

Curated by Clare Elliott, Associate Research Curator

All quotes by Dorothea Tanning are from Donald Kuspit, *Dorothea Tanning: Hail, Delirium! A Catalogue Raisonné of the Artist's Illustrated Books and Prints, 1942-1991*, ed. Roberta Waddell and Louisa Wood Ruby (New York: New York Public Library, 1992).

Public Programs

Curators Lecture Series

Clare Elliott on Dorothea Tanning

Sunday, October 13

3 p.m.

Main Building

The above program is free and open to the public.

Major funding for public programs at the Menil Collection is provided by The Anchorage Foundation of Texas.

Menil members enjoy additional events.

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Collection Close-Up

The Graphic Work of Dorothea Tanning



front Dorothea Tanning, *Second Peril (Deuxième péril)*, 1950. Lithograph on paper, image: 14 ½ × 11 in. (36.8 × 27.9 cm), sheet: 19 ⅞ × 12 ¾ in. (50.5 × 32.4 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston, Gift of Barbara and Jim Metcalf, Courtesy of Gallery of Surrealism. © 2019 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris

June 28 – October 13, 2019

THE MENIL COLLECTION

The Graphic Work of Dorothea Tanning celebrates a recent donation by Barbara and Jim Metcalf and Steve Lucas of the Gallery of Surrealism. Thanks to their generosity, the museum acquired a comprehensive group of prints and limited edition books dating from 1950 to 2001 by the artist and writer Dorothea Tanning (1910–2012). Tanning’s evocative imagery ranges from dreamlike representation to near total abstraction, demonstrating the breadth of her formal innovation. Over the course of more than fifty years, she experimented with a wide range of print techniques, including lithography, etching, and aquatint, harnessing the different processes for a variety of visual effects. Additionally, she combined her literary and artistic aspirations in beautifully illustrated artist books that feature her own or others’ writing.



Dorothea Tanning, *Our Helicopter Shaking Like a Fist*, 1990–91, from *Volcanic Holiday*, 1992, by James Merrill. Spit-bite and soft-ground etching on paper, plate: 7 1/8 x 7 3/8 in. (18 x 18.8 cm), sheet: 7 x 7 1/4 in. (17.8 x 18.4 cm). The Menil Collection Library, Houston, Gift of Barbara and Jim Metcalf, Courtesy of Gallery of Surrealism. © 2019 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris

Tanning’s first collaboration with the master printer Georges Visat was a revelation to her. She described the lithographic stone as “an oracle” producing “effects never possible to achieve with other materials.” In the resulting portfolio, *Seven Spectral Perils (Les 7 périls spectraux)*, 1950, Tanning incorporated several symbolic elements that appeared in her Surrealist-inspired canvases of the 1940s: a sunflower, disembodied eyes and hair, open doors, and the female figure, both clothed and nude. This recurring female character frequently appears overtaken by external forces, be they mystical as in *Second Peril (Deuxième péril)* or even electrical as in *Fifth Peril (Cinquième péril)*.

The female form was a constant in Tanning’s work. In *Tango*, 1953, she imagined a transgressive interaction between a nude woman and a human-sized dog.

A trio of small animals similarly violate boundaries by peeking into windows in *Voyeurs*, 1970. This distorted image of domestic life, where male authority figures are conspicuously absent, reappears in such prints as *Orphans*, 1963; *My Aunt (Ma tante)*, 1972; and *Sisters (Sœurs)*, 1973. Of *Orphans*, Tanning remarked, “The deeply acid-bitten lines seemed to speak of the state of being an orphan. And their entanglement was perhaps the asylum.”

The motif of embracing figures recurs throughout her oeuvre, including in the sculpture *Cousins*, 1970, which Dominique and John de Menil acquired in 1971. In works like *Japanese Poses*, 1967, multiple pairs of intertwined bodies appear in elongated horizontal compositions that Tanning called “friezes.” The long, narrow format was inspired by drawings that she had created on scraps of high-quality papers left over from the paper cutter. The distinct scroll-like presentation illustrating series of linked events imbues these works with a sense of time.

In her illustrated book *Welcome (Accueil)*, 1958, Tanning juxtaposed vivid embossed etchings alongside a dreamlike narrative, previously unpublished, by the Surrealist author René Crevel. The nine plates that compose *Nobody (Personne)*, 1962, are each cut laterally into thirds. Readers can turn individual sections to engage in the Surrealist game of “exquisite corpse,” potentially creating hundreds of different monstrous figures out of the pages’ separate parts. A much different atmosphere is conjured in the nearly abstract illustrations that accompany *The Tide (La Marée)*, 1970. Their sensuous watery feel conjures the moody seaside encounter recounted in André Pieyre de Mandiargues’ text. In a much later project, *Volcanic Holiday*, 1992, Tanning provided intense colors and powerful imagery to accompany the words of American poet James Merrill. Of responding to the text of other writers, she recalled, “A reasonable fidelity to the poet’s subject and to his persona [was] always my goal in these collaborations.”

A writer herself, Tanning succumbed more than once to the “irresistible temptation” to embellish her own work. The printer’s proof of the miniature *Tomorrow (Demain)*, 1964, contains Tanning’s adjustments to the layout of her poem. In the contrasting large format *In Flesh and Gold (En chair et en or)* from 1973 Tanning created, in her words, “a world of cheerful carnality.” A play on the French expression “en chair et en os (in flesh and bone),” this volume depicts boldly colored, elongated nudes who sprawl and cavort next to Tanning’s spare haiku-like verse.