

Raymond Roussel

The President of the Republic of Dreams

curated by François Piron

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Opening reception Friday, 28 June, 19-21

Raymond Roussel (1877-1933), the author of *The View* (1904), *Impressions of Africa* (1909) and *Locus Solus* (1913), is still one of the least-known and most mysterious writers of the 20th century, despite the fact that his profound and often subterranean influence spread far among the literary and artistic avant-gardes of the 20th century. In the ten works he published during his lifetime — poems, novels in verse, narratives or plays — he made supreme efforts to create a world from scratch where “imagination is everything”, with nothing real to get in the way of the writing. Rapt in a singular poetic enterprise and convinced of his own genius, he passed through the first third of the 20th century like a man poised between two worlds, paying no attention to political upheavals and their aesthetic consequences, but never quite understanding why the academic public he thought he was writing for showed such indifference to his works or why they were so scandalized by his dramatic adaptations for the stage.

Until 1914, Raymond Roussel lived in the Parisian high society, as described in Marcel Proust’s novels. In his mother Marguerite Roussel’s salon, it was all a form of theatre, with frequent festivities and costumed balls as seen in the photographs of the Roussel family in fancy dress. This society made Roussel aware that social relationships were a form of representation, while his homosexuality led him to distance himself from society, progressively dedicating his entire life to his literary work.

It was above all to channel an unstoppable imagination that Roussel wrote some of his books by resorting to a “very special procedure”, based on combinations of homophonic words and expressions with double meanings. The path traveled between these words, deliberately situated at the beginning and end of a text, provided Roussel with a framework for his writing and inexhaustible material in the form of unexpected images and narratives in which citation and invention are inseparable.

Although it took him a long time to realize it, Roussel won an enthusiastic following during his lifetime among generations of artists and poets. Marcel Duchamp, who, along with Guillaume Apollinaire and Francis Picabia, attended his *Impressions d’Afrique* at the theatre in 1912, never forgot the experience, and cited it as the main origin of his *Grand Verre*. For the Surrealists, Roussel was the writer who accomplished “the evasion from the sphere of Reality to that of the Concept” (Michel Leiris).

After a period of neglect, Roussel’s work attracted new interest in the 1960s, especially after the investigations of Michel Foucault and the Collège de ‘Pataphysique. Roussel, who took great care to give as little information as possible about his life, is for many the model of an artist at the heart of the labyrinth of his own work.

After the appearance of a set of archives in the late 1980s, we can now shed new light on the oeuvre of Raymond Roussel. This exhibition gathers together never-before-seen documents, paraphernalia, and photographs related to his life and work.

The exhibition begins with publications and documents related to the artistic influences on Raymond Roussel from his early years on, together with his childhood portrait commissioned in 1882 by his mother from the society-painter Madeleine Lemaire, who is now best known for her illustrations in the first book published by Marcel Proust, *Les plaisirs et les jours*. Marguerite Roussel played a very important role in her son's life. The 1912 auction catalogue "Collection Roussel" from the auctioning of Marguerite Roussel's spectacular art collection after her death, document the social and aesthetic context of Roussel's family. This helps account for Roussel's classical taste and why he considered himself a conventional writer.

Editions of every book Roussel published in his lifetime are included in the exhibition, as well as documentation material from the stage adaptations of his books which made Roussel notorious in the 1920s.

A watercolor from the funeral company Lecreux Frères from 1931, together with sketches and correspondence on this, describes the eccentric plan that Roussel had for his own grave in the Parisian cemetery Père Lachaise.

Manuscript pages from *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*, the 1935 posthumously published key text for understanding Roussel's writing technique (or the artist's work), are on view for the first time here. A set of photographs taken by Raymond Roussel throughout his lifetime are here printed for the first time. They show the Roussel family at home, on holiday, in private and social situations. These photos evince Roussel's obsession with scrutinizing minor, trivial details.

Part of the exhibition is dedicated to the very special reception and relationship Roussel's work had with Marcel Duchamp and the Surrealists.

Commissioned by Harald Szeeman for his exhibition *The Bachelor Machines* at Kunsthalle Bern (1975), two works by Jacques Carelman – *Le Diamant* and *La Hie* – are sculptural interpretations made after descriptions from Roussel's book *Locus Solus*.

The exhibition material in this show has been assembled by François Piron, the curator of the exhibition, together with Daniel Buchholz and Christopher Müller.

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