

DUMAS+LIMBACH  
FINE ART



# Jean Hélion

## Everyday mythologies

35 Avenue Matignon, 75008 PARIS

# Jean Héliion

Jean Héliion (1904-1987), born Jean Bichier, began his school career by studying architecture in Paris, while at the same time showing a keen interest in poetry. He turned to painting in 1923. He spent a lot of time at the Louvre, where he studied Champaigne and Poussin in particular. In 1925, thanks to collector Georges Bine, he devoted himself entirely to painting.

A French painter with a complex artistic career, he was instrumental in introducing abstract art to the United States. He initially focused on volume, movement and rhythm, and became close to Mondrian, Léger and then Calder. It was through contact with painters such as Joaquin Torres Garcia and Perre Créixams that the artist discovered Cubism in 1926. Jean Héliion held his first exhibition in 1932, presenting mostly abstractions. After a first stay in the United States in 1932, he became one of the major players in abstraction, both as a theorist and practitioner. He exhibited in NewYork.



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*Portrait of Jean Héliion in his Montmartre studio*  
©Association Jean Héliion



JEAN HÉLON,  
*Le dernier acte*, 1982  
Acrylic on canvas, H 199,5 x L 154 cm.



From 1934 onwards, Hélian gradually returned to the human figure. He finally turned his back on abstraction in 1939, starting to paint from life and devoting himself to a body of work inspired by scenes from everyday life.

In 1940, Hélian took the opposite path to the French intellectuals and artists who fled to the United States. He voluntarily enlisted in the French army. He was taken prisoner in June, interned in two non-commissioned officer camps. It wasn't until 1942 that he managed to escape. He then crossed Germany, Paris and Marseille. Back in the United States, he was soon exhibited at the Paul Rosenberg Gallery and the Peggy Guggenheim Gallery, whose daughter he married.

The doors of success were open to him, but he gave up abstract art for good and continued his figurative work. He was rejected by American collectors, in particular his mother-in-law, who had bet on abstraction and surrealism.

The man who was recognized during his lifetime by Eduardo Arroyo and Martial Raysse, a friend of Mondrian and Arp in particular, thus profoundly marked the history of twentieth-century art. His life as a broken line, embodied and committed, contributes to the richness of his monumental work.

## The unexpected



Helena



JEAN HÉLION,  
*LE GUITARISTE*, 1972  
PASTEL AND CHARCOAL ON PAPER, H 69 X L 83 CM

*"Redrawn. Drawing can be loaded with meaning. Draw for a long time. Let every main element (arm, leg, head) and every detail (folds, fingers, nose) and every fragment (eyebrow, pimple, eyelid, nail) be placed, rhythmically ordered, charged"*

JEAN HÉLION 24 OCT. 1947.

# The drawing

Jean Hélion's preparatory drawings accumulate, refine and converge towards a single goal: to unfold and develop the figurative motif.

His sketches explore indissolubly linked human figures and familiar objects.

Using charcoal, pastel and acrylic, he delves deep into his observations of everyday life. He analyzes his environment and the social reality that results from it. "Fish Market" is a perfect example.

Here, several groups of characters occupy the space. The composition of each part is relatively similar. A minimum of four figures and a fish sliced in two. On one side, the animal's body lies decapitated, revealing the bloody depths of its neck. To the right of the workbench, the second part of the body, the head, rises like a peg. In contrast to the figures, whose physiognomy is rather indeterminate, the fish heads are highly detailed. The protruding jaw continues to worry the viewer as to the potential aggressiveness of the vertebrate.



JEAN HÉLION,  
MARCHÉ AU POISSON, 1977  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, H 130 X L 195 CM  
©ASSOCIATION JEAN HÉLION



JEAN HÉLION,  
MARCHÉ POUR UN POISSON, 1977  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, H 81 X L 116 CM  
©ASSOCIATION JEAN HÉLION



JEAN HÉLION,  
*HOLOCAUSTES*, 1977  
PASTEL AND WATERCOLOR ON BROWN CANSON PAPER, H 75,5 X L 106,5 CM  
©CENTRE POMPIDOU



JEAN HÉLION,  
*LE MARCHÉ AUX POISSONS*, 1977  
PASTEL AND WATERCOLOR ON PAPER MAROUFLE ON CANVAS  
H 75.5 X L 105.5 CM





JEAN HÉLION, *LE MARCHÉ AUX POISSONS*, 1977, PASTEL AND WATERCOLOR ON PAPER MAROULFE ON CANVAS, H 75.5 X L 105.5 CM

When we place this work in the context of the artist's corpus, we realize that it is closely linked to numerous other works by the Norman painter.

