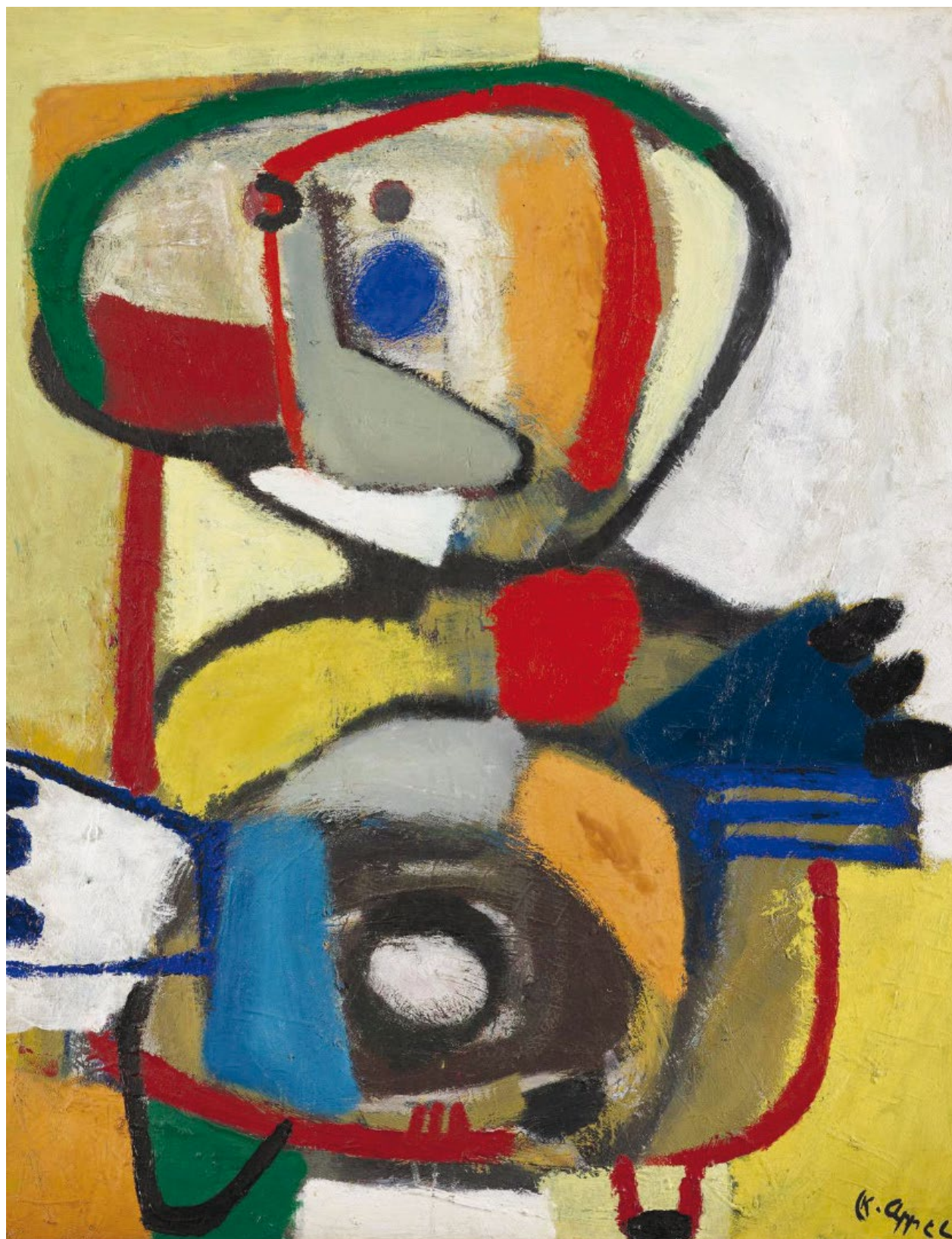


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Siegal, Nina: *Cobra Art: A New Hope*

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# A New Hope

After WWII, a group of artists set out to change the world forever. With their Cobra movement, they aimed to create a utopia through spontaneous poetry and painting.

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Text *Nina Siegal*



Page 26:  
*Child IV* (1951) by Karel Appel.  
c/o Pictoright Amsterdam.

