

MUSÉE D'ART  
MODERNE ET  
CONTEMPORAIN  
SAINT-ÉTIENNE  
MÉTROPOLE

# MARCELLE CAHN

## *IN SEARCH OF SPACE*

15 OCTOBRE 2022 - 5 MARS 2023



The MAMC+ presents the first major retrospective dedicated to Marcelle Cahn (1895–1981). In terms of the history of 20th century art, this artist's career began on the margins of the Expressionist and Purist tendencies and flourished in the 1950s with a lyrical yet highly rigorous free abstraction, from which emerged the remarkable achievement of the relief paintings and spatial paintings of the 1960s. From the infinitely small to the quest for an architectural space, Marcelle Cahn (who never renounced figuration, considering her "lyrical things" as a "recreation") developed a singular language of purified and sensitive abstraction, devoid of dogmatism.

This exhibition illustrates the richness and uniqueness of Marcelle Cahn's work. It revisits the different creative contexts in which this artist developed, from German Expressionism at the beginning of the 20th century to the main currents of geometric and lyrical abstraction. This chronological display brings together more than 400 artworks, covering all the techniques used by the artist, including paintings, graphic pieces, sculptures, photographs and collages. These are on loan from cultural institutions and French and foreign private collections, to which the artist donated her studio collection and archives in 1980.



An Alsatian born in Strasbourg, where she spent most of her youth, Marcelle Cahn trained in Berlin during the Great War under Lovis Corinth and Eugen Spiro, then with Fernand Léger and Amédée Ozenfant in Paris (where she chose to spend the last thirty-five years of her life). During the interwar period Marcelle Cahn participated in large events and movements in support of abstract art. Although supported and appreciated by influential artists and critics of her time, in the last years of her life she only rarely had solo exhibitions and lived in a rather isolated state, increased by periods of withdrawal from the art world. For material and health reasons, collage was the dominant technique practiced for the last fifteen years of the career of an artist inclined to rely on the minimum of resources at her disposal. This reflects the appetite of an artist driven all her life by the freedom and poetry of gesture, as well as the play of infinite variations.

"Dear Madam, you definitely deserve to be made citizen of honour of Saint-Étienne! I am delighted to consider you a benefactor of the Museum, and, all jokes aside, I am infinitely grateful for what you do for us." It was in these terms that Maurice Allemand, curator of the musée d'Art et d'Industrie de Saint-Étienne (1947–1966) acknowledged in November 1958, amid a rich correspondence, the essential role of support provided by Marcelle Cahn to this establishment. The artist's privileged connection with the stéphanois museum was expressed by her role as a go-between, interceding to implore numerous artists to enhance the museum's collections. The exhibition visit is thus extended by a specific section bringing together around forty artworks from the MAMC+ collection.

General curator: **Cécile Godefroy**, art historian and independent curator.

Associate curators: **Barbara Forest**, Chief Curator of Heritage at MAMCS and **Alexandre Quoi**, Head of the Scientific Department at MAMC+.

This exhibition, also presented at Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain de Strasbourg (MAMCS) and at the Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes, will vary in format at each stage depending on the site.

left

**Marcelle Cahn**, *Aviatic Plane-Form*, 1930, oil on canvas, 62 x 73.5 cm, MAMC+ Saint-Étienne Métropole Collection. Gift of the artist, 1957. Photo credit: C. Cauvet/MAMC+

cover

**Marcelle Cahn**, *Les Toits* [Roofs], 1927, oil on canvas, 46 x 55 cm. Collections MAMC+, CNAP deposit, purchase in 1959. Photo: C. Cauvet/MAMC+ © droits réservés

## THE EXHIBITION GUIDE

### FIRST TRAJECTORIES

Marcelle Cahn was born in Strasbourg in 1895 and raised in a family of cultivated and music-loving bankers and merchants. She spoke German, French and Alsatian. The young girl grew up in the company of her father, Anselme, a knitwear merchant who was passionate about astronomy, her mother, Alice, a pianist, her younger brother Roger and Marguerite Steinberger, the governess. The latter would become one of her favourite models in the 1930s, along with her cat Boom. Like her mother and her grandmother (who was a descendant of the composer Giacomo Meyerbeer), Marcelle Cahn played the piano and the violin. In addition to her musical education, she studied drawing and painting in Strasbourg, then in Berlin from 1915 to 1918 and finally in Paris from 1920. At the same time, Marcelle Cahn also studied literature and philosophy at the universities of Strasbourg and Zurich. Her first paintings, which featured the human figure, reflect two main tendencies: a Cézanian and Cubist vein reinforced by her time in Paris and a more Expressionist vein linked to Berlin. In the first case, the coloured volumes were geometric while, in the second, the line was precise and marked. As for the drawings, they bear the mark of the more classical and naturalistic style taught in Strasbourg.



