

An abstract painting by Francis Donas, featuring a complex composition of overlapping, curved, and angular shapes in a rich palette of reds, blues, yellows, and greys. The forms suggest architectural elements or organic structures, with some areas appearing to have a textured, almost fabric-like quality. The overall effect is one of dynamic tension and layered depth.

KMSKA

DONAS, ARCHIPENKO & LA SECTION D'OR ENCHANTING MODERNISM

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ENCHANTING MODERNISM

Donas, Archipenko & La Section d'Or. Enchanting Modernism transports you to Paris and Nice, where Marthe Donas and Alexander Archipenko made art history together between 1916 and 1920. This rediscovered artist couple explored the boundaries of form and colour. This exhibition showcases their cross-pollination and the enchantingly colourful art between cubism and abstraction of their friends from La Section d'Or. Not a stand-alone revolution, but a polyphonic renewal, which they showcase together in the influential artistic cities of Europe.

Nine years following her solo exhibition at MSK Ghent (2016), this exhibition restores Donas to her rightful place: in the international context in which she flourished as a female artist, innovated, and left her mark on early modernism.



© Marthe Donas Foundation, Gent, 2025, Marthe Donas, *Stilleven*, inv.nr. 2948, foto: Hugo Maertens, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen – Collectie Vlaamse Gemeenschap

Marthe Donas wants only one thing: to paint. That is not an obvious dream in an Antwerp bourgeois family. So she takes a radical decision. Instead of accompanying her family to the Netherlands, she moves to Montparnasse in Paris in 1916, after a stopover in Dublin. However, World War I is raging. In the artistic hub of the West, she discovers a new world: that of Cubism. André Lhote teaches her how to render different perspectives simultaneously on a plane surface. He talks about the 'visual rhyming of forms', about rhythm and harmony as the building blocks of a painting. The KMSKA owns *Stilleven* (Still Life) from 1917, which Donas herself called her first successful Cubist work. It is a beautiful exhibition opener.



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A DEFINING ENCOUNTER

A shortage of funds causes Donas to move to Nice in 1917, to follow a wealthy lady to whom she gives drawing lessons. Many avant-garde artists had moved to the French seaside resort, such as Amedeo Modigliani. And Alexander Archipenko. The Ukrainian artist has by then already sparked a revolution in sculpture. He leaves open spaces in crucial places in his human figures, such as the torso and head, under the motto: a void is a volume. His sculptures combine concave and convex shapes, and above all movement. He brings colour back into sculpture, but his geometric shapes in polychrome wood and use of metal make the works seem to come straight from the future. With Modigliani he shares a sense of elegance. At the same time, Archipenko is a born networker and self-promoter who exhibits solo or in group, from Paris and Germany to New York. His work refers to Cubism, but also resonates with the Italian Futurists and Dada

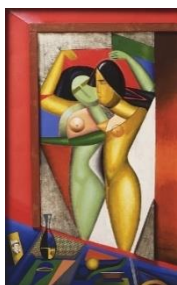
artists. In short, the inspired Archipenko is a jack of all trades, as evidenced by his dynamic masterpieces such as *The Gondolier* and *Walking Woman*.



© Marthe Donas Foundation, Gent, 2025, Ikeda Museum of 20th Century Art, Shizuoka

Archipenko's charisma appeals to Donas. Conversely, he must have noticed her talent in Nice. At his invitation, they share a studio space for a year. It must have been a magical period, far away from the war, devoted solely to experimentation. Together, they search for ways to reconcile form, volume, and colour. Archipenko develops his 'sculpto-paintings': cubist collages in 3D, constructed from relief, semi-relief, and painted surfaces. He challenges the viewer with a visual guessing game: what is physical form and what is painted illusion? You can experience it for yourself with the masterpiece *Two Women*, which has come from Belgrade. Donas both learns and innovates. In her still lifes, she incorporates lace, silk, sand, and sandpaper. With cylindrical shapes, shadows, and subtle colour gradients, she brings objects and figures to life. Her craftsmanship shines through as she translates the shiny metal of Archipenko's reliefs into pearlescent colours. She even finds an equivalent to Archipenko's beloved empty spaces. Like many modernists, they find common ground in the theme of dance, the ultimate way to depict figures in motion. An exceptionally large dancing figure by Donas, who usually worked on a small scale, has been brought over from Japan especially for the exhibition. The work, which was considered lost until 2016, resurfaced during the preparatory research for *Enchanting Modernism*.