Right page:  
*The Bridge* (1958)  
by Asger Jorn.  
c/o Pictoright Amsterdam.

Below: Café de l'Hotel  
Notre-Dame in Paris, where  
the Cobra movement was  
started in 1948.



**N**ovember 1948: an international group of artists gathered at the Café de l'Hotel Notre-Dame on the Quai Saint-Michel in Paris. Why? To start nothing less than an artistic revolution.

Their goal was to leave the past – WWII and its destruction – behind, and everything they had been taught that art should be. They wanted to forge ahead with a new kind of art that was primal, emotive, bold, and above all, experimental.

Their movement, called Cobra, after the cities from which they came – Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam – was a fierce, wild, untamed and joyous one. Its goal was to help create a utopian society of the future built on playfulness, spontaneity, collaboration and 'free thought'.

The movement burned like a furious fire for only three years, from 1948 to 1951, and then died out almost as quickly, which is why many people have not heard of it. But today, many art historians regard Cobra as an important turning point in post-war art, with a far-reaching influence on many art movements and artists since.

Hilde de Bruijn is curator of the Cobra Museum of Modern Art in Amstelveen, the Netherlands. It is one of the leading centres for Cobra art and research. "Today, 70 years since Cobra began, we have a much clearer perspective on the movement and its influence, which is represented in our current exhibition, *Cobra 70: A Multi-Headed Snake*", De Bruijn says.

Today, many people remember Cobra as a "cheerful colourful art movement" with the kind of paintings that "my kid could have made", De Bruijn explains. But she wants the public to know that Cobra was not at all tame and cheerful, and its artists were anything but uniform. "They shared a drive, the feeling of a revolt against the established order", she says. "They shared the idea that the way you can practice art can be different, that it should be as free as possible, that you don't need to hold onto pre-established ideas about art or the world."

**“The artists shared the idea that art should be as free as possible”**

#### Straight from emotions

The two main leaders of the group were Christian Dotremont, a Belgian poet, and Asger Jorn from Copenhagen, a painter who created his own form of protest art during the war. Amsterdam painter and sculptor Constant Nieuwenhuys quickly became one of the leading intellectual figures of the group.

Writing for a magazine by the name of *Reflex*, Constant (as Nieuwenhuys called himself) declared that "a new era is upon us, in which the matrix of cultural conventions loses its significance and a new freedom can be won from the most primary source of life." Many of these ideas were later adopted by the Cobra movement. "Western art, once the celebrator of emperors and popes," Constant wrote, had become irrelevant and outdated, because it only glorified certain "bourgeois ideals". Instead of trying to create an "ideal of beauty", he continued, artists should try to create artworks that came straight from the emotions.

Cobra Museum of Modern Art/Suzzy Embo (left page),  
Alamy (right page)











Cobra aimed to toss out everything that the European art academies had taught them about representation. To begin afresh, starting with a childlike or untrained sense of playfulness, collaboration and spontaneity.

The Cobra artists were particularly inspired by the Swiss artist Paul Klee, who took inspiration from the art of his young son. They also looked to the so-called 'organic surrealism' of Max Ernst, Joan Miró and André Masson. These artists had an especially strong influence on Dutch Cobra artist Guillaume Cornelis van Beverloo, a.k.a. Corneille. A self-taught painter, Corneille shunned formal training at the Rijksacademie in Amsterdam, preferring instead to experiment on his own terms.

"They wanted to make a new art for a new world," says Laura Stamps, curator at the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague, which owns a large collection of Cobra art, especially that of Constant and Dutch painter and sculptor Karel Appel. "It was a purer form of expression."

### Thinkers versus doers

Today, we tend to associate Cobra with just a handful of visual artists, but over the three years of its existence, it included at least 25 loosely affiliated members who contributed to the self-published magazine *Cobra Review*, including poets, novelists, essayists, painters, sculptors and architects. They also came from all over Europe, not just the three cities referenced in their name, many of them contributing to the magazine.

"Some were more politically-motivated intellectuals and others were more down to earth individuals who just wanted to make their art", says De Bruijn.

Dotremont, Jorn and Constant were the main ideologues of the group, constantly discussing and debating and writing, while also producing a lot of artwork. In contrast, Appel seemed to focus entirely on creating, making hundreds of artworks in the Cobra style. He is still the artist most people associate with the movement today.