**Marcelle Cahn**, *Nu berlinois* [Berliner nude], 1916, oil on canvas, 133 x 58 cm. Gift from Denise René Gallery, MAMCS. Photo: Mathieu Bertola, Musées de la Ville de Strasbourg

right

**Marcelle Cahn**, *Les Trois raquettes* [The three rackets], 1926, oil on canvas, 59 x 70 cm. Cholet, Art and History Museum. Photo: Alexandre Production

### AROUND PURISM

The years 1925 and 1926 were decisive in Marcelle Cahn's career and the development of her artistic vocabulary. Through the gallery owner Léonce Rosenberg, she joined the classes of Fernand Léger and Amédée Ozenfant at the Académie Moderne. Her artistic persona asserted itself in terms of a combination of geometric rigor and poetic sensitivity. Quickly assimilating purist aesthetics, she freed herself from the interior scenes and still lifes characteristic of the movement and incorporated subtle vanishing points that hollowed out the space. Between 1925 and 1929 Marcelle Cahn participated in many decisive exhibitions and found herself at the heart of an international artistic proliferation, alongside Léger and Ozenfant and their students, but also Jean Arp, Piet Mondrian, Theo van Doesburg, Willy Baumeister, Wassily Kandinsky and Le Corbusier. Her rise was rapid and, in 1929, she became a member of the "Cercle et Carré" ("Circle and Square") group which was founded by Michel Seuphor and Joaquín Torres-García and advocated the rigor of geometric abstraction as opposed to the irrationality of the Surrealists. However, Marcelle Cahn was an independent and non-partisan artist and frequented both groups. She participated in the first and only exhibition of "Cercle et Carré", displaying four paintings, including *La Rame* (Oar) and *Femme à la raquette* (Woman with Racket).





## FIGURE-REFUGE

In the early 1930s, Marcelle Cahn hardly painted anymore. For more than ten years, she lived in profound solitude, between Paris and Strasbourg, without showing any hostility towards those she knew. She drew a lot, her sketches including nudes, children's heads, Marguerite, her mother, cats, apples and trees, but destroyed some of her paintings when she allowed herself to paint. This return to nature corresponded to a period of personal crisis which was not only emotional but also aesthetic and financial. In 1941, in the company of her mother, she left to join her brother Roger, a doctor for the community of the Sisters of Nevers in Toulouse where she attended seminars given by Abbé Breuil on parietal art, and those given by Father Nicolas on faith, Christianity and ecumenism.



## RECREATIONS

Marcelle Cahn spent the years of the Occupation in Toulouse with her mother and brother. In 1946 she returned to Paris where, from 1949 onwards, she again participated in major events related to abstract art. Having moved into an apartment/studio located in the dynamic Rue Daguerre, in 1952 the artist presented a set of line drawings at the Voyelles gallery which confirmed her return to geometric abstraction. Although from then on the straight line dominated her pictorial production, it did not exclude a serpentine line which made the motifs dance, as demonstrated by *Triptych* whose essential components (black lines on a white background that give a sense of

rhythm and space) responded to the ambition of geometric paintings. Many small-format, abstract or figurative Tachist drawings, to which the artist sometimes added stickers, reveal another aspect of the creation of a woman who indicated her need for "lyrical things", in other words a "certain escape from the constructed, geometric artwork which is a veritable asceticism". In short, according to the artist, it was about "recreation". Free and spontaneous "recreations" (in which the figure sometimes appeared) in dialogue with rigorously elaborated works such as *Three Triangles*, provided a necessary balance, both to the work and the artist.



