

Irène Zurkinden

Love, Life

13 June—
7 September
2025

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Irène Zurkinden: Love, Life is a tribute to an artist who explored life and society through her drawings and paintings with an observant, thoughtful gaze. The exhibition invites a renewed understanding of an artist who engaged with questions of identity, belonging, and expression throughout her life, displaying how groundbreaking her art was then and how relevant it remains today.

The exhibition opens with a room dedicated to Zurkinden's works on paper. Throughout her six-decades-long career as a visual artist, Zurkinden has filled the pages of more than 100 sketchbooks. Together, they form the visual and conceptual foundation of Zurkinden's practice, serving as studies for later works as well as moments of private reflection. They capture daily life and artistic thought, offering a glimpse into the creative mind of an artist who was always closely engaged with her surroundings.

The sketchbooks, in combination with a selection of over forty drawings, highlight key themes in Zurkinden's practice, from her early beginnings in fashion illustration, as seen in *Untitled (Women's Fashion)*, undated drawings from the late 1920s [25–26], to depictions of sexuality and desire such as *Untitled (Woman and Crouching Figure)*, 1981 [18], or the undated drawing *Untitled (Lovers)* [5]. They also illustrate Zurkinden's affinity for Surrealism, a movement whose members she came into contact with during her early visits to Paris and whose interest in dreams and the subconscious remained a major influence throughout her career [28–33]. Concurrently, depictions of more quiet, everyday moments such as garden scenes, still lifes, and family portraits demonstrate the artist's refusal to be swept up by any one art historical movement. Instead, she insisted on a visual language and way of expression that were all her own. Paper remained a key medium of reflection and exploration throughout her career. Taken together, these drawings reveal the confidence of her line—not simply as formal exploration, but as a way of observing and recording her world.

What links the two rooms of the exhibition and Zurkinden's drawing and painterly practice is the way both mediums reveal

her attentive gaze on the world and her deep interest in modes of reflection and representation of herself and the people around her. This becomes particularly striking in her numerous self-portraits, produced across decades, where her exploration of a genre that allows for introspection, as well as the performance of different roles and ways of being, is evident. In these self-portraits, we witness a negotiation between creative independence and the demands of everyday life as painter, woman, and mother. Across the varied depictions, a sense of self-confidence is palpable from the earliest works onward, as can be seen for example in *Selbstporträt im Atelier*, 1926–28 [88] or the equally personal as undaunted self-portrait that shows her visibly pregnant in 1937 [89].

The second room in the exhibition presents a loose chronology of Zurkinden's paintings, organized around themes that shaped her artistic life: her long relationship with Paris; her close ties to friends and family; and her fascination with the circus, ballet, and the vibrant culture of the Basel carnival. Her interest in the circus, for instance, spanned decades. Yet unlike most of her contemporaries, Zurkinden often situated her figures within spacious, almost surreal landscapes or interiors, far from any audience, creating scenes where it remains unclear whether, and for whom, the performers are performing. These theatrical compositions like *Cirque en plein-air* (1937) [95], or *Femmes et chevaux de cirque* (1977) [101] invite a broader reflection on what it means to appear on life's stage, and what roles we assume as we navigate our lives.

Zurkinden often portrayed those closest to her, including her partner of ten years, Kurt Fenster, and later, their two sons [62–64]. Alongside these personal works, commissioned portraits became a crucial source of income for Zurkinden, helping her to support her family. Her cityscapes of Basel and Paris, as well as her commissioned portraits, were central to establishing her reputation in the Basel art scene. In contrast to these works characterized by their formal, representational qualities, Zurkinden's portraits of friends, such as *Liegender Akt (Lotti Krauss)*, 1927 [52], often feel more immediate. In addition to these depictions of fellow artist Lotti Krauss, there are also several depictions of the milliner Thekla Bechtel [51], and other personalities such as the couturier Fred Spillmann [79] or the dancers Marie-Eve Kreis [65–66] and Simone D'Alal [13]. A particularly exceptional position within these portraits is held by the numerous depictions of her lifelong friend Meret Oppenheim. As in her self-portraits, Zurkinden presents Oppenheim in various roles and poses, underscoring their artistic dialogue and mutual affection [54–56]. A unifying feature of these intimate works—almost exclusively focused on women—is how Zurkinden's subjects meet the viewer's gaze directly, framed within tight compositions that intensify their presence.

