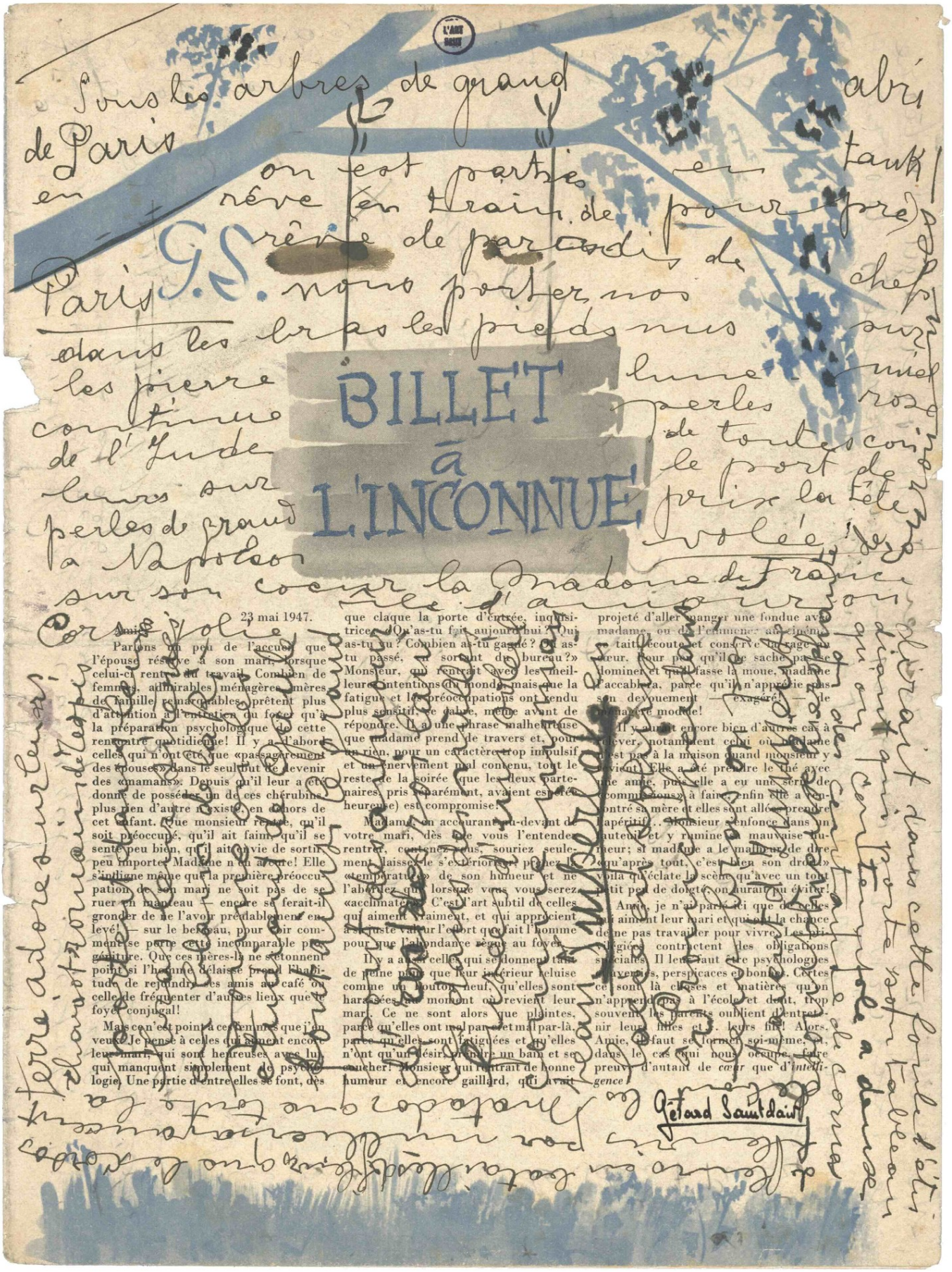
It was only in 1942 that he returned to painting, and two years later his first solo exhibition took place at René Drouin’s gallery in Paris. Later, in the 1960s, he began experimenting with music and sound, even making several recordings, but painting remained central to his life. In Paris, he became close to the Surrealists, yet, being little inclined to accept traditional standards of beauty, Dubuffet entered art history above all as the founder of *Art Brut*, a form of creation that emerged outside established artistic norms. Essentially, it is the work of self-taught creators, often people with psychiatric disorders, who either rejected accepted aesthetic conventions or simply knew nothing of them, and who used whatever materials were available.

