

In Her Hands

Women Sculptors of Surrealism

Sonja Mancoba (1911-1984) / Maria Martins (1894-1973) / Isabelle Waldberg (1911-1990)

Bucerius Kunst Forum Hamburg

February 22 – June 1, 2025

<https://www.buceriuskunstforum.de/en/>

Curators: Dr. Katharina Neuburger, Stuttgart, and Dr. Renate Wiehager, München



Sonja Ferlov Mancoba, 1951, in ihrem Atelier in Gudhjem, Bornholm, © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2025, Foto: picture alliance/Ritzau Scanpix / Johnny Bonne; Isabelle Waldberg, studio New Yorker Atelier with *Construction (Land's End)*, um 1945, © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2025, Foto: H. Brammer, Estate Isabelle Waldberg; Maria Martins mit *Ma Chanson*, New York, 1940s, © Estate Maria Martins, Foto: Unbekannt, Ignez Celia Simoes;

With the exhibition *In Her Hands: Sculptors of Surrealism*, the Bucerius Kunst Forum presents an exhibition of three extraordinary women artists in the spring of 2025: Maria Martins, Sonja Ferlov Mancoba, and Isabelle Waldberg. These three female sculptors, whose main bodies of work date from the 1930s until the 1980s, as artists they formed part of the international modernist movement, especially central to surrealism, whose sculptural ensembles can now be re-examined from a contemporary perspective. Their works, created mainly in Paris and New York, reveal trails of influence that can be traced from Brazil through Africa and all the way to Scandinavia. They expanded the art of their time in highly innovative and unconventional ways.

The exhibition *In Her Hands* places the artistic aims of these three women into relation with each other. With an initial focus on the unique formal language that each of the sculptors developed in their individual contexts, the show reveals how they subsequently moved far beyond any of the habitual classifications of the day, especially in the ways their work engaged with the international style of surrealism.

Central to this exhibition is a striking revelation: that these three artistic positions can combine to form an eye-opening composite image of an interdisciplinary and continent-spanning contemporaneity. In their works, each of the three artists demonstrate an intense physical and spiritual proximity to their materials. They “think” artistically through their works’ materials, lines, volumes, spaces, and expressive gestures, as could only happen *In Her Hands*.

Dr. Katharina Neuburger und Dr. Renate Wiehager

Introduction - questions and answers

All three artists were part of the international avant-garde before and after the Second World War. To this day, their names are not as well known as other protagonists of Surrealism. Nevertheless, they have been presented in solo exhibitions in major museums as well as in themed exhibitions and in important publications. But did they receive the recognition they deserved back then?

KN [Katharina Neuburger]

Even before the Second World War, the three artists were part of important movements—Sonja Ferlov Mancoba (1911–1984) was active at the center of various groups, such as the Scandinavian group *linien*, and later in the broader context of the *CoBrA* group. Together, the members established a European network of artistic cooperation through exhibitions and publications.

Maria Martins (1894–1973) was a successful part of the network of artists in American exile, including André Breton, Marcel Duchamp and Peggy Guggenheim, from the time she moved to the USA in 1939, where she lived for a long time. Rio de Janeiro, Paris, Tokyo, Brussels and Copenhagen were among her most important cities she lived, studied and worked, and she made the acquaintance of protagonists from a wide variety of movements everywhere.

Isabelle Waldberg (1911–1990) was part of an important intellectual circle in Paris in the late 1930s, and then again after 1945, the *Acéphale* group around the philosopher Georges Bataille. In Paris, she met artists such as André Breton and Alberto Giacometti. In exile in New York from 1942–45, she was closely involved in the discussions and exhibitions of the Surrealist exiles. Peggy Guggenheim exhibited Waldberg's *Constructions* in her legendary *Art of this Century* gallery in 1944.

In their respective constellations, the three sculptors were highly recognized for their contributions and—they were known as artists, editors and also as authors. Places where their networks overlapped were Paris and New York—all three artists lived in the French capital repeatedly or for the majority of their lives. Martins and Waldberg worked in New York during the war years, while Mancoba lived through the entire phase of the Second World War in Paris.

What role do these women artists play today in terms of their appreciation in museums and on the art market?

RW [Renate Wiehager]

There are clear differences in how the works of the three artists are traded on the art market. As always, this has to do with taste and zeitgeist. It also plays a major role whether it's about early, rare works or whether their entire oeuvre is already largely tied up in museums, private collections or estates and hardly anything comes onto the market. A lot will happen here in the coming years. All three sculptors are represented with their works in renowned private collections and institutions. Our

list of lenders from Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, New York, Paris, Copenhagen and Ankara makes it clear how international the interest in the work of these sculptors is. The major museums in Scandinavian cities now show Mancoba's sculptures in their permanent exhibitions and her work is also represented in Paris, for example. Her sculptures are currently being exhibited in a major New York gallery—this is a qualitatively new step, the discovery and appreciation of her unique position beyond Europe.

