

Press Release
New Exhibition
Opens 20 February 2014

Alfred Pellan

The Wide-Awake Dreamer



Parc des Champs-de-Bataille
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Québec City, Wednesday 19 February 2014 □ As part of the redeployment of its collections in the new museum complex, the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec is pleased to devote a gallery to Alfred Pellan with the exposition *Alfred Pellan: The Wide-Awake Dreamer*. The Charles Baillairgé pavilion is now the go-to place for the four major artists in the history of Québec art included in the exhibition *Four Figures of Modern Art in Québec*: Jean Paul Lemieux, Alfred Pellan, Fernand Leduc and Jean-Paul Riopelle.

Throughout his career, Alfred Pellan endeavoured to build and maintain an independent body of work, outside established artistic groups, both in France, where he resided from 1926 to 1940, and in Canada, where he is seen as one of the leading lights of the country's cultural modernity. As singular as his art may be, it was nevertheless susceptible to certain modern and avant-garde influences. His work in Paris, for example, is imbued in part with a kind of pictorial abstraction that bears the marks of Cubism, and several of his works, including a few made in the latter half of the 1930s, contain elements that could well be described as Surrealist.

The exhibition *Alfred Pellan: The Wide-Awake Dreamer* is an opportunity to plunge into the artist's visual universe with a view to bringing out how the Surrealist influence on his work gradually manifested itself, to the point that it became undeniable and he laid full claim to it. Although Pellan never wished to belong officially to the Surrealist group, he remained sympathetic to the "state of poetry" which, in his eyes, this movement's essential quest portrayed. This selection of major works from the Musée's collection, alongside new acquisitions included in the bequest by Madeleine Poliseno Pelland and significant works borrowed from other collections, presents a chronological demonstration of the Surrealist inspiration running through Pellan's work, particularly from the 1940s to the 1980s. Although the subjects depicted, their stylistic treatment and the techniques used are clearly a part of this heritage, the originality of his work lies in his intuitive approach to Surrealism, at the same time as it does justice to his ceaseless thirst for creative freedom.

Additional highlights you won't want to miss: works on temporary loan, a mobile application and a new publication

In addition to the some 150 drawings, prints, paintings and sculptures brought together for this exhibition, two temporary loans will be sure to attract visitors' attention between now and the end of June: *Canada Est (Canada East)* and *Canada Ouest (Canada West)*, on special loan from the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development Canada. These two masterly frescos, created in 1942 and hanged for decades in the lobby of the Department's building in Ottawa, will be on view – for the first time in Québec – for just a few months in the Charles Baillaigé pavilion, near the gallery devoted to Alfred Pellan. Be sure to take advantage of this unique opportunity to see them up close!

In addition, a mobile application mobile, *Alfred Pellan: An Interactive Experience*, has been designed to let you experience Pellan's fantastic world, both at home and at the Musée. This free application has some unusual content, access to the archives, an interactive game and an art work that you can experience in augmented reality form.

Finally, a new publication, *Alfred Pellan: Le rêveur éveillé*, sumptuously illustrated and written by four Pellan specialists, takes a look at the most recent research into Pellan's art, drawing on his extraordinary studio archives and on every facet of his remarkable body of work.

The Four Figures of Modern Art in Québec exhibitions have received funding from the Ministère de la Culture et des Communications.

The Exhibition

Parisian Sojourn: The Discovery and Assimilation of the École de Paris

“In 1926 I left for Paris, where I discovered contemporary art; I was so taken with it that I simply started over from scratch. . . . I set out to discover modern art, ferreting about all over Paris, visiting exhibitions, seeing everything that might interest me.”

— Alfred Pellan

After his studies at the École des beaux-arts de Québec, Alfred Pellan, then only twenty years old, set out for Paris, where he assimilated in an eclectic and intuitive manner the aesthetic ideas of various avant-garde movements, including Cubism, Fauvism and Surrealism. Imbued with the stylistic influence of artists he admired, such as Pablo Picasso, Vincent van Gogh, Pierre Bonnard, Henri Matisse, Georges Braque, Paul Klee, Joan Miró and Fernand Léger, he created works which explored various kinds of pictorial abstraction.