Several references to markets and fish are elaborated. The culmination is Holocausts. Here again, dead fish heads, always erected vertically. The eyes are glassy, the mouth open, leaving the viewer haggard in the face of menacing teeth. But as Claude Laugier's sublime analysis tells us:

"The meaning of the image is unambiguously allegorical - as the title on the reverse of the sheet attests. The veiled gaze of the fish - whose skin is sumptuously enhanced in bright pastel colors - also seems to refer to the artist's personal tragedy, as he is threatened with blindness".

In 1965, Hélion spoke for the first time of his eyesight problems: he saw himself affected by near-blindness. The 1965 allegory from Luxembourg shows the early signs of his visual impairment. In May 1971, a retinal haemorrhage forced him to undergo two cataract operations. From then on, his eye problems continued to worsen.

Strongly affected by his visual impairment, his works are shaped by sketched characters and settings.

Details matter little. He cultivates the atmosphere, the subject in its entirety. His touch is lyrical, concise, even schematic. And yet, the emotion that emanates from his work is palpable.

Although his eyesight was declining considerably, his output did not diminish drastically. On the contrary, it reveals the prowess of his memory of his various observations, and the power of his imagination to develop them. The artist would write:

"I draw with my knowledge, I color with my passion, I compose with dreams" ( Carnets, March 1, 1974).

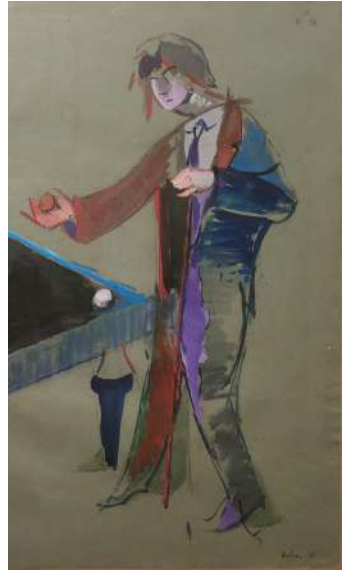
Alongside Jacqueline, his last wife, he now lives almost permanently in Bignonnette. He travels to the surrounding markets, observing the hamlets and bordering provinces.



JEAN HÉLION,  
LE MARCHÉ, 1976  
PASTEL AND CHARCOAL ON PAPER MOUNTED ON CANVAS, H 73 X L 110 CM



In this exercise in comprehensive analysis of the artist's corpus and the correlation of works between them, "Le billard" could be subjected to a similar reflection to the acrylic on the homonymous canvas. The particle conditions the scene: from a designation we move on to an atmosphere. The characters have the same attitude, similar postures, the accoutrements are the same, only the tie has disappeared. Again, the composition is similar: a woman on the left, a man on the right. The white ball grazes the billiard cue, about to hit the second one, also in the corner..



JEAN HÉLION,  
*LE BILLARD*, 1976  
PASTEL AND CHARCOAL ON MOUNTED PAPER  
ON CANVAS , H 75 X L 109 CM



JEAN HÉLION,  
*AU BILLARD*, 1976  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS , H 81 X L 116 CM  
©ASSOCIATION JEAN HELION



JEAN HÉLION,  
*LE BILLARD*, 1976  
PASTEL AND CHARCOAL ON PAPER MOUNTED ON CANVAS, H 75 X L 109 CM

# Everyday mythologies

Hélión is fascinated by the spectacle of life. His interest is in the everyday, which he magnifies and cultivates.

For the man who dreamed of "a Sistine chapel in the costumes and forms of today", markets and scenes of life are his first choice.

A mythology of the everyday is thus elaborated through his creations. Fish in a stall, billiard players, lobsters, lovers in a patch of grass - anything that might resemble the banality of our lives becomes conducive to the legend of his art.