Maria Martins is one of those artists who have been firmly established institutionally for a long time. Since the 1940s, she has been represented in renowned museums such as the Museum of Modern Art New York, the Philadelphia Museum and, of course, in the museums of modern and contemporary art in São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Brasília. Her works are highly prized on the art market.

Isabelle Waldberg's appointment in 1973 as one of the first female professors of sculpture in Paris gave her a strong presence in the culture and exhibition practice of the time, enabling her to establish herself and her work in her later years. She is also represented in numerous collections in France and Switzerland.

How do you manage to unite three sculptors, who can be attributed to the surrealist movement and who may even have met personally in this context. But you nevertheless show very individual work developments – how can these three be appropriately united in one exhibition? What was the guiding idea behind this?

KN

Choosing three positions was ideal for our project, as they form a neighborhood that depicts an expanded horizon of the cross-continental surrealist network. And yet this is not a thematic overview show, so that the three oeuvres can also be presented in depth, as independent positions.

The sculptors' complete works are outstanding positions that find an important common denominator in the international surrealist movement. Even though the artists did not necessarily know each other personally: Their works came together in exhibitions from the 1940s onwards. Mancoba, Martins and Waldberg shared an artistic contemporaneity in places such as Paris and New York. Motifs and thematic overlaps are therefore recognizable. Accordingly, the exhibition *In Her Hands* focuses on an overview and the network as well as the individual work-specifics.

The exhibition concept makes it possible to show the works in the best possible way, bring them into dialog with each other and at the same time make the space itself a new experience. What can visitors expect?

RW

The Bucerius Kunst Forum with Kathrin Baumstark and her team gave us a free hand when it came to the staging of the works. This made it possible to experience the spaciousness of the exhibition location in a new way. The previously closed window fronts into the urban space are opened up. Daylight and urban life can now play a part in the perception of the works, which makes it possible to experience the bronzes

in a completely new way. Almost all of the partition walls have been removed for *In Her Hands*. The exhibition sections are defined by semi-transparent curtains. This allows for independent presentations of the works without obstructing the lines of sight between the artists' works. The works can communicate with each other.

Visitors can thus expect an open and airy tour that makes the connections and networks, the thematic and motivic overlaps between the three artists comprehensible. The exhibition sheds new light on 20th century sculpture, as the works on display describe a period of creation from the 1930s to the 1980s. At the same time, we are opening up a previously unknown chapter of surrealist sculpture. And—in the context of the exhibition here in Hamburg, all three artists are presented more comprehensively in Germany for the first time.

One year was dedicated to the scientific research, the contacts with international collections for the selection of works and the texts for the first German catalog on these three sculptors. If only one work per artist were to be mentioned, which of the exhibits are particularly moving?

KN

I have chosen three of the main works that were created around the same time and which we have fortunately been able to bring together in the exhibition:

Let's start with Sonja Ferlov Mancoba's *Sculpture 1940–1946*. Throughout the war years, as the dates in the title make clear, Mancoba worked almost exclusively on this large-scale abstract sculptural form. The work can be described as an expansive, wedge-shaped volume that has a creature-like appearance thanks to an opening at the top, similar to a magical forehead eye.

Maria Martins' sculpture *The Impossible*, 1946, is an iconic work. Created in the USA, the bronze was at the center of the art-historically significant exhibition *Exposition internationale du surréalisme* in 1947 at the Galerie Maeght in Paris. *The Impossible* consists of two figures with their heads—like the torn open mouths of carnivorous plants—approaching an impossible embrace.

This work by Martins was placed in the aforementioned exhibition in Paris in 1947 together with the so-called *Constructions* by Isabelle Waldberg. It is precisely one such work that we consider important: *Le dernier rôdeur / The Last Drifter*. Created in exile in New York around 1945, it is a portrait-format, an extremely fragile construction made of beechwood sticks, string and glue. The seemingly abstract work allows for interpretations ranging from figurative unification to plant growth, and perhaps one can also think of the overwhelming impression of the New York skyscrapers for Europeans.

What are—thematically—the most important stations of the exhibition?

RW

We welcome guests in the entrance area of the show with a constellation of sculptures, prints, documents and historical photos that make the thematic and historical horizon of Surrealism in the mid-20th century tangible.