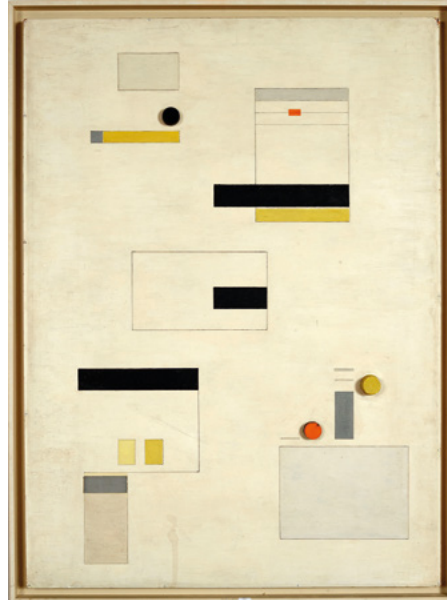
**Marcelle Cahn**, *Triptyque*, *Peinture-relief*, 1953, distemper on isorel, 74,5 × 114,5 cm, FNAC Collection, deposit at Lyon Museum of Fine Arts, purchase 1972. Photo: Martial Couderette - Lyon MBA

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**Marcelle Cahn**, *Untitled (Hand)*, 1930, drawing in black crayon, 25 x 26,7 cm, MAMCS. Photo: Mathieu Bertola, Musées de la Ville de Strasbourg

## RELIEF PAINTING

In 1953 Marcelle Cahn returned to geometric abstraction with a remarkable set of relief paintings that can be seen as a continuation of the most abstract paintings of the Purist period. In each piece, painted on wood, hardboard or plywood, the artist incised the white surface material with parallel and perpendicular black lines which describe more or less tight geometric frames and whose intersection, inside the painting, gives rise to a universe of squares and rectangles punctuated with prisms and white or coloured triangles. To give rhythm to her pieces, the artist affixed to the surface of her paintings small elements of geometric and circular format in wood, hardboard and balsa and (in 1960) the first white and coloured spheres. These medium and large format paintings responded to the works of the international abstract tendency which, via various paths, many had adopted in the wake of Neoplasticism, considering the relief to be one of the possible ways of renewing abstraction, aiming at architecture itself.



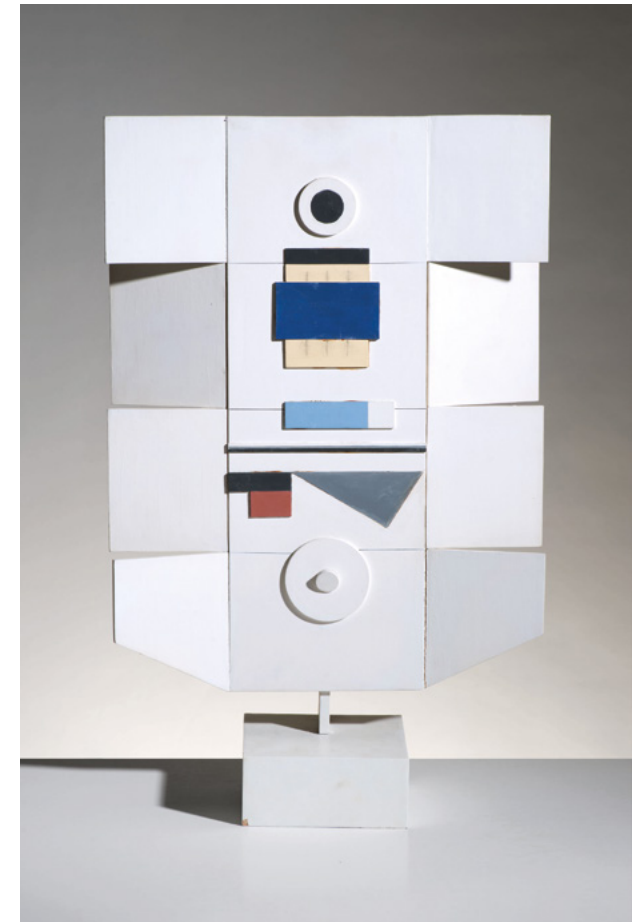
**Marcelle Cahn**, *Untitled*, 1956, oil on wood, 100 x 73 cm. Rennes Museum of Fine Arts . Photo: MBA, Rennes, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais/Jean-Manuel Salingue

right

**Marcelle Cahn**, *Spatial II*, 1969, collage of painted wood on wooden structure. Purchased with the support of the Regional Museums Acquisition Fund (State/Alsace Regional Council), 1985. Unterlinden Museum Colmar © Musée Unterlinden Colmar

## COSMIC OBJECTS

For Marcelle Cahn, who sought to escape from bourgeois interiors and to counter the idea of decoration, "Spatial are spatial equivalences from fixed and mobile panels which should participate in the structure of our universe". In 1961, Marcelle Cahn designed her first *Spatial* with the encouragement of Swiss artist Gottfried Honegger. Originating from the cutting and assembling of small medicine packets, the *Spatial*s were executed in painted wood by a practitioner and are for the most part apprehended frontally through an arrangement of elementary forms cadenced by the relief, the coloured pellets and cut angles that modulate the light. Along with the relief paintings and photocollages, the *Spatial*s evoked space imagery (space stations, aerospace rockets and satellites in orbit) nourished by the rivalry between the United States and the USSR in the astronautical field which had begun in the 1950s, and constituted probably one of the most sensational results of the quest for space that Marcelle Cahn had been engaged in since the mid-1920s.