Pascal Vonlanthen, untitled, 2015India ink and felt-tip pen on paper [notebook page]©

CREAHM, Fribourg / Collection de l’Art Brut, LausannePhoto: Claudina Garcia, Atelier de numérisation – Ville de Lausanne

Jean Dubuffet is known to have been deeply impressed by Hans Prinzhorn’s book *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*, published in 1922. This first work by the German psychiatrist was also one of the earliest attempts to analyse the creations of people with mental disorders. Richly illustrated with patients’ drawings, the book testified to the author’s respect for them, although Prinzhorn refrained from making an aesthetic judgement on these works and avoided the term “art”.

Be that as it may, in 1945 Jean Dubuffet introduced the term *Art Brut* to describe the collection he was assembling from works created by psychiatric patients, children, and representatives of non-European cultures then described as “savages”. In this creativity, free from cultural and social conventions, he saw “a completely pure, raw artistic operation, reinvented in all its phases by its author, solely from his or her own impulses”, as the website of the Collection de l’Art Brut states. Interestingly, in that same first post-war year, the artist undertook a research journey not through his native France, but through Switzerland, where he met artists, writers, and psychiatrists. The works discovered then became the nucleus of the future collection.



BILLET à L'INCONNUE

23 mai 1947.

Amie,

Parlons un peu de l'accusé que l'épouse réservée à son mari, lorsque celui-ci rentre du travail. Combien de femmes, admirables ménagères, mères de famille remarquables, prêtent plus d'attention à l'entretien du foyer qu'à la préparation psychologique de cette rencontre quotidienne! Il y a, d'abord, celles qui n'ont été que «passagèrement des épouses» dans le seul but de devenir des «mamans». Depuis qu'il leur a été donné de posséder un de ces chérubins, plus rien d'autre n'existe, en dehors de cet enfant. Que monsieur reste, qu'il soit préoccupé, qu'il ait faim, qu'il se sente peu bien, qu'il ait envie de sortir, peu importe! Madame n'en a cure! Elle s'indigne même que la première préoccupation de son mari ne soit pas de se ruer en manteau — encore se ferait-il gronder de ne l'avoir préalablement enlevé! — sur le berceau, pour voir comment se porte cette incomparable progéniture. Que ces mères-là ne s'étonnent point si l'homme délaissé prend l'habitude de rejoindre ses amis au café ou celle de fréquenter d'autres lieux que le foyer conjugal!

Mais ce n'est point à ces femmes que j'en veux. Je pense à celles qui aiment encore leur mari, qui sont heureuses avec lui, qui manquent simplement de psychologie. Une partie d'entre elles se font, dès que claque la porte d'entrée, inquisitrices: «Qu'as-tu fait aujourd'hui? Qui as-tu vu? Combien as-tu gagné? Où as-tu passé, en sortant du bureau?» Monsieur, qui rentrait avec les meilleures intentions du monde, mais que la fatigue et les préoccupations ont rendu plus sensitif, se cabre, même avant de répondre. Il a une phrase malheureuse que madame prend de travers et, pour un rien, pour un caractère trop impulsif et un énervement mal contenu, tout le reste de la soirée (que les deux partenaires, pris séparément, avaient espérée heureuse) est compromise!

Madame, en accourant au-devant de votre mari, dès que vous l'entendez rentrer, contenez-vous, souriez seulement, laissez-le s'extérioriser, prenez la «température» de son humeur et ne l'abordez que lorsque vous vous serez «acclimatée». C'est l'art subtil de celles qui aiment vraiment, et qui apprécient à sa juste valeur l'effort que fait l'homme pour que l'abondance règne au foyer.

Il y a aussi celles qui se donnent tant de peine pour que leur intérieur reluise comme un bouton neuf, qu'elles sont harassées au moment où revient leur mari. Ce ne sont alors que plaintes, parce qu'elles ont mal par-ci et mal par-là, parce qu'elles sont fatiguées et qu'elles n'ont qu'un désir: prendre un bain et se coucher! Monsieur qui rentrait de bonne humeur et encore gaillard, qui avait projeté d'aller manger une fondue avec madame, ou de l'emmener au cinéma, se tait, écoute et conserve la rage au cœur. Pour peu qu'il ne sache pas se dominer et qu'il fasse la moue, madame l'accablera, parce qu'il n'apprécie pas son dévouement — exagéré! — de ménagère modèle!

Il y aurait encore bien d'autres cas à relever, notamment celui où madame n'est pas à la maison quand monsieur y revient. Elle a été prendre le thé avec une amie, puis elle a eu une série de «commissions» à faire, enfin elle a rencontré sa mère et elles sont allées prendre l'apéritif... Monsieur s'enfonce dans un fauteuil et y rumine sa mauvaise humeur; si madame a le malheur de dire «qu'après tout, c'est bien son droit» voilà qu'éclate la scène qu'avec un tout petit peu de doigté on aurait pu éviter!