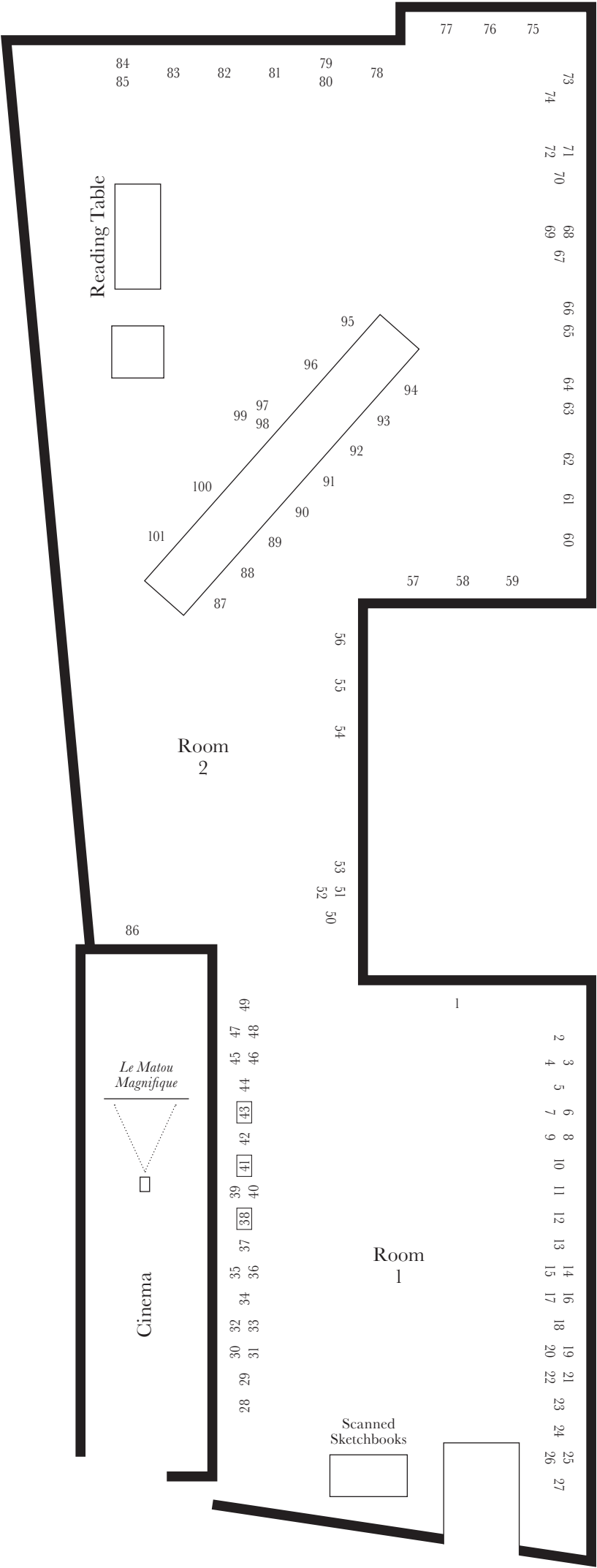
In the early 1940s, Zurkinden joined Gruppe 33, an anti-fascist collective of Basel artists, united more by a shared commitment to resisting conservative tendencies in society than by a singular artistic style. In the 1960s, public attention for her work gradually waned, though she remained a fixture of the Basel cultural scene—among other things, hosting her legendary Hexensabbat at the Kunsthalle during Fasnachts-Zyschtig. Her significance as an artist was rediscovered in the 1980s with a retrospective at the Kunstmuseum Basel in 1985, and the art prize of the city of Basel in 1986.

