

Thalassa!
Thalassa!

Imagery of
the Sea

4.10.2024–
12.1.2025

Exhibition
Guide

ENNASUAL
STRA-XAEB SED
LANONTAC EÉSUS

Existing at the point where art history and the history of culture meet, the exhibition probes our relationship to the sea as that connection has taken shape in figurative art from the 19th century down to the present. In light of humans' reworking and reordering of the shoreline, in keeping with the development of navigation and the advances made in geology and zoology, how we see the oceans and their denizens both real and imaginary has indeed experienced an endless sea change.

Many technical inventions have accompanied these transformations, aquariums, diving bells, hard-hat diving suits, and underwater vehicles, to name just a few. All of these devices – to which we would have to add the microscope, photography, and film – have helped to redefine the visible and the invisible, making our point of view much more fluid, sweeping away our landmarks, and raising unknown creatures from the deep. How have artists incorporated or anticipated the series of upheavals that have redrawn the mental grid humans use to comprehend an immense liquid territory that extends from the water's edge to the ocean depths?

The layout of the show creates a narrative. Visitors will discover how a collective desire to preserve the mystery and beauty of the sea is anchored in an emotional and aesthetic relationship to the natural world, one that is developed here as a story and a history told in images. On the museum's first floor and continuing on the second, three themes are addressed in turn, the shore, the deep, and the abyss.

Coalescing in the 19th century, these themes, however much dramatised, reappropriated, even deconstructed, remain no less identifiable in contemporary art. Today when we are increasingly aware of the role we humans play in degrading ecosystems, and maritime borders are causing a number of conflicts, the themes here form a theatre of questions that are proving absolutely relevant to our day and age.

1st floor – Gallery 1

The shore

Depicting the sea depends on the point of view adopted. Seen from afar and above, the sea appears flat and smooth; from closer up and lower down, it is structured according to the movement of its waters; finally, from directly in front of it, the sea breaks up into waves, crests, and spray. For the artist, the absence of lateral boundaries is what characterises the sea; widthwise, nothing restricts it, save for a decision about how to frame it. In terms of visual depth, however, this immense body of water is delimited by the points where it meets the shore and the sky towards the horizon line.

At the turn of the 19th century, landscape artists documented fortified ports, those extreme limits of empires, in great panoramic views. These works testify to the ancestral terror which the open sea, cautiously given a wide berth, still inspired. Soon Romantic painters were venturing further, leaving behind the shelter of harbours and setting up their easels on the shore. They could see their own moods mirrored in the movements and sounds of the sea. Mid-century their compositions created the template for doing a seascape, separated now into three parallel strips steadied by the horizon line, i.e., the shore, the water, the sky.

For years and years the gods and goddesses, heroes and heroines of Homer and Virgil would spring up in artists' imaginations as they walked upon the

strand. Their spirit remained haunted by the tales of antiquity and legends of the Norsemen.

The painters of modern life, who were attached to realist representation, focused on the activities making up life in a port and the work of the 'toilers on the sea', as Victor Hugo titled one of his novels. Seaside tourism offered these artists fresh subjects, i.e., the crowds flocking to the shores of the Mediterranean and the Atlantic to take advantage of the benefits of the iodised air, and the leisure activities in and by the sea, initially reserved for the elite but gradually opening up to people of all social classes.



Excerpt from Jules Michelet's *La Mer*, 1861. Read by Frank Semelet

1st floor – Gallery 2

The deep

With his novel *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1869–1870), Jules Verne brings his day and age down beneath the waves. This exploration of verticality stands as the most remarkable undertaking to domesticate the marine realm. The French writer was ahead of his time and anticipated oceanographic missions – the Challenger expedition (1872–1876), for example – which soon after would set about charting underwater reliefs and attempting to catalogue life in the depths of the sea.

Following these scraping and dredging initiatives, private and public collections grew as they added ‘dry’ and ‘wet’ preserved specimens. Whereas glass boxes and cases offer the point of view of someone walking by, the walls of specimen jars confuse the eye and trouble the steady gaze by presenting a sectional view of water. The same effects occur in front of aquariums in marine biology research centres, or from behind the portholes and viewports of diving bells and hard hat diving suits, when amazed artists tried to sketch sea plants and animals in the water. Armed with a pencil – and soon enough a camera – they experienced an unprecedented situation in which the landmarks and reference points of the system of perspective that were put in place during the Renaissance vanished.

