

Nicolas de Staël

July 23 - November 8, 2020

Paris, in the wake of the Second World War, was considered to be the world's capital of the arts. The artistic scene was championing an abstract language that was both geometric and gestural. In this context, a young Russian exile started to make a name for himself: Nicolas de Staël.

Born in Saint Petersburg in 1914, Staël studied in Belgium and moved to France in 1938, where he exhibited in Paris for the first time in 1944. At the time, he was producing a dark and austere abstract work. Gradually, light began to resurface in his paintings, as well as colour of almost incandescent intensity. From 1952 onwards, Staël returned to more figurative forms. However, he did not deny his plastic experiences from previous periods. This attempt at pictorial synthesis was driven by a quest for truth and the absolute, in a dialogue with other arts, such as poetry and music.

For the first time, the Centre Pompidou is bringing together in Málaga all the works by Nicolas de Staël that it keeps. Initiated during the artist's lifetime and owing to his generosity, this reference collection showcases the momentous artistic career of one of the greatest painters of the 20th century.



Ayuntamiento
de Málaga

AGENCIA PÚBLICA PARA LA GESTIÓN DE
LA CASA NATAL DE PABLO RUIZ PICASSO
Y OTROS EQUIPAMIENTOS MUSEÍSTICOS
Y CULTURALES

Centre
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1946 – 1948

To the debates opposing figuration and abstraction that raged within the Parisian post-war art scene, Nicolas de Staël responded with intensity and density. In his paintings from this period, unbalanced forms tangle and rise from the depths.

La Vie dure [The Hard Life], 1946, an iconic composition of the sort, reveals in its title the difficult conditions Staël was facing at the time. Living in destitution with no proper studio, the artist had just lost his partner, Jeannine Guillou.

As a counterpoint to his painting, Staël pursued drawing. Long lines traced in Indian ink cover almost the whole surface of the paper, where the white spaces left untouched create holes of light. From 1948 onwards, bundles of thin lines expand and intermingle in ink drawings of larger format.

" At heart, he told me, you can paint anything, anyhow. What matters is density, and density does not lie. "

Pierre Lecuire, *Journal des années Staël*,

April 29, 1947



La Vie dure [1946]

Oil on canvas, 142 × 161 cm

© Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI/Service de la documentation photographique du MNAM/Dist. RMN-GP

1949 – 1951



Composition, 1949

Oil on canvas, 162.5 × 114 cm

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In early 1949, Nicolas de Staël travelled to the Netherlands and Belgium where he was inspired by the landscapes and light-dark contrasts of the Dutch masters. Renouncing the previous years' complex forms, he turned to planes of light and dark, conferring a new depth to his paintings. Crossed by lines of force dividing up the space, these compositions are characterised by the use of thick layers of paint applied with a knife. Focussing on the notion of «in-between», Staël gave a sense of reverberation to the contours, allowing the shapes and colours to resonate.

From 1951 onwards, his pictorial matter was structured into a multitude of slabs spread out across the canvas like the pieces of a mosaic. His compositions were constructed like walls of blocks formed of a magma of paint.

" I do not differentiate between abstract and figurative painting. A painting should be both abstract and figurative. Abstract as a wall, figurative as a representation of a space. "

Nicolas de Staël, *Témoignages pour l'art abstrait*, 1952

1952 – 1953

In 1952, Staël focussed on plein air landscape painting, particularly in the South of France where he was struck by the violent Mediterranean light. Upon returning to his studio in Paris, he produced paintings with vivid, contrasting colours. His drawings of nudes testify to a similar exploration: Staël began to consistently use solid swathes of black ink that contrasted with the unpainted spaces, creating sharply-defined masses.

During this period of return to figuration, the artist, who was interested in contemporary music and jazz, was often drawn to the theme of music. His radiant colours echo lively sounds and rhythms, while more muted tones transpose subtler harmonies.

" I was rather distraught to begin with in this light of knowledge, doubtless the most complete that exists, where diamonds only shine for as long as a brief, dazzling, violent flash of water. The 'weathered blue' is absolutely marvellous, after a while the sea turns red, the sky yellow and the sands purple."