Amie, je n'ai parlé ici que de celles qui aiment leur mari et qui ont la chance de ne pas travailler pour vivre. Les privilégiées contractent des obligations spéciales. Il leur faut être psychologues, ouvertes, perspicaces et bonnes. Certes, ce sont là choses et matières qu'on n'apprend pas à l'école et dont, trop souvent, les parents oublient d'entretenir leurs filles et leurs fils! Alors, Amie, il faut se former soi-même, et, dans le cas qui nous occupe, faire preuve d'autant de *cœur* que d'*intelligence*.

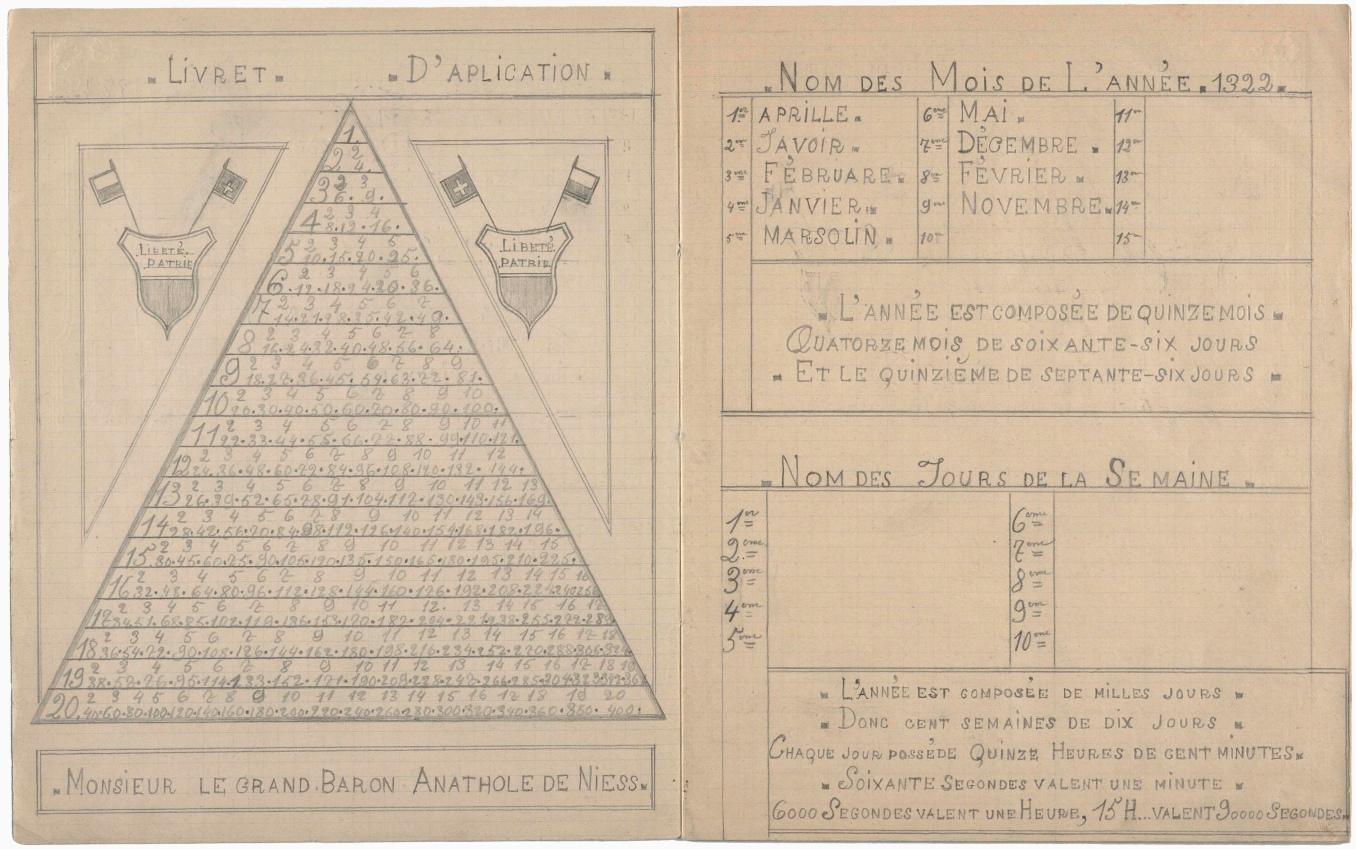
Gérard Sautdair

Aloïse Corbaz, [Note to an Unknown Woman], after 1947Ink on reused paper, 32 × 23.5 cm© Collection de l’Art Brut, LausannePhoto: Claude Bornand, Atelier de numérisation – Ville de Lausanne

Initially, the collection found shelter in the basement of the Drouin gallery, and in 1949 it was already being exhibited in its rooms, accompanied by a manifesto written by Dubuffet under the title *L'Art Brut préféré aux arts culturels* (*Art Brut Preferred to Cultural Art*). Then came a decade of exile in New York, followed by a return to Paris. In 1964, the first issue of the *L'Art Brut* fascicles appeared, an editorial series created by Jean Dubuffet and devoted to the authors represented in the collection. The artist himself worked on the first eight issues, and publication continues to this day. I have a friend who owns every issue published so far!