The Encounter with Surrealism

“Having been deeply moved by Surrealism, I employed it in my work. I think it made a great contribution by helping to stimulate my creative imagination and by spurring me on to seek a new form of pictorial poetry.”

— Alfred Pellan

The bitter mood that took hold in Europe after the First World War prompted in the arts a need to redefine reality, to offer new models to replace the rationalism that had led the continent to the disasters through which it had just lived. In this context, Surrealism was like a gust of freedom, and the aesthetic renewal it proposed gained favour amongst numerous artists around the world.

Initially a literary movement, Surrealism was officially founded in 1924 with the publication of the first *Surrealist Manifesto* under the auspices of the French poet André Breton. This inaugural text set out some of the paths that would guide the movement’s activities until it splintered on the eve of the Second World War. Freeing the imagination from the grip of reason, reconciling the world of dreams with reality and seeing the world through the eyes of the mind and the unconscious were the cornerstones on which new poetic and pictorial experiments were built.

The Surrealists' focus on the imagination and the role some of them granted to chance as the starting point of artistic creation caught the attention of Pellán, who had a front-row seat in Paris from which to view the group's activities during its most flourishing years. Pellán's Parisian sojourn was thus a pivotal period for the blossoming of his work.

A Visual Poetry whose Source Lay in Literature

Among Pellán's first Surrealist adventures was creating illustrations for books of poetry. Surrealist poetry in Québec and France helped inspire his dreamlike universe, giving rise to an abundant body of graphic works. Some of these drawings later served as inspiration for large-format paintings which confirmed his attachment to the spirit of Surrealism. During this same period, Pellán also placed his art and his modern vision in the service of drama by designing sets and costumes for the theatre.

Surrealist Themes and Stylistic Elements

The Surrealism which began to permeate Alfred Pellán's work in the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s led him to overturn a few artistic taboos and upset a few artistic traditions. In some respects, his taste for eroticism appears to be a way of taking up an anti-academic position. "Circumstantial magic," references to dream states, the convergence of the real and the imaginary and the search for the "supreme point" where opposites correspond were some of the Surrealist elements that Pellán appears to explore in his work. He employed numerous stylistic strategies proper to Surrealism to obtain the "poetic uprooting" he was looking for, such as transparency, double or heterogeneous images, the breaking up of motifs and the confusion of spatial perspective.

Surrealist Techniques

Alfred Pellán was quite familiar with the variety of techniques that the Surrealists had refined to stimulate the imagination and encourage creation. In particular, these techniques called for chance to be brought into play to counter the predominance of external reality. Pellán also employed chance as the starting point for several works. His famous *Jardins (Gardens)* series, begun in the late 1950s, as well as several *Bestiaires (Bestiaries)*, were the direct result of such experiments with chance. The "exquisite corpse," collage, "paranoiac-critical activity" and

subverting the photographic image were other Surrealist techniques explored by Pellán throughout his career.

Fruit Bowl

Here Pellán, influenced by the Cubists' experiments, assembled on the same plane fruit, a dish, a table cloth and a fruit bowl. He used these elements, mere signs taken from reality, as the means to modulate a schematic representation. The forms and colours are united musically without breaking up the architecture of the work. Adding to the overall rhythm, the zigzagging and crisscrossing hatch marks and the play of clearly defined bright and dusky areas heightens the vibratory effect found on the surface of the painting.

Bestiaries

Pellán's animals can be found everywhere in his art: in drawings, prints, paintings and sculptures. Often springing from chance sources of inspiration, they sometimes take on the appearance of recognizable animals, but for the most part come straight out of his imagination. At times amusing and untroubling and at others threatening and even ferocious, these zoomorphic creatures take on various human features, creating a kind of theatre in which the human comedy plays out.

Mini-Bestiary

Although depictions of animals can be found in Pellán's work as early as the 1940s, it was in the early 1970s that he inaugurated his bestiary theme, in particular with the small sculptures that make up this astonishing series. Formed out of small stones onto which he grafted legs, horns and tails made out of cotton swabs or plaster, these little critters, painted in bright colours and decorated with whimsical motifs, undeniably bear the stylistic mark of their creator.

