

# JEAN ROULLAND

## Childhood and adolescence

Jean Roulland was born on March 29th, 1931 in Croix, a small industrial town in the suburbs of Roubaix in the North of France. From an upper-class background, he had a happy childhood along with his three brothers and his sister.

His father, Armand Roulland, was the son of a customs' officer and grew up in Okselaere, at the foot of Mount Cassel (North of France). There, he met Anna Humbrecht, a young primary school teacher from Bavinchove. During World War I, Armand Roulland was drafted and got badly injured at his side. He was then evacuated and nursed at the Hotel Magestic of Nice, turned into a military hospital. Armand's vivid and apocalyptic memories of the war impressed and haunted his son's mind.

Armand Roulland held an important position in an insurance company (Agence Verspieren/Lloyd Continental in Roubaix) and his wife resigned becoming a housewife. The couple was quite well-off and could afford a Delahaye with a chauffeur. Mr Roulland was hardworking, he enjoyed doing business and took care of his looks, yet, he suffered fits of depression.

Anna Humbrecht was a former school teacher and a staunch Catholic believer unlike her husband. She raised her children sternly, inculcating religious principles and choosing private confessional schools for their education. Jean Roulland thus went to a private Catholic primary school.

When World War II broke out, the world was turned upside down for the family. The North of France was evacuated and they decided to move South, staying at friends' where they were warmly welcomed. They eventually settled in Saujon, Charente Maritime, for some time before they went back up north. This voyage did not adversely affect young Jean Roulland who lived it as a fascinating adventure. When the family came back, their house was occupied by the Germans and they had to move to Ponteau-sur-mer in Normandy until the end of the war.

Once back in Croix, Jean was fourteen years old and dreamt of making a career in cinema.

He studied at Saint Louis Secondary School in Roubaix where he obtained fairly good results. Nevertheless, he liked spending time with his friends and practicing outdoor sports better than school. His mother enrolled him in the Boy Scouts which he enjoyed since he loved dressing-up, theatrical performances, and outdoor activities. He also discovered the pleasures of camping. Since he did not show any interest in intellectual studies, his parents decided to register him at a professional school hoping he would choose and learn a trade. He studied mechanics for a while but it did not really go anywhere. He learnt how to use a file though, a skill that he used later to chisel his bronzes.

For his part, Jean wanted to be an actor and to make poetic drawings. His father was disappointed by his preference for the artistic field since he was hoping for his son to succeed him.

## Fine-Arts

In 1946, Mr Roulland reconciled himself to register his son to the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts et Industries Techniques in Roubaix where he studied for five years

and was taught many different techniques.

It was a turning point. The moment he joined the academy, Jean was sent to the modeling and sculpting workshop where he proved to be exceptionally gifted.

In spite of his restless nature, he attended every class, devoured art books, learnt how to draw, paint and model earth and plaster. He was initiated to working stone, marble and wood by photographer and painter Achille Veilquin and Pierre Lemaire. At the time, the trend was to emulate Rodin but Roulland was inspired by a simpler style and found his master in Constantin Brancusi.

In 1947, he set up his very first exhibition along with other students and was awarded two encouraging prizes (first runner-up in drawing and painting). From then on, he received prizes for his works every year. He even won four prizes in 1950 (documentary, sketching, sculpture and drawing of live models).

At Roubaix Art School, he met painter Arthur Vanheck, his elder by a few years and became a close friend until the latter passed away. (Vanheck could not afford the school fee and attended classes as auditor).

Roulland quickly made friends with local artists, Jacques Dodin, Michel Delporte, Paul Hemery and Eugène Leroy to name a few. But after a few years, he had no choice but to start earning a living and even though sculpture, along with the expensive investments it involved, was already a passion, he did not even consider living on it. As he wished to work in arts, he decided to learn pottery and ceramics, hoping to become a craftsman.

