

# The New York Times

## The Company They Kept

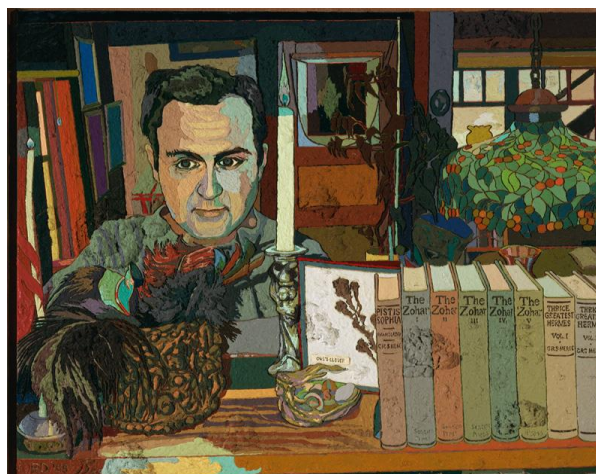
Robert Duncan and Jess, and Their Wonderland of Art

By Holland Cotter

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If you were young, gifted and odd, San Francisco was a good place to be in the years after World War II, when big changes were brewing in American art and culture. And that city is the setting for “An Opening of the Field: Jess, Robert Duncan, and Their Circle,” an exhibition that feels like a chunk of Bay Area turf lifted from the past and set down, untrimmed and buzzing, in New York University’s Grey Art Gallery.

The show spans decades but focuses on the 1950s, when an assortment of offbeat artists and poets found a common link in their friendship with two gay men who lived as committed partners in a wonderland of an old house, filled to the roof with art.



*The Enamour Mage Translation; Translation #6, 1965, oil on canvas over wood, 24 ½ x 30 inches*

One was the poet Robert Duncan (1919-1988), the other the artist Jess Collins (1923-2004), who went by the single name Jess. They met in the early '50s and had a brief courtship. Jess went to a Duncan poetry reading; Duncan bought a little Jess painting. When they sat down to talk and discovered a mutual passion for mystical literature, Gertrude Stein and L. Frank Baum’s Oz books, they knew that their love was meant to be.

It was, even though they were in many ways unlike. Duncan’s parents had been committed Theosophists who told him he was a spiritually chosen being, a former citizen of Atlantis, no less. This may be the source of his assertive self-confidence; from very early, he was convinced of his destiny as an exceptional poet, and glad to be gay.

Jess grew up shy, otherworldly and uneasy in a middle-class family that disapproved of his homosexuality; as an adult, he severed connections with it. Trained as a chemist, he worked during World War II on a government project that was producing plutonium for atom bombs. One night he had a horrific dream about global destruction. He quit work for good and turned to art.

Their contrasting personalities to some degree shaped their lives together. The extroverted Duncan was often out on the road teaching and giving readings. Jess stayed home, tending the garden,

making art. And home really was where the heart was for both of these romantic modernists, who ceaselessly collected art and books, and steeped themselves in Greek myths, Victorian fairy tales, the tarot and Paracelsus, the Renaissance physician and occultist. Espousers of the power of the imagination, they created a self-contained world, and their friends were welcomed in.

The exhibition gives a fair amount of space to Duncan. As a youth, he was fascinated by the Modernist practice of automatic drawing and did variations on it all his life, working in crayon — a medium he associated with children — in a high-color, tantric-surrealist style on book illustrations, sets for his plays and, at one point, hand-drawn wallpaper for his and Jess's house. The work had verve and drive, but words really were his thing.

Where Duncan's art explodes, Jess's only threatens to, which is much more interesting. He started out doing shadowy abstract paintings, influenced by his teacher, Edward Corbett, a wonderful, overlooked artist who has a slate-black picture here. It wasn't long before Jess developed a technique that was better suited to his gift for meditative, labor-intensive precision: paintings with thickly layered surfaces from which images seemed to be incised.

A 1965 portrait of Duncan is a modified example of the type. It shows the poet sitting at home in a jampacked room, a Tiffany lamp behind him, candles with green flames positioned sacramentally at his elbows, and volumes of the Zohar, part of the kabbalah, lined up protectively in front on a shelf.

