

LÉON TUTUNDJIAN

BIOMORPHIC AND GEOMETRIC REVERIES

INTRODUCTION TO THE WORK OF LÉON TUTUNDJIAN



FONDATION
LEON TUTUNDJIAN

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Cover
ill.1 - *Untitled*, 1929.
Painted wood and metal, diameter 60 cm
Private collection.

TUTUNDJIAN, AN AUTHORITATIVE ESSAY

BY ART HISTORIAN AND CURATOR GLADYS FABRE

In 1994, twenty-six years after his death, Gladys Fabre published the first monograph on the work of Léon Tutundjian.

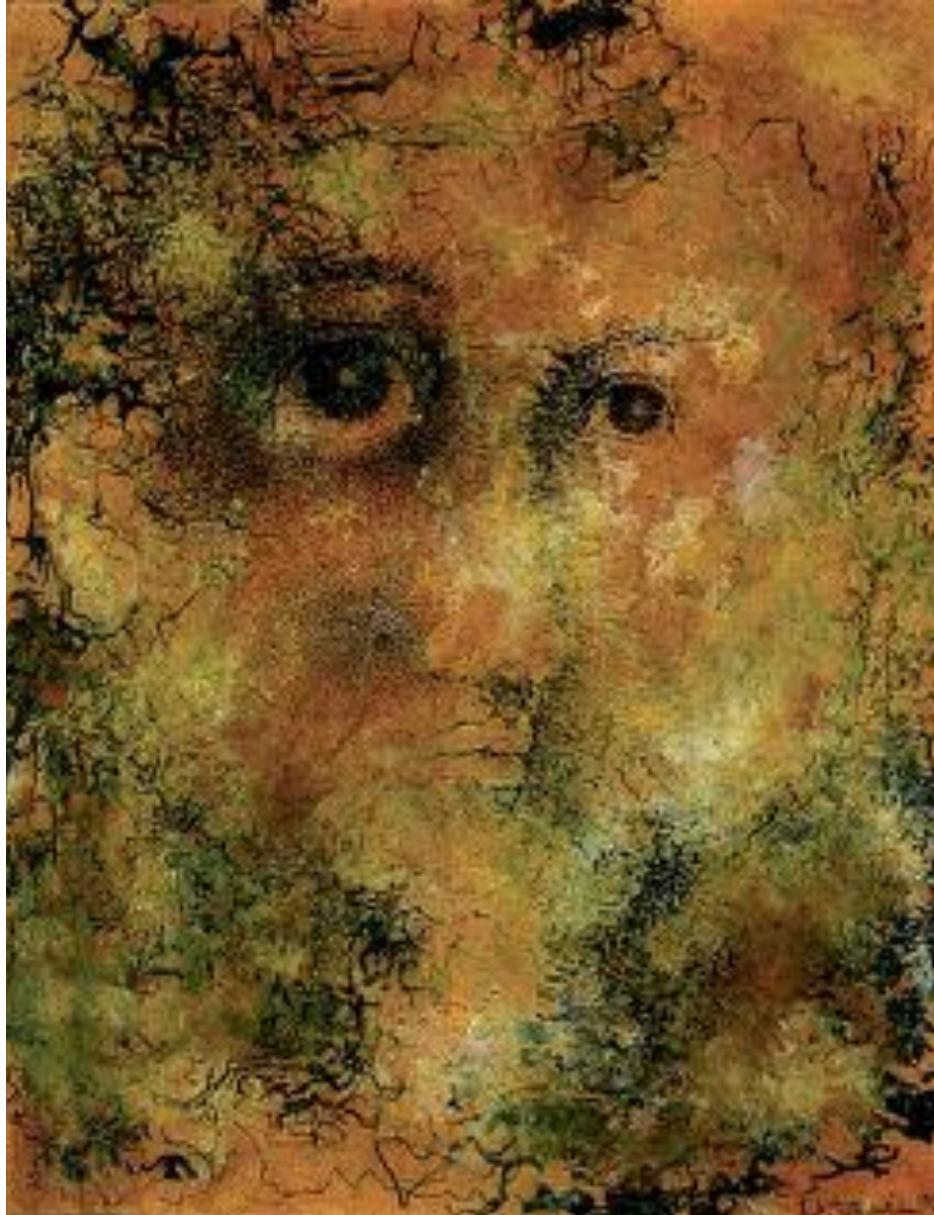
Here we reproduce the first lines of that book, which represents a definitive, in-depth study of Tutundjian's work.

“Was this delay in recognition the penalty levied on an art considered minor? Were institutions, art historians, collectors and the art market blind to him because more responsive to a work's public reputation than to its intrinsic quality? Could distance have been the price to pay for recognition of work that was too singular?”

The aim of this book is to answer these questions by showing the interest and originality of an avant-garde artist who was esteemed in his day and was one of the precursors of biomorphic abstraction. Tutundjian was an authentic creator and quite unyielding when it came his inner imperative, which was to keep constantly perfecting an art that expressed the whole man in his relation to the world.

This permanent calling into question and this desire for perfection led him to several changes of direction. In about 1930, he abandoned abstraction for Surrealist figuration, and therefore did not benefit from the promotion of the Concrete Art and Abstraction-Création movements, of which he had been an active member; nor, though, did he gain the support of the Surrealists, who viewed him as a marginal figure – it is true that what his Surrealist painting expressed was more a symbolic consciousness than the repressed unconscious, a desire for transcendence rather the “beast” that is in man. In 1960 he went back to abstraction, but it was too early for him to benefit from the new interest in the interwar avant-gardes, and too late for him to be able to assert his status among the newcomers to abstraction.

It will be clear that the artist's rigour did not facilitate a career whose development ran counter to the trends of the day and refused to follow fashions.”



ill.2 - *Untitled*, 1925. Gouache, watercolour and ink on paper, 27 x 21 cm. Private collection.

LÉON TUTUNDJIAN, BIOMORPHIC AND GEOMETRIC REVERIES

BY MARIE DENIAU, DIRECTOR OF THE FONDATION LÉON TUTUNDJIAN

He “anticipates,” he “precedes,” he “prefigures,” he “sets the example,” he “opens the way”; he is a “precursor,” a “pioneer,” a “master”: these are some of the powerful terms that crop up with striking frequency in the few texts written about Léon Tutundjian, and in particular the authoritative monograph written in 1994 by the art historian Gladys Fabre.

Clearly, then, the artist played an active part in the artistic inventions of his day and produced a singular and sometimes surprising body of work, which now demands to be brought back to the fore and presented to the public.

True, his name is becoming increasingly familiar, and a number his works can be seen regularly in galleries, auction houses and major museums. But a light aura of mystery still hangs about Léon Tutundjian. Who was he really? What were his intentions and what did his “inner necessity” consist of? How can we not be intrigued by his ambivalence and radical changes of orientation? Where does the indefinable beauty of his compositions come from? How many works are there in all and where can they be found?

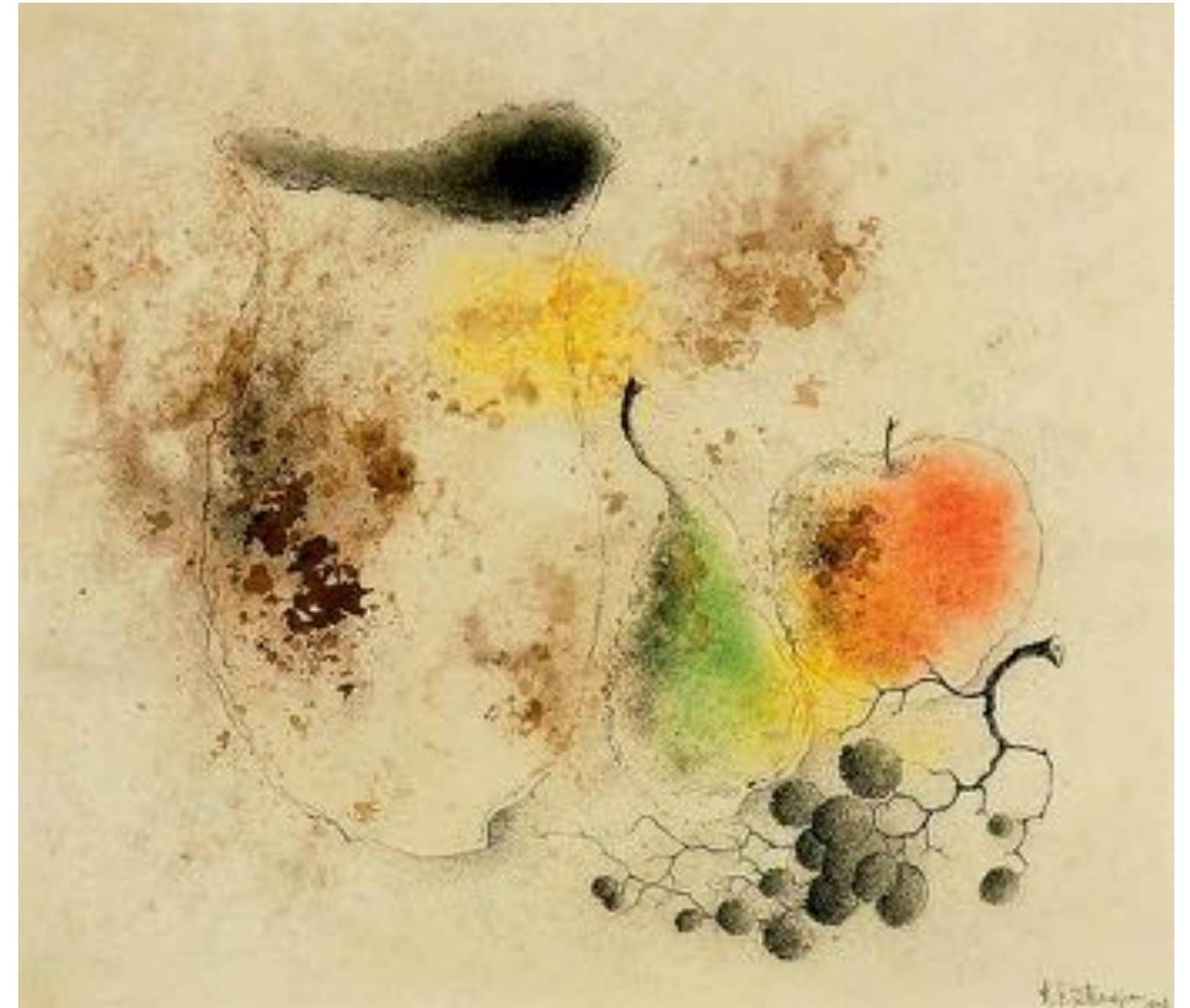
In the absence of any text by the artist himself, or even memoirs, letters, or interviews, some of these questions can never be answered. That leaves the essential: the work, which is resolutely modern, still capable today of inspiring – among those who look to “see” – both existential meditation and aesthetic delectation.

The paths of exile and learning

Léon Tutundjian was born in Amasya (Anatolia). It was a cultivated family: his mother was a primary school teacher, his father taught physics and chemistry as well as music. From him the young Léon learned violin, which he played all his life, and sciences, for which he always had a great appetite, and which would become a source of inspiration. He was sent to Constantinople (today's Istanbul) to continue his primary and secondary education, and it was there that he learned about painting at the city's school of fine arts. The death of his father in about 1915 was very certainly linked to the Armenian genocide that took place under the Ottoman Empire. In around 1921–22 Léon himself fled the continuing massacres, leaving his mother, his sister and his country.

On the path of exile, first in a Greek orphanage where he set up a choir and an orchestra, and then in the Armenian monastery on San Lazzaro in Venice, he continued his studies centring on scientific disciplines, and learned the techniques of ceramics and painting on fabric.

As his sense of his artistic vocation grew, he began to dream of going to Paris, the capital of the arts. He arrived in the city in 1923 or 1924, and found employment as a ceramics worker. It was not long before he befriended Ervand Kotchar, a fellow Armenian, and then the Georgian David Kakabadzé, their elder. These two artists would have an important influence on Tutundjian's work, firstly by encouraging him to frequent the places and figures of the Parisian scene and to take part in its debates, and secondly by revealing to him the potential of certain techniques (spraying paint with an airbrush, stamping on silk) and certain forms (organic forms in the work of Kakabadzé).



ill.3 - *Still Life with Fruit*, 1926. Watercolour, pastel and ink on paper, 40 x 46 cm. Private collection.

An artistic language that soon became original and distinctive

The young man began to find his way by composing nudes or small still lifes in the Cubist style on paper or cardboard. The touch is dense, and slightly stiff, but the handling of the ground is original. Before drawing, he carefully applies rings of wash or watercolour, already showing his desire to experiment.

