



## Martin Schmidt Experiment und Vorstellungskraft – Max Ernsts hintergründiges Spiel mit unseren Erwartungen

Taking the fascination as his starting point that the changing reflections of the sun and moon on the ocean's surface exert on the viewer, Max Ernst devoted himself to the phenomenon of reflection in a multiplicity of ways, using colour, light, and texture in varying degrees of predominance. Our painting *Effet de soleil reflété dans l'eau* forms part of a series of maritime images by the artist dating from the late 1920s. In this case, Ernst used a technique which he had discovered in 1925 – or perhaps it had discovered him. He described the event in his autobiographical notebook, "He spends the vacation at the seaside in Brittany. There he has an epiphany while staring at the wooden floor. The frottage technique is found." The process involves placing a sheet of paper over a structured texture and then rubbing hard so as to make the underlying texture visible on the paper's surface. Ernst used the method to create his epochal *Histoire naturelle* series. That same year, the artist also applied it on canvas, and grattage was born. It was a technique that Max Ernst would use to prominent creative effect in many paintings, and also plays a salient role in the lower half of our painting.

The picture's clear division into two sections makes us think of a seascape. Underneath a grey sky, which transitions to soft blue in its higher reaches and culminates in a dark sun, the lower section is dominated by a luminous, dark-orange surface, in the centre of which rests an even darker large disc with radiant edges. It was grattage that enabled Max Ernst to create the modulations on this surface. After laying the canvas on top of a textured substratum, a vivid relief of the underlying texture is created by partially scraping off several of the layers of colour applied onto the canvas surface. This teases our visual perception, since we interpret the big, glowing disc in the lower half of the picture as the sun and are thus tempted to rotate the image. Ernst is cleverly toying with our habitual way of seeing by steering our visual expectations into a specific direction, only to call them into question in the end. This means the painting remains – just like the other ones in the same series – dynamically suspended between the realms of depiction and abstraction. The crescent shape drawn with the teeth of a comb across the grey plane of the sky serves to confuse us even more, since it introduces a geometric element into the composition that clashes with the landscape we think we are seeing. The artist is playing on two levels: He creates a strange horizon that fails to cancel the image's two-dimensionality while also shrewdly exploiting our habit of perceiving of anything arranged above and below a line as open expanse. Such shifting ambiguities are a hallmark of many of Ernst's images, and the title of our work confirms that an associative effect is consciously intended.

All of which makes this painting a prime example of the penchant for experimentation that is so typical for Max Ernst. It highlights his receptivity to the numberless textures of the visible world, which he transposes into his art through novel techniques like grattage. Which is not to say that he ever used these diverse textures and painting methods in his images as ends in and of themselves. On the contrary, they were always intended to serve an idea that lay outside the attractiveness of the material itself. In essence, Max Ernst's visual creativity was invariably focused on an intensive exploration of a wide range of artistic and artisanal processes, with a view towards boosting the power of imagination of both artist and viewer. By trusting in the poetic potential of what he found at hand, which "merely" needed to be turned into a picture, Ernst left us with a non-dogmatic oeuvre that stands wholly apart in the history of 20th century art.

# 3<sup>N</sup> Max Ernst

Brühl 1891 – 1976 Paris

“Effet de soleil reflété dans l'eau”. 1927/28

Oil on canvas. 65 × 54 cm (25 5/8 × 21 1/4 in.). Signed (incised into the wet paint) lower right: max ernst. On the stretcher a label of Galerie Richard L. Feigen, New York.

Not in the catalogue raisonné by Spies/Metken.

Accompanied by a confirmation by Prof. Dr. Werner Spies, undated (in copy) and a certificate by Dr. Jürgen Pech dated 10 April 2016. The painting has the work number 97A and will be included in the addendum of the catalogue raisonné of works by Max Ernst, edited by Werner Spies, Sigrid Metken and Jürgen Pech (in preparation). [3069]

## Provenance

René Gaffé, Cagnes-sur-Mer / Jean Cooken, received approx. 1937 from Gaffé as a gift / Pierre H.J. Cooken, Amstelveen / Richard L. Feigen & Co, New York / Galerie Daniel Malingue, Paris (1989) / Waddington Galleries, London / Private Collection, Germany/Switzerland (acquired 1994 at Waddington Galleries, thence by descent to the present owner)

EUR 300,000–500,000

USD 349,000–581,000

## Exhibition

Aspects de l'Art Moderne en France. Paris, Galerie Daniel Malingue, 1989, cat. no. 20, w. ill.

## Literature and illustration

Auction catalogue: Impressionist and Modern Paintings and Sculpture. London, Christie's, 21.3.1983, cat. no. 34

- An associative game with viewers' habits of seeing and experiencing
- A prime example of Max Ernst's penchant for experimenting with various artistic techniques
- From the artists' famous series of sea paintings

The artist plays with our visual expectations by guiding them in a particular direction and then subverting them.