Shoes

The organizers of the exhibition *Souliers d'artistes (Artists' Shoes)*, held at the gallery of the Société des artistes professionnels du Québec in 1974, asked the group's members to send a pair of used shoes which reflected their personality. Pellán, quite taken with the idea, created twenty-seven different shoes. In his hands, shoes and skates acquired unexpected extensions such as a painter's brush, iron nails, a phallus, rubber suction cups and the blade of a sickle, turning the shoes into biting commentaries on our everyday lives. Ten pieces from this series were purchased by the

Bata Shoe Museum Foundation in Toronto in 1981. The others are part of the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec collection.

Satellites

A news report on television about the launching of satellites is at the root of this astonishing series from 1979. These mobile sculptures, designed to be hanged, are made up of an assemblage of unusual objects sprayed with silver paint. A vacuum-cleaner hose, a sink stopper, shells, a plastic banana and door handles are some of the articles that went into the making of these outer-space devices. Pellan had the habit of saving boxes of objects of every description, drawing on them when inspiration told him to. His 15 *Satellites* were set up to revolve permanently on the ceiling of his Sainte-Rose studio in Laval. There are being exhibited here for the first time.

Masks

An exhibition of costumes designed by Pellan for a staging of the Shakespeare play *Twelfth Night* in 1946, revived in 1968 by the Théâtre du Nouveau Monde, was presented at the Canadian Cultural Centre in Paris in 1971. For this occasion Pellan decided to recreate on plastic masks twenty-six of the original masks he had designed for the play. Most of these masks divide the face vertically in two, thereby evoking the dual personalities of the characters.

Pellan let himself be swept along by this “decorative game” and added forty-nine new faces to those he had previously created for the stage. These masks bear a wide variety of motifs with striking visual effects. Decorated with flowers, stars and diverse forms in dazzling colours, they refer both to the animal and vegetable kingdoms and to the superheroes of popular culture.

Mad Love (*Tribute to André Breton*)

L'Amour fou (*Mad Love*), whose title is a reference to the book by André Breton, synthesizes the supreme Surrealist experience which joins the real and the imaginary, poetry and life. Here Pellan has composed an obsessive vision of the object of this love. Placed head down, she becomes a muse, emerging from the poet's dream. This painting, drawing explicitly on Surrealism, is at once a kind of rallying cry and a contribution and tribute to the movement.

And the Sun Continues

For this work, Pellán took a painting created around 1938 and reworked it from top to bottom. In the first version, which we know from a photograph in the artist's archives, the motifs come closer together in the centre of the canvas. In transforming his composition, Pellán set himself the challenge of incorporating myriad depictions of women. In this new version, the forms overlap, connecting allegorical female creatures and fanciful plants with a network of symbols, gratings and geometrical figures.

Green Garden

The *Jardins (Gardens)* series consists of six paintings identified by a primary or secondary colour: *Blue, Red, Yellow, Mauve, Orange* and *Green Garden*. Each work depicts luxuriant and fantastic vegetation and is made from the same starting point, an accident on the surface of the canvas, from which he set about manipulating the paint and creating a play of textures and colours. With this new propensity for flora, Pellán confirmed his interest in thematic series, which would proliferate in later years, for example in his *Bestiaries (Bestiaries)* of the 1970s and 80s.

Ultraviolet Lemons

The impulse behind this work is mostly graphic in nature, in the action of drawing and the almost irrepressible movement that takes hold of the hand. Some areas of the painting have been retouched with fluorescent paint and become luminescent when the painting is seen under an ultraviolet light. Opening up to strange, dream-like associations, Pellán is closer here to the conscious elaboration of the irrational, lucidly induced, than to the liberating act of the Autonomists. As in the work of Borduas and his disciples, however, here he wishes to rid the viewer of any preconception in order to attain a level of perception heightened with new power.

The Spiral

The momentum and very title of this painting might suggest that its function is to fix movement. This mechanical conception can also be found, albeit in an ironic form, in some Dada and Futurist works. In this encomium to the plane curve, Pellán suggestively joins centrifugal forms and stunningly dynamic circulations. Caught in grip of the gyratory screens and gratings, supple planes of colour cancel out the effect of depth. "Kidney" shapes, derived from Picasso's vocabulary, act as fulcrums, unless they function to conceal hints of a central anthropomorphic icon.