In 1971, Jean Dubuffet donated his entire *Art Brut* collection, comprising around 5,000 works, together with his archive, to the city of Lausanne. In 1975, the Geneva publishing house Albert Skira brought out the first book devoted to *Art Brut*, written at Dubuffet's request by the Lausanne art historian Michel Thévoz. A year later, Mr Thévoz became the collection's first curator, after it had found its home in the wing of the Château de Beaulieu in Lausanne. Thus was born the world's first public museum devoted entirely to *Art Brut*, with more than 800 works on permanent display. Remarkably, it was only in 2018 that the museum ventured to organise its first travelling exhibition: *Art Brut. Swiss Made*, devoted to *Art Brut* in Switzerland, was shown at the Museo contemporaneo d'arte in Ascona and at the Kunstmuseum Aarau. And now visitors to the Fondation Jan Michalski in Montricher can discover some of its treasures, many of which had never previously been exhibited.

The mission of this foundation, a unique place created by Vera Michalski-Hoffmann at the foot of the Swiss Jura, is "to foster literary creation, encourage the practice of reading, and give all forms of writing to be read, seen, and heard".

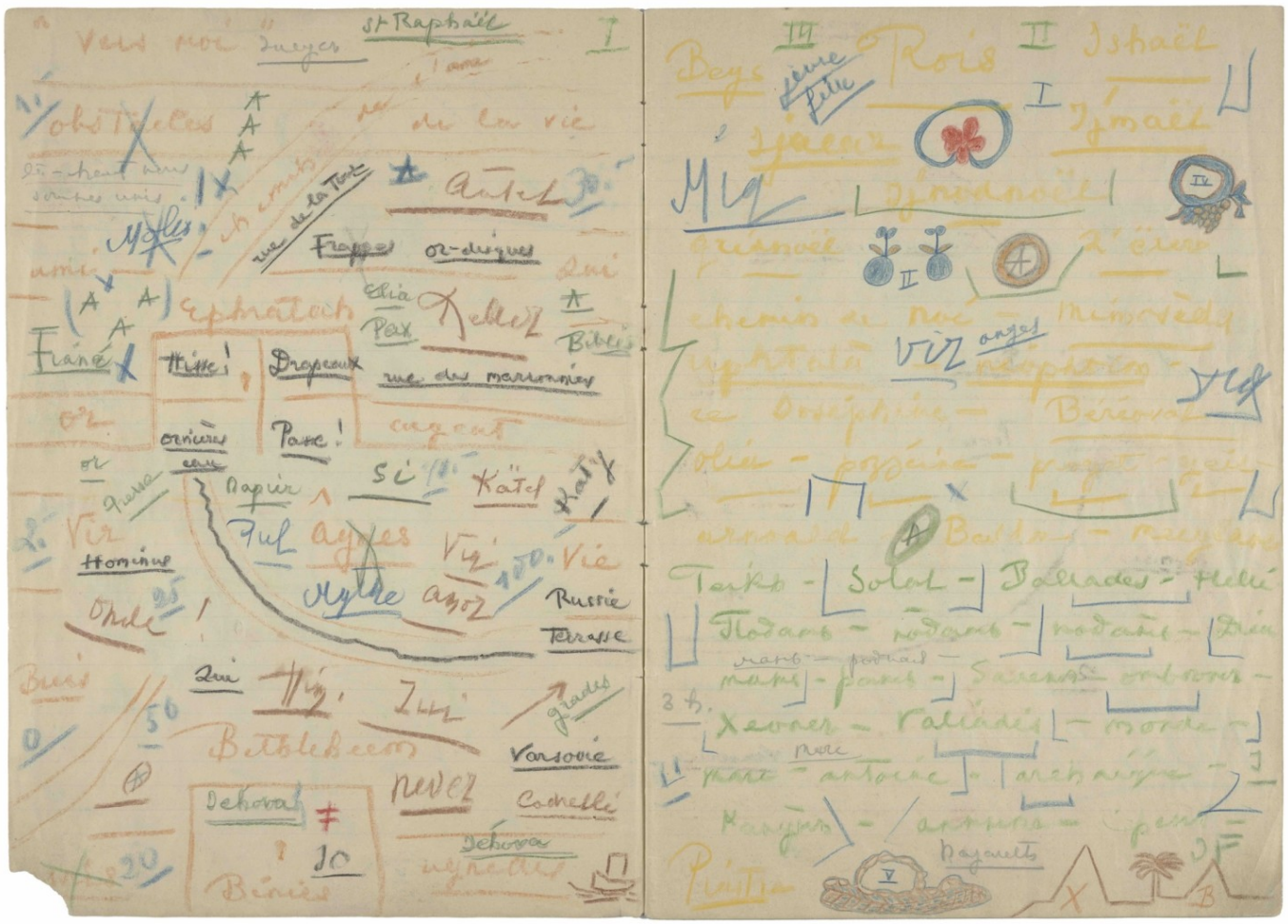


Adolphe LanyUntitledBetween 1914 and 1939© ProLitteris, Zurich / Collection de l'Art Brut, LausannePhoto: Claudina Garcia, Atelier de numérisation – Ville de Lausanne

In this case, the emphasis is above all on reading and seeing. It is logical that, for the exhibition held within its walls, the Fondation's team selected works featuring, in one form

or another, drawings and writings from notebooks, almost always untitled. “Sometimes illegible, invented, at times interwoven with drawings, these forms of writing, expressive both formally and poetically, trace a territory of power and freedom,” the exhibition’s curators emphasise. For the poster, they chose a 2015 work by Pascal Vonlanthen, born in 1957 and still alive today. The artist gave it no title, but I would call it *Variations on the Letter “A”*.