Nicolas de Staël, letter to René Char, June 23, 1952



Les Musiciens. Souvenir de Sidney Bechet, 1952-1953
Oil on canvas, 162 × 114 cm
© Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI/Georges Meguerditchian
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1954 – 1955



Coin d'atelier fond bleu, 1955

Oil on canvas, 195 × 114 cm

© Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI/Georges Meguerditchian/

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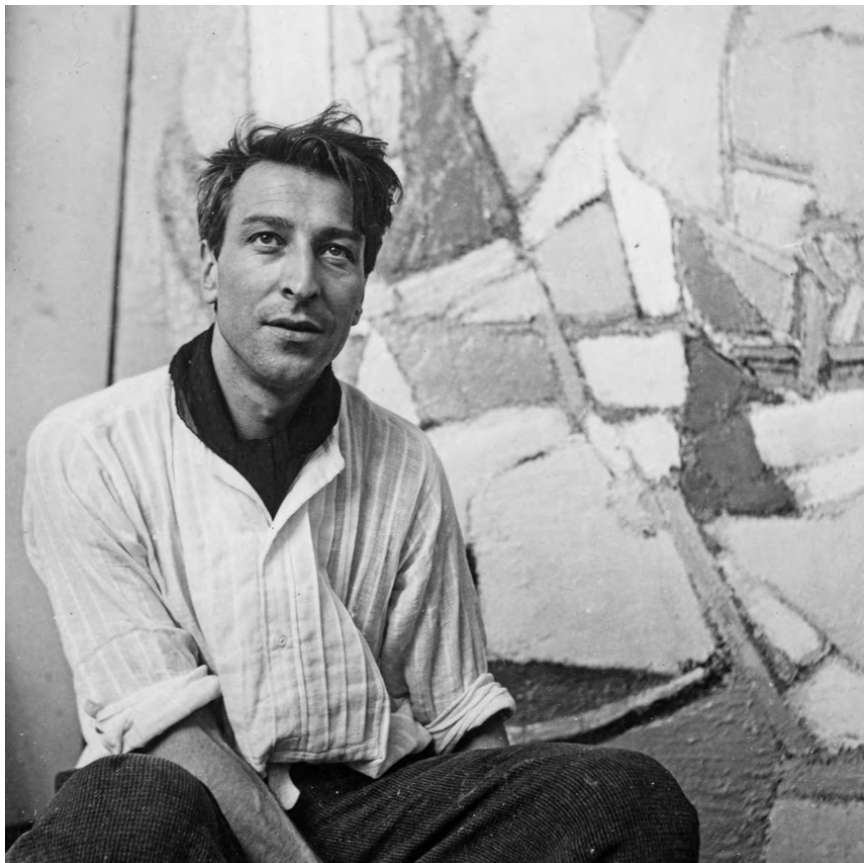
At the end of 1953, Staël spent some time in Italy, where he drew continuously, in particular among the ancient ruins in Sicily. Upon returning to Provence, he painted and drew landscapes demonstrating a formal economy similar to Matisse's drawings. This leanness coincided with the sense of solitude experienced by the painter, who set up his studio in Antibes on the Mediterranean coast in September 1954.

At this time, Staël began a new exploration of still life. Subtle variations of grey in large charcoal drawings transcribe the vibration of light and shadow. In his painting, he used more fluid material and afforded a greater role to transparency. A mysterious and melancholic atmosphere emanates from these works, as with his ghost-like nudes which were among the last of the works produced by the artist, who took his own life in March 1955.

" Don't torment yourself about me, you can kick back up from the bottom if the swell lets you, I stay here because I intend to go hopelessly to the end of my heartbreaks, to the point of tenderness. You have been a great help to me. I will go as far as deafness, as far as silence, and it will take time. I weep alone in front of the paintings, they become humanised gently, very gently, the wrong way round."

Nicolas de Staël, letter to Pierre Lecuire,

November 27, 1954



Nicolas de Staël in his studio on rue Gauguet, 1949
Archives Comité Nicolas de Staël

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CATALOGUE

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centrepompidou-malaga.eu

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from the exhibition, in an active and
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Visit in Spanish included in the price of
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at the reception. 8 people maximum.
Wednesday at 6:00 pm

Groups

From a group of 8 people. In Spanish,
English and French, by prior
reservation: [educacion.
centrepompidou@malaga.eu](mailto:educacion.centrepompidou@malaga.eu)

INFORMATIONS

OPENING HOURS

9.30 a.m. to 8.00 p.m., every day
Ticket offices close at 7:30 p.m.
The museum is closed on Tuesdays
(except holidays and days before
holidays), 1 January and 25 December

PRICES

Entry to temporary exhibitions:
€4, concessions: €2.50
Entry to permanent exhibitions:
€7, concessions: €4
Entry to permanent and temporary
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€9, concessions: €5.50

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