

Artists from the CoBrA Group You Should Know

Nadia Herzog, June 2016, WideWalls

It was November 8, 1948, when a group of fellow artists gathered together in **Café Notre-Dame** in Paris. At that exact spot in place and time, a new art group was created. Present **artists** signed its manifesto which was symbolically named *The Case Was Settled*. And that was it! The **CoBrA group** was settled. Their manifesto was printed in the Reflex magazine afterward, and looking from today's point of view, this avant-garde art movement may be one of the most influential movements of the post-war Europe in arts, even though it lasted only for four years, from 1948 to 1951.

Who sat together at that table in Café Notre-Dame? Well, there were mainly representatives of the North Europe art scene at the time. CoBrA actually stands for the initial letters of Copenhagen, Brussels, and Amsterdam, as those are the cities from which founder artists of the CoBrA movement came from. Okay, now we'll get to the point. Who were those founding artists, you asked? Initially, there were [Karel Appel](#), [Constant](#), [Asger Jorn](#), [Christian Dotremont](#), [Corneille](#), and Joseph Noiret, but many important artists at that time were included in the group later on. At the moment of the group foundation, founders were all already established artists in their countries and regions, with some of them being renown even widely throughout Europe.

So, what unified those artists to come together as a group? First of all, it was the fact that they all shared a unifying doctrine of complete **freedom of color and form**. They also shared the interest in Marxism, as well as in Modernism and Surrealism. To all of them, the process of making art was far more interesting than the final product of art. And after all, they were all rather spontaneous and curious about experimenting in art, finding a huge inspiration in the simplified forms and the children's drawings. Being influenced by artists like [Paul Klee](#) and [Joan Miró](#), they altogether embraced primitive, mythical, and traditional elements, usually by using strong colors and heavy handwritings in their artworks.

CoBrA group changed its name in November 1949 to *Internationale des Artistes Expérimentaux*, but that name never really appealed to anyone. They remained CoBrA for all of their followers, both in Europe and the United States, and for art historians as well. After having two successful major group exhibitions, one at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam in November 1949 entitled *International Experimental Art*, and the other one in Liège, Belgium, in 1951, the group dissolved. The movement was officially broken in 1951 due to some contrarities among members. However, many of the artists from the group continued to collaborate even when there were no CoBrA anymore, and some of them remained close friends until their very end. Whether they were performing solo or in a mutual collaboration after the group's transformation, some of the artists from the CoBrA art movement carried their careers further on paving impressive artistic paths.

Following is the list of **most influential CoBrA artists**, whose art was the most significant for the art movement itself, but whose work also went on being truly important for the world of art beyond the group's 4-year long existence.

If you missed the chance to visit the [unique exhibition](#) of artists from the **CoBrA art movement** organized simultaneously in New York and Los Angeles, or if you did see the show and want to dive deeper into the legacy of this post-war avant-garde artistic collective and its impact on contemporary art and the European Abstract Expressionism, do not miss the opportunity to read this book. Be among first who will get the privilege to hold it and read it, as it is going to be available from September 15, 2016. This book is chronologically exploring the years before the formation of the CoBrA group, its existence and, finally, its influence on shaping the **contemporary art** scene. It features a lot of original artworks from the CoBra artists, full-page images, essays, critics, and detailed biographies of artists that made CoBrA what it was.

Karel Appel: Starting Again Like a Child

[Christiaan Karel Appel](#) (1921-2006) was a Dutch painter, sculptor, and a poet. He started painting at the age of fourteen and studied at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam in the early 1940s. There he had met young painters Corneille and Constant, who'd he became really close friends and together they founded the CoBrA. His parents constantly opposing his choice to become an artist, led him to leave home, and had his first show in Groningen in 1946. He was highly influenced by [Pablo Picasso](#), [Henri Matisse](#), and [Jean Dubuffet](#). A year later he started sculpting with all kinds of used materials and painted them in bright colors. *'To paint is to destroy what preceded. I never try to make a painting, but a chunk of life'*, described Appel his artistic approach. When forming the **CoBrA group**, his words easily defined their fascination with children's drawings. *'We wanted to start again like children'*, Karel Appel stated. Typical childish picture language was commonly used among the CoBrA artists. Appel especially used it very often. But that resulted in a controversy over his *Questioning Children* fresco in Amsterdam City Hall from 1949, which stayed covered up for ten years. It led to Appel moving to Paris in 1950 and developing his international reputation by traveling to Mexico, United States, Yugoslavia, and Brazil. He also lived in New York and Florence. It was only after 1990 that he became more popular in the Netherlands.