I admit it: I certainly did not expect, among all those names that meant nothing to me, suddenly to see… Schischkoff. Just like that, with no first name, no dates, only a sheet of paper with a fold down the middle, clearly torn from a notebook. But it was dated: December 1938. On this little sheet are drawings in graphite and coloured pencil: flowers, berries, a little boat, a palm tree between pyramids… Various zigzags and strokes. And words, words, words in Russian, French, and English, suggesting that the author was an educated person and probably belonged to a cultivated milieu: Russie, Катя, подать – надеть, never, St Raphael, Jehovah, anges, amor, Varsovie. And several times, in different colours, the Latin word *vir*, meaning “husband”, “man”, but also possibly “hero”. So who was the author? And what obsessive thought lay hidden behind this seemingly chaotic collection of words?



Catherine Schischkoff, sans titre, décembre 1938 Mine de plomb et crayons de couleur sur papier (cahier) © ProLitteris, Zurich / Collection de l’Art Brut, Lausanne Photo : Claudina Garcia, Atelier de numérisation – Ville de Lausanne

For someone who, like me, received a classical Soviet education, the surname “Shishkov” – which looks much longer in some transliterations, since some Russian sibilants require three Latin letters – immediately brings one association to mind: Pushkin. “Our everything”,

as Russians say. *Eugene Onegin*, Chapter VIII, stanza XIV, ending:

All was quiet, simple in her,
She seemed the faithful image
Du comme il faut… (Shishkov, forgive me:
I do not know how to translate.)

This is how Pushkin concludes his description of Tatyana, already married to Gremin, at a ball in St Petersburg. Describing what he saw as the ideal society woman, Pushkin uses a French expression while addressing Alexander Shishkov (1754-1841), philologist, statesman, admiral, and president of the Russian Academy, who advocated purifying the Russian language of borrowings and called for foreign words to be replaced by native Russian ones. With this ironic aside, the poet made it clear that the Russian language of the time simply had no exact equivalent for this French concept of *comme il faut.*

Naturally, I wanted to know more about the mysterious owner of the notebook, whoever he or she might be. But how? “Very little is known about Mlle Schischkoff,” Aurélie Baudrier, a member of staff at the Fondation Jan Michalski, replied to my enquiry, sharing with me the information received from the Collection de l’Art Brut:

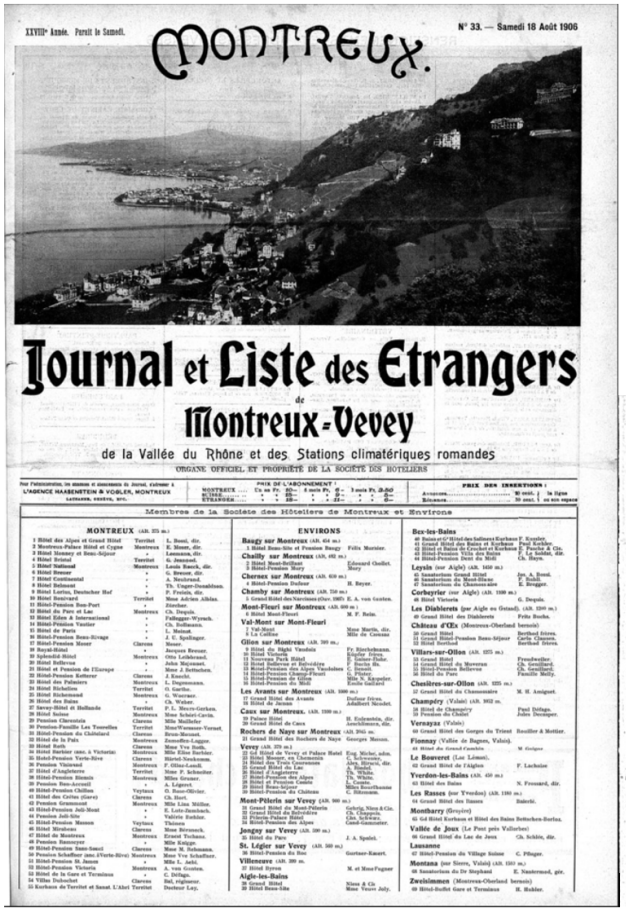
“Schischkoff (dates unknown)