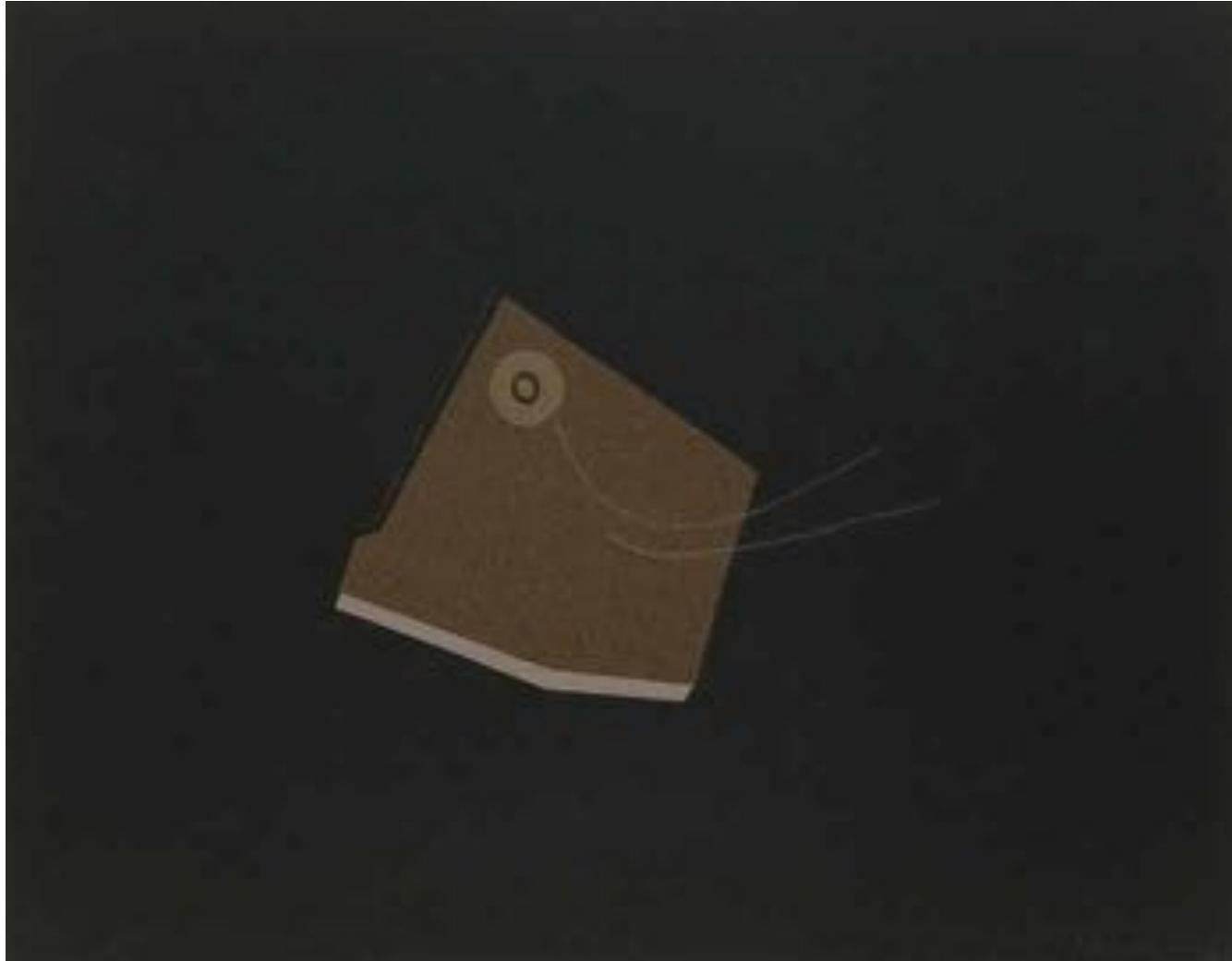
In 1925–26 his compositions with fruits (ill. 3) and his series of enigmatic faces (ill. 2) show him perfecting his Tachiste technique and developing a more expressive drawing style involving irregular line, with cracks and gaps, crisscrossing, knotty lines and little sprayed dots, thereby managing to translate into paint effects usually obtained in ceramics (the random effects of firing) and silk painting (uncontrolled dripping and absorption). His palette subtly combined warm, slightly blurred colours with more rustic brown, earthy hues. Tutundjian was already manifesting his desire for a poetic, surreal universe. He was creating psychic atmospheres that could be gentle or harsh, strange or aggressive. "The main characteristic of Tutundjian's art throughout his career emerges thanks to this Tachiste technique which actively solicits the viewer's own psychic engagement, just as much as the creator's."¹

Shadowy faces appear, like the materialisation of a dream. And in these portraits as in these still lifes, the notion of time is resonant. The absent gazes are fixed on a distant future (or past?). The visible process of the disintegration of objects and faces seems to herald a new phase. But it is impossible to say if the mechanism at work is one of subsiding into chaos or, on the contrary, the gradual emergence of creation from an original confusion.

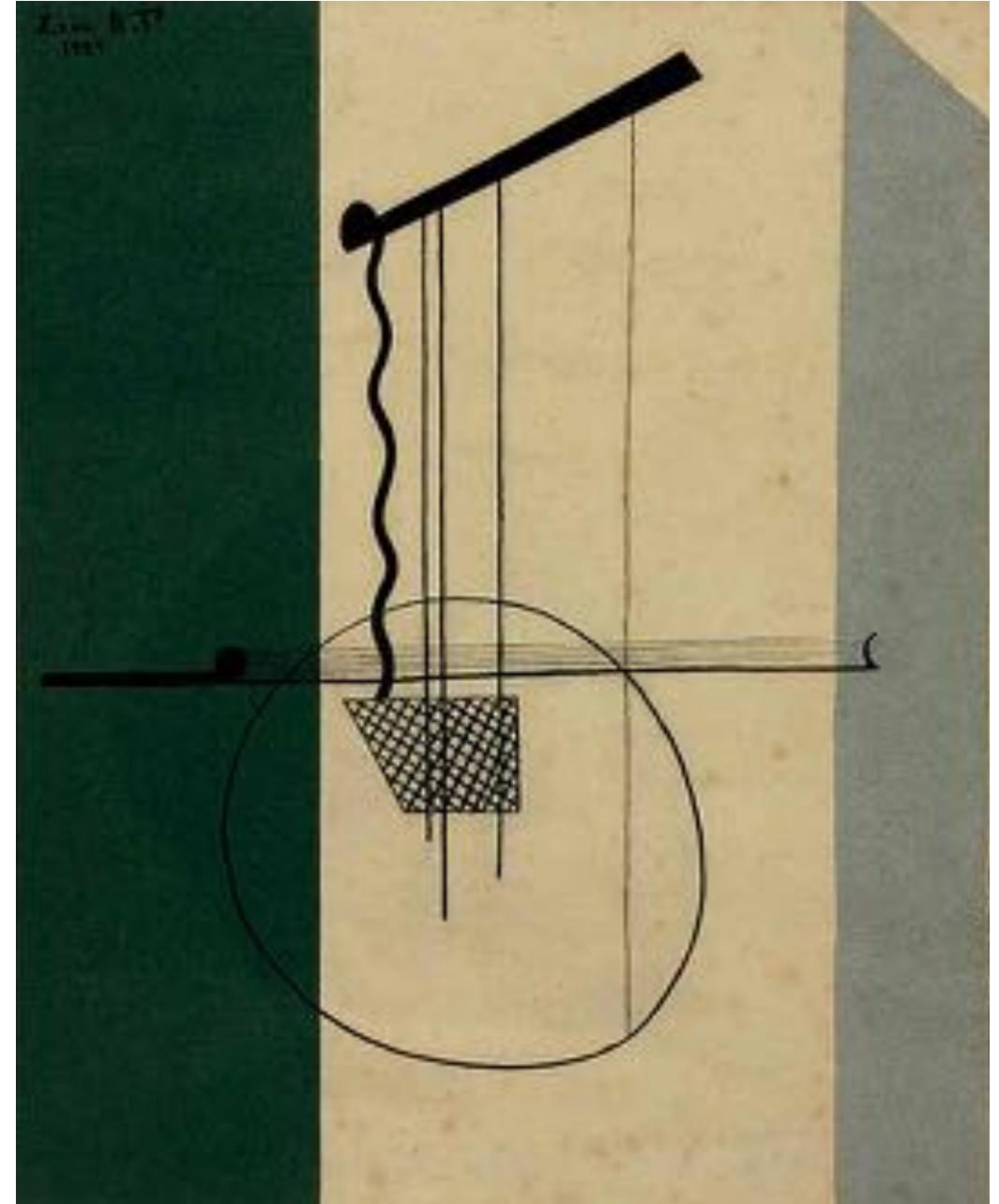
¹ Gladys Fabre, *Tutundjian*, Paris: Editions du Regard, 1994.



ill.4 - *Untitled (or Picture of Civilisation)*, c.1925-1926. Collage and ink on paper, 46 x 32.5 cm. Private collection.



ill.5 - *Untitled*, 1925. Collage on paper, 31.8 x 40.5 cm. Private collection.



ill.6 - *Untitled*, 1925. Collage on paper, 41 x 33 cm. Private collection.

During the same period, Tutundjian made a set of collages combining cut-out or torn paper with highly delicate graphic techniques: here, graceful straight or supple lines framing and placing the fragments; there, undulating lines following the contours of the tears like the sea along a coast; elsewhere, a shadowy line underscores the edges of the fragments and melds them with the ground (ill.4, 5 and 6).

Many of these assemblages incorporate illustrations taken from school textbooks in a very original fashion. Such elements are not there for purely formal reasons; the figurative content they introduce has a particular significance for Tutundjian. Most of them emphasise key moments in Western civilisation, such as technological or scientific developments (ill. 4), or seminal events in French history. Some focus on the French Revolution, on Napoleonic conquests and, above all, the Rights of Man, which subjects were anything but incidental for an Armenian refugee.

In her remarkable book *Collage*, art historian Herta Wescher shows herself to be touched by “the subtle interplay of representational and nonrepresentational elements” which, as she argues, “lends a special character to these last and more refined offshoots of the Cubist *papiers collés*.”²

Indeed, Tutundjian had now started to develop his own very personal language marked by an undeniable finesse. His singularity was also the result of an astonishing ability to swiftly link his inventions, to hybridise aesthetics and genres; to simultaneously pursue researches in several different and seemingly opposed directions.

² Herta Wescher, *Collage*, New York: Abrams 1971.



ill.7 - *Untitled*, 1926. Ink on paper, 23 x 16 cm. Private collection.



ill.8 - *Untitled*, 1926. Gouache and ink on paper, 19 x 27 cm. Private collection.



ill.9 - *Untitled*, 1926. Gouache on paper, 22.2 x 28.2. Private collection.

Taking wing: towards the intimate structure of things

In 1926 he completed his series of still lifes, then broke free of the presence of objects by working simultaneously in several different directions.

First, he gradually put in place a geometrical vocabulary that was dominantly linear. The small constructions comprising straight lines, curves, triangles, circles and arcs, either smooth or notched, appear to be highly ordered. But Tutundjian, who was just beginning to renounce the coherence of figuration, still felt the need to back them with a Tachiste framework (ill. 7), just like any artist who, "in giving up resemblance, is no longer sure of finding a convincing logic of composition."³

Then, very quickly, realising the inherent qualities of his main components – geometric forms on one side, indeterminate and moving forms on the other – he chose to separate them and to work to make them flourish, by exploiting their full potential. He then brought them back together in a renewed dialogue. And so, on one side, the blot or mark gained autonomy. It was no longer a simple alteration on the support, but was deployed in its own right, taking over the whole surface of the paper, gaining in complexity and density, its colours also becoming more diverse (ill.8, 9, 10 and 11). For this, Tutundjian did not hesitate to draw on a large repertoire of forms (cellular, placental, vascular, root-like) taken from life. He was thus setting forth – in 1926 – on what was still a little-explored path, insofar as so-called "biomorphic" art, based on "associations with the human body, the world of the unconscious, visible nature or, again, microbiology"⁴ did not really emerge until "the late 1920s, and notwithstanding the fact that Arp was already using this kind of vocabulary as early as 1915–16."⁵

Along the other path, leading to a cosmic space, the geometric language was enriched by the appearance of the sphere as the central element: then, from 1927, with the recourse to holed black forms (ill. 17) that give rise to subtle effects of depth and weight/counterweight, and, in 1928, with the

³ Philippe Sers, *La Révolution des avant-gardes, l'expérience de la Vérité en art*, Paris: Hazan, 2012.

⁴ Guitemie Maldonado, *Le cercle et l'amibe, Le biomorphisme dans l'art des années 1930*, Paris: CTHS/INHA, 2006. See also: Oliver Botar, Isabel Wunsche, *Biocentrism and modernism*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2011.

⁵ In 1926–1927 Tutundjian went even further along this path of emancipating form. In a series of twenty to thirty ink pieces his gesture became freer, letting the pen and brush develop an almost automatic writing that is astonishingly radical. Gladys Fabre writes of it as follows in her monograph: "No Surrealist at this time went as far, not even Kakabadzé, who also tried similar experiments [...]. The two men were some twenty years ahead of gestural art."



ill.10 - *Untitled*, 1926. Gouache and ink on paper, 23.7 x 32.5 cm. Private collection.

making of oils that have a velvety texture and silvery highlights; finally, in 1929, with the transcription into three dimensions of the reliefs.

The two tendencies – the organic and the geometric – would thus coexist without clashing and in fact often combined. For what Tutundjian had undertaken was a process of exploring the whole universe, both the infinitely big and the infinitely small; an itinerary of knowledge and meditation on the inner structures of things, a germinative and stellar reverie on the mechanisms of life. Tutundjian was certainly a keen and attentive reader of works about the science of forms and growth processes. For example, several years earlier the famous book by the American biologist and mathematician D'Arcy Thomson, *On Growth and Form* (1917), had opened the way to artistic research combining the rigour of equations and mathematical patterns with wonder at the beauty of the forms observed.

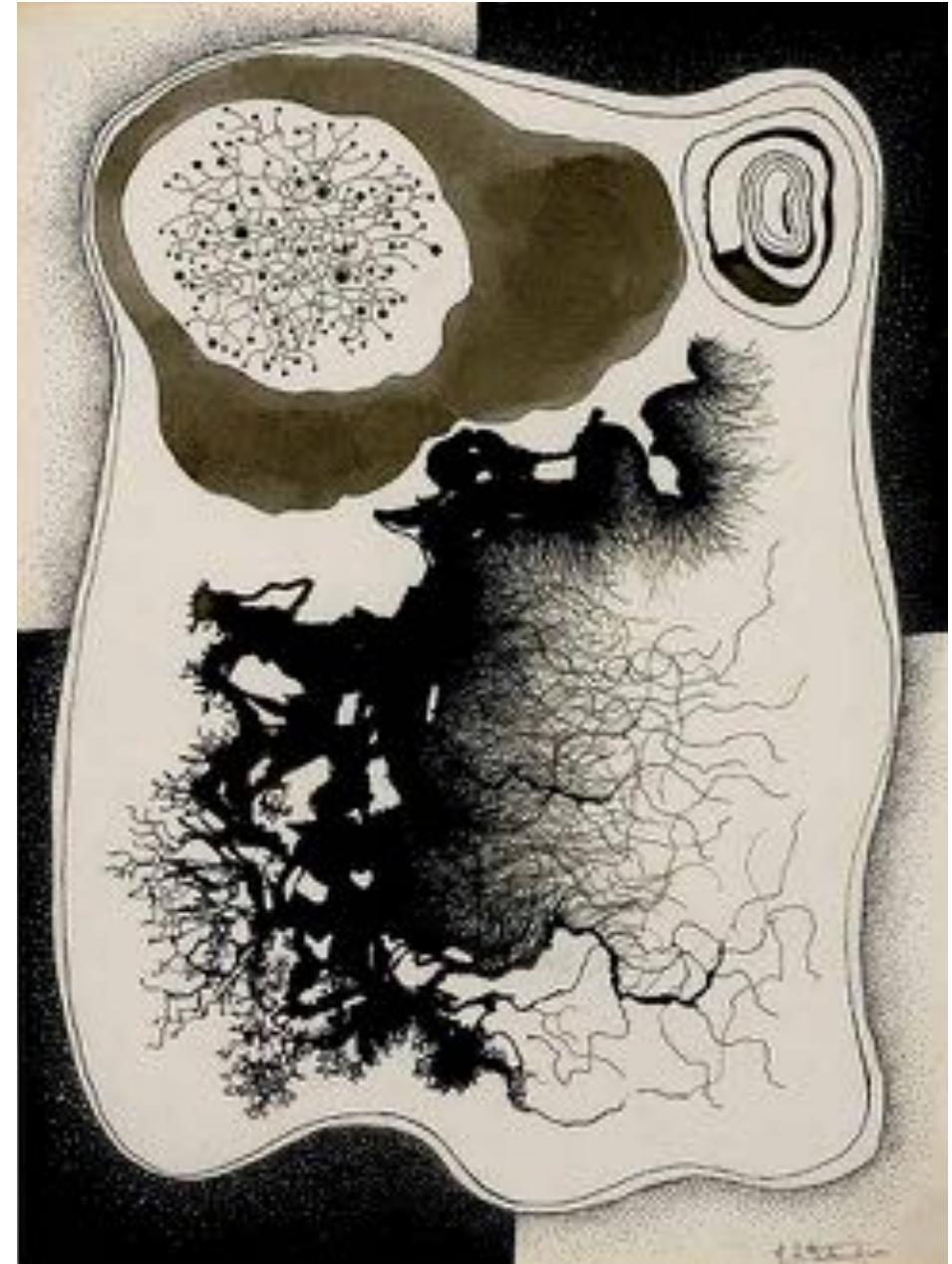
And Tutundjian's keen curiosity for scientific disciplines in all their diversity was further stimulated by advances in modern astronomy and biology. Likewise, his vision as an artist could feed on the novel and fascinating images resulting from the new techniques of reproduction (micro-cinema, macro-photography), that were starting to become a part of the contemporary imaginary.

