



## The CoBrA movement (1948 – 1951)



The word Cobra is derived from the French names of the cities of Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam. The artists who founded the CoBrA group during a major international conference held in Paris in 1948 came from these three European capitals. A curled snake became the symbol of the movement.

It was in the Paris café Notre Dame that Asger Jorn (from Copenhagen), Joseph Noiret and Christian Dotremont (from Brussels) and Constant, Corneille and Karel Appel (from Amsterdam) signed the manifesto 'La Cause était entendue' (The Case was Heard). This manifesto, drawn up by Dotremont, was a response to a statement by the French Surrealists entitled 'La Cause est entendue' (The Case is Heard). In it Dotremont makes it clear they are no longer in agreement with the French artists. The CoBrA painters wanted to break new ground, preferring to work spontaneously and with the emphasis more on fantastic imagery. In 1951 the CoBrA movement was officially disbanded, yet during its short existence CoBrA rejuvenated Dutch modern art.

## The CoBrA style

The CoBrA artists painted directly and spontaneously. Just like children, they wanted to work expressively without a preconceived plan, using their fantasy and much colour. They rebelled against the rules of the art academies and aimed at a form of art without constraint. They also explored working with all kinds of materials: the experimental was paramount. The Danish CoBrA artists were already experimenting well before the Second World War and Asger Jorn encouraged Constant Nieuwenhuys to do the same in the Netherlands. Subsequently, Constant, together with a band of artists that included Karel Appel and Corneille, set up the 'Dutch Experimental Group' on 16 July 1948 which became the CoBrA group on 8 November 1948.

## Typical subject matter

Animals like birds, cats and dogs were favourite subjects, while fantasy animals and creatures were also much loved themes (some creatures were half-human, half-beast). Masks caught the CoBrA artists' imagination and they further drew inspiration from mythology, children's drawings, folklore, prehistory, eastern calligraphy, primitive art (non-western art from places like Africa and Oceania)

and art by the mentally disabled. As Corneille once said, “We used everything and loved everything. We took from children’s drawings, folklore, drawings by the insane, negro masks...” The Danish CoBrA artists in particular were interested in mythology and some felt they even created new myths in their work. As a result they were sometimes known as myth creating artists. The Dutch artists frequently used children’s drawings as a direct source of inspiration. In Belgium, where the interest in writing was huge, several CoBrA artists studied eastern calligraphy. Dotremont and Alechinsky had a fascination for personal handwriting, seeing it as the most intimate and direct expression of a person’s psyche.

## Peinture-mots: word paintings

Poets and painters also created joint works, combining word and image in an unrestrained manner. These works were dubbed 'peinture-mots' or word paintings.

Two major collaborative projects in Denmark: the Bregneröd ‘congress’ and Erik Nyholm’s farmhouse

In the summer of 1949 CoBrA members and friends, some with their wives and children, came together for a month at a weekend house for Danish architecture students at Bregneröd, near Copenhagen. The Danes were in the majority, although there were a few artists there from France and Sweden. Dotremont was the only Belgian and no Dutch were present. The house was made available to Jorn on the understanding he would decorate the entire interior. Like one large family everyone lived and worked together making paintings, poems and sculptures. The walls of the house and many of the objects present were sacrificed as part of the process. During the exercise, the ideals of CoBrA were realised: a small, free society expressing itself without any special requirements or preconceived ideas. At the same time Jorn’s ideal of combining art and architecture was also achieved in a practical sense.

The Dutch artists Appel, Constant and Corneille were received at the farmhouse of Erik Nyholm, a ceramist and trout farmer, in late November 1949. Within the shortest possible time here, too, doors, walls and ceiling as well as household objects were covered with fantastic creatures. It formed an animated integral whole. The three Dutch painters wrote their names and date above a door, while Corneille wrote above the entrance to the house the words: 'Entrez, ici c'est vivre'. After they left Jorn also visited the farm and together with Nyholm painted a left-over blank wall in the kitchen. Fortunately Jorn recorded everything on film as these paintings, apart from Constant’s ceiling, have since disappeared.



## Anton Rooskens (1924 – 1976)



Anton Rooskens went to technical school in Venlo from 1924 to 1934 and after that he became an apprentice with a builder of instruments. In 1935 he took up his residence in Amsterdam. As a painter he was a self-educated man. In the works he made during the nineteen thirties, mainly landscapes, the influence of Van Gogh prevailed.

In 1945 Rooskens visited the exhibition “Kunst en Vrijheid”(Art and Freedom) at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam where he was confronted with African sculptures and sculptures of ancestors from New-Guinea. The simplified, straight shapes of this art can be found in his work of the early post-war period in which also the influence of cubism can be detected.

From 1946 Rooskens was regularly in touch with Appel, Corneille and Brands. In 1948 he met Constant. In that year he was the co-founder of the Nederlandse Experimentele Groep which merged with CoBrA later. Rooskens participated in the illustrious exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum in 1949. After that he immediately withdrew from the movement.

The connection with CoBrA turned out to be very stimulating for Rooskens. He developed a personal language of magic signs in penetrating black, yellow, ochre, blue and red and he painted compositions in which masks, shields and images of gods were entwined in a jumble of spontaneously painted areas of colour and lines which nevertheless form a certain balance.