The work attributed to ‘Mlle Schischkoff’ is a notebook of writings and drawings dated 1938 and produced at the Cery psychiatric hospital in the canton of Vaud (Switzerland). Each page contains compositions combining texts with figurative or abstract drawings, executed in coloured pencil or graphite. The religious dimension is obvious, and biblical references recur throughout.

The author most often depicts houses, churches, and landscapes, drawn with a lively, assured line and invariably accompanied by writing. Names of saints, cities, proper names, and biblical terms are placed across the page and sometimes linked by lines and arrows within dynamic graphic compositions. At times, an entire page consists solely of a dense list of words separated by dashes. Ornamental motifs and symbols also punctuate several pages of this enigmatic cycle. An Orthodox cross is also represented in the notebook, which would suggest that ‘Mlle Schischkoff’ may have been of Russian or Balkan origin.”

This information seemed insufficient to me. In the *Journal et liste des étrangers à Montreux, Vevey, dans la vallée du Rhône et les stations climatiques de la Suisse romande* and in the *Revue littéraire et sportive de Leysin* for 1906, I found a mention of “Madame Schischkoff from Russia”. There was nothing surprising in this. Even before the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, Leysin was world-renowned for its pure mountain-air treatments and its sanatoriums for tuberculosis patients. The Russian Charitable Society of Leysin, founded between 1907 and 1910 to help wealthy visitors from the Russian Empire, had to adapt its mission after 1917. It then played a crucial role by offering financial support to new émigrés, often impoverished and stripped of their former social status, as well as providing them with a place to meet and a library.

At that point, the trail went cold. Yet I am not used to stopping halfway, so I decided to contact the Cantonal Archives of Vaud. Who knows…?



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Journal et Liste des Etrangers de Montreux-Vevey

de la Vallée du Rhône et des Stations climatériques romandes

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54 Villas Dubochet	Clarens	Bel, régisseur.
55 Kurhaus de Territet et Sanat. L'Abri	Territet	Docteur Lay.