In and through his artistic actions Tutundjian brought alive something that touches on the emotion and fascination provoked by natural phenomena and the beauty of a "biologised cosmos."⁶ But it was never a matter of "painting stars gravitating in space, or atoms at the genesis of molecules" – for "that would be another naturalism."⁷ On the contrary, he needed to limit himself to "using the notions that derived from the study of these things" and to use painting to address problems and phenomena that were out of reach of mathematics. The aim, then, was to approach the essence of things hidden behind appearances, and to make it perceptible by an elementary vocabulary that strove to be universal.

Seen in this light, each drawing, each canvas, each relief, must be taken, not as an illustration, but as an act of witness by a travelling artist. And they can be seen as so many snapshots taken by the explorer at each station; so many small worlds revealed in a simplified language in which the gaze can circulate without discontinuity: mini-cosmoses, so to speak, active and expanding.

⁶ Arnauld Pierre, *Maternités cosmiques. La recherche des origines, de Kupka à Kubrick*, Hazan: Paris, 2010.

⁷ Excerpt from *Art concret*, Paris, 1930.



ill.11 - *Untitled*, 1925. Ink on paper, 24.6 x 20 cm. Private collection.

A dogged and esteemed worker

The second half of the 1920s was a particularly intense period for Tutundjian, and certainly the most fruitful of his career, in terms of creativity but also of relations and events.

Of course, he studied and applied the teachings of his elders, notably his friends Kotchar and Kakabadzé, but also Klee and Kandinsky. But his way of simultaneously engaging with several different tendencies and following one creative cycle with another was certainly no symptom of a tendency to imitate or dither. On the contrary, Tutundjian, who was more usually described as imperious, stubborn and proud, was a man of very high standards who forged ahead and persevered, showing a real spirit of innovation. Beyond the reductive question of influences, what opens up here is the idea of a dialogue – both direct and indirect – between his approach and that of other avant-garde figures.

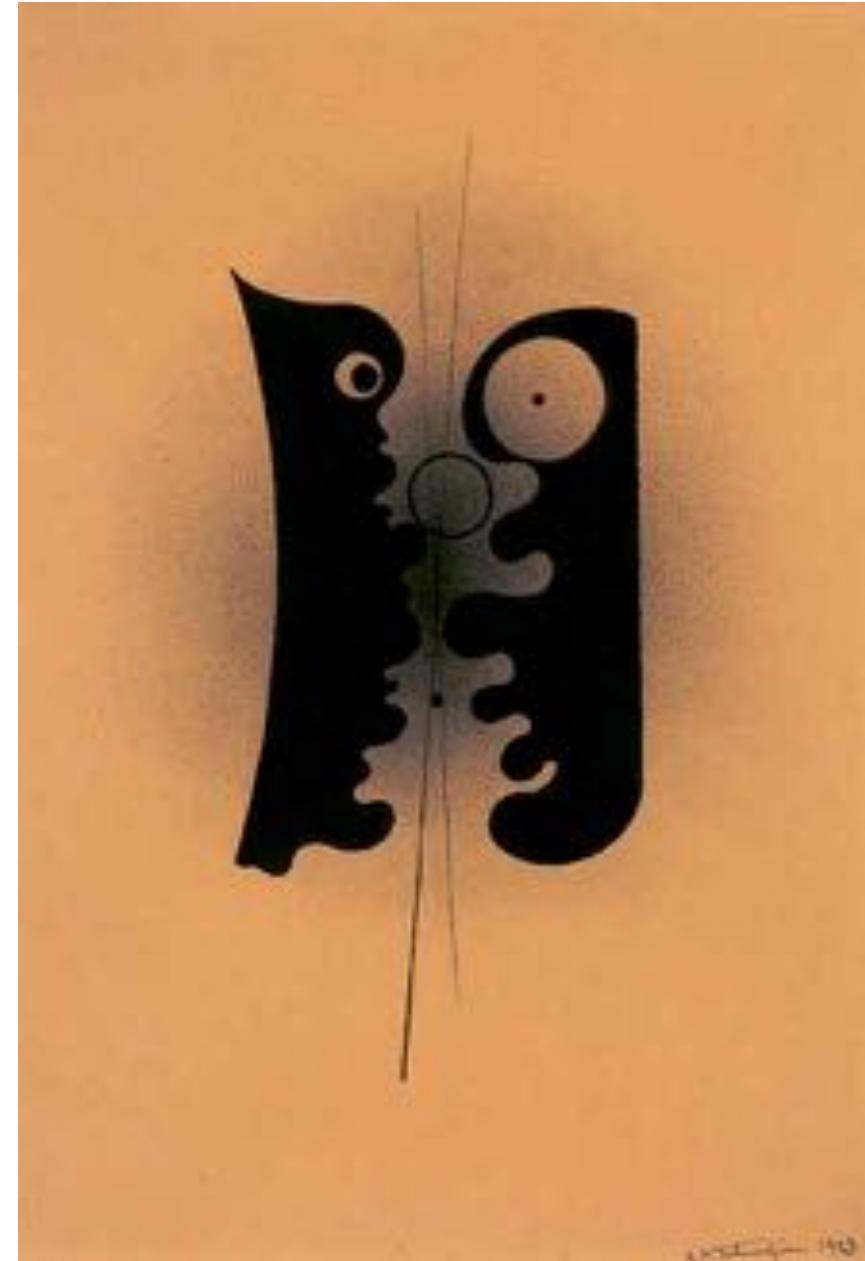
At the time, despite material hardship – something experienced by many artists – and the incomprehension that abstraction continued to meet with, he devoted himself totally to his art. Reflecting a teeming imagination coupled with great technical mastery, his body of work on paper is both prolific – nearly a thousand drawings from 1925 to 1928 – and rich in its graphic developments, showing an unbroken series of variations (ill. 12 to 16).

Was the young artist sometimes overwhelmed by the dizzying infinity of forms and rhythms, and the infinite range of possibilities? Should the sheer industry of his graphic work be seen as an attempt to desacralize the artwork, by “repeating” it ad infinitum?

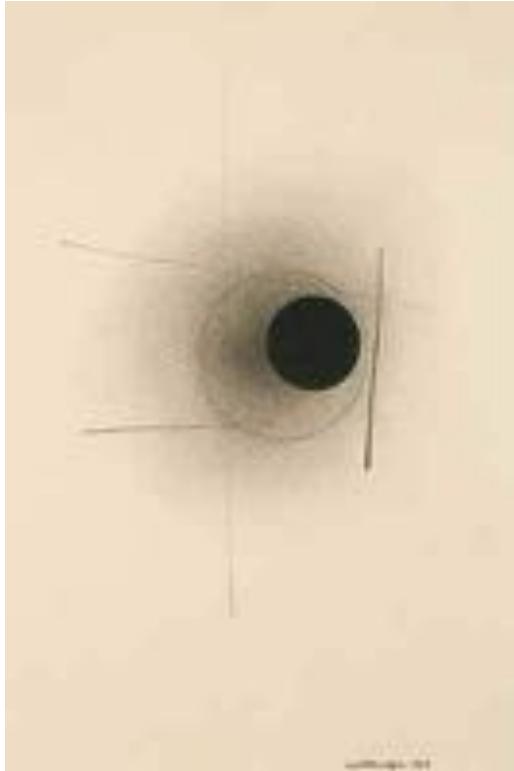
Whatever the case, Tutundjian did not rest content with a combination that would serve as an “acquired result, a completion, a conclusion.”⁸ He was constantly going back to the work, diversifying the vocabulary, and undertaking to transpose it onto other supports, such as canvas, relief, or even glass.⁹

⁸ Paul Klee, *Paul Klee on Modern Art*, University of California Press, 1979.

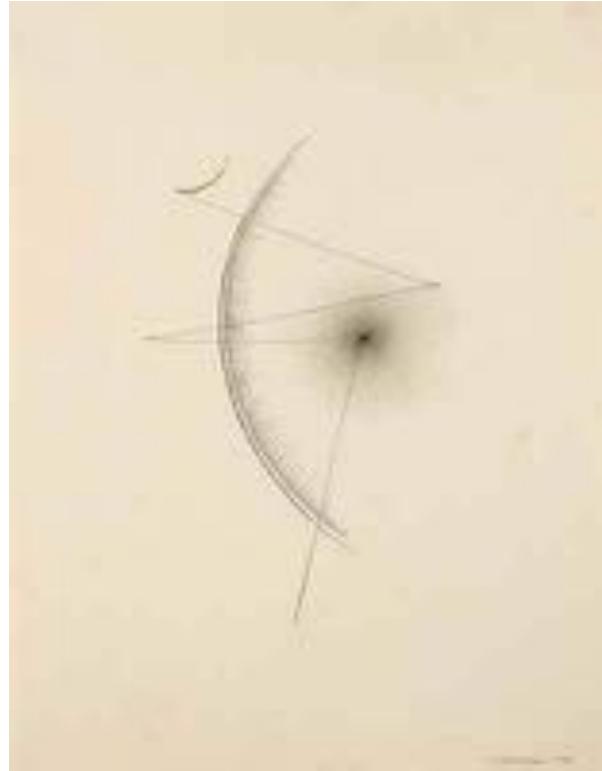
⁹ Tutundjian made several paintings under glass in 1928–29.



ill.12 - *Untitled*, 1928. Ink on paper, 30 x 21.5 cm. Private collection.



ill.13 - *Untitled*, 1928. Ink on paper, 27 x 17.8. Private collection.



ill.14 - *Untitled*, 1926. Ink on paper, 28.5 x 22 cm. Private collection.



ill.15 - *Untitled*, 1927. Ink on paper, 30 x 21 cm. Private collection.



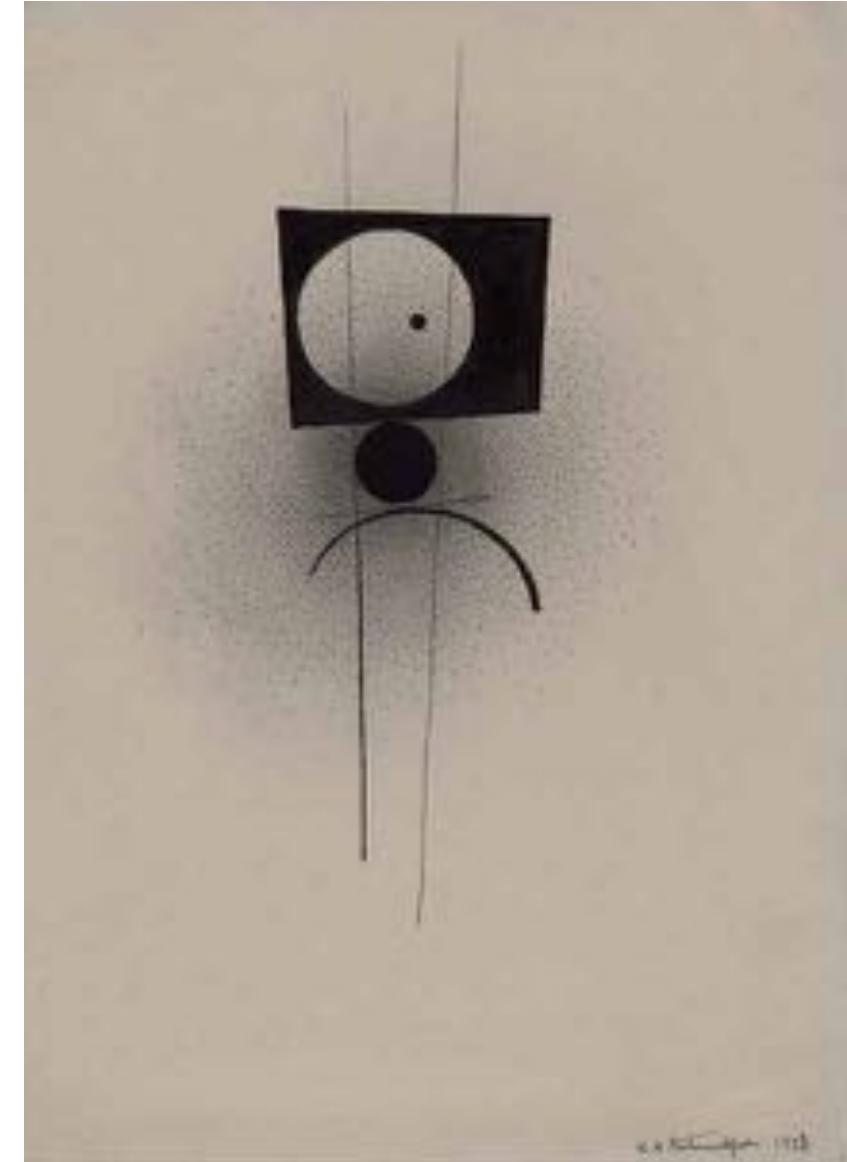
ill.16 - *Untitled*, 1926. Ink on paper, 24 x 17.7 cm. Private collection.