Corneille: Developing Poetic Art of Painting

The Dutch painter [Corneille](#) (1922-2010), born Guillaume Cornelis Beverloo, was a co-founder of the **avant-garde CoBrA movement**, and one of its driving forces. *'Corneille is considered to be one of the most important modern graphic artists of the previous century. As one of the pioneers of CoBrA, he developed an entirely new poetic art of painting'*, the Dutch Cobra museum from Amsterdam stated in the announcement after the artist's death in 2010. Corneille was a close friend of Karel Appel, and much like Appel, Corneille was also very interested in **children's art** and **artistic experiments**. His work was merging the art on the one side, and the life itself on the other, in order to make a unifying fusion of form and expression.

Constant: Experiment is a Mirror Image of Changes

'Experimentation was the symbol of an unfettered freedom, which, according to Constant, was ultimately embodied by children and the expressions of children', said Constant, a co-founder of the CoBrA movement, arguably one of the last avant-garde movements of the 20th century. Constant Anton Nieuwenhuys (1920-2005), better known as [Constant](#), was a Dutch painter, sculptor, graphic artist, author, and a musician. His younger brother **Jan Nieuwenhuys** was also an artist and was also a member of the CoBrA group. But, before CoBrA, Constant was living in Bergen for a short period of time, where he was introduced to the work of [Paul Cézanne](#), which had an enormous impact on Constant's artistic work. Afterwards, he met the young Danish painter Asger Jorn during one of his travel trips to Paris. It was their friendship that formed the firm basis of the CoBrA later on. In the meantime, Constant also met Corneille and Karel Appel, two other Dutch painters. In July 1948 Constant, his brother Jan, Karel Appel, and Corneille had founded what was known as the *Reflex Experimentele Groep in Holland*. Only a few months later, CoBrA was founded. The first edition of the *Reflex* magazine was published with a CoBrA manifesto inside, written by Constant. When it comes to Constant's artistic approach, he was always on the quest for **innovation and experimentation**. 'The work of experimental artists is a mirror image of changes in the general perception of beauty', stated Constant in the manifesto. *White Bird* (1948), *Ladder* (1949) and *Scorched Earth I* (1951) are some of his noted works from the CoBrA period. 'A painting is not a structure of colours and lines, but an animal, a night, a cry, a man, or all of these together', Constant described his art vision in the manifesto. After the CoBrA, Constant's work became more abstract, as he developed the interest in spatial architecture and three-dimensional works.

Asger Jorn: Author of The CoBrA Library

[Asger Oluf Jorn](#) (1914-1973) was a **Danish painter**, sculptor, ceramic artist, and an author, and also a founding member of the avant-garde movement CoBrA. During 1947 and 1948 he was a part of the *Surréalisme-révolutionnaire* group in Paris and Brussels. During that time, he met Belgian poet Christian Dotremont. Together they had left that group, and became fellow founders of the CoBrA movement. Asger Jorn was one of the leaders of the group, and he actively contributed to the *Reflex* magazine. He also published *The CoBrA Library* in 15 booklets. After the group was dissolved, Jorn remained in Silkeborg Sanatorium for some time, where he completed two book manuscripts, for the *Luck and Chance* and *Pages from the Book of Art*. He also painted several pictures over there and worked on two large series of pictures – *The Seasons* and *From The Silent Myth*. Afterwards, he had left Denmark and lived in Switzerland and Italy, where he emerged himself into the thrift-store paintings, ceramics, textiles, and the use of unconventional materials in art. The largest collection of Asger Jorn's work can now be seen in the **Museum Jorn** in Silkeborg, Denmark.

Christian Dotremont: Creator of the Group's Name

[Christian Dotremont](#) (1922-1979), was a **Belgian painter and a poet**. Being born into a family connected with the publishing of art journals, he had found out the deep **passion for words, images, and art** as a young boy. So, he carried that passion through his entire career. Dotremont was a founding member of the *Revolutionary Surrealist Group* in 1946, and the CoBrA movement in 1948. It

was Dotremont who came up with an idea to call the group by the initial letters of the artists' home cities, which they all agreed on. After CoBrA dissolved, Christian Dotremont became well known for his **painted poems**, which he called logograms. He was truly immersed in creating artworks by using words. Eventually, it becomes the defining style of his artistic language.

Joseph Noiret: Illustrated Poetry

Joseph Noiret (1927-2012) was a Belgian painter, writer and poet, and also one of the founders of the CoBrA group. In his 20s, as a communist militant, he joined the *Surrealism Revolutionary* movement, where he met Christian Dotremont. Not only that he became one of the leading artists of the avant-garde CoBrA, but he continued to hold one of the leading roles in the field of art and culture of Belgium. During the CoBrA period, he wrote many poems and articles for reviews of the movement. After 1951 he proceeded with his own way of shaping **something like new CoBrA**, with the literature in the leading position, but without losing connection with art. He illustrated his poetry collections by himself, but there were also works of other artists like [Mogens Balle](#) or Sergio Dangelo. In 1953, Noiret established the cult magazine *Phantomas*, and later on, he became the director of the long school *La Cambre* in Brussels. Although he emerged deeply in the **literature**, he never gave up on painting.