

The “New School of Paris”

The term “New School of Paris” refers to a group of very diverse artists, and in its broadest sense, to any independent artist working in the French capital in the years around the Second World War, whether figurative or abstract.

For the sake of pertinence, art historians prefer to restrict the term to painters who genuinely upheld and popularised non-figurative tendencies during that period, such as Jean Bazaine, Alfred Manessier, Roger Bissière, Jean Le Moal, Édouard Pignon or Maurice Estève. These artists practiced a form of expression close to pure abstraction during the years when the Nazi regime wanted to banish modernist tendencies, which it described as degenerate art. During this difficult period, they expressed their resistance against a realistic propaganda style that also held sway in France. During the German occupation, under Vichy France, they inaugurated an exhibition entitled *Twenty Young Painters in the French Tradition* at the Galerie Braun in Paris on Saturday 10 May 1941. The event was the brainchild of the painter Jean Bazaine and the publisher André Lejard, and brought together artists such as Jean Bertholle, Jean Le Moal, Alfred Manessier, Gustave Singier, Pierre Tal Coat and Charles Walch.



Jean Bazaine, *The Man with the Glass of Wine*, 1946, oil on canvas

The expression “in the French tradition” was designed to express the participants’ nationalism, but also to reassure the Germans as to the content of the

exhibition, with its suggestion of figurative art in the tradition of the old masters.

Lejard had this to say about the choice of title: “It was simultaneously the truth and a confidence trick. People should remember that at that time, in their destructive fury, the Nazis were pursuing all forms of artistic expression linked to what they called “degenerate art”, precisely because of their affirmation of the free-dom and joy of creation. So something had to change”.

If the Germans understood the implicit attack, they did not stand in the way, as Jean Bazaine recalled: “I remember the private view quite well: two German officers arrived and walked to the centre of the gallery. They glanced around, looked at each other, and turned on their heels. That was all. It was at the time when the Germans still wanted to be nice.”

These non-figurative artists often came together to express the vitality of French art and modernist tendencies. Most of them contributed to the establishment of the Salon de Mai, which was founded in 1943 by the critic Gaston Diehl and held its first exhibition in 1945 under his presidency. They exhibited alongside figurative artists, with no other distinction than a pronounced taste for modernity and the refusal of any academic principles. Founded in 1946, the “Salon des Réalités Nouvelles” was more restrictive, being exclusively reserved for abstract artists.

In the 1950s, the term “New School of Paris” continued to refer to these exponents of French abstract tendencies. Certain gallerists, such as Raymond Nacenta (Galerie Charpentier) or Denise René, regularly presented their works in exhibitions that served as aesthetic manifestoes.