In December 1919, Donas exhibits solo for the first time in Geneva. Under the pseudonym 'Tour d'Onasky' - soon shortened to 'Tour Donas' - Archipenko promotes her as his top student to his European network, which extends to Berlin and Italy. His recommendation is tantamount to a 'golden ticket' in the avant-garde world. By today's standards, it sounds odd: women exhibiting under a male or androgynous name because they are 'too good'. But in the context of the time, the pseudonym also offered opportunities. It gave Donas the space to develop her undeniable talent without encountering the prejudices that exist around female artists. A critic from *La Feuille* notes with surprise: "There is a charm in Tour Donas' work that we are not accustomed to seeing in painters of his (sic) school... a kind of gentle timidity that seems to reveal a feminine sensitivity." Her sensual colour palette of pink, grey, light green, and mother-of-pearl is striking. It would not be the last time that her jewel-like colours and undulating lines would be praised as subtly feminine within a predominantly male-led art scene.



© 2025 Estate of Alexander Archipenko / SABAM Belgium, 2025, Philadelphia Museum of Art: Gift of Christian Brinton, 1941-79-119

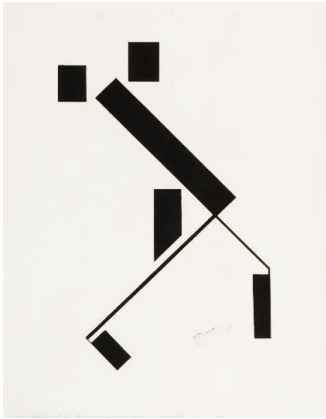
LA SECTION D'OR: A COSMOPOLITAN MODERNISM

Archipenko and Donas are working on the idea of reviving La Section d'Or after the war, based on the 1912 Paris exhibition that put Cubism on the map. In Paris, on March 2, 1920, Archipenko, Albert Gleizes, and Léopold Survage outline their plans. No stylistic constraints, but a shared commitment. To exhibit without the intervention of dealers, to collaborate across borders. Donas joins the committee for foreign exhibitions, alongside Theo van Doesburg, among others. The group organizes an international exhibition that travels to Paris, the Netherlands, Brussels, Geneva, and Rome. At these group exhibitions, Donas has no qualms about showing mostly her own work. She still participates as Tour Donas.



© SABAM Belgium, 2025, Dansmuseet, Stockholm

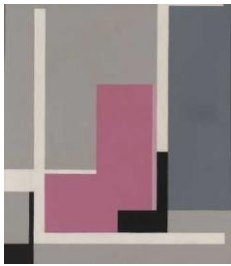
The list of participants reads like a who's who of the Parisian avant-garde, with many Slavic artists: from Louis Marcoussis, Fernand Léger, Serge Férat, and Piet Mondrian to Mikhail Larionov and František Kupka. Among them were a striking number of women: Natalia Goncharova, Marie Vassilieff, Jeanne Rij-Rousseau, Irène Lagut, Baroness Hélène d'Oettingen... and Donas. Guillaume Apollinaire had already noticed before the war: this group produces art that is less dogmatic, more cosmopolitan, more colourful – enchanting. *Enchanting Modernism* shows the diversity of this group, in which the pre-war, angular Cubism of Picasso and Braque has been cut into a diamond with many facets, each shining in its own direction. These facets reflect the precursors of Art Deco and Surrealism. All these nuances are featured in the exhibition: in paintings, drawings, sculptures, and in the sumptuous costumes that Larionov and Goncharova designed for Les Ballets Russes.



