

Jo Delahaut (Vottem, 1911 - Schaerbeek (Brussels), 1992)

Composition, 1958

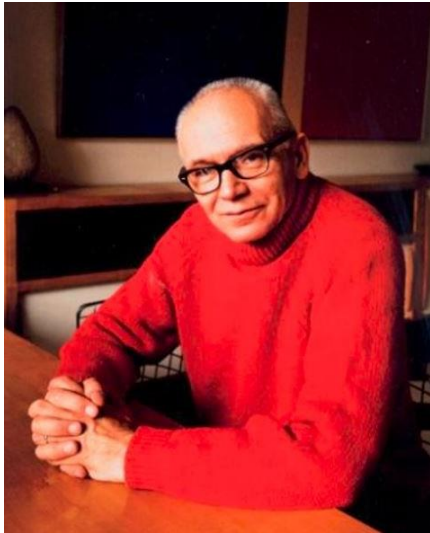
Oil on canvas, 79 x 60 cm (with frame)

Signed and dated lower right :

Jo Delahaut 58

Painted in 1958, an emblematic year for Belgian modernity, we owe this geometric composition to Jo Delahaut, one of the leading figures of geometric abstraction in Belgium.

Jo Delahaut



Jo Delahaut was born in Vottem, in the Liège province, in 1911. He studied between 1928 and 1934 at the Academy of Fine Arts in Liège, where he was a student of Auguste Mambour (1928 - 1934). He then continued with a degree in art history at the University of Liège. His doctorate obtained in 1939¹, he devoted himself to painting, creating figurative canvases marked by the colorful richness of Fauvism and the structure of Expressionism and Cubism. Some works evoke the art of Picasso (fig.1). A drawing teacher since 1936 at the Athénée of Schaerbeek (until 1962), he settled in Brussels in 1945, where he created his first abstract paintings, bringing abstraction back to life in Belgium in the post-war period. He also was the only member of *La Jeune Peinture belge* (young Belgian painting) to present an abstract work during his 1947 exhibition².

Marked by the work of French abstract painter Auguste Herbin (1882 - 1960) (fig.2), whom he met at the *Réalités Nouvelles*³ salon of 1947, Delahaut developed his own geometric style that was directly recognizable and had no external meaning, based on solid colors and static forms, which would evolve throughout his life (fig.3)⁴. This abstraction, seeking more and more purity and simplicity, can be compared for the last periods of Delahaut's work to American *Hard edge*⁵

¹ Delahaut defends a thesis on neo-classicism in Belgium

² The association founded in 1945 includes among its members Mig Quinet (1906-2001), Louis Van Lint (1909-1986), Gaston Bertrand (1910-1994), Marc Mendelson (1915-2013) ou Anne Bonnet (1908-1960). The association was dissolved in 1948.

³ *Réalités Nouvelles* (News Realities): Parisian salon defending abstraction. It was created in 1946 by, among others, Sonia Delaunay, August Herbin and Jean Arp. Delahaut was a member of the show and exhibited there from 1947 to 1956.

⁴ On the evolution of Delahaut's style, see: VAN DEN BUSSCHE (Willy), *Analyse de style chronologique*, in : *Jo Delahaut*, Ostende, PMMK, 1989-1990, pp.56-65.

⁵ *Hard edge painting* refers to an artistic movement characterized by painted works in which transitions are abrupt between areas of color (Wikipedia), in opposition to *Abstract Expressionism*.

artists like Ellsworth Kelly (1923 - 2015) for example (fig.4). It is in any case the opposite of the lyrical abstraction practiced by other Belgian abstract painters such as Englebert Van Anderlecht or Maurice Wyckaert among others (fig.5).

From the 1950s on, Delahaut participated in several groups and journals defending abstract art and more specifically geometric abstract art (*Art abstrait, Art construit...*). He also wrote several theoretical texts (*Manifeste spatialiste* (Spatialist Manifesto) in 1954 with Pol Bury⁶) as well as poetry.

Delahaut was also interested in the integration of plastic arts in public space⁷. This resulted in large ceramic tile compositions designed for the Sart Tilman campus in Liège or for the Brussels metro (Mongomery station) (fig.6).