Jess is best known for his collages, which he called paste-ups: staggeringly intricate symbolic narratives pieced together from bits of scientific treatises, muscle magazines, art history books, cartoons and popular periodicals like *Life* and *Time*. This work is not lost-in-the-clouds stuff. A 1968 collage in response to the war in Vietnam called "The Napoleonic Geometry of Art — Given: The Pentagon in the Square: Demonstrate: The Hyperbolic Swastika," is about as pointedly angry as art can be.

Despite their hermetic interests, Jess and Duncan were visible and influential cultural figures. Duncan, a natural mover and shaker, maintained a transcontinental network of literary contacts, which included Denise Levertov in New York, Charles Olson at Black Mountain College in North Carolina and Jack Spicer, a rivalrous frenemy in San Francisco.

Jess didn't go out after people; they came to him, and he had a coterie of admirers and emulators, like Ernesto Edwards, Eloise Mixon and Helen Adam. Each artist seemed to latch on to a different aspect of his maximalist, foraging art — homoeroticism, fairy tale feyness, biting social wit.

Ms. Adam, who was born in Scotland in 1909, wrote hair-raisingly dark ballads which she recited with assaultive flair, and produced funny-scary collages. In one, a fierce-looking fashion model stands guard over a litter of giant kittens. Ms. Adam lived with her sister all her life and died a ward of the state. She's the kind of figure easily dismissed as a "character." She's also one of several artists here you wish you had known. Ms. Mixon, a collagist of splendor; the ill-fated Jack Boyce; and the great Wallace Berman are others.

An acquaintance with Norris Embry might have been more difficult. A painter with a big talent but no fixed address, he crashed with Duncan and Jess and wouldn't leave. Mr. Embry drew compulsively and is now pigeonholed as an "outsider artist," though he had solid academic training and could just as accurately be called an Expressionist.

He was certainly a Modernist. So was Lyn Brown Brockway, who in 1950 traveled to Paris with a fellow M.F.A. student, Jay De Feo, and there painted a lovely baguette still life, seen here. Harry Jacobus did symphonic things with pastels, which no else appeared to be using. And Virginia Admiral did practically everything.

Although based in New York — Ms. Admiral was the mother of the actor Robert De Niro, and a fast Duncan friend — she not only painted expertly, but also published literary magazines, wrote for True Crime magazine and campaigned for socialist causes.

She sounds like a terrific, out-there person, a San Franciscan in spirit. So does William McNeill, the circle's champion polymath. He studied with Franz Kline at Black Mountain College, left for New York to pursue architecture, then moved to San Francisco to write poetry, before moving to Japan to practice Zen Buddhism. Zen didn't work out, so he returned to the Bay Area, where he ended up painting flowers, specializing in poppies. The one place he found a consistent market for the pictures was in San Francisco's leather bars. He died of AIDS in 1984 in his early 50s.

"An Opening of the Field" — the title is borrowed from a Robert Duncan book — is a very gay show, in the sense of having many gay figures, who found an acceptance within this circle. The acceptance extended to their art. Madeline Gleason, who met her life partner, Mary Clarke Greer, through Jess and Duncan, was basically a Roman Catholic religious poet trying, as she put it, to sweep "the dust of inattention" from everyday life. Her devotional verses and paintings might have been a hard sell in New York, but in San Francisco, they were treasured for what they are: intensely personal, unabashedly spiritual and completely of a piece.

And so, despite its jumble of styles and skills, loopiness and holiness, is the show, organized by two independent curators, Michael Duncan (not related to Robert Duncan) and Christopher Wagstaff, for the Crocker Art Museum in Sacramento. Maybe the sense of unity comes from the presence of a marriage at its center, a same-sex union that lasted almost 40 years.

Or maybe it comes from the fact that so much of the art fits into no school, suits no market, lies outside the range of normal. It was an end in itself, a psychic collaboration, the communal property of lovers, spouses and friends.

"An Opening of the Field: Jess, Robert Duncan, and Their Circle" runs through March 29 at the Grey Art Gallery, New York University, 100 Washington Square East, Greenwich Village; 212-998-6780, [nyu.edu/greyart](http://nyu.edu/greyart). It travels to the Katzen Arts Center, American University, Washington (April 26-Aug. 17), and the Pasadena Museum of California Art (Sept. 14-Jan. 11).