Sobriety and refinement are the watchwords of Tutundjian's artistic language, and his reliefs epitomise these qualities (ill.1, 20, 21 and 34). In 1928 and 1929 he made a series of mural sculptures, known as "reliefs," that would greatly impress his contemporaries. Even today, they remain his most famous works. Monochromes in neutral, dark colours, made in simple materials and on a small scale, using a limited number of modular elements built from recuperated materials, these works elaborate a raw aesthetic. Their appearance is *poor*. And yet these small assemblages of wood and metal exude a monumentality and elegance that compel and delight the gaze.

Tutundjian made the fullest use of contrasts, playing on effects of shadow and light, with the full and hollow of inverted cupolas, the emptiness of rings and the mass of cylinders, opposing the rhythm of circular volumes to that of lines. He thus imparted balance and dynamism to his compositions. The spaces formed seem open to the outside and endowed, like the universe, with a power of expansion already activated by the way the rods reach beyond the base below.

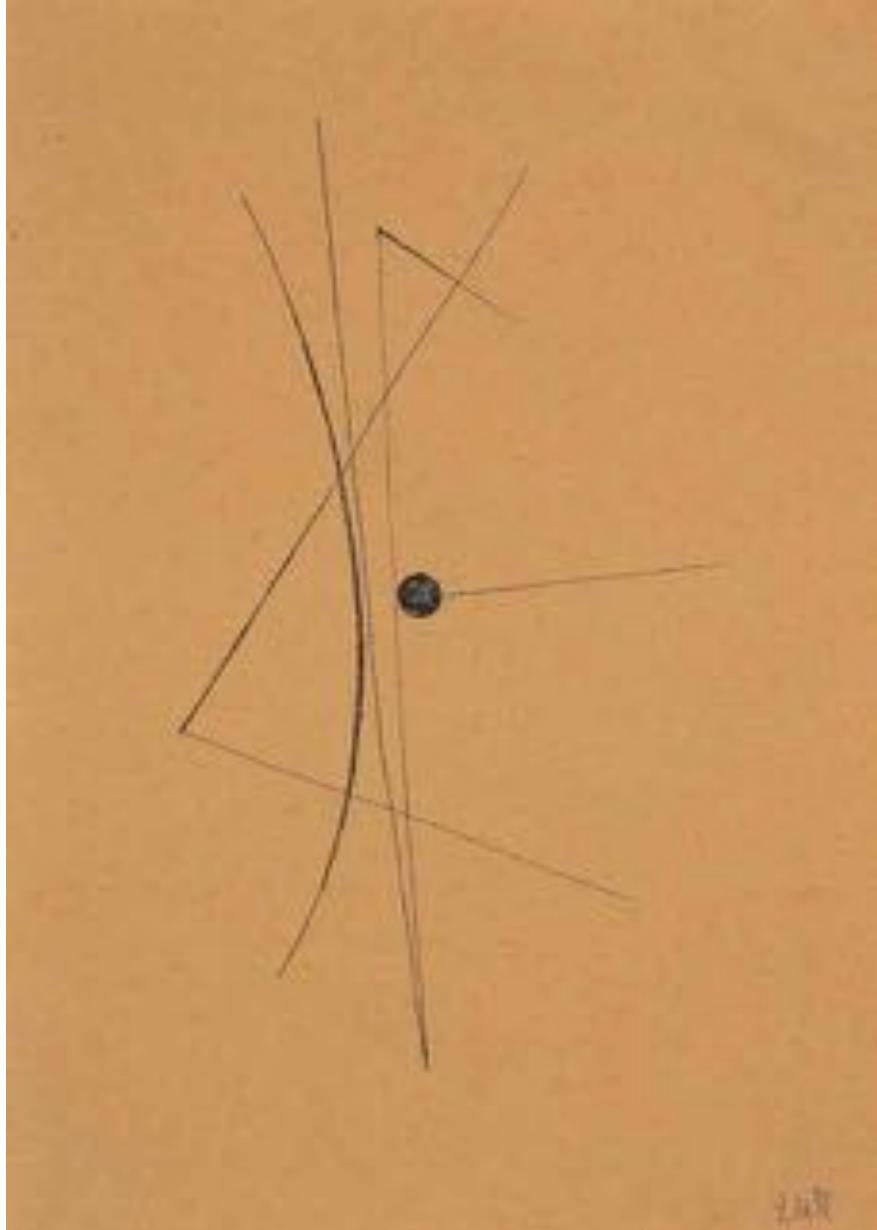
Such boldness did not go unnoticed. Tutundjian was spotted, esteemed and even admired by his peers, and invited to feature in avant-garde events and publications in Europe.

Héliou, a very close friend and vital witness, recalled: "The exhibition at Galerie Bonaparte in 1929 made a violent impression on the little world of people tormented by a new art. [...] His painting of thin lines and subtle gradations seemed to paint a cosmos, a world of spheres oscillating on their trajectories. This all had extraordinary authority. [...] Léon Tutundjian spoke a very different language and spoke it admirably [...]. This was the other truth that I had long been looking to discover."¹⁰

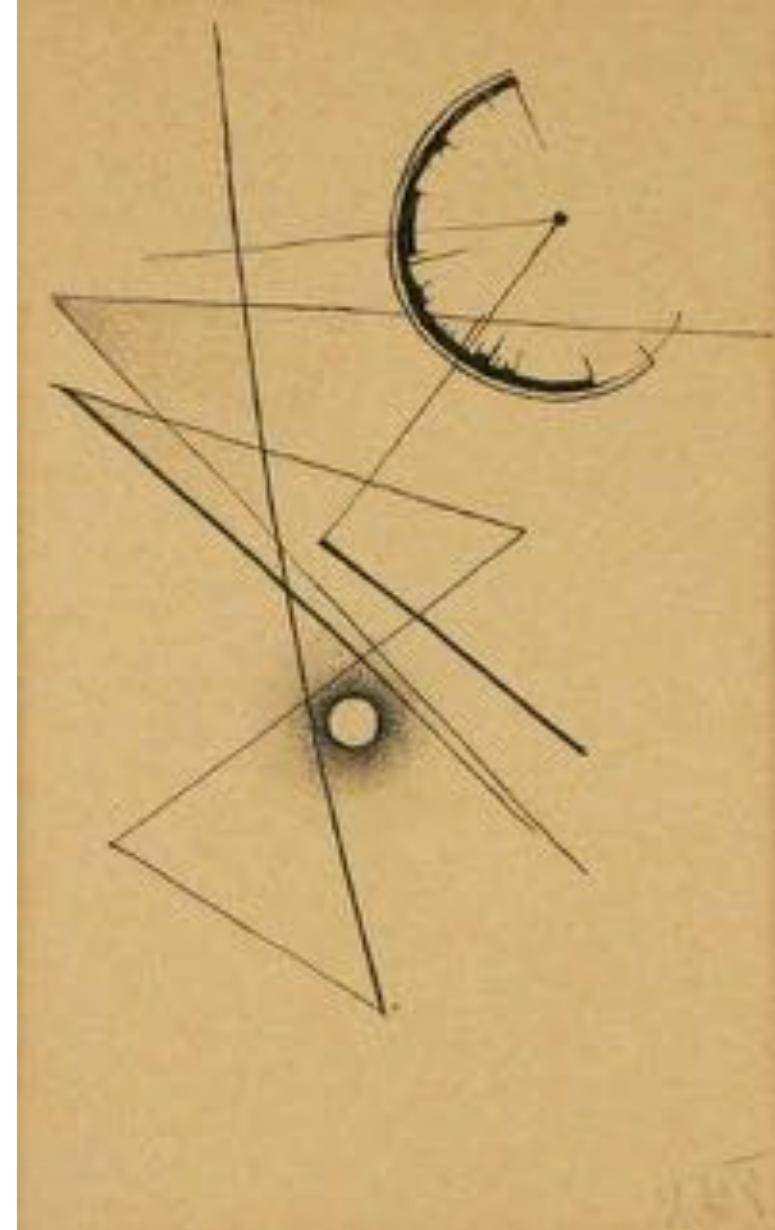


ill.17 - *Untitled*, 1928. Ink on paper, 24.1 x 17.1 cm.
MoMA - Museum of Modern Art, New York. The Riklis Collection of McCrory Corporation

¹⁰ Jean Héliou, *À perte de vue* followed by *Choses revues*, Paris: IMEC Éditions, 1996.



ill.18 - *Untitled*, 1928. Ink on paper, 16.2 x 11.8 cm. Private collection, Paris.



ill.19 - *Untitled*, c.1927. Ink on paper, 18 x 11.5 cm. Private collection.

Theory and manifestos

In 1929–1930, Tutundjian, Héliou, Carlsund and Wantz joined with Van Doesburg to create a group and a journal titled Art Concret. Their project was one in a series of undertakings – the formation of artists' groups, publication of manifestos and journals, etc. – aiming to promote knowledge of abstract art, which at the time was still the target of virulent attacks.

Art Concret presented a radical programme designed to define a rigorous foundation for non-figurative art. It excluded from its idea of the artwork both any reference to the forms of nature and any recourse to intuitive modes of composition, in order to construct paintings uniquely from purely plastic elements using only exact methods: calculation, precise ratios between pictorial components and the repetition of modular elements. Sensibility, emotion, dream, lyricism, sentimentality, fantasy, mystery and all things personal were prohibited. Line, just like sculpture, must be set free of the author's psychology, the objective being for the work to take on a universal character. The point was to "find in art invariants just as there are laws in the sciences."¹¹

Indeed, Tutundjian must certainly have been charmed by the idea of learning "from the mathematician to eliminate and discard; to keep in mind the type and leave the single case with all its accidents, alone." Such, again, was the idea put forward by the biologist and mathematician D'Arcy Thompson. Like him, they believed that "rigour" could be "combined with all but endless freedom."¹²

It was in the year preceding the formation of the group that he made his pared-down, monochrome (black or ash grey) reliefs, using great economy of means and simple materials, with a limited number of elements: rods, bowls, small wooden cylinders, rings and metal springs.

11 Serge Lemoine, *Art constructif*, Paris: Editions du Centre Georges Pompidou, 1992.

12 D'Arcy Thompson, *On Growth and Form* (1917), Cambridge University Press, 2014, p. 269.



ill.20 - *Untitled*, 1929 Painted wood and metal, 36.3 x 29. Private collection.

By placing one of his wall sculptures (ill. 1) at the centre of the eighteen pages of the journal *Art concret*, its founders were recognising the closeness of these visual propositions to their own declared programme. In the same way, a drawing conceived by Tutundjian almost entirely on mathematical principles featured on the catalogue cover of the ESAC exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, in 1929 (ill. 32).

However, at the time the members of Art Concret made very few works that effectively matched their stated theory. They were aware of the discrepancy between the passionate asceticism of their manifesto and the deep, inner aspirations that drove them on. Moreover, such orthodoxy tended to isolate them from other non-figurative artists. As Héliou ironically recalled some years later: "We wanted to do something so pure that we eliminated just about everyone [...]. Van Doesburg had already fallen out with everyone."¹³



ill.21 - *Untitled*, 1929 Painted wood and metal, 23 x 25 cm. Private collection.

13 Daniel Abadie, *Héliou ou la forces des choses*, La Connaissance, 1975.

A strange beauty

Thus, even if Tutundjian's allegiance to Art Concret meant that he was adhering to a declared enterprise of rationalising art, all his work carries an emotional charge and an oneiric dimension that both intrigue and capture the gaze. And it is particularly from this duality, with strict, orthogonal construction alongside the presence of a different, poetic and mysterious reality, that the enigmatic beauty of his works arises.

It is hard not to be slightly destabilised by the sight of this organic form which is both finished and evolving, bathed in a stellar light and seeming to come out of a dream, floating in a space where it is caught in the web of the ether (ill. 22). With its milky white colour it suggests the soft, reassuring curve of a female body, as in archaic evocations like a Palaeolithic Venus. In contrast, the imprecision of its left side, which is slightly hidden, is perturbing here. Are we seeing the obliteration of the thing, as if absorbed by its environment, or, on the contrary, the expansion of an organism still being formed? As for the encounter with a finely traced red circle, it announces the possibility of a conjunction of constructed, predetermined forms and indeterminate, dreamed forms. But, like an eclipse, the encounter could well be short-lived. The two heavenly bodies are placed together on the same axis. There is nothing to tell us that this will be stable and durable.

How can we not marvel in the same way at this simple yet majestic extended form covered with a grid of greyish fibrils forming a protective shelter for delicate cells (ill. 23)? There is something calm and soothing about this horizontal composition. And yet through it there runs a real vitality, and a slow movement, produced as much by uninterrupted ciliary movement as by the thrust of the thick black circle. The form is accompanied in its ineluctable movement by genial undulating lines.

In all these works, the general impression – which is fascinating – partakes of a transitory balance between stasis and dynamics, finiteness and metamorphosis, serenity and tension.

Just as much as the biomorphic visions, the most rigorous drawings are endowed with potential kinetic energy and dynamic relations between the forms. Thus, in this strict system of appearances (ill. 18), the straight line – which has a little globe at its tip – is transformed into an arrow. Its speed is slow but its power, augmented by the orientation of the triangle, seems



ill. 22 - *Untitled*. Oil on canvas, 55 x 38 cm.
Musée National d'Art Moderne - Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris.

irresistible. The vertical lines will soon be impacted. And the bow, though charged with an opposing force, does not look like a buttress capable of countering the process that has been initiated.