Zurkinden's oeuvre reflects an ongoing interest in both the grand and the intimate moments of life, capturing what is often overlooked or deemed insignificant. Through her constant attentiveness to the world in all its facets and peculiarities, Zurkinden created a lens that is radically inclusive and connecting. Often situated slightly outside the mainstream, she remained true to her own vision of the world, marked by quiet attention and care. The exhibition and the accompanying publication seek to offer contemporary perspectives on Zurkinden's oeuvre that underscore its ongoing relevance.

Zurkinden's lightness and humor, as well as her life and the way it meandered between different social spheres, are also honored in the newly commissioned film *Le Matou Magnifique* by Ariane Koch (author) and Garrick Lauterbach (director).

Through the eyes of Zurkinden's cat Matou, viewers are invited into a world where the boundaries between fiction and memory, past and present, begin to blur, and where archival footage and interviews intertwine with Matou's wanderings through the life of her companion, Zurkinden.

The exhibition is curated by Rebecca Eigen and Reto Thüring with Elsa Himmer. On the occasion of the exhibition, *Irène Zurkinden: Love, Life* has been published with Hatje Cantz and is available free of charge.



Room 1	15 “Vally”, 1946. Black ink on paper, 25.7 × 18.1 cm. Private collection, Basel	29 <i>Untitled (Surrealist Drawing)</i> , 1936. Brown and black ink on paper, 46.8 × 31.5 cm. Private collection, Basel	45 <i>Untitled (Surrealist Drawing)</i> , 1978. Black ink and graphite on paper, 21 × 29.5 cm
1 <i>Design for the Tapestry in the Wedding Room of the Civil Registry Office</i> , 1962. Gouache on paper, 301 × 150 cm. Collection Kunstkredit Basel-Stadt	16 <i>Untitled (Erotic Drawing)</i> , undated. Black ink on notebook page, 29.5 × 20.5 cm. Collection Thomas Rüegg	30 <i>Untitled (Surrealist Drawing with Cats)</i> , undated. Black ink on paper, 29.7 × 20.4 cm. Private collection, Basel	46 <i>Untitled (Children Crossing the Street)</i> , undated. Black and brown ink on notebook page, 20.7 × 29.7 cm
2 <i>Untitled (Portrait Studies and Apples)</i> , undated. Black ink on paper, 29.6 × 20.2 cm. Private collection, Basel	17 <i>Untitled (Phallus as Woman's Body)</i> , undated [circa 1936]. Black ink on paper, 20.5 × 20.9 cm. Musée d'art et d'histoire de Genève	31 <i>Untitled (Surrealist Drawing with Cats)</i> , 1980. Black ink and graphite on paper, 28.5 × 20.5 cm. Private collection, Basel	47 “C'ETAIT SA PREMIERE SORTIE,” undated. Black ink on paper, 21.1 × 29.8 cm. Musée d'art et d'histoire de Genève
3 “ein Männlein steht auf einem Bein...,” undated. Black ink and watercolor or gouache (?) on paper, 29.8 × 21 cm	18 <i>Untitled (Woman and Crouching Figure)</i> , 1981. Black ink and graphite on paper, 17 × 25 cm. Private collection, Basel	32 <i>Untitled (Surrealist Drawing)</i> , undated. Black ink on paper, 29.5 × 20 cm. Private collection, Basel	48 “tu es loin,” 1950. Black ink on laid paper, 25 × 30 cm
4 <i>Untitled (Two Abstract Figures)</i> , undated. Black ink and watercolor or gouache (?) on paper, 29.8 × 21 cm	19 <i>Untitled (Erotic Collage)</i> , undated [1930s]. Watercolor (?), gouache, black ink, and collage on paper, 26 × 18.7 cm. Private collection, Basel	33 “chacun son sort ou les plus bêtes que leur pieds,” 1935. Black ink on paper, 28 × 22 cm. Private collection, Basel	49 <i>Untitled (Surrealist Building)</i> , undated. Black ink on paper, 14.5 × 20 cm. Private collection, Basel