## MUSIC AND POETRY

Music and painting are closely linked in the imagination of artists, particularly in the synesthetic debates that heralded the birth of colourist abstraction. The musical theme is present in Marcelle Cahn's work, as can be seen in *Éventail et guitar* (Fan and Guitar) of 1926, but also through the titles that allude to jazz syncopation and other tempos. The many variations that the artist created from screenprints, invitation cards and photographs, making identical motifs dance in a constantly renewed way, testify to a musical sensitivity that recalls the family of musicians that the artist, who studied violin and piano in her youth, came from. Close to composers as well as poets, the woman who declared she "develops initial, simple forms, like a musician develops a theme in a fugue" without "excluding poetry" was the author of about twenty short poetry texts as well the drawing-poems she composed from 1956 onwards.



**Marcelle Cahn**, *Untitled (drawing-poem)*, 1956, heightened Indian ink, 12,2 × 13,7 cm, private collection.  
Photo: Raphaëlle Krieger

## COLLAGE IN PLAY

The collages that Marcelle Cahn produced from 1952 onwards and which, from the mid-1960s, constituted the bulk of her production, oscillate between strict geometry and lyrical fantasy. On the one hand, there is the rigor of constructed thought and, on the other, spontaneity and deconstructive fun. In 1969 she had to leave her Rue Daguerre apartment/studio for the retirement home for artists run by the Galignani Foundation in Neuilly. There, Marcelle Cahn restricted her practice to materials that remained easily accessible to her: coloured paper, stickers, transparencies and other items of stationery, medical materials, embossed cardboard, wool and various fabrics, envelopes, razor blades, metro tickets, more or less unexpected packaging and discarded materials. These were enhanced with pencil, oil pastels or white paint, reused and metamorphosed into mostly abstract compositions that sometimes nevertheless evoked reality. The poetry and humour with which Cahn transformed the most modest everyday objects and scraps transports us into a constantly renewed, sensitive and vibrant world.



Collage on postcards seems to have been as much an occupation as a game for the artist who deployed all her sense of space when using postcards of the city of Paris whose poetic and mischievous transformation she liked to address to those dear to her.

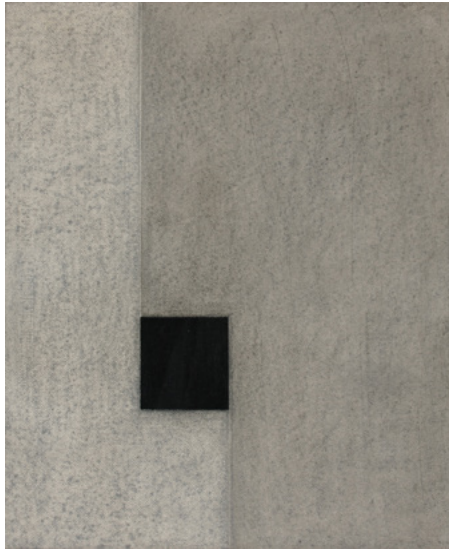
For the Dijon stage of the Marcelle Cahn exhibition in 1973, Serge Lemoine commissioned the artist to create a set of collages based on postcards of the city. Using stickers of various colours and formats, the artist humorously and poetically presented the most emblematic monuments of the Burgundian city, whether medieval or of more recent construction (like the large Lake Kir urban planning project built on the outskirts and lined with multi-storey towers).