Here, Tutundjian's approach fully takes on Klee's idea of "an original movement" and "natural obviousness of movement."¹⁴ It also echoes the work being done by astronomers at the time on the ineluctable movement of the galaxies and the general expansion of the universe. By the same token it introduces into the elaboration of forms, into painting, a principle of temporal unfolding and speed. The images that are created, while fixing that movement, convey the image of what is a phase leading on to others, a momentary state between two evolutions. The forms, "as if moved by an internal power that we usually credit only to the realm of life, seem capable of continuing their growth beyond the moment when they are seen."¹⁵

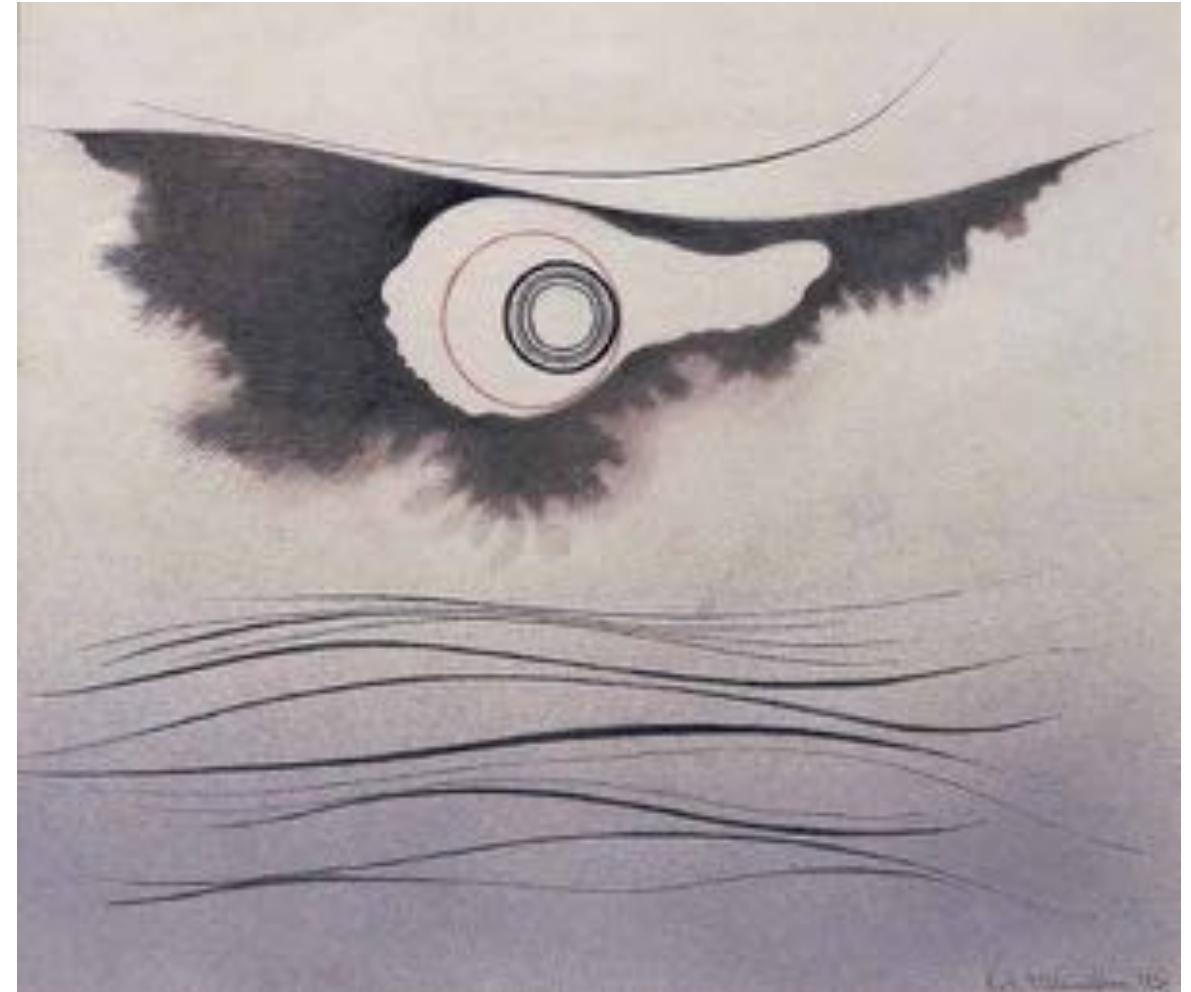
Rooted in a poetics of life forms and a cosmos in a state of constant evolution, this vision echoes the words of Pre-Socratic philosopher Anaxagoras: "Nothing is born nor destroyed, but there is mixture and separation of things which exist." This may be taken to mean that there is no process of disappearance, and no true death, but only phases of transformation of things linked in endless cycles. The forms created by Tutundjian thus convey to us the notion of infinity seen in its two aspects: the spatial and the temporal. In keeping with what Jean de Loisy writes about "simple forms," they "accompany and sometimes signify the modification of all things, and thus, also, the enigmatic cycle of our lives. [...] They are the expression of continuous transformations of what existed, exists and will exist."¹⁶

The aesthetic emotion is further heightened by Tutundjian's ability to liberate his compositions from gravity while instituting relations of weight and counter-weight between the elements, thereby managing to maintain a perfect overall coherence. In his series of "compositions with sphere" (ill. 24), all of them extremely elegant, a surprising equilibrium forms. On one side, the inertia of the sphere that, despite its vaporous modelling, appears dark and bulky;

14 Paul Klee, *Cours du Bauhaus*, op. cit.

15 Jean de Loisy, "Simples ?", in exhib. cat., *Formes simples*, Metz: Ed. du Centre Pompidou-Metz; Paris: Fondation d'entreprise Hermès, 2014.

16 Ibidem.



ill.23 - *Untitled*, 1927. Gouache and ink on paper, 27 x 31 cm. Private collection.

on the other, vertical impetus, underscored by a “stepped” ground, enlivens the edifice with a movement of elevation, towards the domain of the vibrant, of the spiritual.

Everywhere in Tutundjian’s work, straight lines “vibrate, at once precious and moving in their fragility,”¹⁷ just as the string of the violin springs to life under the bow. Thus, the compositions, the fruit of an orderly rhythm, of harmonies and dissonances, seem capable of sounding a harmonious music of the spheres. The violinist and painter are now one.

The art of synthesis

One of the keys to Tutundjian’s language is to be found in the union of geometrical and organic forms, as in the combination of rational and emotional atmospheres, which so many others try to make hermetically separate. The opposition can be summed up in this definitive, imagistic formula: “the shape of the square confronts the silhouette of the amoeba.”¹⁸ Rather than confrontation, Tutundjian, who refuses to choose categorically between the aesthetic of the engineers and poeticised forms, between (scientific) construction and (plastic) intuition, establishes a climate of alliances and dialectics.

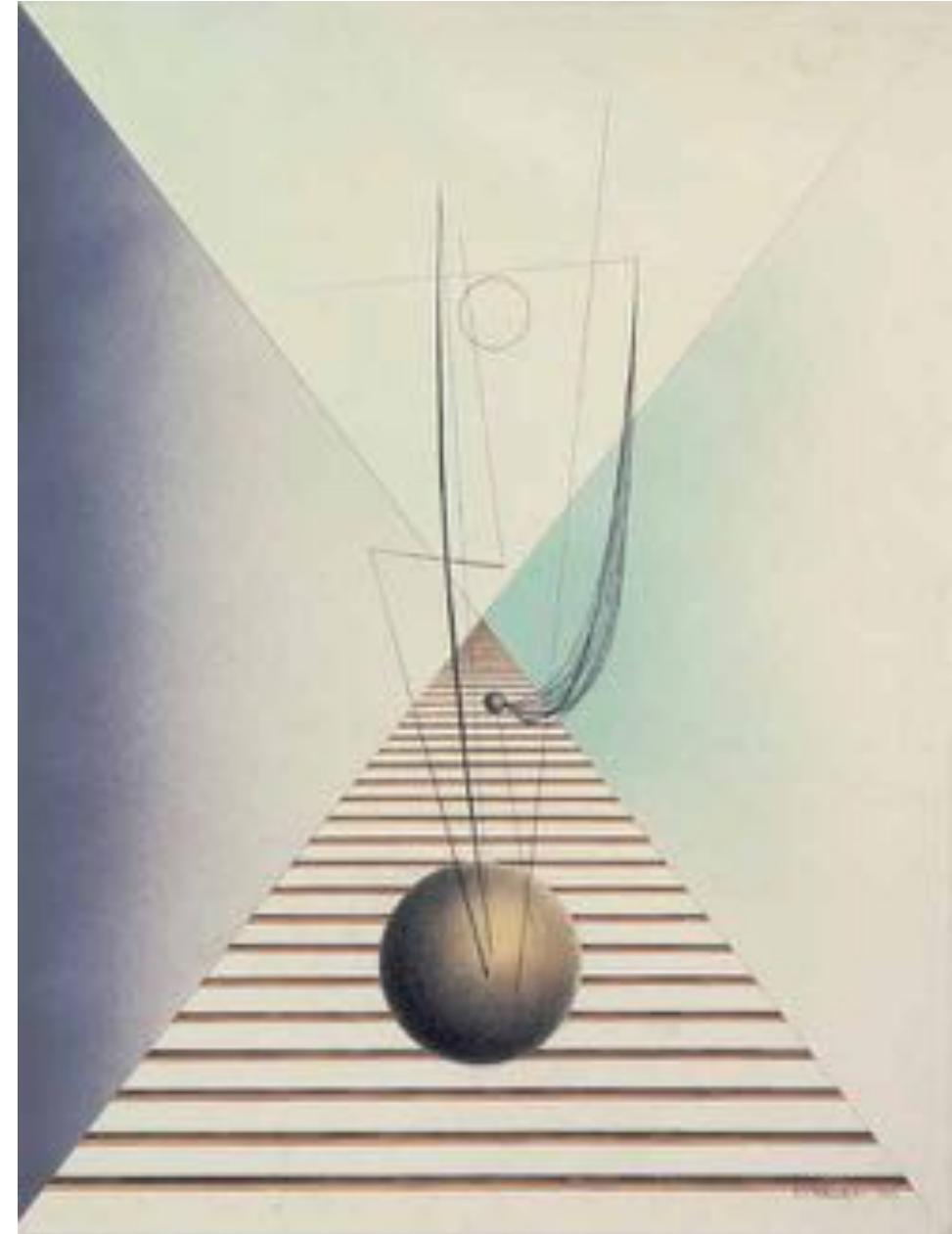
In this respect, together with Arp, Miró, Picasso and Giacometti, he is among those artists who opened the way to synthesis. All followed their own path freely, ignoring partitions and constituted movements: abstraction on one side, Surrealism on the other.

His art is an art of the in-between, and its influence on those around him was immediate. For Daniel Abadie, a former curator at the Musée National d’Art Moderne-Centre Pompidou, “divided between geometry and lyricism, prefiguring with an advance of twenty years the discoveries of Art Informel, [his] universe of lines and balls which left its mark on the first constructions of Calder, creates an inward, personal climate close to that of certain works in the Surrealist movement.”¹⁹

17 Gladys Fabre, *Tutundjian*, op. cit.

18 The words were used by Alfred Barr in the MoMA exhibition catalogue *Cubism and Abstract Art* (1936). Quoted by Guitemie Maldonado, op. cit.

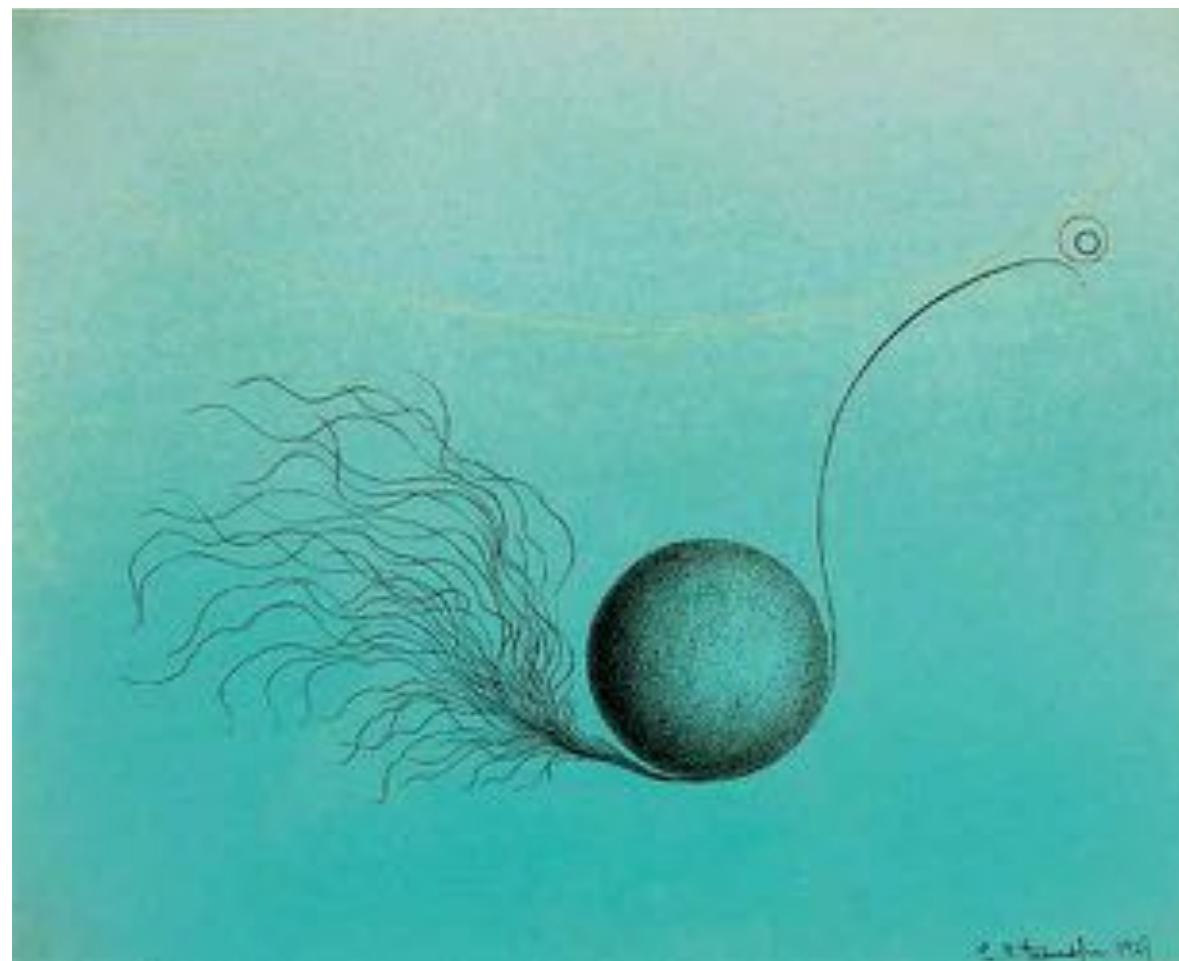
19 Daniel Abadie, “Art abstrait, art concret”, *Études*, 1970/9, vol. 333.