ENVIRONS

Baugy sur Montreux (Alt. 416 m.)	
1 Hôtel Beau-Site et Pension Baugy	Félix Mermier.
Chailly sur Montreux (Alt. 492 m.)	
2 Hôtel Mont-Brillant	Edouard Ouillet.
3 Hôtel-Pension Mury	Mury
Chernex sur Montreux (Alt. 610 m.)	
4 Hôtel-Pension Dufour	H. Beyer.
Chamby sur Montreux (Alt. 740 m.)	
5 Grand-Hôtel des Narcisses (Fac. 1907)	E. A. von Gunten.
Mont-Fleuri sur Montreux (Alt. 800 m.)	
6 Hôtel Mont-Fleuri	M. F. Reim.
Val-Mont sur Mont-Fleuri	
7 Val-Mont	Mme Morin, dir.
8 La Colline	Mlle de Cossau
Glion sur Montreux (Alt. 700 m.)	
9 Hôtel du Mont Vendais	Dr Rietschmann.
10 Hôtel Glion	Kopfer frères.
11 Nouveau Park Hôtel	E. Gainer-Dufour.
12 Hôtel Bellevue et Belvédère	E. Bucher fils.
13 Hôtel-Pension des Alpes Vaudoises	C. Bruno.
14 Hôtel-Pension Mont-Fleuri	E. Gainer.
15 Hôtel-Pension de Glion	Mlle N. Kaysler.
16 Hôtel-Pension du Mont	Louis Gaillard
Les Avants sur Montreux (Alt. 800 m.)	
17 Grand Hôtel des Avants	Dufour frères.
18 Hôtel du Jaman	Adolfori Nicolet.
Caux sur Montreux. (Alt. 1100 m.)	
19 Grand Hôtel	H. Eujenstein, dir.
20 Grand Hôtel de Caux	Aeschlimann, dir.
Rochers de Naye sur Montreux (Alt. 2045 m.	
21 Grand Hôtel des Rochers de Naye	Georges Mamin.
Vevey (Alt. 372 m.)	
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29 Hôtel du Simplon	Ch. Schaffhauser
30 Hôtel-Pension du Château	C. Dérosiers.
Mont-Pèlerin sur Vevey (Alt. 800 m.)	
31 Grand Hôtel du Mont-Pèlerin	Gehrig, Niess & Cie.
32 Grand Hôtel du Belvédère	Ch. Chappuis.
33 Hôtel-Palace Hôtel	Ch. Schwarz.
34 Hôtel-Pension Alpes	Gaud-Gaussinier.
Jongny sur Vevey (Alt. 500 m.)	
35 Hôtel du Parc	J. A. Spaini.
St. Légier sur Vevey (Alt. 560 m.)	
36 Hôtel-Pension du Rac	Gertner-Kaupert.
Villeneuve (Alt. 380 m.	
37 Hôtel Byron	M. et Mme Fugner
Aigle-les-Bains	
38 Grand Hôtel	Niess & Cie
39 Hôtel Beau-Site	Mme Veuve Jolly.
Bex-les-Bains	
40 Bains et Hôtel des Salines Kurhaus	F. Kuepfer.
41 Grand Hôtel des Bains et Kurhaus	Paul Kohler.
42 Hôtel-Pension Villa des Bains	Ch. Bonard & Cie.
43 Hôtel-Pension Villa des Bains	F. La Soldat, dir.
44 Hôtel-Pension Dent du Midi	Ch. Hayn.
Leysin (sur Aigle) (Alt. 1450 m.)	
45 Sanatorium Grand Hôtel	Jos. A. Bossi.
46 Sanatorium du Chamossaire	F. Bonzli.
47 Sanatorium du Chamossaire	E. Bezggar.
Corbeyrier (sur Aigle) (Alt. 1100 m.)	
48 Hôtel Victoria	L. Despois.
Les Diablerets (par Aigle ou Gstaad). (Alt. 1248 m.)	
49 Grand Hôtel des Diablerets	Fritz Boehe.
Château d'Œx (Montreux-Oberland bernois)	
50 Grand Hôtel	Berthod frères.
51 Grand Hôtel-Pension Beau-Séjour	Carlo Chauvet.
52 Hôtel Berthod	Berthod frères.
Villars-sur-Ollon (Alt. 1275 m.)	
53 Grand Hôtel	Frauchwiller.
54 Grand Hôtel du Mouveran	Ch. Gouillard.
55 Hôtel-Pension Bellevue	Ch. Gouillard.
56 Hôtel du Parc	Famille Molly.
Chesières-sur-Ollon (Alt. 1275 m.)	
57 Grand Hôtel du Chamossaire	M. H. Amiguet.
Champéry (Valais) (Alt. 1052 m.	
58 Hôtel de Champéry	Paul Délage.
59 Pension du Châlet	Jules Decoppet.
Verossaz (Valais)	
60 Grand Hôtel des Gorges du Trient	Reuiller & Mottier.
Finnay (Vallée de Bagnes, Valais).	
61 Hôtel du Grand-Combin	M. Gaillard
Le Bouveret (Lac Léman).	
62 Grand Hôtel de l'Aiglon	F. Lachaise
Yverdon-les-Bains (Alt. 450 m.)	
63 Hôtel des Bains	N. Frossard, dir.
Les Rasses (sur Yverdon) (Alt. 1180 m.)	
64 Grand Hôtel des Rasses	Baiotti.
Montbarry (Broyère)	
65 Gd Hôtel Kurhaus et Hôtel des Bains Bettschen-Burlas.	
Vallée de Joux (Le Pont près Vallorbes)	
66 Grand Hôtel du Lac de Joux	Ch. Schlée, dir.
Lausanne	
67 Hôtel-Pension du Village Suisse	C. Pfluger.
Montana (sur Sierre, Valais) (Alt. 1550 m.)	
68 Sanatorium du Dr Stephani	E. Nastermed, gér.
Zweisimmen (Montreux-Oberland bernois)	
69 Hôtel-Buffet Gare et Terminus	H. Bühler.

Journal et liste des étrangers à Montreux, Vevey, dans la vallée du Rhône et les stations climatiques de la Suisse romande, 1906. Archives cantonales vaudoises.

I was extraordinarily lucky. My letter reached the archivist Gilles Jeanmonod, who proved to be not only an excellent professional, but also a man of rare kindness. “Initial research in various sources available at the Cantonal Archives of Vaud indicates that this person was probably Catherine Schischkoff, a Russian national born on 11 February 1900 and hospitalised at the Cery Asylum from 2 September 1935 to 1 May 1962. This woman belonged to a Russian refugee family settled in the canton of Vaud.” Attached to the letter was a photograph of the death notice of Catherine Schischkoff, published in the *Feuille d’Avis de Lausanne*, the predecessor of today’s *24 heures*.