In the 1890s, under the influence of Japanese art and design, avantgarde artists asserted the formal value of planarity, that is flatness, two-dimensionality. Art nouveau was determined to put an end to realism and relief in the decorative arts. The movement promoted a stylisation and geometrisation of form, as well as a treatment of colours by applying them in large uniformed patches of pigment. Life underwater offered artists a repertoire never seen before. Ornamentalists drew inspiration from it in decorating fabrics, vases, wallpaper, and ceramic tiling. Everyday objects were adorned with motifs copied from seaweed, starfish, shellfish and jellyfish, taking over home interiors until the 1910s.



Excerpt from Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, 1869–1870. Read by Matthias Urban

1st floor – Gallery 3

The abyss

In the 1880s, the Symbolist artists began revisiting the repertoire of undersea motifs through the prism of an anxious subjectivity. Because they were enemies of materialism and positivist rationality, they took refuge far from modernity in a cosmos governed by unknown forces. Beneath their brushes, the churning surface of the oceans becomes the theatre of all temptations and all turmoil.

The darkest zones of the sea were compared to the substratum of the unconscious, recently discovered by experimental psychology. Primordial forces roiled the surface of the waves. Scylla and Charybdis set off cyclones and maelstroms. Ophelia now plunges vertically down to the depths of the sea. The Sirens cast their spell on humans to lure them into the unknown, towards madness and the mystical.

The heirs to the Symbolists, the Surrealists pushed further in the exploration of the inner world's abyss. From their expeditions they brought back phrases, forms, and objects, so many riddles and puzzles to be deciphered. They compare each element of this precious trove to the bouquet of light rays captured in a crystal or the stonelike branches of coral.

André Breton and his followers devised a synthesis of reality and the imaginary, objectivity and subjectivity. They were simultaneously the sea and the diving

suit, the fish and the fisher. Undines, sea nymphs and sea maids embody the dream of fusing with the Other. The moving images of the first science documentaries on octopuses, seahorses, and jellyfish fascinated artists in the 1920s and '30s. Blurring the distinctions between different scales, rhythms, and kingdoms, these images challenged narrative and broke new ground in erotic imagery.



Excerpt from Georges Rodenbach's *Les Vies enclôses*, 1896. Read by David Gobet

2nd floor – Gallery 4 The shore

Unsinkable despite the crises and challenges it experienced throughout the 20th century, figurative art pursued the formidable and stimulating task of fitting itself into a tradition it could not avoid. It did so, too, while never letting up questioning either its styles and iconographic options, or the broadened spectrum of available mediums (painting and drawing of course, along with photography, video, and installation art). The sea is part of the depictions in which this challenge demanded to be met and with even more urgency in that the shore, long unchanged, experienced profound transformations in the last century.

While in the past it had been protective rampart, harbour refuge, or advanced post of the holiday resort, the shore indeed stands nowadays as a territory in tension, where new environmental, political, societal, and ethical issues are heightened. The idea of a shore being a natural border, haven, or space for contemplating and dreaming safe from constraints falls apart in artists' imagination and imagery.

We can read in the works displayed here this doubting of the prospects for the continuing existence of artistic solutions whose heyday was long in the past. What are we to make of seascapes in their grand gilt frames that were once hanging on the walls of bourgeois interiors to lend them the *frisson* of the vast open sea?

On beaches today, who are the people, the 'water-gazers' who are 'fixed in ocean reveries', as Melville put it? How do they reappropriate the sea, how do they chart it? Is it still possible to offer a serene image of the shore when along the coasts, from which the epics and stories of Western civilisation at one time were dreamed up, the binoculars of ecologists and border guards are now turned to the horizon? When the makeshift boats of migrants are strewn over the beaches where fair Amphitrite and Aphrodite once appeared?



