

*Wols: Retrospective* is curated by Toby Kamps with Dr. Ewald Rathke.

This exhibition is generously supported by the National Endowment for the Arts; Anne and Bill Stewart; Louisa Stude Sarofim; Nina and Michael Zilkha; Skadden, Arps; and the City of Houston.

#### PUBLIC PROGRAMS

##### Panel Discussion

Thursday, September 12, 2013, 6:00 p.m.

Following introductory remarks by Frankfurt-based scholar Dr. Ewald Rathke, Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art Toby Kamps is joined by art historians Patrycja de Bieberstein Ilgner, Archivist at the Karin and Uwe Hollweg Foundation, Bremen, Germany; and Katy Siegel, Professor of Art History at Hunter College, New York, and Chief Curator of the school's galleries, in a discussion of Wols's work.

#### BOOK

##### WOLS: Retrospective

Texts by Ewald Rathke, Toby Kamps, Patrycja de Bieberstein Ilgner, and Katy Siegel  
300 pp., 266 illus.  
Hardcover \$65  
Available at the Menil Bookstore

front cover:  
Wols, *It's All Over*, 1946–47. Oil, grattage, and tube marks on canvas, 31 7/8 x 31 7/8 inches (81 x 81 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston.  
Photo: Paul Hester

All works by Wols © 2013 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris

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# WOLS

## Retrospective

The Menil Collection  
September 13, 2013–January 12, 2014



Wols, *Selbstporträt (Self-Portrait)*, 1937 or 1938, modern print. Gelatin silver print, 3 1/2 x 2 3/4 inches (8.9 x 5.9 cm). Kupferstich-Kabinett, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden. Photo: Elke Estel/Hans-Peter Klut

*A tiny sheet of paper can contain the world.*  
—Wols<sup>1</sup>

During his short, star-crossed life, German artist Wols created a spectacular body of paintings, drawings, watercolors, gouaches, photographs, and engravings that flow freely and inventively between representation and abstraction. Raw, mysterious, and heedless of aesthetic niceties, Wols's ever-evolving images earned him a reputation as the prime progenitor of *art informel*, or "formless art," a term coined by critic Michel Tapié to describe new developments in nonobjective painting in Europe in the mid-twentieth century. Yet today he is woefully under-recognized, particularly in the United States, where his accomplishments and those of his like-minded French successors have been overshadowed by related experiments by Abstract Expressionists such as Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Mark Tobey. Wols was, however, one of Dominique de Menil's favorite artists, a figure she described as having a "total disregard of 'society,' 'rules,' 'law.' He was the absolute rebel who does not even care about rebellion."<sup>2</sup> Because of this passion, the Menil Collection possesses perhaps the most wide-ranging, if not the largest, public collection of the artist's works. So it is fitting that the museum has co-organized this exhibition, the first comprehensive retrospective of Wols's work in an American museum, introducing this inspiring artist to a new audience.

Born Alfred Otto Wolfgang Schulze to a prominent Berlin family on May 27, 1913, the artist spent his childhood in Dresden. Despite obvious intelligence, Wols failed to complete school, and in 1932, not long after the death of his father, with whom he had a contentious relationship, he moved to Paris in an attempt to break away from his bourgeois roots. Except for a brief stint in Spain, he remained in France until his untimely death in 1951. The story of Wols's dramatic transformation from sensitive, musically gifted German youth to eccentric, near-homeless Parisian artist is legendary. So too are accounts of his many adventures and misadventures during the tumult of wartime Europe: his marriage to the fiercely protective Romanian hat maker Gréty Dabija; his grueling incarceration as an expatriate at the outset of the war and subsequent moves across rural France; his late-night perambulations in liberated Paris; and his ever-worsening alcoholism, health, and poverty.

During his first years in Paris, Wols eked out a living as a photographer, making experimental cityscapes, portraits, and still lifes that dilate in original ways on Bauhaus and Surrealist ideas. By 1937, the same year he adopted his moniker after receiving a telegram that reduced his name to Wols, he had achieved some commercial success. These achievements turned out to be short lived, however, as the artist was incarcerated for fourteen months for being a citizen of a hostile nation immediately after the start of World War II. Under the difficult conditions of the French detainment camps, necessity dictated that he switch his primary mode of expression to works on paper.