5 <i>Untitled (Lovers)</i> , undated. Black ink on paper, 29.7 × 20.2 cm. Private collection, Basel	20 <i>Untitled (Female Nude With Knife)</i> , undated. Graphite, watercolor (?), and collage on watermarked paper, 27 × 19.2 cm. Private collection, Basel	34 “EWIG DEIN,” undated. Black ink and colored pencil, 21 × 27 cm. Musée d'art et d'histoire de Genève	Scanned Sketchbooks
6 <i>Untitled (Children and Self-Portrait)</i> , undated. Black ink on paper, 24 × 30 cm. Private collection, Switzerland	21 <i>Untitled (Surrealist Drawing)</i> , undated. Black ink on paper, 29.5 × 20 cm. Private collection, Basel	35 <i>Untitled (Seated Figure and Four Vases)</i> , undated. Black ink on paper, 29.3 × 20.2 cm. Private collection, Basel	Sketchbook [open cover], 1965, 34 pages
7 <i>Untitled (Presumably Stephan Sleeping)</i> , undated. Graphite on paper, 20.9 × 29.5 cm	22 <i>Untitled (Two Busts of Women)</i> , undated. Black ink on paper, 28 × 22 cm	36 “et l'un n'empêche pas l'autre,” undated. Black ink on paper, 29.5 × 20.5 cm. Private collection, Basel	Sketchbook [ROMA], 1953–54, 40 pages
8 “Kurt”, undated. Graphite, chalk, and black ink on paper, 26.3 × 16.2 cm	23 <i>Untitled (Two Women Looking at Two Women)</i> , 1936. Black ink on notebook page, 21 × 25.7 cm. Musée d'art et d'histoire de Genève	37 <i>Untitled (Surrealist Drawing)</i> , undated. Black ink on paper, 29.6 × 20.2 cm. Private collection, Basel	Sketchbook [ERDBEER], 1947, 42 pages
9 <i>Untitled (Irène and Kurt in an Interior)</i> , undated. Black ink on paper, 29 × 20 cm. Private collection, Basel	24 “bas / centre / haut,” 1952. Black ink and graphite on paper, 29 × 20.5 cm. Private collection, Basel	38 Sketchbook [A], 1949, 30 pages	Sketchbook [black cover], undated, 70 pages
10 <i>Untitled (Self-Portrait with Kurt)</i> , undated [late 1930s]. Black ink on paper, 21.5 × 31 cm. Private collection, Basel	25 <i>Untitled (Women's Fashion)</i> , undated [late 1920s]. Black ink on paper, 25.5 × 15.5 cm	39 <i>Untitled (Houseplants)</i> , undated. Black ink on paper, 29.5 × 20.2 cm. Private collection, Basel	Sketchbook [Le matou magnifique], 1947, 94 pages
11 <i>Untitled (Self-Portrait at Rheinsprung)</i> , undated [1931–32]. Graphite on paper, 27.4 × 21.5 cm	26 <i>Untitled (Women's Fashion)</i> , undated [late 1920s]. Black ink and graphite on paper, 17 × 13 cm	40 “je reviens,” 1968. Black ink on paper, 29.5 × 20.5 cm. Private collection, Basel	Sketchbook [A] 1959, 26 pages
12 <i>Selbstporträt</i> , undated. Black ink on paper, 45 × 36 cm. Collection Suter, Basel	27 <i>Untitled (Woman With Hat in Her Hand)</i> , undated. Black ink on paper, 29.5 × 20.9 cm	41 Sketchbook [ROMA], 1953–54, 40 pages	Cinema
13 <i>D'Alal au réveil</i> , 1984. Gouache and graphite on paper, 14 × 22 cm. Private collection, Basel	28 <i>Untitled (Surrealist Drawing)</i> , 1983. Black ink and graphite on paper, 16 × 40 cm. Private collection, Basel	42 <i>Untitled (Rocks by the Sea)</i> , 1953. Black ink and graphite on paper, 29.5 × 20.4 cm	Ariane Koch and Garrick Lauterbach, <i>Le Matou Magnifique</i> , 2025. 4K digital video, 23 minutes
14 <i>Untitled (Vally)</i> , undated. Black ink on paper, 25.5 × 17 cm. Private collection, Basel		43 Sketchbook [Spirax No. 1024], 1961–63, 36 pages	
		44 “les pêts” [sic], undated. Black ink on paper, 29.5 × 20 cm. Private collection, Basel	

