

Regards actuels sur la Figuration Narrative

May 17 — Oct 5, 2025 | Musée des Beaux-Arts de Dole, France

This exhibition is based on the collection of the Eur'Art Endowment Fund. Its president, Dominique Defontaines, acquired important works by artists of the Narrative Figuration movement over a period from 1964, the date of the first exhibition, 'Mythologies quotidiennes' (Everyday Mythologies), to 1977, the date of the second exhibition, both of which were presented at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. 'Narrative art is any visual work that refers to a figurative representation of duration, through its style and composition, without necessarily telling a story in the strict sense of the term,' wrote Gérald Gassiot-Talabot in 1967. What interested this collector was also the European dimension of this movement. In 1964, when the first exhibition was held, he noted that only ten of the 34 artists on display were French, with the others coming from 11 other European countries. But he explained his true commitment in his choices: 'The militant paintings that sought to create art in direct contact with the world seemed to me to be more like illustrations of ideas. I preferred those that touched my sensibility and appealed more to my imagination.' It is through this particular commitment that his collection, the result of personal choice, exudes a coherence that gives it its full artistic power.

The Musée des Beaux-Arts in Dole, the first stop on this travelling exhibition, is an institution that has actively contributed to the recognition of Narrative Figuration, both through its temporary exhibition policy and by enriching its collections with emblematic works from this essential artistic movement in France. Sébastien Sévery, its curator, writes: "In France, it was May 1968, the end of Gaullism, the break with the past declared by Giscard at the beginning of his term. Elsewhere in the world, it was the Vietnam War, the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, the student movements in Mexico, the Prague Spring, Pinochet's coup d'état, the death of Mao, Brezhnev replacing Khrushchev... a decade of major political changes and ruptures. Amidst aesthetic and intellectual diversity, if we had to identify one common element of the Narrative Figuration movement, it would be political engagement. "

This exhibition is co-produced by three museums in France in 2025-2026: the Fine Arts Museums of Dole, Chambéry and Hospice Saint-Roch in Issoudun, as well as the Espace Mirabeau in Aix-en-Provence (Bouches-du-Rhône Departmental Council). The works from the Eur'Art collection will thus interact, in each of the exhibitions, with a selection of works chosen by the curators from their own collections. At the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Dole, the choice naturally fell on a selection of paintings from the Narrative Figuration movement, which our institution has been collecting since the early 1980s.

La Fabrique Centre d'art, the organiser of these exhibitions, is publishing a reference book under the editorial direction of Bruno Bernard, with a preface by Jean-Luc Chalumeau, an art historian and critic who experienced the events relating to the history of Narrative Figuration at first hand. He writes: 'It should be noted here that the artists of Narrative Figuration did not fall into the trap of didacticism inspired by Bertolt Brecht. All deeply influenced by the "thought of '68", particularly the theories of Herbert Marcuse, they understood that the subversive potential of their works had to lie in their aesthetic dimension rather than in a more or less explicit discourse.' This book will also contain texts by all the actors and participants in the itinerary of this exhibition.

This return to the Narrative Figuration of the 1970s follows on from a series of major group exhibitions, notably the one organised by our institution and the Musée des Beaux-Arts d'Orléans in 2006, and even more so the one presented in 2008 at the Grand Palais. These exhibitions highlighted not only the major artists who brought it to prominence, but also the collective force that unites them. Unlike many artistic movements of the 20th century, it is not based on aesthetics, but more fundamentally on the relationship to the image as a vehicle for challenging consumerism and post-colonial global economic imperialism. This commitment remains as relevant as ever in today's society, which is undergoing profound upheavals and major crises.