Of his own work, Appel said: "Painting, like passion, is an emotion full of truth and rings a living sound, like the roar coming from the

**"Painting is like the roar coming from a lion's breast"**

**Left page:**  
*Femme-fleur* (1943) by Constant. c/o Pictoright Amsterdam.

**Below:**  
*Astres et Desastres* (1969) by Alechinsky. c/o Pictoright Amsterdam.



Alamy (left page),  
Jasik Gallery Amsterdam (right page)



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1. One of the Cobra gatherings in 1948.

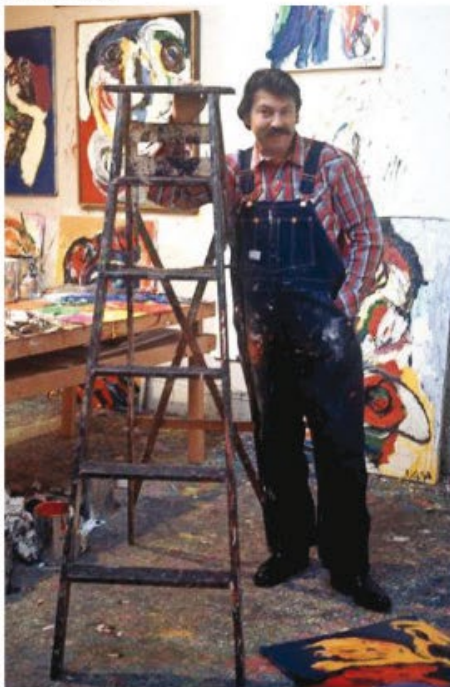
2. *Above Mountain Summit* (1917) by Paul Klee.



2

3. Members of the Cobra movement at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam in 1949.

4. Karel Appel in his New York studio in 1966.



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5

5. Corneille (left) and Constant holding their self-produced *Reflex* magazine in 1948.

Cobra Museum (1, 5), Paul Klee, *Above Mountain Summit*, 1917 © Collection Gemeentemuseum Den Haag (2), E. Kokkoris-Syriër (3), Hollandse Hoop (4)



lion's breast. To paint is to destroy what preceded. I never try to make a painting, but a chunk of life. It is a scream; it is a night; it is like a child; it is a tiger behind bars." Appel's art has also had the most lasting presence in the art market. Today, his best works from the Cobra years fetch as much as €1 million at auctions, says Robbert van Ham of Jaski Gallery in Amsterdam, which specialises in Cobra art. That makes him the best-selling artist of the movement, says van Ham.

#### **Collaborative spirit**

But Cobra wasn't supposed to be an art movement like impressionism or cubism that promoted individual artists or a particular style, says Stamps. "The idea of being an artist and of ownership wasn't important, so you didn't even need to know who had made the work. They were experimenting a lot with visual artists collaborating with poets and combining the words with visuals."

The ideals of the movement were perhaps best represented by what's now known as the Bregnerød Gatherings that took place at the Frederiksholm cottage in the Danish countryside near Copenhagen in the autumn of 1949. Cobra artists, as well as their spouses and children, lived and worked together on what they thought of as a *Gesamtkunstwerk* – a work of art that combines many art forms – filling the cottage with art. They covered the inside of the house with painted murals, wrote collaborative poetry, took photographs and made collages and sculptures. Dotremont would later reflect on this project as the very embodiment of Cobra's ideals, saying: "We were not organised, we were organic."

Just a few months later, Willem Sandberg, the director of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, organised the *International Exhibition of Experimental Art*, featuring the work of a broad range of Cobra artists, including artists of ten different nationalities.

The exhibition catalogue, which had the word 'Cobra' written repeatedly all over it, featured a woman's mouth with her tongue sticking out at the viewer. The first page declared: "It is our desire that makes a revolution."

Inside the exhibition, visitors could find wood sculptures that looked like Oceanic totems, paintings of strange hybrid animals,

## The movement was a fierce, wild, untamed and joyous one

and very abstract paintings made of large blobs of colour or rough, thick primary hues, as well as drawings, photomontages and collages that seemed like they'd been made by children. "There was almost a riot," says Van Ham. "The Netherlands was quite a conservative country back then, and it came as quite a shock. A lot of critics and the audience said: 'This is horrible, what is happening to our museums?' People were used to Rembrandt or Van Gogh, and contemporary art like Cobra was something that people had never seen before. The first reaction was always: 'My two-year-old grandchild can also do this.'"