Jean Hélión selects "Witnesses and actors in this modern fresco" of which he is the builder.

In the 1970s, public spaces, the world of markets and the Puces de Saint-Ouen flea market attracted his full attention. The chromatic diversity of these places gave him great freedom in the use of tonalities.

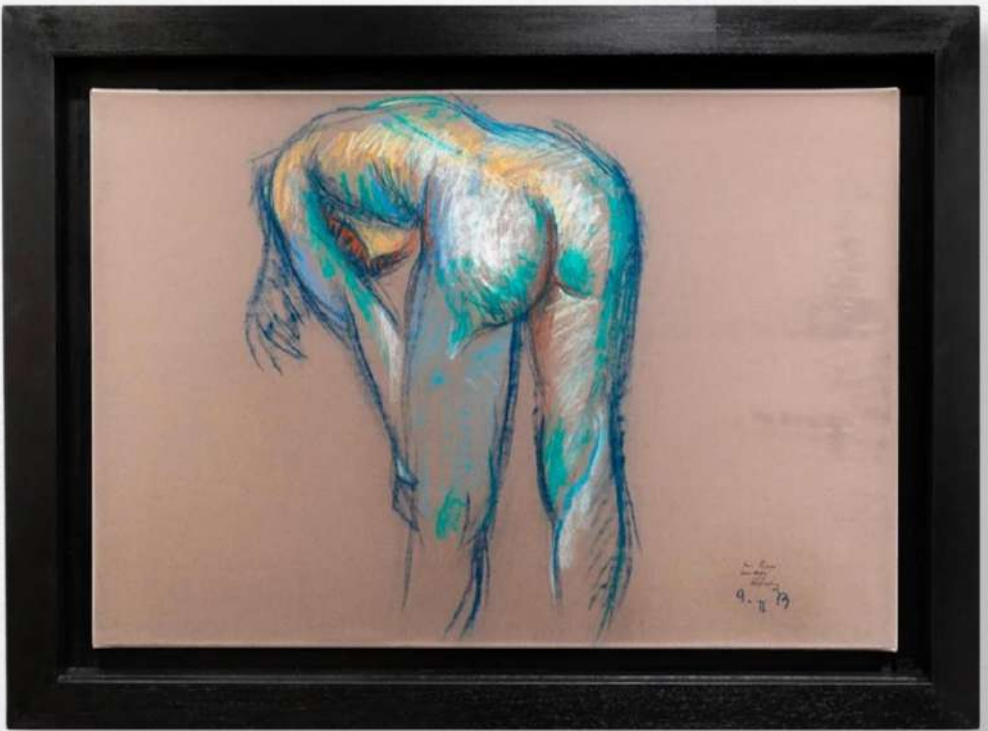


JEAN HÉLION,  
COIFFURE POUR UN TUBA III, 1980  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS , H 80 X L 100 CM

"Ten years ago, I produced my first graphics freed from the natural image. I'm about to turn 35. I still have time to accomplish a great work. For ten years, I think I'll be looking at, admiring and loving the life around us, passers-by, houses, gardens, stores, trades, everyday gestures. Then, once I've mastered the means and acquired the baggage of characters and attitudes that will allow me to experience the ease I now have in non-figurative art, I'll embark on another period that I've been anticipating for a few days: I'll restore to painting its moral and didactic power. I'll be tackling great scenes that will no longer be merely descriptive or administrative, but meaningful like the great Poussins."

Jean Hélion





Jean Hélon,  
*Nu*, 1973  
Pastel on coloured paper mounted on canvas, H 49 x L 75 cm

"Nu", 1973, will once again arouse our curiosity. It surprises us both by its unusual use of blue and green chromatic tones to represent the human anatomy, and by its integration into the artist's work.

This work, dedicated to a man named Pierre, shows us the body of a woman, nude, from behind, gently bending down. Her hand rests lasciviously on her knee. Part of her bust is revealed, though slightly concealed by her arm. Taken at face value, this sketch captures a fleeting moment in the intimacy of this anonymous woman.

The same year, Jean Hélon produced "Tête-à-tête". Green and blue are once again the order of the day. But the figure has been split into two by a clever play of mirrors. Another, darker acrylic, also entitled "Tête-à-tête", is also available. The colors are more realistic. The posture is still identical. Only her buttocks are more visible, thanks to a subtle rotation.