**Marcelle Cahn**, *Untitled*, around 1972-1975, collage on postcard, 15 × 10 cm. Private collection. Photo: François Doury



## AN AMBASSADOR OF THE MUSÉE DE SAINT-ÉTIENNE

"Dear Madam, you definitely deserve to be made citizen of honour of Saint-Étienne! I am delighted to consider you a benefactor of the Museum, and, all jokes aside, I am infinitely grateful for what you do for us." It was in these terms that Maurice Allemand, curator of the musée d'Art et d'Industrie de Saint-Étienne (1947-1966) acknowledged in November 1958, amid a rich correspondence, the essential role of support provided by Marcelle Cahn to this establishment. The artist's privileged connection with the *stéphanois* museum was notably expressed by her role as a go-between, interceding to implore numerous artists to enhance the museum's collections. From Aurelie Nemours to Carmelo Arden Quin, from Nicolas Schöffer to Léon Tutundjian, to André Bloc and Alicia Penalba, the list is long concerning donations of artworks that the musée de Saint-Étienne received through the intermediary of Marcelle Cahn. This broad network of artists that she solicited, in solidarity with Maurice Allemand, relativises the image of solitude and distance that is often how she is portrayed. The exhibition visit is thus extended by a specific section bringing together around forty artworks from the MAMC+ collection.



**Aurelie Nemours**, *Abstract composition*, 1958, pastel on paper, 55,5 × 46 cm. MAMC+ Collections, gift of the artist in 1959.  
Photo: Yves Bresson / MAMC+ © ADAGP, Paris 2022

right

**Léon Tutundjian**, *Untitled*, 1925-1926, collage of drawing paper, wrapping paper and an engraving taken from a school textbook, pasted on paper and Indian ink, 46,5 × 33 cm. MAMC+ Collections, gift of the artist in 1964.  
Photo: Yves Bresson / MAMC+ © ADAGP, Paris 2022



# BIOGRAPHY



*Marcelle Cahn*, by Shirley Goldfarb and Gregori Mazurowski, around 1955, silver print, 17,3 × 12,6 cm. MAMCS Archives, Marcelle Cahn Fund. Photo: Mathieu Bertola, Musées de la Ville de Strasbourg

1895  
Birth on 1<sup>st</sup> March in Strasbourg of Marcelle Delphine Cahn, eldest child of an Alsatian Jewish family. Her father, Anselme Cahn, was a knitwear merchant and her mother, Alice Sophie Blum, was a musician descended from a family of Strasbourg bankers.

1906-1913  
Drawing lessons with the renowned Strasbourg artists Émile Schneider, Joseph Sattler and Georges Ritleng.

1914  
Enrolled at the School of Decorative Arts in Strasbourg, Marcelle Cahn studies philosophy at the University of Strasbourg at the same time. The painter Simon Lévy, future founder of the May group, introduces her to the paintings of Cézanne and Van Gogh.

1915  
Marcelle Cahn lives in Berlin with her mother and her brother Roger until 1918. She attends classes given by Eugen Spiro and at Lovis Corinth's studio, and attends exhibitions at Der Sturm gallery.

1920  
Period of comings and goings between Paris and Strasbourg until 1925. In Paris, she enrolls at the Ranson Academy where the teachers include Édouard Vuillard, Maurice Denis and Félix Vallotton, she is subsequently taught by Othon Friesz at the Académie Moderne.

1925  
In Paris again (until 1930). At the Académie de la Grande Chaumière, she draws the nude from life. Meets Léonce Rosenberg, director of the gallery and review named *L'Effort moderne*, thanks to whom she meets and attends courses given by Fernand Léger and Amédée Ozenfant at the Académie Moderne. First abstract paintings and participation in Victor Poznanski's exhibition "Art Today" in Paris which brings together the main currents of the international avant-garde of the time. Ruined following bad financial investments, Marcelle Cahn faces her first material difficulties.

1926  
Joins the Society of Independent Artists, and participates in its first Salons. Participation with other Léger students in an exhibition at the Contemporary Art Gallery, then in the Société anonyme exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum in New York following her meeting with Marcel Duchamp.

1930  
Invited to join the "Cercle et Carré" group founded in 1929 by Michel Seuphor and Joaquín Torres García, Marcelle Cahn participates in the group's one and only exhibition at Galerie 23, which features 85 abstract and constructivist artists. She returns to live in Strasbourg.

1932  
Marcelle Cahn returns with her mother to Paris which, due to the economic crisis and the rise of Nazism in Germany, hosts many foreign artists. She stays there until 1935.

1939  
On 15 April, 1939, she leaves Strasbourg where the buildings belonging to Alice Cahn's family are subsequently occupied by the Nazis (in 1940), then bombed. With her mother, she joins her brother

in Toulouse where the two women remain until the end of the war. Marcelle Cahn is deeply affected by the death of her mother on 28 December 1945.