Wols, *Untitled (Chicken and egg)*, 1938 or 1939, printed 1976. Gelatin silver print, 8 3/4 x 5 1/2 inches (22.2 x 14.8 cm). The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles



Wols, *Untitled*, 1942–43. Ink and watercolor on paper, 7¾ x 5 inches (19.9 x 12.7 cm). Karin und Uwe Hollweg Stiftung, Bremen, Germany. Photo: Joachim Fliegner, Bremen

Wols's earliest surviving drawings and paintings, mostly in watercolor and gouache, were inspired by the Surrealists. In them, one sees elements of Yves Tanguy's biomorphic landscapes, Giorgio de Chirico's metaphysical cityscapes, Andre Masson's dancing lines, and Max Ernst's Janus heads.<sup>3</sup> For these intimately scaled works, Wols did not start with preconceived compositions. Instead, his images began with a few marks and then developed into complex, self-contained visual universes, often including fantastical animals, figures, sailing ships, and hive-like cityscapes.

Tracing the ongoing dance between representation and abstraction running through Wols's works on paper, one sees an artist aligning his processes ever more with the forces of nature—both generative and destructive. As Wols recounted in an interview with the American writer Ione Robinson shortly after the war, his aim was to reach beyond superficial appearances to access deeper truths. Robinson recounts, "Pointing to a deep crack in the sidewalk, Wols laughed as he said:

That crack in the sidewalk is one of my drawings. That crack is a living thing. It will grow, change every day like a flower. It has been made by something that none of us really understands, the incredible force in nature. That crack is very beautiful because it was created by the only reality that is reality, a force that is beyond you and me."<sup>4</sup>

In 1946 and 1947, Wols made the first of two groups of approximately forty oil paintings. Previously, the artist had dismissed the medium, saying, "The arm and forearm movements in oil painting are so ambitious, like gymnastics. That's not for me."<sup>5</sup> But when his dealer gave him paint and canvases, he did not hesitate, tackling the challenge in what his wife described as a "frenetic furor of creativity."<sup>6</sup> The resulting paintings are abstract, with heavy impasto and tentacle-like drips emanating from a central mass, suggesting otherworldly flowers or violent eruptions.

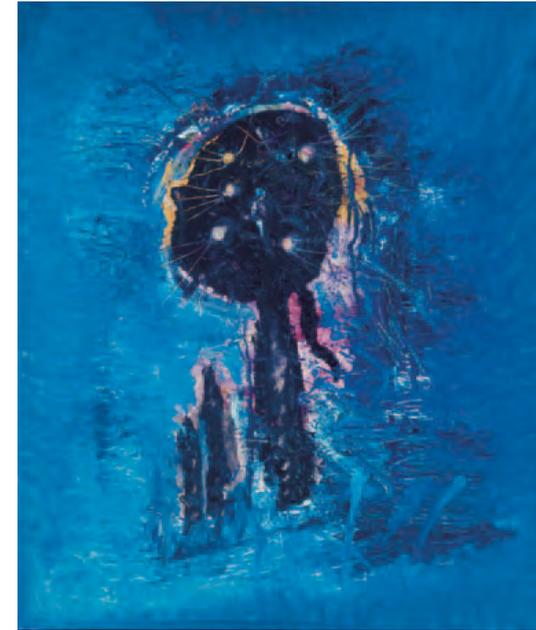
When Wols's first canvases were exhibited at Galerie Drouin in Paris in May 1947, they were a critical success. The influential painter and writer Georges Mathieu was ebullient:

Forty masterpieces! Each more shattering, more thrilling, more wounding than the others: a great event, surely the most important since Van Gogh. I walked out of the exhibition utterly shattered. Wols has destroyed everything. After Wols everything has to be done over from scratch. . . .<sup>7</sup>

In Europe, as in the United States, the late 1940s saw a strong desire for a fresh cultural start after the terrors of World War II. In painting, conditions on both continents were right for new forms of gestural abstraction—ones that accounted for the turmoil of the time and a new, existentialist understanding of the individual. In Paris, it was exemplified by Wols, and within a few years the term *art informel* and the names of the artists associated with it, including Jean Dubuffet, Pierre Soulages, and Georges Mathieu, would become part of common art-world parlance in Europe.