But all this iconography is completed by a painting produced between January and February of the same year, entitled "La belle maraîchère". A familiar silhouette catches our eye. Although the arm is no longer busy concealing the young woman's bosom, the scarf she is clutching suddenly gives meaning to the inclination of her posture.





Jean Héliion, *Tête-à-tête*, 1973  
Acrylic on canvas, H 50 x L 61 cm  
©Association Jean Helion



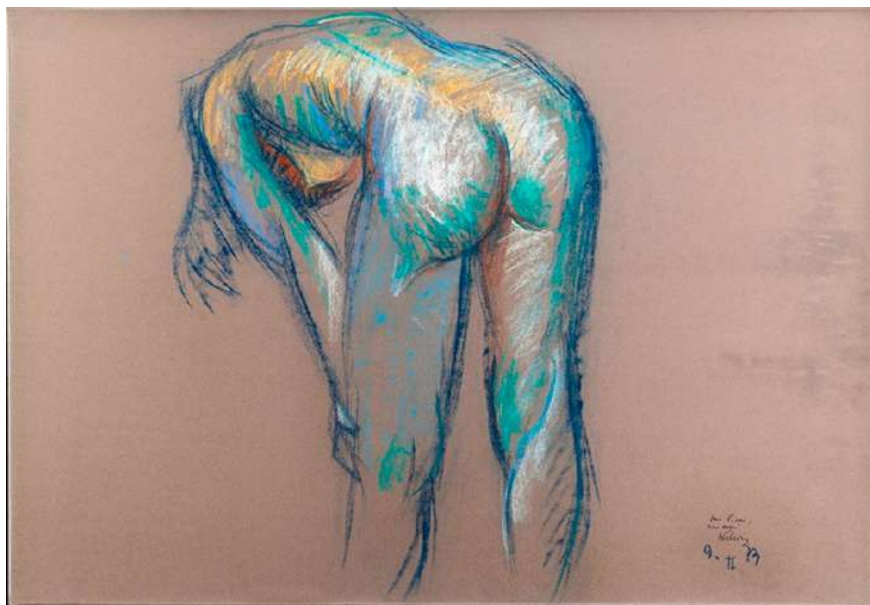
Jean Héliion, *Tête-à-tête*, 1973  
Acrylic on canvas, H 38 x L 46 cm  
©Association Jean Helion



Jean Héliion, *Tête-à-tête*, 1973  
Acrylic on canvas



Jean Héliion, *La belle maraîchère*, 1973  
Acrylic on canvas, H 46 x L 65cm  
©Association Jean Helion



Jean Héliion, *Nu*, 1973  
Pastel on coloured paper mounted on canvas, H 49 x L 75 cm

# The abstract ?

For someone who is renowned for his abstraction and his membership of the Abstraction-Création movement, we might have seen this return to the figurative as paradoxical, devoid of meaning or conceptual cohesion.

But this is not the case. Hélión went against the wishes of the market, the advice of gallery owners and the expectations of his most loyal collectors. In 1934, due to the dogmatism of its members, all of whom were hostile to any figurative allusion (notably Auguste Herbin), Hélión left Abstraction-Creation.

In 1946, on his return to France, he definitively abandoned abstraction in favor of resolutely figurative painting. The practice of drawing became fundamental. After 1968, the painter finally achieved a synthesis of abstract geometry and figuration. His works explore contemporary rituals and the founding myths of the collective imagination. His aim is to suggest what lies hidden in our everyday actions. In a way, he is bringing ancient mythologies into dialogue with those of his own time. Specifically, in "Couple au Jardin des Tuileries" and "Monument sur l'Herbe", he isolates characters emblematic of modern life: couples embracing and kissing become figures of desire and love.