Excerpt from Alessandro Baricco's *Océan mer*, 1993. Read by Melanie Bauer

2nd floor – Gallery 5

The deep

Crochet Coral Reef is a research-oriented art project from Margaret Wertheim and Christine Wertheim of the Institute For Figuring. Located at the intersection of mathematics, marine biology, handi-craft, and a community art practice, *Crochet Coral Reef* is a response to a pair of crises, global warming and oceanic plastic trash, raising awareness about the damage humans are inflicting on the Earth's ecology and our power to take positive collective action.

By creating a 'vernacular natural history', *Crochet Coral Reef* offers us 'a material imaginary' grounded in a traditional craft. It highlights crochet, a woman's craft usually viewed as unworthy of serious consideration. The project also boasts a mathematical dimension. The wavy forms of marine organisms and their crocheted interpretation involve what is called hyperbolic geometry, a variety that opens up classic Euclidian geometry to new kinds of spaces.

As part of the *Crochet Coral Reef* project, 25,000 individuals around the world have already helped to create over 50 local 'satellite reefs'. The *Baden-Baden Satellite Reef* shown here is part of this constantly evolving archipelago. At the Museum Frieder Burda, where this reef was produced, more than 40,000 corals crocheted by some 4,000 participants were assembled to form immense coral islands under the direction of

Margaret Wertheim and Christine Wertheim.

The project also suggests parallels between biological and social evolution. Through their participation, each crocheter, like one minuscule polyp in a living coral reef, contributes to a collective work that redraws the border between the 'individual' and the 'community'.



Excerpt from Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's *Conversation sur la Plantation*, an interview with Donna Haraway, 2019.
Read by Agathe Hauser

2nd floor – Gallery 6

The abyss

The show's title makes a cry that went up in 400 BCE ring out in the museum's halls and galleries. Following the wanderings of an eclectic troop of mercenaries of the Greek army through hostile territory in the Persian Empire, these exhausted men, the famous Ten Thousand, had finally reached Euxeinos Pontos, the Black Sea. They let their joy and relief explode at the sight, as Xenophon relates in his *Anabasis*, 'Thalassa! Thalassa! The sea! The sea! What hope or dismay do we hear in this exclamation in the world today?

Tashlikh (Cast Off), a video installation by Yael Bartana, reinterprets whilst universalising the ritual observed by practicing Jews of purifying themselves of their sins following the Jewish New Year (*Rosh Hashanna*). Gathered by the sea, they shake the ends of their garments or toss bread into the water to symbolically rid themselves of their filth, their sins. Here a continuous shower of objects awakens the recollection of collective tragedies, shipwrecks, the Armenian genocide, the wars in Eritrea, *Shoah*, *Nakba*. The soundtrack reinforces the feeling of a catastrophe. The demand to repair, to bind up wounds, to make reparations is replaced by an urging, if not to utterly forget, then to collectively purge our memories, the indispensable prerequisite for any pardon.

Miriam Cahn composes inescapable confrontations with victims of violence in a patriarchal society and a world at war. In a series of large-format paintings she has devoted to the human beings who have died at sea whilst trying to reach Europe, bodies fall at eye-level, subjected to a dual gravity, both physical mass and the gravitas of tragedy. Here a woman and child are inexorably pulled down to the bottom of the sea. The Mediterranean (the *Mare Nostrum*, 'Our Sea', of the Romans) is changed into a cemetery where nothing remains of what once was the bedrock of our humanity. For those who perish at sea, there is no grave, and their names are writ in water, the final affront.



Excerpt from Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, 1862. Read by Coralie Vollichard

Organisation and Publication

Exhibition curators:
Catherine Lepdor, chief curator, MCBA, and Danielle Chaperon, professor of French literature, University of Lausanne, with the assistance of Camille de Alencastro, research associate, MCBA

Display design:
Raphaële Gygi, Geneva

Publication:
Danielle Chaperon and Catherine Lepdor, *Thalassa ! Thalassa ! L'imaginaire de la mer*, Éditions Octopus, 2024, 208 p., Fr. CHF 29.– during the show's run
Available at the MCBA Book- and Giftshop
→ shop.mcba@plateforme10.ch

Exclusive Interview:
Margaret and Christine Wertheim



Thematic music playlist



Bringing together some 200 works of art, *Thalassa!* features a number of pieces that are generously on loan from Swiss and European museums and private collections.