Room 2	68 <i>Untitled</i> , undated. Oil on canvas, 27 × 19 cm	86 <i>Selbstbildnis mit Interieur</i> , 1955. Oil on canvas, 45.3 × 55.2 cm. UBS Art Collection	All works Estate of Irène Zurkinden unless stated otherwise. Our thanks go to the private and institutional lenders as well as to everyone who contributed to the success of the project.
50 <i>Copines—Copains</i> , 1927–28. Oil on wood, 44.8 × 52.8 cm	69 <i>Stilleben</i> , undated. Oil on plywood, 22 × 20.5 cm. Private collection	87 <i>Selbstbildnis</i> , 1930. Gouache on paper, 32.5 × 24.6 cm. Collection Suter, Basel	
51 <i>Thekla</i> , undated. Oil on canvas, 41 × 33 cm. Collection Suter, Basel	70 <i>Bardame</i> , 1959. Oil on canvas, 85 × 65 cm	88 <i>Selbstporträt im Atelier</i> , 1926–28. Oil on canvas, 119.4 × 100 cm. Stiftung für Kunst, Kultur und Geschichte, Winterthur	
52 <i>Liegender Akt (Lotti Krauss)</i> , 1927. Oil on canvas, 46.3 × 73.4 cm. Private collection, Switzerland	71 <i>Porträt Stupsi Rainer</i> , 1945. Oil on cardboard, 49.5 × 35 cm. Private collection, Switzerland	89 <i>Untitled (Self-Portrait, Pregnant)</i> , 1937. Oil on cardboard, 51 × 36 cm	
53 <i>Liegender weiblicher Akt</i> , 1940. Oil on canvas, 60 × 81 cm. Private collection	72 <i>Clara Haskil</i> , second half of the 1940s. Oil on cardboard, 29 × 18.5 cm. Private collection, Basel	90 <i>Nature soit-disant morte</i> , 1943. Oil on canvas, 81 × 67.5 cm. Kunstmuseum Basel, acquired with funds from the Schiess-Fonds	
54 <i>Meret Oppenheim</i> , 1929. Oil on canvas, 65.2 × 50 cm	73 <i>Häusergruppe beim Basler Bahnhof</i> , 1941. Oil on canvas, 38 × 46 cm. Private collection, Riehen	91 <i>Selbstbildnis im Fauteuil</i> , 1942. Oil on cardboard, 49.7 × 39 cm. Private collection	
55 <i>Meret en bleu</i> , no XXXVI, 1930. Oil on canvas, 73 × 60 cm. Stiftung für Kunst, Kultur und Geschichte, Winterthur	74 <i>Huningue juste d'après la guerre</i> , 1945. Oil on wood, 27.2 × 34 cm	92 <i>Le dimanche du Matou</i> , 1966. Oil on canvas, 53.5 × 80 cm. Private collection, Solothurn	
56 <i>Meret à l'orange</i> , 1932–35. Oil on canvas, 65 × 54.5 cm. Kunstmuseum Basel, acquisition	75 <i>Friedhof in Paris</i> , circa 1950. Oil on canvas, 73 × 60 cm. Private collection	93 <i>Autoportrait</i> , 1961. Oil on cardboard, 35 × 18 cm. Stiftung für Kunst, Kultur und Geschichte, Winterthur	