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DONAS ACROSS BORDERS

In Berlin, an unlikely venue so shortly after the war, Donas exhibits at Herwarth Walden's legendary Der Sturm gallery. This should have been paired with Archipenko's work, but he chooses the Russian pavilion at the Venice Biennale to show his new works from Nice. In the end, only Donas is featured on the cover of Der Sturm, exhibiting together with Nell Walden. She presents her 'shaped paintings', paintings in cut-out shapes. The subject determines the form, not the frame. Even Archipenko usually remains within the confines of his frames. Later on, the official premiere of this art form is attributed to László Peri, who was living in Berlin at the time, but Donas was just ahead of him. Would he have seen her work? In any case, Donas' name is established, abroad at least. In Belgium, hardly anyone knows of her. Nevertheless, she was the first Belgian artist to exhibit at Der Sturm after the war.



© Marthe Donas Foundation, Gent, 2025, Koninklijke Musea voor Schone Kunsten van België (Brussel), foto: J. Geleyns

Meanwhile, the relationship between Donas and Archipenko seems to have come to an end. Inspired by the work of other Section members such as Gleizes and Léger, she begins to organize her compositions in a more flat manner, without any illusion of depth, moving away from Archipenko's volumes. Donas always strives to move forward, to discover something new, and becomes increasingly fascinated by abstraction. The pleas of Van Doesburg and his De Stijl circles play a role in this. *Enchanting Modernism* is one of the rare occasions to bring work by Mondrian to the KMSKA. Archipenko, meanwhile, moves to Berlin and later marries the German sculptor Angelica Forster.

Along with the rest of La Section d'Or, Donas takes part in the *Exposition internationale d'art moderne* in Geneva in 1920, where fellow Belgians Jozef Peeters and René Magritte also represent their country. While the League of Nations is set up to keep the peace, 369 artists from 24 countries show that art can connect people across borders. Donas' entire career, from Montparnasse to Nice, from Cubism to abstraction, is a search for a universal visual language. A way to make connectedness tangible. An ambition that still resonates today.



© Succession René Magritte - SABAM Belgium, 2025, Collectie Mu.ZEE Oostende - Collectie Vlaamse Gemeenschap. Foto door Steven Decroos

MODERNIST AUTUMN AT KMSKA

2025 will see KMSKA combine Cubism, abstract art, and Surrealism into a Modernist autumn. With René Magritte's futuristic work in *Enchanting Modernism*, we build a bridge to our own René Magritte exhibition: *Magritte. La ligne de vie* (November 15, 2025 – February 22, 2026). When La Section d'Or makes its last public appearance as a group in 1925 – without any work by Donas – Surrealism has meanwhile taken the lead. Abstract art has not disappeared, but must temporarily step aside. In the fall of 2025, they become two sides of the same coin.

ARTIST BIOS



Marthe 'Tour' Donas (1885 – 1967) is a Belgian artist born in Antwerp. She has her big breakthrough around 1920. In this period, her work is exhibited internationally and she is at the forefront of the European avant-garde. She studies under the Cubist André Lhote and, from 1917 onwards, associates with artists such as Alexander Archipenko and Amedeo Modigliani in Nice. Thus she becomes an important link in the interwar networks of modernists. Her paintings from this period clearly lean towards Cubism, but are more colourful than the works of Picasso and Braque, and play subtly with depth and texture. One of her major inventions are her 'shaped paintings', which put her ahead of artists such as Peter Laszlo Peri, and the American minimalists. Later on, her works become more two-dimensional. This is probably inspired by her contacts with De Stijl. Although she loses popularity from the 1930s onwards, Donas' role as a pioneer of abstraction is undeniable.

Alexander Archipenko (1887 – 1964) is a Ukrainian-born American sculptor. Together with Constantin Brancusi, he is considered one of the most influential sculptors of the early twentieth century. Even before the war, he participates in the Salon des Indépendants and the Salon de la Section d'Or in Paris, where the Cubists cause scandal and make their name. An outstanding artist, teacher and networker, he acts as a link between the Cubists, the Italian Futurists, the Russian Constructivists and later also the Dutch De Stijl movement. His works similarly connect these different influences. They play with shapes and facets in the manner of the Cubists, but retain the Futurists' sense of movement. Archipenko pioneered negative space in sculpture. With this, he influences a subsequent generation of artists such as Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore.