The thread began to unwind, and Gilles Jeanmonod was able to continue disentangling this skein, more than a century old. A few days later, I received another message from him: “I shall continue, in a few lines, the brief history of the Schischkoff family, which settled in Switzerland as early as the 1910s. I do not know whether it was the state of health of one of the daughters, Hélène, that led to the family’s move to Switzerland before the Revolution, or the Revolution itself.”

Mademoiselle Catherine **Chichkoff**, à Glion ;
Mademoiselle Hélène **Chichkoff**, à Chailly sur Montreux ;
Monsieur et Madame Serge **Matvéef**, en Russie ;
Madame Hélène **Janowsky**, à Bruxelles ;
Madame Olga **Troyanoff** et famille, à Lausanne ;
ainsi que les familles parentes, alliées et amies,
ont la douleur de faire part du décès de

Monsieur

Léon Nicolaïevitch

CHICHKOFF

officier de l'armée impériale russe

leur frère, neveu, cousin et ami, qui s'est éteint à Lausanne le 14 avril 1979, dans sa 85e année.
L'office des défunts sera célébré en l'église russe de Vevey, le mercredi 18 avril, à 14 h. 45.
L'inhumation aura lieu à 16 h. 30 au cimetière du Bois-de-Vaux, à Lausanne.
Domicile mortuaire : chapelle de l'Hôpital cantonal, à Lausanne.
Domicile de la famille : 11, avenue de la Gare, 1003 Lausanne.
Cet avis tient lieu de lettre de faire part.

Death notice of Léon Shishkov, published in 24 heures on 17 April 1979.

As a result of our correspondence and Mr Jeanmonod's further research, the following picture emerged.

The Schischkoff family consisted of:

- the mother, Catherine Schischkoff, already mentioned in my first letter, born in Moscow on 21 November 1868 and deceased in Lausanne in 1953;
- Léon Shishkov, born in Moscow on 18 August 1894, naturalised Swiss in 1931, and deceased in Lausanne in April 1979;
- Catherine Schischkoff, born in Moscow on 11 February 1900, hospitalised at the Cery psychiatric hospital from 2 September 1935 to 1 May 1962, and the author of the notebook of writings and drawings dated 1938. She died in Lausanne on 30 January 1984;
- Hélène Schischkoff, born in Moscow on 10 March 1902, hospitalised at the Cery psychiatric clinic from 20 July to 4 December 1953 and from 24 February to 28 March 1960, and later at the Bellevue psychiatric hospital in Yverdon. She died in Montreux

on 24 April 1979.

None of the Schischkoff women had a professional occupation. The husband of Catherine senior, and the father of the three children, remained in Russia.

It was finally possible to establish the name and at least the dates of the author of the notebook presented in the Fondation Jan Michalski exhibition: Catherine Schischkoff (11 February 1900 – 30 January 1984). It is unlikely that much more can be discovered, since the circumstances surrounding the preservation of medical archives at the Cery psychiatric hospital led to only her sister Hélène's file being preserved.

The photographs of Hélène Schischkoff were taken on 21 July 1953.

It then emerged that Tikhon Troyanov, the most senior Russian-speaking lawyer in Geneva, had known Léon Shishkov. He confirmed that this family was indeed related to the very Admiral Shishkov whom Pushkin addresses in *Eugene Onegin*. He also shed some light on the family tragedy: according to his recollections, Catherine Schischkoff's husband, an officer in the Tsarist army, received permission after the Revolution to visit his wife and children in Lausanne, on his word of honour that he would return. Evidently not trusting an officer's word, the representatives of the new regime took two of his friends who remained in Russia hostage, just in case. Naturally, Shishkov returned – he had given his word, after all.

What happened afterwards, Tikhon Troyanov did not know. Having consulted Hélène Schischkoff's file from the Bellevue psychiatric hospital in Yverdon, where she stayed from 17 April to 1 May 1970 and from 3 May to 31 July 1970, Gilles Jeanmonod learned from the biographical note it contained that Hélène had barely known her father, "shot in Moscow in 1931 by the Bolsheviks". During the Revolution, "she took refuge in Switzerland with her mother and elder sister".

… The exhibition *Art Brut Writings* (*Écrits d'Art Brut*) runs at the Fondation Jan Michalski until 30 August 2026, so you still have time to visit it and take a close look at these strange works by unknown artists. I have the feeling that sad stories lie hidden behind each of them; one only has to pull gently on the thread…

Swiss museums
Fondation Jan Michalski
private suisse foundations

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