57 <i>Histoire d'une nuit (un rêve)</i> , 1935. Oil on canvas, 54 × 73 cm. Private collection, Switzerland	76 <i>Treppe mit Schülern</i> , 1955. Oil on fiberboard, 27 × 34.9 cm. UBS Art Collection	94 <i>Mes souliers</i> , 1971. Oil on canvas, 82 × 107 cm. David Meili	
58 <i>Le ballet lugubre</i> , 1942. Oil on canvas, 50.3 × 65.3 cm. Helvetia Art Collection	77 <i>Neue Welt in Basel</i> , undated. Oil on canvas, 38 × 46 cm. Private collection, Switzerland	95 <i>Cirque en plein-air</i> , 1937. Oil on canvas, 59 × 71 cm. Private collection	
59 <i>Erotische Szene</i> , 1935. Oil on cardboard, 25 × 42.8 cm. Collection Suter, Basel	78 <i>Porträt Lucretia</i> , 1945. Oil on canvas, 127 × 87.5 cm. Collection Hotel Les Trois Rois, Basel	96 <i>Clown</i> , 1946. Oil on canvas, 120 × 80 cm. Kunstmuseum Bern, Estate Werner Belmont	
60 <i>Venedig</i> , 1934. Oil on canvas, 54.3 × 65.3 cm. Stiftung für Kunst, Kultur und Geschichte, Winterthur	79 <i>Porträt Fred Spillmann</i> , 1978. Oil on canvas, 35.4 × 27.3 cm. Private collection	97 <i>Claude à la barre</i> , 1945. Oil on canvas, 41 × 33 cm. Private collection	
61 <i>Rue d'Odessa en fête</i> , 1935. Oil on canvas, 62 × 49 cm. Helvetia Art Collection	80 <i>—minu</i> , 1985. Oil on canvas, 32 × 27 cm. —minu	98 <i>Zirkusbild</i> , 1949. Oil on canvas, 45 × 37 cm. Private collection, Switzerland	
62 <i>Kurt</i> , 1938. Oil on canvas, 55 × 46 cm	81 <i>Waggiswagen mit Kindern im Basler Industriegebiet</i> , circa 1960. Oil on cardboard, 20.7 × 26.2 cm. Private collection	99 <i>Impression du ballet</i> , 1935. Oil on canvas, 50 × 73 cm	
63 <i>Untitled</i> , 1943. Oil on cardboard, 22.5 × 33.5 cm	82 <i>Böcklinade</i> , 1958. Oil on canvas, 65 × 110 cm. Collection Hotel Les Trois Rois, Basel	100 <i>Cancan (Paris)</i> , 1946–47. Oil on canvas, 54.3 × 81 cm. Stiftung für Kunst, Kultur und Geschichte, Winterthur	
64 <i>Untitled</i> , undated. Oil on canvas, 73 × 65 cm	83 <i>Marché à Dakar</i> , 1977. Oil on canvas, 50 × 65 cm. Private collection Francesco Manzoni, Porza	101 <i>Femmes et chevaux de cirque</i> , 1977. Oil on canvas, 150 × 300 cm. Private collection Carabelli, Schweiz	
65 <i>Marie-Eve au peigne bleu</i> , 1941. Oil on canvas, 72 × 51 cm	84 <i>Nature morte aux œufs</i> , 1981. Oil on wood, 21.5 × 27 cm		
66 <i>Danseuse</i> , 1946. Oil on canvas, 79.5 × 63.5 cm. Private collection	85 <i>Untitled (Cherries)</i> , 1985. Oil on cardboard, 34 × 40.8 cm		
67 <i>Untitled</i> , 1939. Oil on canvas, 65 × 54 cm			