Nevertheless, it is now considered a landmark exhibition because it was the only exhibition that presented Cobra, and all of its artists and their ideas in a single place and time. It was the climax of the short life of the movement – or at least a last hurrah.

#### **Drawing to a close**

By the end of 1949, a very personal feud between the two key members of Cobra started to have an impact on the group. Asger Jorn had started a relationship with Constant's wife, Matie van Domselaer, and the Dutch and Danish artists in the group ended up taking sides, and refused to work together anymore. >



### Where to see Cobra?

#### Cobra Museum of Modern Art

This museum (pictured below) is entirely devoted to the art of the Cobra movement and its legacy. Until 2 June 2019, the museum presents *Cobra 70: A Multi-Headed Snake*. The exhibition explores the movement's origins, ideals and impact.  
[cobra-museum.nl](http://cobra-museum.nl)  
 Sandbergplein 1, Amstelveen

**Stedelijk Museum**  
 Amsterdam's leading contemporary art and design museum has a large collection of Cobra artworks, and hosted the landmark 1949 art exhibition focused on the art movement.  
[stedelijk.nl](http://stedelijk.nl)  
 Museumplein 10, Amsterdam



“Cobra was a radical influence on a generation of artists”

**Stedelijk Museum Schiedam**  
 The Stedelijk Museum Schiedam presents an extensive Corneille retrospective, ending this month on 3 February.  
[stedelijkmuseumschiedam.nl](http://stedelijkmuseumschiedam.nl)  
 Hoogstraat 112, Schiedam



**Jaski Gallery**  
 One of the leading art galleries selling works by Cobra artists and those influenced by them.  
[jaski.nl](http://jaski.nl)  
 Nieuwe Spiegelstraat 29, Amsterdam

**Gemeentemuseum**  
 The Gemeentemuseum in The Hague owns a large collection of works by Cobra artists, such as Karel Appel and Constant.  
[gemeentemuseum.nl](http://gemeentemuseum.nl)  
 Stadhouderslaan 41, The Hague

Right page:  
*Petite Musique du Printemps* (1987)  
 by Corneille. c/o  
 Pictoright Amsterdam.

(Jorn and Van Domselaer later married and had two children together.)

The two founding members of Cobra went their separate ways, with Constant developing a whole new utopian art project called *New Babylon*, which would consume his attention for the next two decades. And Jorn went on to found a movement in Italy, which he called the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus.

Ultimately, by 1951, the group couldn't maintain its centre and was falling apart. In November of that year, a Cobra farewell exhibition was held at the Palais de Beaux Arts in Liège, Belgium, featuring the work of 35 artists, coming together for the last time. “Maintaining a group with all these differences was extremely tiresome”, says De Bruijn. “They were still really unknown and very poor. Asger Jorn was very ill. He had scurvy and tuberculosis, and he had to be hospitalised in a sanatorium for quite a while, and Dotremont happened to be in Denmark and he was diagnosed with tuberculosis as well. They were fighting for their lives and still fighting about the meaning of Cobra.”

Even after Cobra disintegrated, the movement's artists continued to travel, work, write and have a far-reaching impact on new art movements, which they infused with the Cobra ethos. Cobra's influence and energy can be traced through performances by the Japanese Gutai group, in American Abstract Expressionist painting, in the Austrian avant-garde movement called Viennese Actionism, through to the raw graffiti-inspired 1980s art of Julian Schnabel and Jean-Michel Basquiat, as well as in the prankster antics of contemporary artists like Mark Flood.

“Cobra was a radical influence on a whole generation of artists”, says Victoria Gramm, a contemporary art specialist at Christie's in Amsterdam, where Cobra art is still top-selling category. “Their raw exuberance, which can be seen in the swirling impasto paint of Appel and the undulating forms of Jorn and Pierre Alechinsky, was key to the post-war and European art scene.” ■

Cobra Museum of Modern Art (top left), Cobra Museum of Modern Art/PeterTijhuis (bottom left), Die Galerie/Frankfurt am Main/© Natta and Dimitri Beverloo - Pictoright Amsterdam, 2019 (right page)



