

pet songbird in a cage, Zeus in the form of an eagle swooping down to abduct Ganymede, or otherworldly attendants on the shoulders of the departed in an Egyptian funerary portrait, images of birds underscore the complexity of humankind's connection to the natural world and the spiritual aspiration found in many cultures to transcend an earthly reality.

*Paul R. Davis, Curator of Collections*

#### PUBLIC PROGRAMS

##### Public Opening Reception

Friday, November 15, 2019  
7:00–8:00 p.m.

##### On Art and Birds: Artist Joseph Havel in Conversation with Curator of Collections Paul R. Davis

Thursday, January 9, 2020  
7:00–8:00 p.m.

##### Bird Ambassadors Close-Up at the Menil Collection Presented in collaboration with the Houston Zoo

Saturday, March 14, 2020  
3:00–4:00 p.m.

Major Funding for the public programs at the Menil Collection  
is provided by The Anchorage Foundation of Texas.

*Menil members enjoy additional events.*

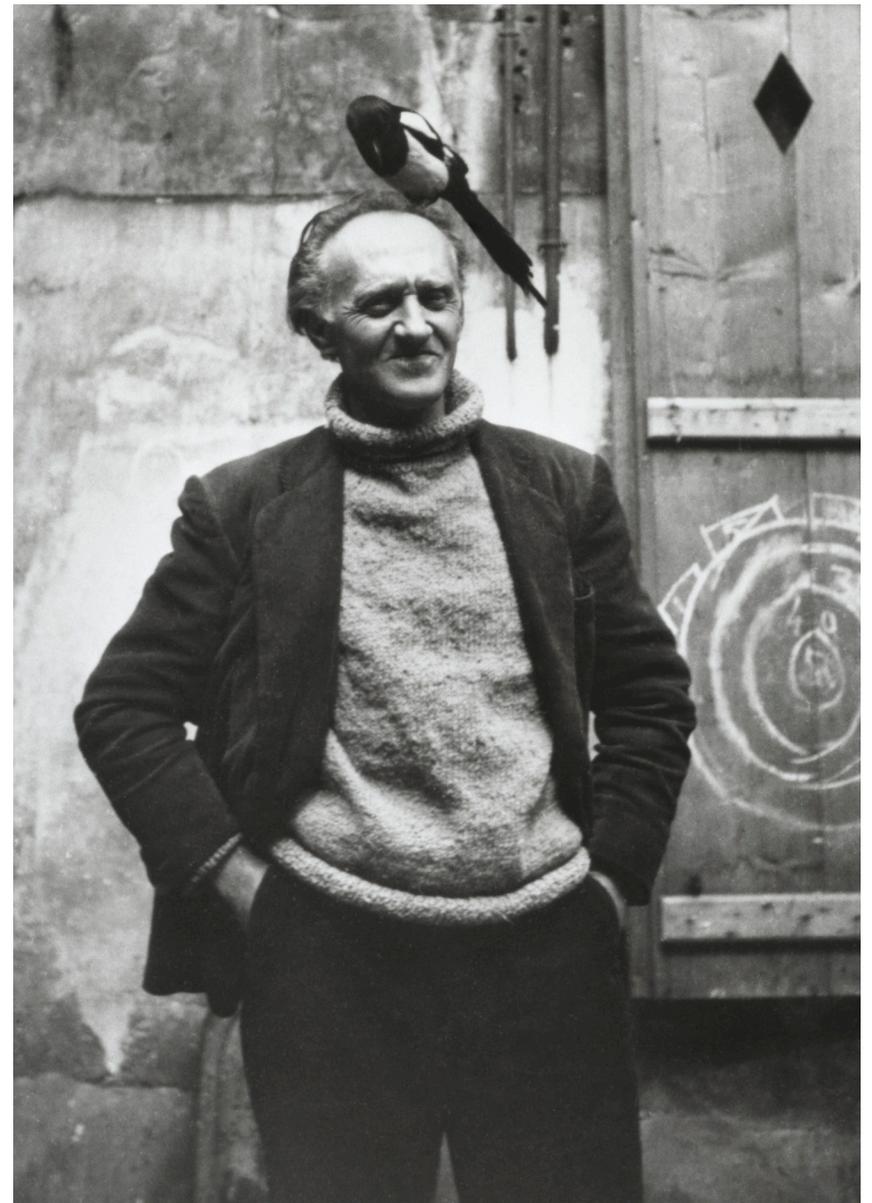
*Visit the museum or [menil.org](http://menil.org) to join or for more information.*

FRONT Victor Brauner with his magpie outside his studio, 2 bis rue Perrel, Paris, 1946.  
Menil Collection Archives. Fonds Victor Brauner, Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Musée  
national d'art moderne / Centre de création industrielle, Centre Pompidou, Paris