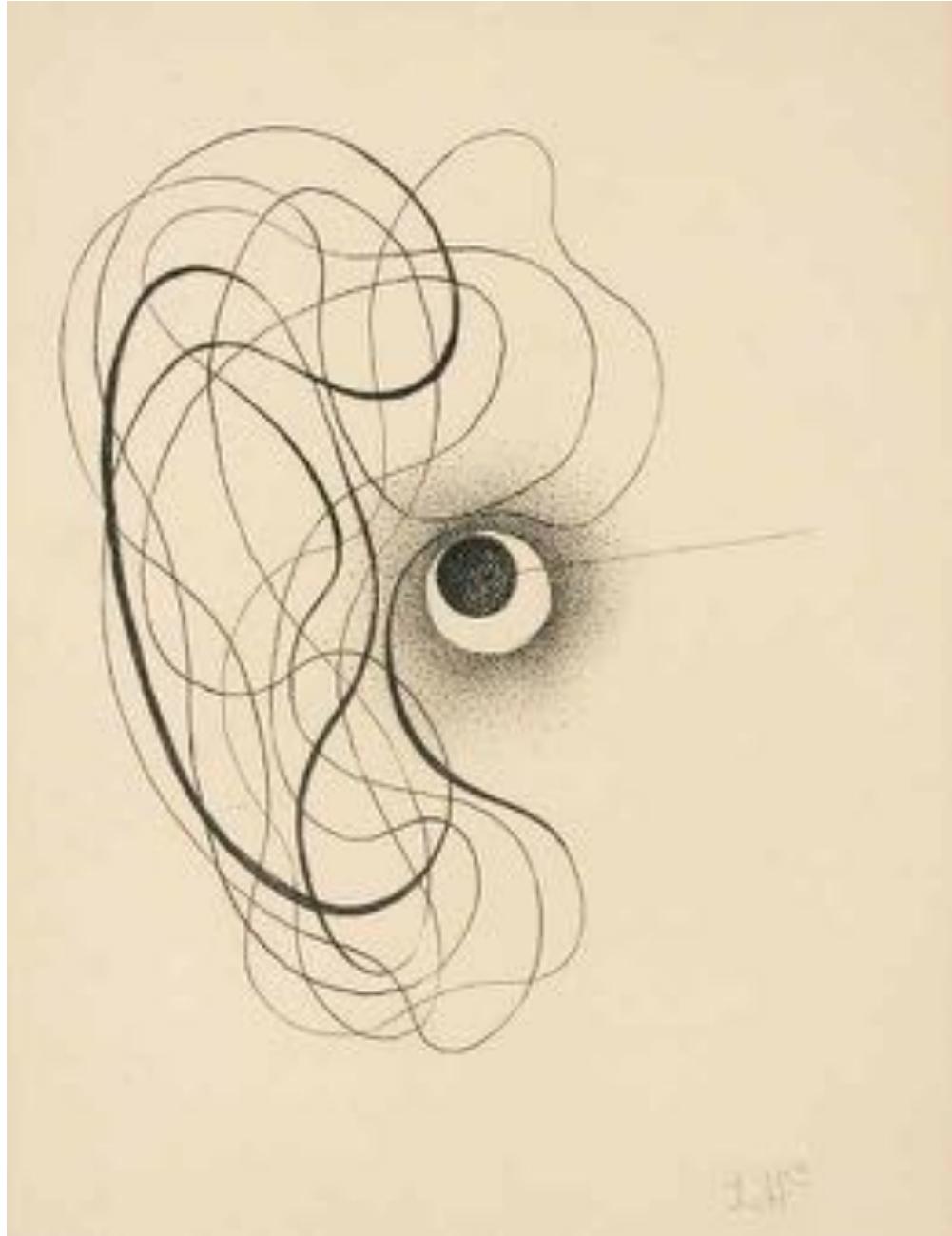
ill.24 - *Untitled*, 1927. Ink and watercolour on paper, 64 x 49.5 cm. Private collection.



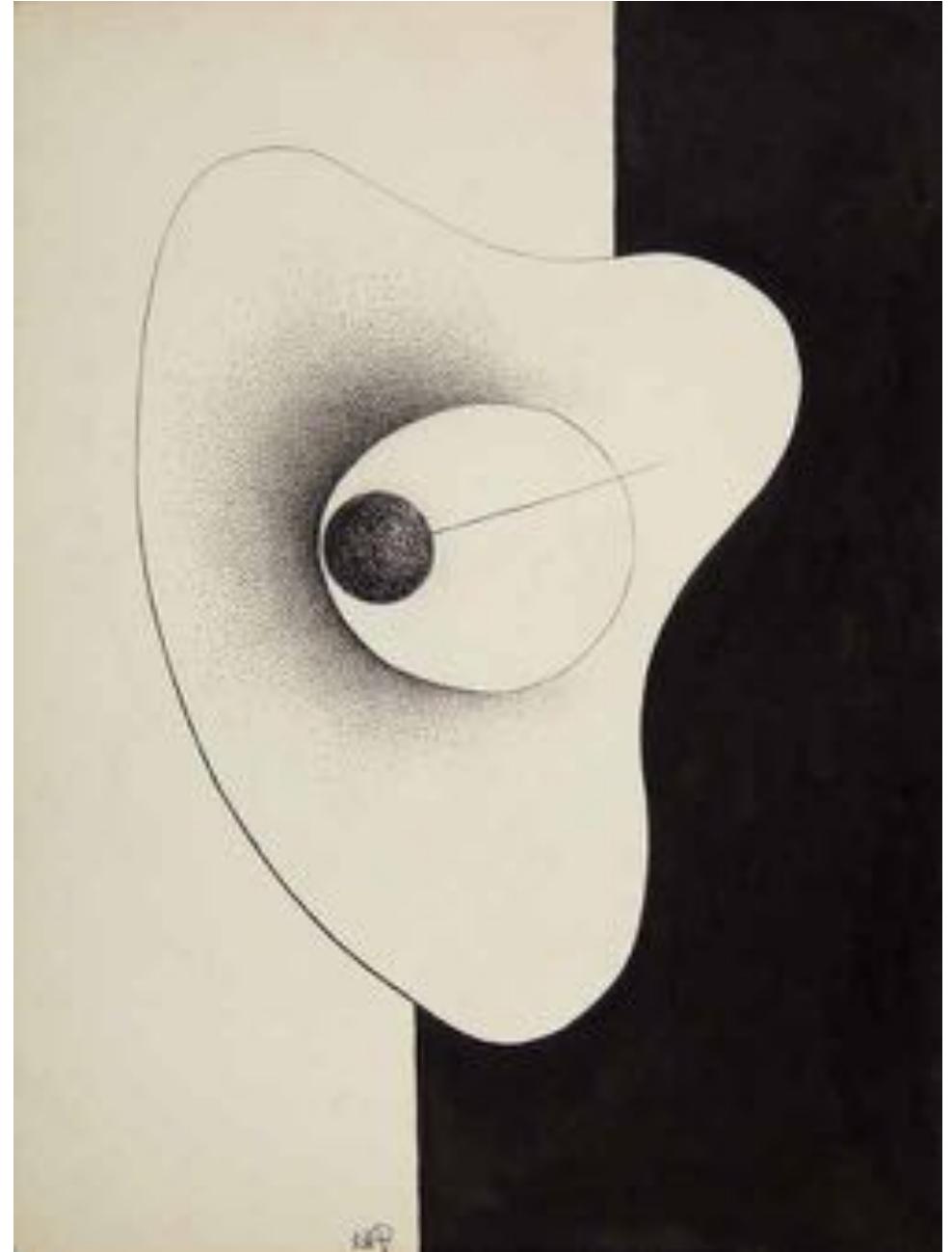
ill.25 - *Untitled*, 1927. Gouache and ink on paper, 26.3 cm x 30 cm. Private collection.



ill.26 - *Untitled*, 1927. Gouache and ink on paper, 24.5 x 30.2 cm. Private collection.



ill.27 - *Untitled*, 1927. Ink on paper, 23.5 x 18 cm.



ill.28 - *Untitled*, 1928. Ink on paper, 31 x 23 cm. Private collection.

Gladys Fabre sees more artistic connections: “The expression of sensitivity to immateriality and the transcendent is something that is shared by Malevich, Miró, Klein and Tutundjian. Much as it is non-representational, this form of expression diverges from so-called Art Concret and pure formalism in that it remains the sensuous transposition of a referent that is outside painting.”

This vocabulary taken from life forms, which he used in the years 1926–1928, heralds the biomorphism of the 1930s, which we find both in the evolution of Balmer and Valmier and in Kandinsky’s Parisian period; it would also have its place in England (notably with Moore and Hepworth), and “play an important role in the definition of American abstraction.”²⁰

The desire for an elsewhere, and for another way

All the signs are that Léon Tutundjian returned to figurative work some time in 1929, initially in the form of drawings, and that he stopped making abstract works as early as 1930. Surprisingly, then, for two more years he nevertheless remained a member and even a founder of the movements most adamantly opposed to figurative art.

Thus, with the failure of Art Concret due to the inability of its founders to properly echo their manifesto, but also for financial reasons, and because the aesthetic platform it afforded was too restrictive, he joined the steering committee of Abstraction-Création. This group, founded in 1931 on a broader basis, with abstraction as its sole principle, brought together all kinds of tendencies and a great diversity of artists. Tutundjian was therefore in contact with numerous painters. It was also in this context that he met Léonce Rosenberg, director of L’Effort Moderne, one of the most esteemed galleries of the day. He now had the chance to truly become a part of the world of artists of all nationalities of which Paris was then the centre.

Soon, however, things grew more complicated. Tutundjian, like Arp and Héliou, became wary of conventions and dogmatism. They did not buy into the certitudes of those who thought they had attained a definitive truth. “In real art,” Kandinsky had written, “theory does not precede practice.”²¹ Tutundjian’s own rather humorous words expressed a very similar idea: “It’s

²⁰ Guitemie Maldonado, op. cit.

²¹ Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Dover, 1977.



ill.29 - *Untitled*, 1929. Oil on canvas, 59 x 73 cm. Private collection.

when you think you're smart that you're about to screw up."²²

In his memoirs, Héliou spoke at length about this period of closeness with his friend, Tutundjian. "The two of us," he wrote, "were on our way elsewhere, whereas the abstract painters to whom we were close had arrived and had every attention of staying there."²³ And he adds: "Tutundjian said quite openly that our concerns were insubstantial, that we were tying ourselves to the surface, to the materials. He wanted to address the deeper dimensions." The two men went to the Louvre together. Out of a spirit of contradiction as much as from the fear of sterility and intellectual stagnation, they were "attracted by what was condemned."²⁴ Héliou was convinced that "something that had happened in painting in the age of Cimabue, Giotto and Raphael could still circulate in modern painting." And Tutundjian, in the letters he wrote to Léonce Rosenberg in 1933, echoes these kinds of preoccupations in his concern for "technical durability," speaking of painting that, founded on "theoretical bases," ran the risk of "not outliving its own theory" while evoking a "degradation of the quality value."

Such questions thus led to what looked like a radical transition. Indeed, it is striking to see how much his first figurative works are haunted by both the symbolism of the passage between different universes and states (doors, tunnels, mirrors, pierced wall, hollowed forms in which the gaze can circulate, the gestures of passing objects and passing thresholds, rough/carved stone) and omnipresent Greco-Roman elements (colonnades, temples, etc.).

But we should note that if Tutundjian felt stifled and ended up leaving Abstraction-Création in 1932, when he oriented his expression towards Surrealist figuration, he viewed this development more as a natural development in his work than as a break.

Certainly, his new attentiveness to the inner life and to the resources of the individual represented a major change, but already in his abstract painting we can find suggestions of all kinds of tiny echoes of the real world and of referents "outside painting." In formal terms, therefore, the shift was effected almost gradually. The circle becomes an eye, filaments turn into hair, the skeins

22 Aphorism by Tutundjian which Héliou quotes several times in different forms in his memoirs in connection with the years 1930/31. Another variant is: "When you're feeling clever, that means you're about to make a mistake."

23 Daniel Abadie, *Héliou ou la forces des choses*, op. cit.

24 Jean Héliou, *À perte de vue*, op. cit.



ill.30 - *Untitled*, 1927. Gouache and ink on paper, 50 x 62 cm. Private collection.

of lines become rope, the spheres become apples, the rhizome, branches of a tree, the compositions with flat patches of black and white become chessboards, the placental and cellular forms become fruits and seeds.