But the Academy did not own the necessary tools, and Roulland, headstrong and determined as he was, took the necessary steps for the school to acquire a stoneware oven. For three years, every night, Jean Roulland would practice modeling ceramic with a teacher who was no more a specialist than he was. Learning from experimentation and books, he soon developed a keen knowledge of the technique, which proved quite useful later on and fostered his passion for the arts of fire. He was also greatly impressed by Picasso's ceramics he discovered during a trip to Vallauris.

In 1949, he was commissioned a public sculpture for the first time; the portrait of Abbot Lemire for the city of Croix. He did not quite master foundry at the time and the work was cast in a factory close-by.

He audited classes for a few months at the Art School of Paris in 1951. He also visited the Musée de l'Homme and studied skulls and anatomy thoroughly.

### **An artist's life**

Jean did a 15-month long military service in Sarrebourg, Germany.

In 1952, he exhibited his work at the Parenthoux Gallery of Roubaix. From 1952, Jean Marusel, a manufacturer, art collector, and patron had taken under his wing young self-taught artist Arthur Vanheck. He was the one who introduced Jean Roulland to his protector. The latter bought some of Roulland's first sculptures which are part of the Masurel donation (LAM, Villeneuve d'Ascq).

In 1953, he exhibited his first plaster sculptures at the Salon des Artistes Roubaisiens and his first potteries and decorated plates at the Dujardin Gallery.

He married Marie-José D'Hulst the same year. They founded a family together and had four children. Jean worked as moulder at the majolica factory of Wattrelos (North of France) where he persuaded the director to set up a ceramics workshop. He stayed there

for nine years.

At the time, the young couple lived in a flat in Roubaix right above the Dujardin Gallery which organized important contemporary art exhibitions. Jean would sometimes enter the gallery at night to muse at Picasso's, Manessier's and Germaine Richier's works in peace.

His own paintings were inspired by neo-cubism and geometrical abstraction ("La vieille dame", "Femme à la couture"). His drawings were made in a quick, instinctive and expressionist manner, contrasting with his Brancusian sculptures which were made in a more simple style. He exhibited at the Salon Annuel des Artistes Roubaisiens where he kept on meeting with local artists such as Arthur Vanhecke, Michel Delporte, Jean-Paul Hemery, Jacques Dodin, Robert Conte, Pierre Hennebelle and Pierre Leclercq.

In 1954, after a series of quarrels between the younger and the older generations – namely the members of the Salon des Artistes Roubaisiens Organization Committee, all of the young artists followed Vanhecke in his decision to withdraw his contribution. The Parenthou and Dujardin galleries welcomed these young artists whose creations they exhibited. In 1954, the Dujardin Gallery set up the exhibition of "Twelve painters", the poster of which Jean Roulland designed. Among them the young dissidents Hémery, Van Hecke, Roulland, Leroy, Leclercq, Delporte etc were to be found.

If informal, this group of friends was characterized by their northern origins and came to be known as the "Groupe de Roubaix" years later, although they never belonged to any particular trend or movement. They would often meet, debate, exhibit together but remained independent and stuck to their personal styles and wild personalities.

In Lille, Jean was also in touch with the artists of the "Atelier de la Monnaie": Roger Frézin, Claude Vallois, Lyse Oudoire, Jean Brisly... They were supported by patrons and local manufacturers; among them Jean Masurel, Albert Prouvost, André Lefebvre, and Philippe Leclercq who also exhibited masterpieces from their own collections: works by Picasso, Braque, Léger, Utrillo, Buffet, Gromaire, Manessier, Lanskoy, Miro, Klee, Laurencin, Kermadec, Souverbie, Estève, Riopelle, De Staël, Bazaine, Singier, Pignon, Vlaminck, Derain, Van Dongen ...etc. It allowed Jean Roulland to sharpen his appreciation of art and his knowledge of the major art trends of the first half of the century.