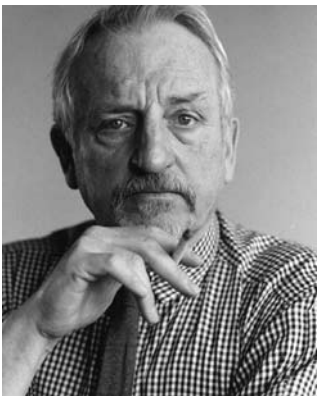
Venus and the Bull

In this work, the theme of Venus is used as a pretext to break up the female figure. The reference to mythology is conveyed through the filter of an immemorial collective imagination. Eroticism is depicted as a universal force and as a kind of energy inherent to human experience. Archetypal value attains the level of exploring the “inner model” described by André Breton in *Surrealism and Painting*. Demonstrating no allegiances, here Pellan plumbs human instinct and the labyrinths of our existence.

Sainte-Rose

In the early 1950s, the Pellans moved into an old “Canadian-style” home in Sainte-Rose. Pellan lived and painted there until his death in 1988, definitively establishing his studio there in 1955 following a second sojourn in Paris of a few years in length. This home was acquired by the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec in 2006 and was designated a historic site in 2014.

Here Pellan created a series of collages on masonry. By applying pieces of self-adhesive tile to the stone walls of his bathroom, veranda and kitchen chimney he transformed them into a proliferation of birds, fish and peculiar quadrupeds, creating a joyful domestic bestiary. This theme of the bestiary would, in many different forms, continue to inspire Pellan for the rest of his career.



Chronology

1906

Alfred Pelland is born on 16 May in Québec City. Around 1930, he removes the “d” from his family name.

1921

Pellan enrolls in the newly-opened École des beaux-arts de Québec on Saint-Joachim St. in the Saint-Jean-Baptiste neighbourhood.

1926

Alfred Pelland and Omer Parent are the first recipients of the province of Québec’s arts grants. The two friends set sail for Paris, where Pellan enters the École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts.

1940

Back home because of the Second World War, Pellan exhibits 161 works at the Musée de la province de Québec (today the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec). This exhibition, entitled *Alfred Pellan*, also mounted on a reduced scale at the Art Association of Montreal (today the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts), is the opportunity for Pellan to launch an initial attack against academicism in favour of a living art.

1944

Pellan is named the École des beaux-arts de Montréal's professor of painting. The following year, several of his students mount a noisy protest against the academicism that reigns there, demanding the departure of the school's director, Charles Maillard, who resigns a few months later.

1948

Fourteen artists band together around Pellan for the exhibition *Prisme d'yeux (Prism of Eyes)*, accompanied by a manifesto of the same title. The text, written by Jacques de Tonnacour and signed by all the artists, expresses Pellan's commitment to an independent art that is open to more than one artistic movement.

1949

On 23 July, Alfred Pellan marries Madeleine Polisenno, whom he met in the summer of 1947 at a social gathering at the home of Jacques de Tonnacour.

1950

The couple settles in Sainte-Rose in a nineteenth-century home near Mille Îles River. This house, where Pellan has his studio until his death, is today is the property of the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec.

1955

The Musée national d'art moderne de Paris presents *Pellan*, the first true large-scale retrospective exhibition of Pellan's work.

1969

The documentary film *About Pellan*, produced by the National Film Board of Canada, is launched at the opening of a solo exhibition at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal. The opening takes the form of a happening, with members of the public in costume and multi-coloured slides projected onto dancers dressed in white.

1972

The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and the Musée du Québec organize the joint exhibition *Pellan*, the first retrospective of his work on Canadian soil.

1984

Alfred Pellan receives the prestigious Paul-Émile Borduas award, the highest distinction in the visual arts in Québec.

1988

With Alfred Pellan's agreement, the Musée du Québec and the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal join forces to mount a major exhibition of his paintings. Pellan dies on 31 October this same year. The exhibition *Alfred Pellan, une rétrospective* is finally shown in Montréal and then Québec City in 1993.