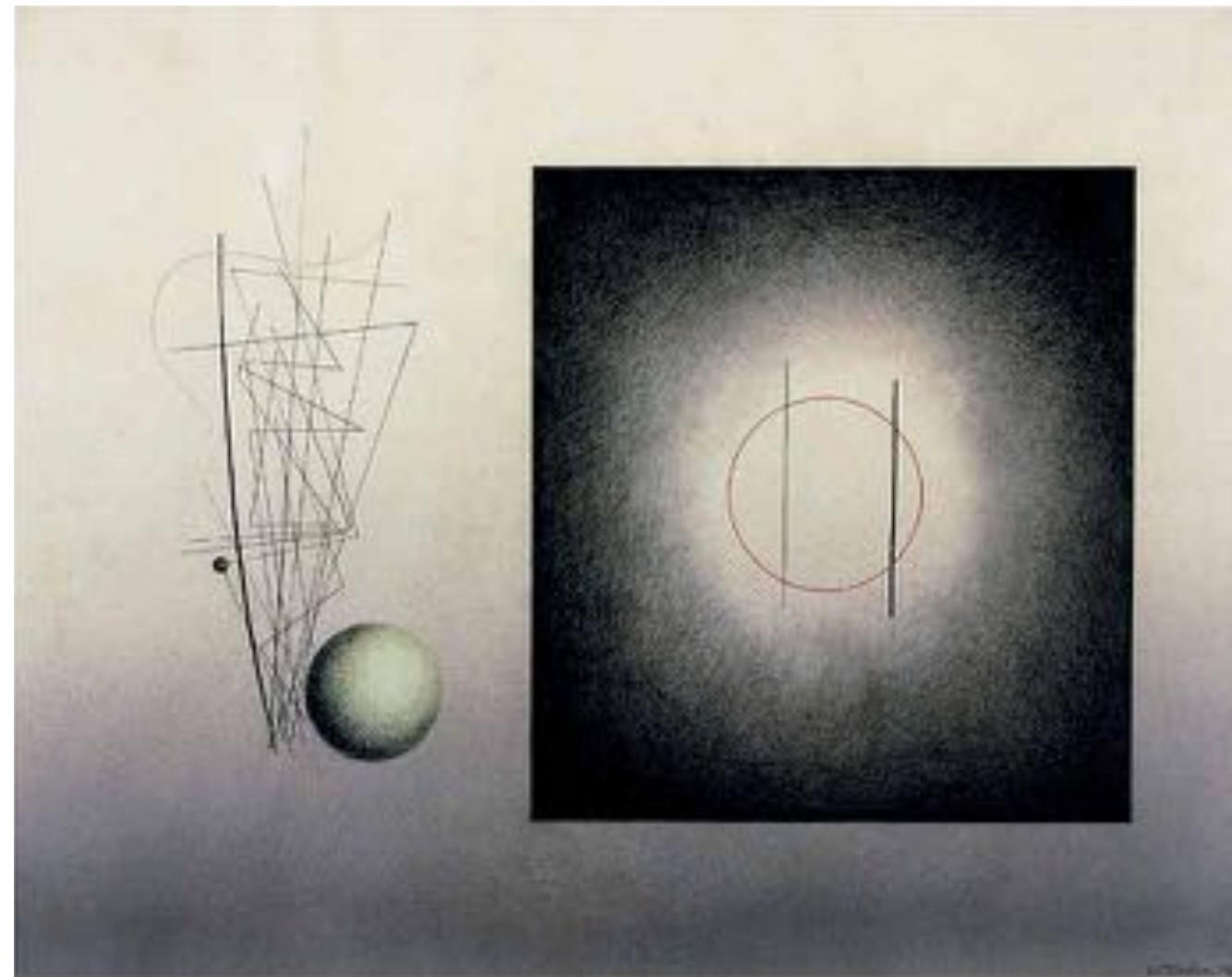
Certain atmospheres, too, while handled in a way that is literally different, are ultimately fairly analogous. With his new painting, Tutundjian extended and amplified his reveries about life forms and his metaphysical questions, between the aesthetic of the geometer and processes of metamorphosis. His aim was, as ever, to express himself through a language that aspired to universality. But he changed his method. For mathematical and above all geometrical vocabulary – supposed, already to avoid the particularisms of periods, milieus and persons – he substituted another universality, that of a symbolic idea developed out of visual impressions and archetypal forms.

In fact, his change of direction was no isolated event on the avant-garde scene of the day. It was very likely related to that of the Halmstad group formed in 1929 by six Swedish painters whom Tutundjian could well have met through their compatriot Carlsund. Initially faithful to Art Concret, this group soon opted for a Surrealist language. Erik Olson, its best-known member, wrote these words, which are very close to Tutundjian's, in 1930: "After a whole summer of calculations, I have tried to develop and renew myself [...]. The compass and the ruler lead no further than a training in discipline; a deeper vibration is lacking."²⁵

For these artists, the greater formal freedom offered by Surrealism opened up the possibility of representing the oppressively threatening and doubt-ridden atmosphere of the times. In Tutundjian's work there appeared distressing images combining empty spaces, grotesque creatures, doffed masks, derelict buildings, bound and severed hands, and gagged faces.

The red, grimacing mask (ill. 41) belongs in this vein. The right-hand and bottom zone, near the dead tree, are unsteady, as if struck by the threat of dislocation. The mouth is tense, the teeth are shaky, the frozen and lifeless eye seems blind, the flesh is blackening or rotting, painfully transfixed by slender struts. In a more limited space, the top of the figure offers the calm of a tree-planted landscape, like a recollection of the artist's native land. And the right eye, animated by a light yet ample movement, is very much open. This is an element that runs all through Tutundjian's work: the open eye, observing the

25 Pontus Hultén (et al.), *Le groupe de Halmstad*, Halmstad, 1978.



ill.31 - *Untitled*. Gouache and ink on paper, 89 x 116.5 cm. Private collection.

world, and the gaze, more often turned to face another place. A lost epoch, perhaps? Possibly. An uncertain future. Most certainly. As he himself wrote in 1933, the artist is "the sensitive magnet of future evolutions."

"A most unjustified neglect"²⁶

At the turn of the 1930s, Tutundjian occasionally showed his new work and obtained the support of Léonce Rosenberg.²⁷ But while on one side, he was deprived of the growing renown of the abstraction movements and then of their international stature, nor did he ever really become a part of the world of Surrealist artists. Later, having no official gallery, he exhibited little and sold only a few canvases to collectors and to the state. Throughout his life, it was his activity as a ceramist²⁸ that enabled him to support his family. This was a great drain on his time and energy.

He went back to abstraction at the turn of the 1960s for a new immersion in its spatio-temporal universe, halfway between the worlds of stars and cells. Geometry is discreet here. A certain gentleness is felt. The compositions are less strict, but always full of authority.

Vital élan is perhaps no longer the subject. And yet everything holds together, everything vibrates and quivers.

The often trembling line, the instability of the charcoal, the pale and evanescent rendering of the pastel now favoured by the artist, the vaporous spraying, all give the works a fragility through which a sense of melancholy sometimes emerges. Once again, the artist evinces considerable freedom and his works in oil from 1960 "are masterpieces that synthesise all his present and past researches."²⁹ Enveloped in the rust and gold light of a winter sun, the canvas held at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (ill. 42) offers a telescopic view of a strange phenomenon. Like a comet, a brown, stony body, followed by a thin red trail, seems to have taken flight, orbiting around a gaseous mass that a chaotic net struggles to contain, as if blown hither and thither by a cosmic wind.

²⁶ Gladys Fabre, exhib. cat., *Abstraction création 1931-1936*, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1978.

²⁷ Rosenberg for a while took up the role of selling his Surrealist paintings.

²⁸ In the 1930s he opened a small studio which worked to capacity during the war to produce everyday objects, to make up for the closure of factories. In the 1950s he concentrated on one-off decorative pieces.

²⁹ Gladys Fabre, *Tutundjian*, op. cit.



ill.32 - Cover of the catalogue for the ESAC exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam in 1929.



ill.33 - *Untitled*, 1929. Oil on canvas, mounted, 33 x 19 cm. Private collection.

During this decade, a number of events helped put the artist back in the public eye. In 1957 he took part in the Art Concret show in Stockholm and, the following year, the Collette Allendy gallery in Paris featured his work from the 1920s in a critical successful show. In 1964 he was to the fore once again with the exhibition *50 ans de Collage* at the Musée d'Art et d'Industrie in Saint-Etienne and shortly afterwards, in an authoritative book on *Collage* by art historian Herta Wescher. Finally, in 1966 the up and coming Yvon Lambert gallery in Paris displayed his abstract work on three separate occasions: pieces from the 1920s in the exhibition *Art concret* with Héliou and Arp (ill. 18) and at the Salon Grands et Jeunes d'Aujourd'hui, and recent work in a solo show. Lambert's exhibitions were greeted by several very favourable reviews in the press and led to several other collaborations (Tutundjian took part in the *Zero Point* exhibition organised by the poet and critic Imre Pan, and was featured in a special issue of the poetry journal *Strophes*³⁰).

But the public life of Tutundjian's art did not really begin until after his death, in 1968. For by now museum interest was revived and typical works from 1926–30 featured regularly in national and international shows (see the list of posthumous exhibitions on page 70). Art historian Gladys Fabre played a decisive role here as of 1978 as she worked to redress a "most unjustified neglect."

When Tutundjian died, the contents of his studio were dispersed at several auctions organised by Maître Robert in Paris. Large numbers of works were acquired in fragmentary fashion by individuals and dealers, but no one ever really specialised in them except for the Basmadjian gallery, which no longer exists.

After those auctions, several determined collectors worked to locate and gather representative groups of the works, that being the necessary precondition for public exhibitions.

For example, Galerie de France, directed by Catherine Thieck, was able to present an outstanding monograph show of Tutundjian's work at the FIAC in 1994. This was a great success in terms of both the quantity and quality of press coverage and of interest from collectors.

At the same time, Gladys Fabre produced the first and, so far, only monograph

30 Founded in the 1960s by Daniel Abadie and Daniel Templon, among others.



ill.34 - *Untitled*, 1929 Painted wood and metal, 29 x 43.8 cm. IVAM - Centre Julio Gonzalez.

on Léon Tutundjian, the definitive volume on his entire artistic output. This was published by Editions du Regard, with the support of Martine and Alain Le Gaillard.

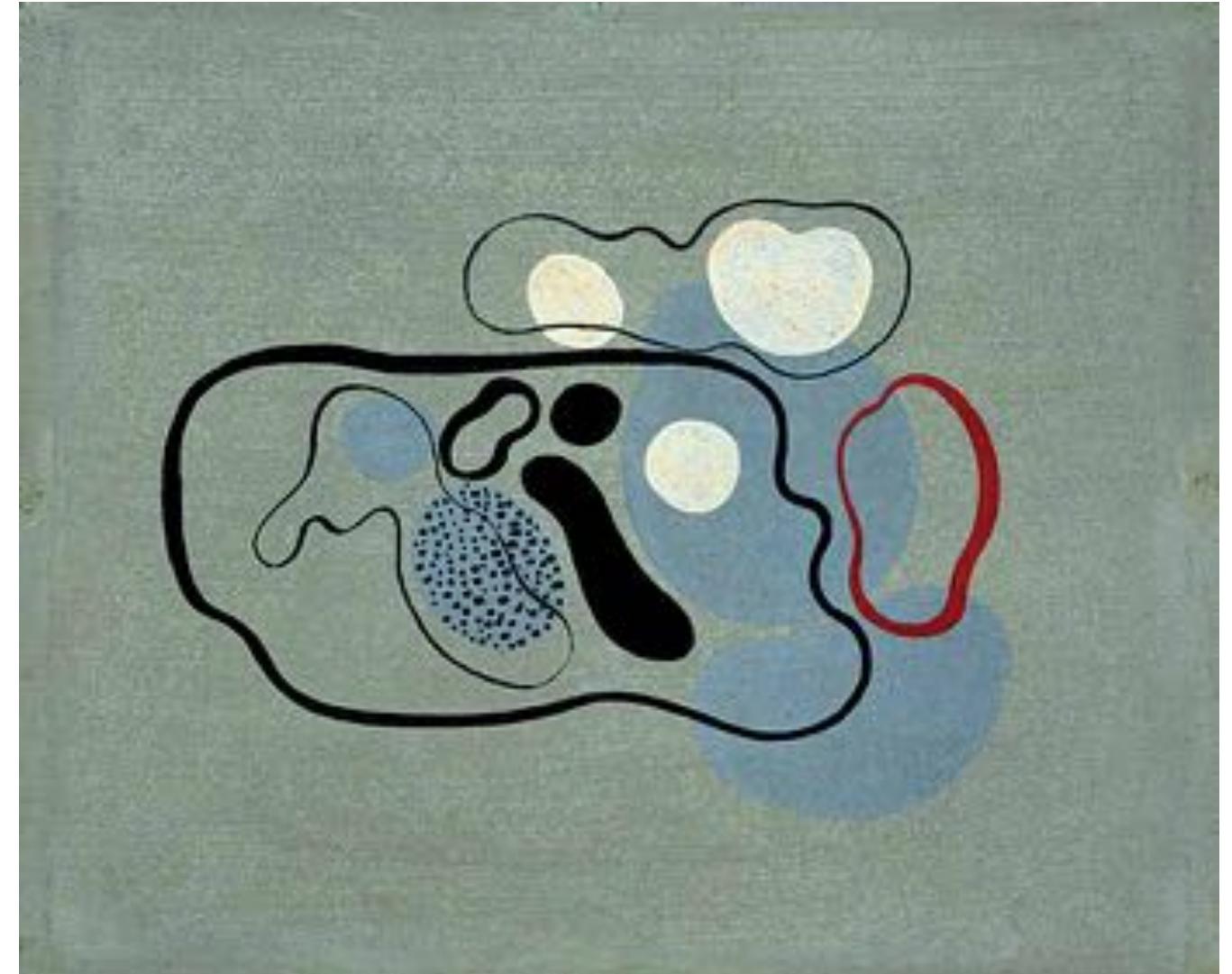
Since then, the work of rediscovery has been continued by the Alain Le Gaillard and Le Minotaure galleries in Paris, and by the Proun gallery in Moscow, who have organised exhibitions and published catalogues.

Even so, Tutundjian's art has continued to suffer from under-exposure and its study is often limited to specialists of the 1920s and 30s.

Hence the need to create tools that are both flexible and solid, capable of creating a lasting dynamic, in order to develop awareness of Tutundjian's artistic specificity and convey the full scope of his work. The creation of a foundation and a committee helped meet this objective by extending and mobilising the circle of enthusiasts and passionate collectors.

These people will join their voices and their actions to the words – full of conviction – that Jean Héliou wrote to Tutundjian in 1958: "I remember when we met, in about 1929, and how extraordinarily far ahead you were of others in our generation, in your mind and in your works. You impressed and influenced quite a few artists, some of whom are now well known, like Calder, for example, who admired you hugely. [...]. Van Doesburg spoke of you in the most glowing terms [...]. Carlsund, and many others, when you had your exhibition in 1929 at Galerie Bonaparte, considered you a master. Herbin liked you especially well. I cannot understand that all these people – those still living – who are now famous, are not indignant at the obscurity into which your name has fallen. I am. No doubt you, like myself, helped matters along in that respect."

Héliou may have been referring here to Tutundjian's temperament, which made him incapable of compromise; to his rigour towards both himself and others; to the principle by which he forbade himself to comment on his works; to his discretion at meetings; or again, to his moral inability to "manoeuvre" for advantage. To illustrate this, we may recall that Tutundjian does not even appear in the one and only group portrait immortalising the founding of Art Concret: he was the one who self-effacingly chose to take the photograph! Ten years later, hearing about the death of his "old companion," Héliou again noted his enthusiasm in his diary: "What a fine retrospective could be put on."