In 1957, he worked on sculpting earth ("Maternité") and built casts. He was still fascinated by Brancusi and met Gilioli in Paris. Roulland's work was influenced by "Cycladic sculpture" until 1962. When he came back home from work at the majolica factory, he worked on his own pieces; pastel or gouache drawings that were regularly exhibited in the galleries of Lille and Roubaix. He also taught private pottery classes to young ladies from the upper class.

Although he always managed to give free rein to his feelings through his drawings, he was not quite satisfied with his earth sculptures. He wanted to find another material, one that would be as strong but more malleable to express his impetuosity. He opted for lost-wax. As the work of fire and bronze fascinated him, the very words "lost-wax casting" sounded delightful to him. Without the slightest knowledge of the technique, he decided to give it a go. He read the rare books released on the topic as well as essays dating back to Italian Renaissance. His first designs were made by professional workshops such as Valsuani (Femme enceinte, Vierge Marie) but he longed to do it all himself.

In 1959, Eugène Dodeigne joined the "Groupe de Roubaix" as he moved to Bondues. They grew to be close friends and co-exhibited at the Renar Gallery from 1962. In 1961, Jean had moulded his first bronze all by himself "Nouveau-né", and started working on his first

heads which came to epitomize the whole of his creation. He also kept on moulding earth.

As he left Roubaix for Flines-les-Râches (near Douai) where he bought a shabby farmhouse on mortgage, he built his first "potager" oven (a fire-brick cube heated with coke) with the help of retired miners. He had also acquired a melting pot in Lille and a few tools crafted by the local blacksmith and was finally able to mould his first bronze sculpture using brass and second-hand materials.

Although his knowledge of lost-wax moulding mainly came from books and random tests, his first production was a success and the piece was sold, which encouraged him to follow this path. These first creations were soon exhibited and sold by the Renar Gallery, alongside works by Cesar, Ipousteguy, Roel d'Haese and Dodeigne. Jean then resigned his job at the ceramic factory and took to bronze sculpting and drawing full-time in spite of a few difficult first months.

In 1964, collector Philippe Leclercq introduced young Jean Roulland to François Mathey who was the curator at the Arts Décoratifs. Jean consequently gave up the Brancusian style for good in order to extend his own expressionist line of work. This is the year when he exhibited at the Salon de Mai in Paris and met Cesar who fiercely encouraged Claude Bernard to invite the young artist to his gallery (Paris). Philippe Leclercq was a rich manufacturer from the North. He had a modern chapel built in Hem (near by Roubaix) and commissioned works to Manessier, Dodeigne as well as Jean Roulland (Jean XIII, Christ de Procession).

Jean left Flines-les-Râches to live in a public estate for some time before he decided to move to Casteljean, near Les Vans, Ardèche, with his family. He put together a new coke oven and kept on moulding bronze under the inquisitive gaze of villagers. Now his own master, and in spite of his rudimentary tools, he created a series of remarkable sculptures, namely "Christ mort", "L'Aveugle", and "L'Ardèche gisant"... He also met Yankel who was quite impressed by his work.

In 1966, the Claude Bernard Gallery devoted a whole exhibition to him. Unfortunately, life in Ardèche was far from comfortable and after a couple of years, he decided to move back to the North of France. With the assistance of Dr Habart, a collector and surgeon based in Calais who bought back his house for him, he arrived with a van filled with unfinished works and designs for new creations.

For a short time, Jean was inspired by Picasso and Cesar and realized "Totems": sculptures in which he moulded together a patchwork of heteroclitic objects. He did not follow this path for long though and soon turned back to his very own brand of expressionism. Progressively, after swaying between simple Brancusian style and expressionism, he finally found his personal style and never stepped away from it.

In 1967, after spending some time in Gravelines, he bought a large house in Vieille-Eglise, Pas-de-Calais, from the Butez family. This old bourgeois cottage needed repairs but had a large garden which allowed him to build a workshop. He still lives here today. Over time, he put together a foundry in which he could take every necessary step to the realization of lost-wax moulding; modeling, building and baking of the casts, melting bronze, casting and remoulding, chiseling, patina as well as plinth design.