2006

The Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec acquires the *Maison Alfred et Madeleine Pellan*.

2010

The Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec receives a bequest of Pellan's studio archives in keeping with the last wishes of Madeleine Polisen-Pelland, who passes away on 27 September. The Musée now holds the largest collection of Alfred Pellan's work.

Credits

The exhibition *Alfred Pellan: The Wide-Awake Dreamer* is an original production of the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec.

Project Director

Paul Bourassa

Graphic Design

Marie-France Grondin

Curator

Eve-Lyne Beaudry

Technical Coordinator

André Sylvain

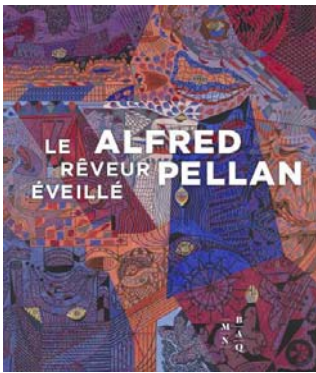
Design

Jean Hazel

The Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec is a government corporation which receives funding from the Ministère de la Culture et des Communications du Québec.

The publication

The new publication devoted to Pellan, *Alfred Pellan: Le rêveur éveillé*, brings out the special connections that Pellan, one of the leading lights of Québec modernity, maintained with Surrealism. Pellan’s dream-like universe was the source of an abundant body of graphic work, and his paintings explore freely several major Surrealist themes in an iconography in which human, animal and plant elements joyously intermingle. Pellan gives free rein to spontaneity and the unexpected, devising a number of controlled improvisational techniques which would be used in his famous series *Jardins* (*Gardens*) and in the fantastic *Bestiaires* (*Bestiaries*).



Written by four specialists, Eve-Lyne Beaudry, Paul Bourassa, Roxanne Martin and René Viau, this 144-page, abundantly illustrated volume presents the latest research into Pellan’s art, making use of his extraordinary studio archives and with reference to the many dimensions of his work throughout his prolific career. This book also focuses on his work in Paris, which demonstrates his intuitive assimilation of the European avant-garde; on his work in theatre, for which he created remarkable costumes and set designs; and on his sustained interest in the “decorative,” mural art and the effects of his artistic materials. This publication will be on sale at the Boutique du Musée and in bookstores throughout Québec at a cost of \$39.95.

A “Pellanian” Mobile Application Is Available

The MNBAQ is launching its application, which includes basic information about the Musée and novel content entitled *Alfred Pellan: An Interactive Experience*, a mobile application available free of charge beginning in February 2014 on the iOS and Android platforms. This application provides complementary content for the exhibition *Alfred Pellan: The Wide-Awake Dreamer*. Its novel content includes a selection of archival documents from the Fonds Madeleine et Alfred Pellan and a light-hearted activity which enables the user to dress up as one of the characters in the play *Twelfth Night*, whose costumes Pellan designed. At the Musée, the application will enable visitors to experience an augmented reality moment involving the work *Bestiaire 24^e* (*24th Bestiary*). A techno experience you want want to miss, at home or at the MNBAQ!

General Information

OPENING HOURS OF THE MUSÉE

Until 31 May 2014

Tuesday to Sunday,
10 a.m. to 5 p.m.
Wednesdays until 9:00 p.m.
Closed Mondays

1 June to

1 September 2014

Daily from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.
Wednesdays until 9:00 p.m.

ADMISSION

Adults: **\$18**
Seniors (65 years and over): **\$16**
18 to 30 years: **\$10**
13 to 17 years: **\$1**
12 years and under: **free**
Members: **free**
Wednesdays from 5:00 p.m.
to 9:00 p.m.: **half price**
Reduced rates for groups

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Page 1

Alfred Pellán, *L'Homme A grave (Man A Engraving)* around 1948. Gouache and ink on paper, 29.8 x 22.8 cm.
MNBAQ coll. Photo: MNBAQ, Idra Labrie © Estate of Alfred Pellán/SODRAC (2014)

Page 9

Portrait of Alfred Pellán by the photographer André Le Coz, 1968