The show features works by a wealth of artists, including:

Louis Ducros
Alexandre Séon
François Bocion
Alphonse Osbert
Jean-François Auburtin
Albert Marquet
Félix Vallotton
Maurice Pillard-Verneuil
Arnold Böcklin
Edward Burne-Jones
Ary Renan
Bolesław Biegas
Jean Painlevé
Max Ernst
Germaine Martin
Pierre Boucher
Marcel Broodthaers
Ad van Denderen
Lubaina Himid
Caroline Bachmann and Stefan Banz
François Burland
Margaret Wertheim and Christine Wertheim
Sandrine Pelletier
Miriam Cahn
Yael Bartana

Events

Reservations required
for all events
→ mcba.ch/agenda

Guided tours (in French)

Every Sunday at 11am
Thursday 17 October,
21 November, 19 December
and 9 January at 6:30pm

Guided tours (in English)

Sunday 8 December at 2pm

Guided tours with the show curators (in French)

Thursday 5 December at
6:30pm
Sunday 12 January at 3pm
With Catherine Lepdor and
Danielle Chaperon

Guided tours for Les Ami·e·s du MCBA (in French)

Tuesday 5 November at
12:30pm
Thursday 21 November at 6pm
With Catherine Lepdor and
Danielle Chaperon

Event (in French)

Thursday 14 November
Carte blanche for the Centre Culturel Afropea
An Afro-European take on the show, featuring a talk, film and performance at MCBA and Photo Elysée.

Readings (in French)

Sunday 24 November, 3 to 4pm
Licia Chéry raconte les petites et grandes sirènes
Readings from illustrated children's books that relate the adventures of mermaids the world over.
For all

Thematic tour

Thursday 9 January at 6:30pm
Bocaux anatomiques et coquillages en boîtes
Tour the show with Michel Sartori, former director of the

Zoological Museum, Lausanne, and Céline Stoffel, laboratory technician at Naturéum, Lausanne

Workshops for kids (in French)

Saturday 9 November,
14 December and 11 January,
2 to 5pm
Prendre soin des animaux du lac

Make stamps inspired by the crayfish, fish, and micro-plankton living nearby in the waters of Lake Geneva.
8–12 years old / CHF 15.–

Workshops for adults (in French)

Saturday 16 November,
2 to 5pm
Dessiner les créatures du Léman
Discover how the naturalist artists featured in the show go from observing marine animals to interpreting them in various mediums, before trying your hand at depicting our aquatic neighbours living in the lake depths. With Anne Crausaz, graphic artist, author, and illustrator
CHF 50.–

Workshop 0–100 (in French)

Saturday 7 December,
2 to 6pm, nonstop
Coquillages et crustacés
The group will create a 2025 calendar inspired by the aquatic animals. Come with your family, friends, or alone and take part for 15 minutes or 3 hours! Free admission/
No reservations required

Kids activity booklet (in French)

Free, available at the reception desk

Program for schools and private tours

→ mcba.ch

Information

Hours:
Tuesday–Sunday 10 am–6 pm
Thursday 10 am–8 pm
Monday closed

MCBA is closed:
25 December and 1st January

Admission and Online Tickets:
→ mcba.ch/billetterie
First Saturday of the month:
free

Access:
SBB Lausanne train station,
3 minutes on foot
Bus: 1, 3, 20, 21, 60,
Gare stop
Bus: 6, Cecil stop
Metro: m2, Gare stop
Car: Montbenon parking,
Reduced fee

Staying connected:
Behind the scenes, a look at the
collection, etc.
@mcbalausanne
@mcba.lausanne

Newsletter:
Events, Museum life,
editorial, etc.
→ mcba.ch/newsletter

Association des Amis·es
du MCBA:
Special tours and visiting
hours, classes and trips, etc.
→ mcba.ch/amis-du-musee

Your opinion is important to us



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The exhibition *Thalassa!*
Thalassa! is supported by the
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ject, which fosters dialogue
between the three museums
through thematic commissions
to regional artists: Sandrine
Pelletier (MCBA), Maya Rochat
(Photo Elysée) and Olga
Kokcharova (mudac).

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DES ARTS
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