Sonja Ferlov Mancoba, Maria Martins and Isabelle Waldberg were important figures in the Surrealist movement, which was founded in Paris in 1924. In that year, Martins came to the metropolis for a few years, followed by Mancoba and Waldberg in the mid-1930s. In exile in New York, Martins and Waldberg exhibited with the Surrealists from 1943–45 and became an important part of the international network. In 1947, the *Exposition internationale du surréalisme* opened in Paris and drew a first summary of the changes since the end of the Second World War. Martins' iconic sculpture *The Impossible* was shown here in relation to the *Constructions* by Isabelle Waldberg. At the same time, Mancoba completed her important work *Sculpture 1940-1946* in her Paris studio. The self-determined artistic practice of the sculptors is validly formulated in these three main works, which are presented as original works in the exhibition tour. They are united by an unconventional approach to techniques, materials and motifs. The intensive, sensual and intellectual exploration of materials is reflected in the design of lines, volumes, spaces and expressive gestures in their sculptures. The individual quality and inventiveness of these three artists testify to their artistic contemporaneity with Surrealism.

From this dense ensemble, we move on to **Sonja Ferlov Mancoba**. Over four decades, and often under the most difficult of living conditions, Sonja Ferlov Mancoba created a sculptural oeuvre of the greatest concision, intensity, and concentration. Her work both contains traits of yet transcends the classifications of modernism, primitivism, surrealism, and the post-war avant-gardes. Instead, her work has moved towards a sculptural embodiment of imaginative inner worlds that can be translated across cultural, political, and linguistic boundaries.

The fact that Mancoba has recently come to the attention of art historians as one of Scandinavia's most important woman sculptors of the 20th century is due to a coincidence—as is the case for many such rediscoveries in recent history. Around 1960, the art historian Troels Andersen, who was working on an article about the Danish artist group *linien*, found himself repeatedly coming across the name “Sonja Ferlov.” After being provided with Sonja's address in Paris, a lively exchange of letters began, and, in 1979, Andersen published a monograph on her. This was the first step towards lifting her work out of oblivion. [<https://ferlovmancoba.com>]

The path to the window front that opens the exhibition space onto the city leads visitors to a dialog between two groups of works by Sonja Mancoba: the motif of the double-figure pair of birds in the early work and the major theme of masked heads and figures in the later work. In the second section, we have then brought together the early, largely abstract main work *Sculpture 1940–1946* with various examples of standing figures in an ensemble with echoes of political and mythological motifs.

The actual central space of the Bucerius Kunst Forum is then shared by Maria Martins and Isabelle Waldberg.

The sculptor **Isabelle Waldberg**, whose oeuvre as a whole awaits rediscovery, was closely connected both as an artist and an intellectual with the milieu and leading

figures of Surrealism in Paris before and after the Second World War and during her years in exile in New York from 1942 to 1945. Her place in this artistic and literary network, along with her initiatives and texts for key publications of the time, testifies to her importance as a theorist, author, and, from 1973 onwards, professor at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Even before the war, she was closely associated with the circle around the philosopher Georges Bataille. In New York, she was in close contact with Marcel Duchamp. She was married to Patrick Waldberg until 1959 and was close friends with Robert Lebel for decades—writers who laid the theoretical and art-historical framework for French Surrealism. The elaboration of her sculptural work from 1960 onwards positioned her at the center of French sculpture.

[<https://oam.io/artistes/isabelle-waldberg/catalogue>]

[<https://www.isabellewaldberg.com/en/index.html>]

For visitors to the exhibition who walk through the area of around twenty works by Waldberg from four decades, circling the sculptures and perhaps looking for a kind of “narrative thread”, it may seem as if they are looking at two or three different artists. The seemingly abstract linear sculptures of the early period, inspired by indigenous navigation maps, stand in surprising contrast to the often voluminous figurations of the later years. Nevertheless, there are clearly defined groups of themes that we have tried to bring together in constellations. There are the sculptures with female and suggestively erotic themes; the sculptures with mythological or historical-political themes; the portrait heads; and recurring aspects of time, transience and the fateful nature of humanity.

As an artist and curator, as a collector and author, as an imaginative mediator and networker, **Maria Martins** was one of the most important personalities of Brazilian culture in the 20th century. With around seventy sculptures, created between the 1930s and the 1950s and often realized in several versions, as well as accompanying graphic works, she created a small, but in the context of international surrealism and South American art, intensively discussed and powerful oeuvre.

Ten sculptures from the period 1940 to 1955 as well as prints, an artist's book and a portfolio make Maria Martins' most important themes and sculptural techniques comprehensible for the first time in Germany—following the presentation at documenta 2012. The sculptures from the early 1940s—the motif of the warrior, the mythical bird *Uirapuru*, the figure with the title *Glèbe-ails / Earth-Wings*, which oscillates between animal, human and plant, and the artist's book *Amazonia*—visualize her preoccupation with the myths and indigenous themes of the Amazon region. The sculptures *Ma chanson / My song*, 1944, and *Prometheus*, 1944, combine figurative echoes with a more modern, abstract formal language. The ever-present erotic dimension of her works is condensed in her main work, *The Impossible*, 1946, but also remains visible in a seemingly non-representational work such as *Canto do mar / The Song of the Sea*, 1952.