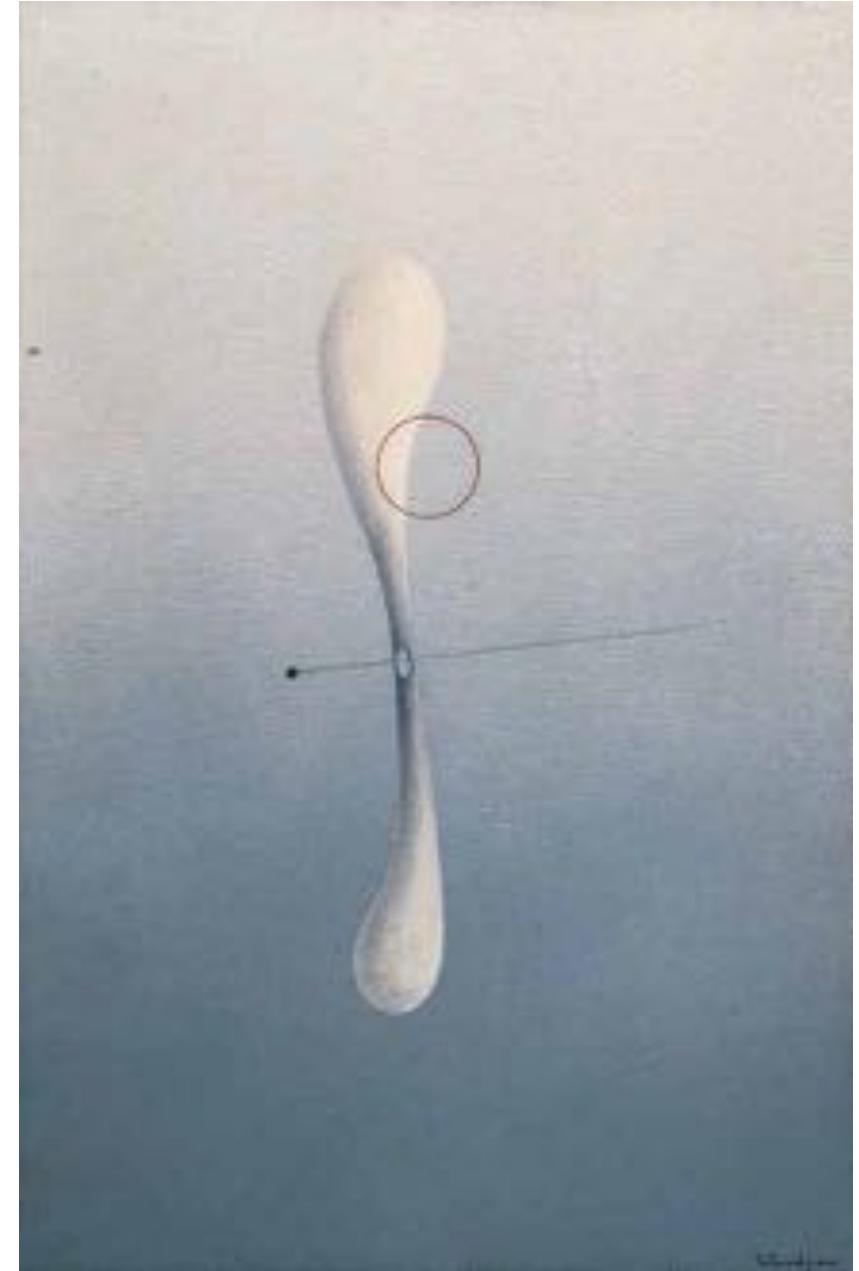
ill.35 - *Untitled*, 1927. Oil on canvas board, 20.3 x 26.5. Private collection.



ill.36 - *Untitled*, 1928. Gouache on board, 24.5 x 32.8 cm. Private collection.



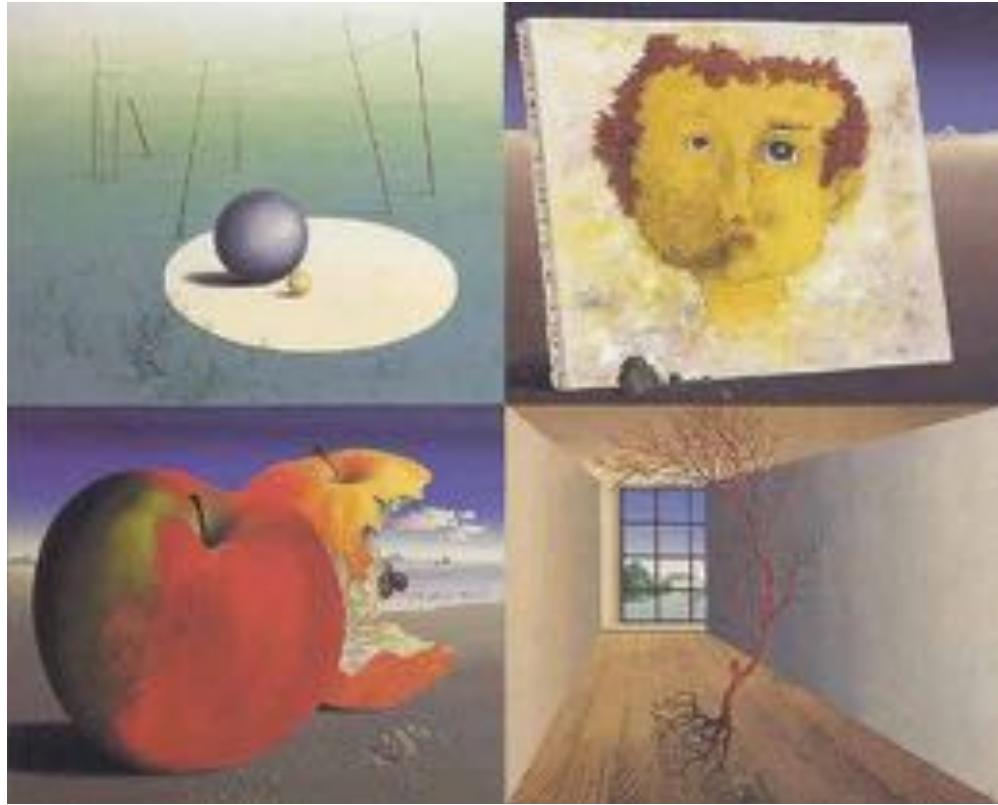
ill.37 - *Untitled*, 1929. Oil on canvas, 100 x 74.5 cm. Private collection.



ill.38 - *Untitled*, 1929. Oil on canvas, 55 x 33.5 cm. Private collection.



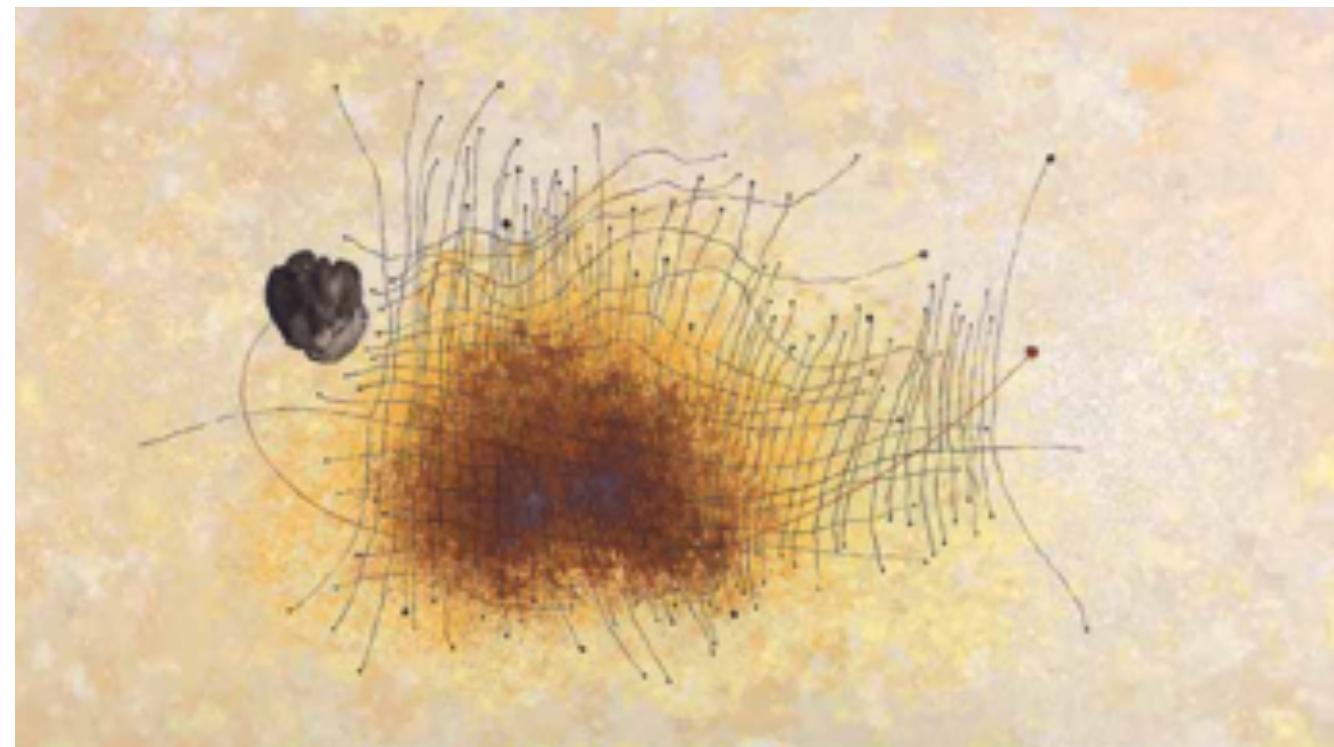
ill.39 - *Untitled*, 1929. Oil on canvas, 65.5 x 81 cm. Private collection.



ill.40 - *Untitled*, c. 1940. Oil on canvas, 81 x 100 cm. Private collection.



ill.41 - *Untitled*. Oil on canvas, 89 x 116.5 cm. Private collection.



ill.42 - *Untitled*, 1960. Oil on canvas, 71 x 125.5 cm.
Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris.

BIOGRAPHICAL HIGHLIGHTS

1905

Born in Amasya (Anatolia).

1922

Goes into exile. Stays in an orphanage in Greece and in the Armenian monastery of San Lazzaro, Venice.

1923–1928

Arrives in Paris. Finds work with a ceramist. First group show.

1929

Exposition d'art abstrait, Galerie des Editions Bonaparte.

ESAC - *Expositions selectes d'art contemporain*, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, with Arp, Charchoune, Van Doesburg, Freundlich, Torres-Garcia, Kupka, Miró, Mondrian, Picasso, Severini, Survage, Villon, etc.

Salon des Surindépendants.

1930

Foundation of the Art Concret group with Carlsund, Héliou, Van Doesburg and Wantz.

Solo show, Galerie des Editions Bonaparte.

International Exhibition of *Post-Cubist Art (Cubism, Post-Cubism, Purism, Constructivism, Neoplasticism, Surrealism)*, organised by Carlsund in Stockholm.

Salon des Surindépendants.

Produktion Paris exhibition, Zurich, featuring Arp, Béothe, Delaunay, Giacometti, Gleizes, Mondrian, Freundlich, Ernst, Vantongerloo, etc.

1931–1933

Is a founder of the Abstraction-Création group and member of the editorial board of the eponymous journal alongside Arp, Gleizes, Héliou, Herbin, Kupka, Valmier and Vantongerloo. Meets the dealer Léonce Rosenberg. Resigns from Abstraction-Création and exhibits with the Surrealists at Galerie Pierre Colle.

1937–1958

Group exhibitions include *Konkrete Kunst* at the Kunsthalle Basel in 1944; the Union of Free Armenian Artists in 1945; the *Salon des Indépendants* every year; *Art Concret* in Stockholm in 1957, etc.

1958–1967

Solo shows of his old abstract works at Galerie Colette Allendy in 1958 and Galerie Yvon Lambert in 1966. Takes part in several group shows, including *Art concret* at Yvon Lambert; *Zéro Point*, (organised by the poet and critic Imre Pan), and *50 ans de collages* at the Musée d'Art et d'Industrie in Saint-Etienne. Salons: *Comparaisons, Grands et Jeunes d'Aujourd'hui*.

1968

Dies in December.



MUSEUMS HOLDING ONE OR MORE WORKS BY LÉON TUTUNDJIAN

SELECT LIST

France

- Musée National d'Art Moderne - Centre Pompidou
- Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris
- Musée de Grenoble
- Musée d'Art moderne et contemporain de Saint-Étienne
- Musée d'Art moderne et contemporain de Strasbourg
- Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lille

Other French public collections

- FNAC - Fonds national d'art contemporain

Europe

- IVAM - Institut Valencià d'Art Modern, Valencia, Spain
- Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk, Denmark
- Museu Coleção Berardo, Lisbon, Portugal
- Museu Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisbon, Portugal

USA

- Mead Art Museum of Amherst College, Amherst
- MoMA - Museum of Modern Art, New York
- Albright Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo
- National Gallery of Art, Washington
- Birmingham Museum of Art

POSTHUMOUS MUSEUM GROUP EXHIBITIONS

SELECT LIST

- Musée d'Art moderne de Strasbourg (1970) *L'art en Europe autour de 1925*
- Dallas Museum of Fine Art (1972) *Geometric Abstraction: 1926-1942*
- MoMA - Museum of Modern Art, New York (1974) *Seurat to Matisse: Drawing in France*
- MoMA - Museum of Modern Art, New York (1975) *In the Twenties*
- MNAM - Centre Pompidou, Paris (1977) *Paris/New York*
- Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin (1977) *Tendenzen der Zwanziger Jahre*
- Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (1978) *Abstraction-Création, 1931-1936*
- The Solomon R.Guggenheim Museum, New York (1979) *The planar dimension. Europe 1912-1932*
- Musée d'Art et d'Industrie de Saint-Etienne (1979) *L'art dans les années 30 en France*
- From 1979 to 1984 in some twenty museums in the United States and Japan (Hokkaido Museum of Modern Art, National Museum of Modern Art Tokyo, Indianapolis Museum of Art, Denver Art Museum, Milwaukee Art Museum, Carnegie Museum of Art etc.) *Constructivism and the Geometric Tradition: Selection from the McCrory Corporation Collection*
- IVAM - Institut Valencià d'Art Modern, Valencia (1990) *Paris 1930. Arte Abstracto-Arte Concreto*
- Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (1997) *Années 30 en Europe*
- Royal Academy, London and Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao (2002) *Paris, capital of the arts 1900-1968*
- The State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg, the Von der Heydt Museum, Wuppertal and Musée des Beaux-Arts de Bordeaux (2003) *Russisch Paris 1910-1960*
- Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid (2004) *Monocromos - de Malevich al presente*
- GAM - Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Turin (2008) *Collage/Collages from Cubism to New Dada*
- Tate Modern, London (2010) *Van Doesburg and the International Avant-Garde*
- BOZAR/Centre for Fine Arts, Brussels (2016), *Theo van Doesburg, A New Expression of Life, Art and Technology*

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IVAM - Centre Julio Gonzalez (page 51)

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September 2018



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