In 1968, Jean Roulland realized his most imposing work "L'Apocalypse". Unfortunately, he had to give up on the project due to technical and financial problems. The sculpture was cut to chosen pieces which were deemed to convey the strength of the original work. He

was not discouraged and started working on large Christs "Christ de Verdun 1970". Meanwhile, he threw himself in a frenzy of pastel drawings which he executed with life, impetuosity and exuberance as a counterpart for sculpting which demanded the patience he lacked for the result to be revealed. If the themes tackled in the drawings were reminiscent of his sculptures, the sketches were never preparatory drawings. Roulland's pastels were overlooked for a long time but are now regarded as central in his line of work.

Living on art was not always a bed of roses but Jean managed to stay afloat thanks to the support of art-lovers, and, most importantly, was able to keep on working.

In 1972, he was commissioned two major works and awarded prestigious prizes (Prix Rodin and Prix Lenchener, 1972). His pieces were acquired by famous private collectors, French and foreign alike, museums, and public places within the 1% quota instituted by French legislation. He realized important sculptures: "Christ Oublié", "Christ de Rédemption" followed by "Le Gisant" in 1976 and 1977.

In 1978, Jean's wife passed away. This event led to the creation of some of his most poignant creations: "Reine Morte" and "Marie-Madeleine" but also to a period of loneliness and excesses.

In 1981, he was chosen to represent France at the Hakone Open Arts Biennial in Japan. Thanks to the financial and material contribution of his friends, he realized "la Bête Ecorchée" which won the 1st Kotaro Takamura Grand Prize.

In 1984, he permanently drew out of financial troubles with a major commission by the city of Lille strongly supported by Pierre Mauroy: the monument to Cardinal Liénard meant for the Cathédrale de la Treille. This work raised a lot of voices before eventually taking its rightful place.

This is when Marie-Christine Remmery, a student from Roubaix Art School came to assist him as part of her internship. With him, she improved her own skills and learnt how to make lost-wax sculptures all the while designing her own creations. In 1991, the city of Lille set up a great retrospective exhibition of sculpture spanning over the previous thirty years in Hospice Comtesse. It was soon followed by an exhibition of Jean's pastel drawings which met great success. Jean was suddenly struck by the desire to make ceramics again and produced a series of large round and rectangular plates.

In 1995, in parallel to bronze sculpture and drawing, he took to modeling terracotta, and turned to raku and many other techniques. This paved the way to the realization of an impressive set of terracotta heads.

With time, Jean's creation took a new turn. At the beginning, his terracottas were akin to a three-dimension notebook to be converted into bronze sculptures since it allowed him to discover the result of his work right after baking. He made more than three hundred pieces that quickly came to be seen as a new phase in his artistic life due to the hurdles induced by the use of so many different materials, colours, flame motifs and glazes.

Jean Roulland and Marie-Christine Remmery got married in 1998. He kept on sculpting bronze and terracotta as well as drawing pastels. This is when some of his most famous works were realized: "L'Afghane", "La Mariée", "L'Homme de la Forêt" ...etc.

In 2007, he nearly died after suffering a stroke and going in a coma and had to stop working. Marie-Christine assisted him in his relentless struggle against handicap, and he hoped he would soon be able to take up his unfinished creations. In 2012, he was awarded the Academy of Fine Arts Prize for his entire body of work.

## **Encounters, friendships and Influences.**

The influence and education provided by his parents played a significant role in Roulland's artistic life.

His zealous, stern, uncompromising mother in sharp contrast with his dandy, fanciful, depressive and anxious father who impressed him with war stories from an early age contributed to shaping his dual spirit. He was conflicted between profound mysticism and mixed feelings of fascination and repulsion for religion which resulted in his choice of works exploiting the struggle between good and evil tainted by a concern for human condition.