INSIDE FIG. 1 Oval Stone Block with Relief Carving of Male Figure with Bird's Head,  
Carrying Egg, Easter Island (Rapa Nui). Collection of the British Museum

COLLECTION CLOSE-UP

# OF HEAVEN & EARTH



The Menil Collection

November 15, 2019–March 15, 2020

A thematic exploration of the Menil's permanent collection, *Of Heaven and Earth* examines the representation of birds in the history of art since the third millennium BCE. It highlights these creatures' roles in the natural world and as prophetic agents and mediators between the terrestrial and the divine. With their striking beauty, melodic song, and gift of flight, birds arguably embody Dominique de Menil's conviction that the experience of art can be transcendent, a mythological "marriage of heaven and earth."

Birds and hybrid avian creatures are central to many works by the surrealist artists with whom the museum's founders were close. The exhibition begins with René Magritte's *The Healer (Le thérapeute)*, 1967, an enigmatic figure whose torso is an open birdcage containing two pigeons. Though free to fly away, both appear powerless to free themselves from the reality of the cage. Loplop or "Superior of Birds" was one of German surrealist Max Ernst's dominant alter egos and part of his mythic biography in which he was born from an egg. Part-human, part-bird, the Loplop persona fully emerged in the late 1920s after Ernst's military service during World War I; however, this identity was a collage with multiple origins. In German folklore, birds are synonymous with unrestrained freedom but also with the nonconformist, revolutionary individuality championed by the artists of surrealism. Loplop also derives from the artist's fascination with the cultures of the Pacific Islands and the Pacific Northwest. Ernst was particularly enamored with popular European accounts of Easter Island (Rapa Nui) and the ceremonial competitions there that determined the ruler, *tangata manu* or "birdman," who was considered to be the physical manifestation of the creator god Makemake. Ernst's painting *Inside the Sight: The Egg (A l'intérieur de la vue: l'oeuf)*, 1929, borrows from the many petroglyphs depicting birds found on the island (as illustrated in fig. 1).



In the wall case, several personal and religious objects illustrate iconographies of birds from the ancient Mediterranean, Africa, and Pacific Islands. A Late Period Egyptian bronze fragment of a bird's head was probably part of a shrine sculpture depicting the falcon god Horus, who was

FIG. 1

associated with the sky and kingship. John de Menil later remembered this fragment, purchased in 1931, as the first object that he and Dominique acquired together. In the ancient Mediterranean, birds were intermediaries for divine beings and could portend the unpredictability of life and the natural world—the caprice of the gods. The Greek word for bird can also mean omen, and ancient poets and chroniclers frequently used these meanings interchangeably. Bronze and stone objects from the Cyclades, Greece, and the eastern Mediterranean depict birds or waterfowl. They were probably worn as protective amulets or deposited at shrines to petition the favor of the gods.

Many West African cultures associate bird imagery with divination, skillful oration, and leadership. A ceremonial instrument that terminates in a hornbill-beaked bird, possibly an ibis, signifies the power of a divine ruler to overcome his defeat in war foreseen by the "bird of prophecy" (*ahianmwēn-oro*). A flock of birds on a small brass weight used for measuring gold powder in the Akan-speaking regions of Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire references proverbs extolling virtuous leadership and the importance of community. Sharpened and engraved femur bones of the cassowary—a large, flightless and aggressively territorial bird—come from the Sepik River region of Papua New Guinea. Made by men, they are daggers used for hunting and fighting or lime-powder spatulas used in the consumption of betel nut, a caffeine-like stimulant. Both types of objects are highly personalized attributes of one's masculinity or social status.

One of the most historically significant works on view, a yellow and red cloak (*ahu'ula*) from Hawai'i, exemplifies the feathered emblems and sacred powers of Polynesian leadership. It is imbued with *mana*, a socio-spiritual energy animating all life. Dating from the early 19th century, this *ahu'ula* reportedly belonged to Kamehameha III (1814–1854), who presented it to British Consul William Miller (1795–1861) as a diplomatic gift. It combines the red feathers of the 'iwi and the yellow feathers of the 'ō'ō, both now extinct. Displayed nearby are two types of Māori "treasure boxes" (*wakahuia* and *papahou*) for the storage of items owned by high-ranking individuals, such as the prized black feathers of the *huia* bird used as hair or body ornaments.

The images of birds selected for *Of Heaven and Earth* represent only a small spectrum of the avian-related works in the museum's permanent collection. John and Dominique de Menil collected a vast number of them, revealing an intriguing facet of their collecting interests. Whether a magpie on the head of artist Victor Brauner (on the cover), a mechanized