1946  
Back in Paris she resumes working and emerges from her artistic isolation. She then gets back in touch with her friends, including Natalia Goncharova, Seuphor and Arp.

1949  
First participation in the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles (in which she takes an active part until 1967). This exhibition marks her return to the art scene.

1951  
Moves into an apartment/studio at 63 Rue Daguerre, in a district frequented by many artists, where she remains for nearly twenty years.

1952  
First solo exhibition at the Voyelles gallery featuring a series of line drawings. A pivotal year in her work, she returns to the practice of collage. First eye problems.

1953  
First relief paintings.

1955  
Joins the "Space" group, founded by André Bloc and Félix Del Marle, and participates in the group's exhibition in Saint-Cloud.

1956  
Lyrical drawings and composition of short poems. She joins the "Structures" group which contributes to the promotion of abstract art in the region.

1958  
Meets the Hungarian poet and art publisher Imre Pan.

1959  
First retrospective of the artist at the Simone Heller gallery, organized through the art critic Waldemar-George. The French State and the Museums of the City of Strasbourg buy artworks by her.

1961  
A founding member of the "Measure" group, Marcelle Cahn participates in their one and only exhibition in France at the Rennes Museum of Fine Arts. First Spatial.

1962-1964  
Three solo exhibitions are devoted to her in galleries in Paris and Milan.

Worsening of her problems related to sight, requiring several operations and hospitalizations over the following years. The artist stops painting.

1966  
Beginning of her collaboration with the Denise René gallery.

1969  
Moves to the Galignani Foundation in Neuilly, a retirement home for artists where she resides until her death.

1972  
Major retrospective of her work organized by the CNAC at the Museum of Art and Industry in Saint-Étienne. This travelling exhibition then tours France until 1974, showing in fifteen cities, including Dijon and Strasbourg.

1973  
Made a Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters.

1975  
Retrospective at the Denise René gallery.

1976  
Installation of two public sculptures for the middle schools Le Parc in Dijon and Paul Fort in Is-sur-Tille as part of the 1% funding scheme for artistic projects in new buildings.

1980  
Donation of her artworks and personal archives to the Strasbourg Museum of Modern Art.

1981  
Death of Marcelle Cahn on 20 September in Neuilly-sur-Seine.



# ACCOMPANYING THE EXHIBITION

## CONFERENCE

"Around Marcelle Cahn (1895-1981): a historiography of abstraction"

**Monday 7 November 2022 at 6.30 pm**

In this lecture, Cécile Godefroy will return to the context that preceded the re-reading and re-evaluation of this great figure of abstract art, Marcelle Cahn.

Cécile Godefroy is art historian, doctor of the University of Paris IV-Sorbonne and member of the International Association of Art Critics. She has taught at French and American universities in Paris. She is a specialist in the historical avant-garde and in transdisciplinary issues in art. She was co-curator of the exhibitions *Sonia Delaunay. The colors of abstraction* (Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris; Tate modern, London, 2014-15) and *Picasso. Sculptures*, Musée national Picasso-Paris; BOZAR, Brussels, 2016-17; and curator of the exhibitions *Picasso's musics*, Musée de la Musique - Philharmonie-Paris, 2020; *Picasso ibero*, Centro Botín, Santander, 2021. Author of numerous books and essays on Picasso's work, she has just joined the Musée National Picasso-Paris to direct the future Centre d'Études Picasso which will open in autumn 2023. She is the general curator of the exhibition *Marcelle Cahn. In search of space* for the Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain de Strasbourg, the Musée d'art moderne et contemporain de Saint-Etienne and at the Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes.



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**Marcelle Cahn**, *Untitled*, 1972-1973, colour serigraph printed on Arches paper, 65 × 38,5 cm.  
MAMC+ Collections, gift of the artist in 1973. Photo: Yves Bresson / MAMC+

## USEFUL INFO

### Musée d'art moderne et contemporain de Saint-Étienne Métropole

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Open every day from 10am to 6pm, except on  
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## FOLLOW-US



### ONLINE TICKETING

[www.mamc.saint-etienne.fr](http://www.mamc.saint-etienne.fr)



## Catalogue

*Marcelle Cahn. En quête d'espace*

Publication director: Cécile Godefroy.

Associate director: Alexandre Quoi and Barbara  
Forest. 336 pages, 360 illustrations.

The catalogue includes an English version  
of all the essays, at the end of the book.

Retail price : 44 € TTC

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