At Art School, he was influenced by his masters and his paintings were inscribed in analytic cubism and abstraction whereas his drawings, more expressionist and cursive paved the way for his future sculptures.

His interest in ceramics was spawned by his happy discovery of Picasso's work in Vallauris.

When he studied Art in Roubaix, his tutor and example was Rodin whose sculptures always mesmerized him. He became fascinated by Constantin Brancusi's and Jean Arp's simpler styles and met Gilioli in 1957 as he was visiting Paris with Delporte. The encounter was brief but the two men became good friends. Jean was deeply moved by the ideal purity of shapes put forward by Cycladic sculptors until 1962.

His ties to great collectors and patrons from the North of France (Jean Masurel, Albert Prouvost, André Lefebvre and Philippe Leclercq) allowed him to gain better understanding of the greatest artists of the first half of the twentieth century such as Picasso, Braque, Léger, Utrillo, Buffet, Gromaire, Manessier, Lanskoy, Miro, Klee, Laurencin, Kermadec, Souverbie, Estève, Riopelle, De staël, Bazaine, Singier, Pignon, Vlaminck, Van Dongen ...).

He also saw primitive art at private collectors' and at Marcel Evrard's Gallery in Lille.

His friends among the "Groupe de Roubaix" and the "Atelier de la Monnaie" had no relevant impact on his line of work. Each artist followed their own path, moreover, Jean was one of the only sculptors within these groups.

Several encounters made in 1964 were significant: after Jean Roulland had shown his paintings to François Mathey who did not know his sculptures, the latter pushed him to continue his work and give up Brancusian abstract style for good and embrace expressionism. Jean's brand of expressionism put forward the depiction of the struggles between Good and Evil nourished by an intense consideration for the tragedy of human condition.

In the same year, he exhibited his work at the Salon de Mai in Paris and met Cesar who, impressed as he was by one of Roulland's heads, told him that » he was doing what he had always wanted to achieve ». César then pushed Claude Bernard to include Roulland to the artists of his gallery. Thirty years later, César, who still admired Roulland and had kept in touch with him said that « Jean Roulland, for one, was never a sell-out ».

Between 1964 and 1967, in Ardèche and after his return to the North of France, Roulland was inspired by Picasso and César's similar experiments and realized patchwork sculptures of heteroclit elements (gas masks, shovels, containers and other discarded objects) that he moulded together. This recreational experimentation was short-lived and the few creations realized were called "Totems". He did not pursue this work and turned back to

his own trend of expressionism, keeping his distance from volatile fashions, external influence and from the sirens of contemporary art. He had found his own way.

Among his friends featured Claude and Michèle Vallois, sculptors Eugène Dodeigne, Mario Slinckaert and ceramist Jean Brisý with whom he spent many nights discussing ceramics and checking the ovens.

Jean liked people, humble people in particular who were an endless source of inspiration. In Ardèche and in Vieille-Eglise he would go to Mrs Brazy's pub straight from work and meet with local farm workers, peasants and retired people. Their features, marked by time and excesses can be seen in some of his sculptures.

Apart from the books he used to find technical tips, not that he really needed them, Jean did not read much. Art papers and reviews did not particularly arouse his interest. On the other hand, he liked pictures. His bookcase is filled with art books in which he gazed at photographs. He owned books devoted to Rodin, Goya, Picasso, Giacometti as well as plenty of books about Japanese, Egyptian, Pre-Colombian, and African art. Primitive art also filled him with awe. He read books about anatomy or Chinese, Japanese and Arabic ceramics. He worshipped Hamada.

He also had a passion for rugs and fabrics as well as archeological artifacts and voodoo statues. All these elements, including sulfurs (he has an extensive collection of them), African masks and mummies nourished his imagination.

In the beginning of the sixties, he discovered Kafir idols in Afghanistan along with Sepik tribal artwork, and was quite fond of naïve art.

For many years, he kept paintings by Crépin and Scottie Wilson as part of his collection.

07/2013

Christian Evrard

Translation : Diane Evrard