Wols, *Untitled*, 1944. Ink and watercolor on paper, 6¾ x 4¾ inches (15.8 x 10.4 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston. Photo: Paul Hester



Wols, *Le fantôme bleu* (*Blue Phantom*), 1951. Oil, grattage, tube marks, and fingerprints on canvas, 28¾ x 23¾ inches (73 x 60 cm). Museum Ludwig, Cologne. Photo: Rheinisches Bildarchiv, Cologne

Seen against the backdrop of growing Cold War anxiety in Europe, it is no wonder that works by Wols seemed such powerful emblems of a zeitgeist. For example, the Menil Collection's painting *It's All Over*, 1946–47 (cover), with its corkscrewing dynamism, resembles nothing so much as a detonating bomb. Wols, however, whose health was failing by the time he started working on canvas, denied that his images were nihilistic, saying, "In spite of misery, poverty and the fear of becoming blind one day, I love life."<sup>8</sup> The centripetal compositions and infolding forms so common in his works are in keeping with the philosophy of an artist who prized not self-assertion but a Taoist-inspired passive acceptance he expressed in one of his many aphorisms: "Not to do but to be and to believe."<sup>9</sup>

Wols's second round of oil paintings, made between 1949 and 1951, are generally larger, more "arm-driven," and more gestural. They also employ higher-keyed colors, especially a vivid blue, and more vigorous brushwork. Centralized forms are still prominent and are given new emphasis, solidity, and occasionally a totemic quality through thick impastos, wrinkling skins of dried paint, or expressive, calligraphic brushwork and *grattage*, scratching away paint with the brush handle. Crackling with confidence and energy, they evoke bolts of lightning, ghostly apparitions, and prismatic windmills or sailing ships.

Wols died of food poisoning on September 1, 1951. Although his fame continued to increase throughout the 1950s, the appearance of

works of questionable authenticity from his estate and shifts in taste to cooler Pop and minimalist modes in the 1960s left the artist and the movement he inspired on art history's sidelines.

Wols was an explorer, a consummate artist's artist who followed an independent vision to carve an inspirational new path. He transformed two opposing currents in art—the psychological rawness accessed by Surrealism and the painterly investigations promulgated by abstract artists—into a new language partaking of both.

But as much as Wols's work points to new ways forward, it is also an inward art. As his friend and writer Henri-Pierre Roché recounted, "Before he started a picture, he would close his eyes and wait. What he was going to paint, he used to say, accumulated gradually under his right eyelid."<sup>10</sup> At great cost, Wols worked to make himself as susceptible to the entire range of forces shaping consciousness and the world. Perhaps the last word on Wols's oeuvre, alternately agile and playful or crabbed and hermetic, belongs to the artist himself. His goal, as he alluded in an undated aphorism, was not to illustrate a primal life force but to conjure it on his own terms:

The image may be related to nature as a Bach fugue is to Christ in which case not a second copy but an analogous creation.<sup>11</sup>

*Text adapted from Toby Kamps's essay in the accompanying publication*

#### Notes

1. Wols, in *Wols: Die Aphorismen*, ed. Hans-Joachim Petersen (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 2010), 32, translation by the author.
2. Dominique de Menil, "About a Wols Exhibition," January 22, 1995, Menil Archives, The Menil Collection, Houston.
3. For an excellent analysis of early inspirations for Wols's drawings, see Ewald Rathke, "Zur Kunst von Wols," in *Wols: Bilder, Aquarelle, Zeichnungen, Photographien, Druckgraphik* (Bern: Benteli Verlag 1989), 13–42.
4. Wols, quoted in Ione Robinson, "Talks with Wols," in *Modern Art Yesterday and Today: An Anthology of Writings on Modern Art from L'Oeil, The European Art Magazine*, ed. Georges and Rosamond Bernier, The Selective Eye 4 (New York: Reynal, 1960), 113.
5. Henri-Pierre Roché, "Wols as I Remember Him," in *Wols: Watercolors, Drawings, Writings*, ed. Werner Haftmann (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1965), 45.
6. August Kaiser, "Juli 1946 bis August 1951: Der Maler Wols," in *Wols: Bilder*, 258.
7. Mathieu, quoted in Werner Haftmann, "Wols, His Life and Work," in *Wols: Watercolors*, 27.
8. Wols, quoted in Robinson, "Talks with Wols," 113.
9. Wols, "Aphorisms," in *Wols: Watercolors*, 51.
10. Roché, "Wols as I Remember Him," 46.
11. Wols, "Aphorisms," 53.