Delahaut taught introductory aesthetics at I.N.S.A.S. and painting at La Cambre (until 1976). He died in Schaerbeek in 1992.

Composition, 1958

In the beginnings of his abstraction, Jo Delahaut painted works in a reduced range where grays and blacks dominated (fig.3). If black remained emblematic of his work, outlining the patterns or filling them, gray became rarer, here occupying the background, usually white from the mid-1950s on. At the same time, the bright colors of his beginnings reappeared in his works.

In the first half of the 1950s, marked by the aesthetics of Herbin, Delahaut created works with a well-defined order in which the same form was repeated. This repetition creates a rhythmic play, accentuated by contrasting colors (note here the confrontation between the primary colors, green-red and blue-yellow). The typical geometric pattern from the mid-1950s is a rectangle with a rounded edge, a half-arcade, sometimes outlined in black, or even entirely black. Delahaut created numerous variations with these elements (fig.7), including our painting, dated 1958, the year of the Brussels Universal Exhibition and its major retrospective of modern art (*50 ans d'art moderne* (50 years of modern art)).

⁶ For the text of the manifesto, see : *Jo Delahaut*, Ostende, PMMK, 1989-1990, p.48.

⁷ In the *Manifeste spacialiste*, Delahaut insists on the absence of boundaries between so-called major and minor art.

Delahaut then moved on to a brief materialist period before evolving in the 1960s and 70s towards more serene works, with great formal simplicity.

Our painting was purchased directly from the artist by the parents of the previous owners.

To conclude, two quotes from the *Manifeste spacialiste* (1954), written a few years before the creation of our painting, shed light on Jo Delahaut's intentions:

« *L'art abstrait n'est pas un art figuratif dont on effacerait le sujet.* »⁸

« *Le spacialisme est une construction concertée de formes et de couleurs qui tend à donner à celles-ci une vie et une poésie propre.* »⁹

Laurent Stevens, Art historian, 2024

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⁸ “*Abstract art is not a figurative art from which we erase the subject.*” That is to say, the abstract art that Delahaut advocates is not a referential abstraction.

⁹ “*Spacialism is a concerted construction of shapes and colors which tends to give them a life and their own poetry.*”

Illustrations

In the text : Photograph of Jo Delahaut.



Fig.1 : Jo Delahaut, works from the first half of the 1940s.



Fig.2 : Auguste Herbin, *Vendredi 1*, 1951, Paris, Centre Georges Pompidou.

Fig.3 : Stylistic evolution of Jo Delahaut through works kept in public collections.



1946, King Baudouin Foundation.



1954, Brussels,
Royal Museums of
Fine Arts of
Belgium.



1960, Brussels, Belfius coll. /
années 60, Antwerp, KMSKA.



1986, Leuven, M.

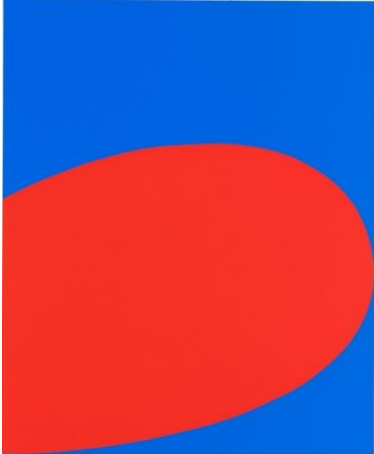


Fig.4 : Ellsworth Kelly, *Red Blue*, 1964, New York, Whitney Museum of American Art.



Fig.5 : Englebert Van Anderlecht, *Résurgence des instincts*, 1957 / Maurice Wyckaert, *Het ruime leven*, 1974, Brussels, Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium.



Fig.6 : Jo Delahaut 1976, Brussels Montgomery station.

Fig.7 : Jo Delahaut : Paintings with the half-arcade pattern.



Matin bleu, 1953, private collection.



Rythmes Incas, 1954, Brussels, Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium.



1954 / 1962, private collection.

Resources used

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Jo Delahaut, Ostende, PMMK, 1989-1990.

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