In 1954 he painted, influenced by African art, in a geometric style for a short period. From 1956 he put, in a more and more dynamic manner, abstract signs on large canvasses on which black paint, put on in sturdy strokes, is of a prominent presence. In about 1965 the fantastical beings, reminiscent of the CoBrA period, emerged again. Until the time he died in 1976 his paintings were brighter again



## Lucebert (1927-1994)

Lucebert was born Lubertus Jacobus Swaanswijk on the 15th of September 1924 in the working-class quarter of “De Jordaan” in the heart of Amsterdam, Holland. When he was nearly two years old, his parents marriage broke up, leaving him and his two brothers to grow up in the custody of their father. At home Lubertus didn't find a good family atmosphere so he spent the days making drawings and inventing stories. In 1936 he went to secondary school where two teachers noticed his emerging talents. They stimulated the young boy to read literature and keep drawing, a stimulation which he didn't find among his family relatives. At school he met some good friends who shared his interest for culture, among them the later well-known poet Hans Andreus.



untitled / sin titulo  
drawing / dibujo  
29x21 cm 1974

Lucebert started drawing at a very young age and until the last days of his life he made several drawings with black Indian ink on a daily basis. We could say that drawing was the constant thread during his lifetime. Once he was able to buy oil paints and canvas, he started to paint with great dedication, aside from making aquarelles and gouaches. In the fifties he bought a camera and started to photograph, which he kept doing until the eighties. His photos are kept in the Nederlands Fotomuseum in Rotterdam. During his life, Lucebert made several murals – as an example, you can see a mural in the Letterkundig Museum in The Hague. Graphical techniques captured his interest at the beginning of the sixties when he explored etching, lithography and silk-screening. Etchings were, in his opinion, the most surprising technique, which he made until 1994. In his final years, Lucebert created ceramics during his stays in Berlin and several hundred unique specimens are the result of it.



untitled / sin titulo  
oil on canvas / óleo sobre tela  
90 x 70 cm 1993





## *I paint the way I laugh*



The Dutch painter Jan Nieuwenhuijs is probably the most unknown but the most mysterious artist of the European CoBrA movement. He was one of the early active founders of the Dutch 'Experimentele groep' that later became part of CoBrA. With this site we try to give some more insight in his work, his life and backgrounds.

Jan lived and worked his whole life in Amsterdam from 1922 until his death in 1986.

Around the age of 14 he and his two year older brother decided to become painters. From 1938 to 1941 he attended the 'Rijksnormaalschool' in Amsterdam. Later in the Second World War he also took lessons at the 'Rijksacademie' in Amsterdam. At the Rijksacademie he met Karel Appel and Corneille.

In the Second World War Jan painted almost only clowns, nudes and couples making love. Just after the war he started painting fantasy animals like aggressive cocks, cats and bulls.



He and his brother Constant had lots of arguments about his paintings. During the war Constant himself painted only, catholic scenes like piétas and Maria portraits or still life's and thought that Jan chose his subjects too lightly.

In 1948 Appel, Elburg, Kouwenaar, Wolvekamp, Corneille, Constant, Brands, Rooskens and Jan Nieuwenhuijs founded the 'experimentele groep' that a few months later became the European group CoBrA. Jan was in his paintings of this period influenced by dreams, children's drawings, the artistic expressions of mentally handicapped people and primitive art. Animals such as birds and cats play a leading role in most of his works, along with fantastic creatures and beings that are made up of a combination of human, animal and mechanical elements. A lot of the creatures balance on a rope or wear boats as a hat.

Jan was soon disappointed in the members of the CoBrA group, some of them were more interested in fame than being an activist, he couldn't stand the fighting that was going on between the members and so he left the group in the middle of 1949, some other members also left but they joined again, for the great exhibition in the Stedelijk Museum.

In 1964 he says in an interview; 'The group was not founded as an exposition group but as a group of activists. We wanted to put an effort into that, to fight against the softness in art at the time and using our imagination to change that. Regrettably I must ascertain that a lot of the Experimentalists of that day also became esthetics. Everything official stops to be combatant. I think that work of some of them look very dormant these days'

Jan went his own way, disillusioned, and concentrated only on his work. His paintings became more and more liberated and he experimented with different materials like fluorescent paint and everything he could get his hands on. Everything could become a painting.

In an interview from 1964 he says; 'I start with my material and my color. With that I express myself. From the material I come to my subject and that is maybe contrary to what painters did in earlier days. I paint the way I write, the way I laugh. That's why I paint differently all the time, because my moods change. That's the way I feel.'

'As a painter I don't want to paint a particular situation. I am not abstract, not really non-figurative. I try to be expressive and therefore I need certain images. Today I am in China, tomorrow in Paris, after tomorrow some other place. We are confronted every day with what happens in the world. You're living on a specific spot, but also in the whole world. It's maybe therefore that we become so ignorant and hard, because we experience too much. Hunger, war. that particular situation doesn't anymore

From the same interview; 'I wish, if they see my work later on, that they can see the twentieth century. The artist must give his time a suit. And it doesn't matter if he is an architect, poet or painter. In abstract painting I miss the beat of this time, the rudeness. We, the people of today we are living with the fear of an atom bomb. The abstracts are building only a superficial world for you.'