Jean Hélión, *Couple aux jardins des tuileries*, 1972  
Watercolor, pastel, charcoal and gouache on paper mounted on canvas,  
H 50 x L 65 cm



Jean Hélión, *Monument sur l'herbe*, 1972  
Acrylic on canvas , H 38 x L 46 cm  
©Association Jean Helion



Jean Hélon, *Nu*, 1973  
Pastel on colored paper mounted on canvas, H 49 x L 75 cm



Jean Hélon, *Couple aux jardins des tuileries*, 1972  
Watercolor, pastel, charcoal and gouache on paper mounted on canvas, H 50 x L 65 cm



Jean Hélon, *Le Marché aux poissons*, 1977  
Pastel and watercolor on paper mounted on canvas, H 75,5 x L 105,5 cm



Jean Hélon, *Le Billard*, 1976  
Pastel and charcoal on paper mounted on canvas, H 75 x L 109 cm



Jean Hélon, *Le Marché*, 1976  
Pastel and charcoal on paper mounted on canvas, H 73 x L 110 cm



Jean Hélon, *Le Dernier Acte*, 1982  
Acrylic on canvas, H 199,5 x L 154 cm



Jean Hélion, *Le Guitariste*, 1972  
Pastel and charcoal on paper, H 69 x L 83 cm



Jean Hélion, *Coiffure pour un tuba III*, 1980  
Acrylic on canvas, H 80 x L 100 cm

## EXHIBITIONS

- 1934** « Hélion », Université de Chicago, Chicago
- 1937** Howard Putzel Gallery, Exposition organisée par Marcel Duchamp, Los Angeles
- 1937** San Francisco Museum of Art
- 1943** « Hélion. Abstract Paintings », The Arts Club of Chicago, Chicago
- 1943** « Hélion. Paintings 1933-1939 », Art of this Century, New York
- 1970** Retrospective, Grand Palais, Paris
- 1977** « Hélion, les marchés (1972-1977) », Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris
- 1984** « Hélion, peintures et dessins 1925-1983 », Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris
- 1984** Abstraktion und Mythen des Alltags, Städtliche Galerie im Lenbachhaus, München
- 1986** « Omaggio a Jean Hélion. Opere recenti/Homage to Jean Helion. Recent Works », Fondazione Solomon R. Guggenheim, Venise
- 1987** Tate Gallery, Liverpool
- 1990** IVAM-Centro Julio Gonzalez, Valence, Espagne
- 1991** « Dation, peintures et dessins », Musée national d'art moderne, Paris
- 1995** Musée des Beaux-Arts, Orléans
- 1995** « Helion, la figure tombée », Musée d'Unterlinden, Colmar
- 1996** « Hélion, la figure tombée », Musée de l'Abbaye Sainte-Croix, Les Sables d'Olonne
- 2004** Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris
- 2005** Musée Picasso, Barcelone
- 2018** National Academy Museum, New York
- 2022** « Jean Hélion, de 1955 à 1966 « Mon métier est de penser avec les yeux » », Galerie Alain Margaron, Paris
- 2024** « La prose du monde », Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris,



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FINE ART

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# From the Editor

Dear family, dear friends, dear collectors,

It is with great pride and joy that we invite you to discover our new exhibition at DUMAS+LIMBACH Fine Art. This time, we are pleased to present an exceptional exhibition entitled "Mythologies du Quotidien", retracing the last twenty years of the work of Jean Héliion, one of the undisputed masters of figurative painting.

With his distinctive style and unique sensibility, Jean Héliion has captured the very essence of the human form and the landscapes that surround us. Through his canvases, he invites us on a timeless journey where color, light and composition combine to create paintings of striking beauty.

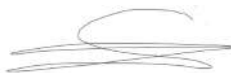
This exhibition is the fruit of painstaking and passionate work, in which we have sought to highlight the diversity and depth of Jean Héliion's work. From portraits to still lifes to scenes of daily life, each painting tells a story, evokes an emotion and transports us into the fascinating universe of this extraordinary artist.

We want to share this artistic experience with you, our dear visitors, and invite you to plunge into the rich and captivating world of Jean Héliion. Whether you're a confirmed art lover or simply curious, we're convinced that this exhibition will amaze and inspire you.

We would also like to thank all those who have contributed to this event, in one way or another. Their unfailing support and passion for art have been essential to the success of this project.

Finally, I invite you to come and discover this exceptional exhibition at DUMAS+LIMBACH Fine Art. Whether it's your first visit or you're a regular visitor, we look forward to welcoming you and sharing this unique artistic experience with you.

Sincerely,  
Salomé Limbach Dumas



Editor-in-Chief

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