

RICHARD SALTOUN

PRESS RELEASE

Dreaming in the Margins: Toyen

3 September – 4 October 2025

Richard Saltoun Gallery London

Richard Saltoun Gallery presents *Toyen: Dreaming in the Margins*, the first UK exhibition devoted to one of the most extraordinary women artists of the Surrealist movement, whose reputation and critical reappraisal have risen dramatically in recent years. The exhibition marks the second in a series of three major Surrealist exhibitions the gallery is staging in 2025.

Recognized as one of the most enigmatic and fiercely independent figures in Surrealism, TOYEN (1902–1980) was born Marie Čermínová in Prague. She adopted a gender-neutral identity early in life, rejecting societal conventions - a position reflected throughout her work and public persona.

Toyen was a central figure in both the prewar formation of Surrealism in Prague with the Devestil Group and later in postwar Paris with the Surrealists. Her work in Prague with Jindřich Štyrský, and later with Jindřich Heisler, were regarded by André Breton as quintessential contributions to the Surrealist movement. In 1934, she designed the Czech edition cover of Breton's *Les Vases communicants*, and she met Breton in person the following year during his visit with Paul Eluard to Prague. Breton remained a devoted admirer, later writing the preface to her first solo exhibition in Paris in 1947 at Galerie Denise René. He described her as having a "face medalled with nobility." Their friendship and creative exchange endured until his death, after which Toyen moved into his former studio at 42 Rue Fontaine, where she lived until her own death in 1980.

This exhibition brings into focus the depth and breadth of Toyen's graphic work - including illustrated books, prints, drawings, catalogues and archival materials - making it one of the most comprehensive presentations of this part of her oeuvre ever compiled. The exhibits are drawn entirely from a single-owner collection.

Dreaming in the Margins follows two recent institutional presentations devoted to this dimension of Toyen's work: *Toyen: Books Without Borders*, Gallery of Fine Arts, Ostrava (2024) and *Toyen*, Ludwig Museum, Koblenz (2023). It also follows on the major retrospective *Toyen: The Dreaming Rebel*, which toured from the

RICHARD SALTOUN

National Gallery Prague; Hamburger Kunsthalle and the Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris (2021-2022).

Toyen viewed the graphic arts as a vital extension of her imagination and politics - pursuing, through them, a lifelong search for freedom: political, sexual and artistic. Books and graphics were central to her artistic identity from the outset of her career. Her early collaborations with Štyrský in interwar Prague gave rise to a visual language charged with Surrealist eroticism and resistance. Their collaborations spanned visual art, book design, photography, and avant-garde publishing, and played a foundational role in both artists' development—as well as in Czech Surrealism. Together, they produced a number of influential publications under the imprint Edice 69 (1931-32), including a legendary underground series of erotic books which challenged the boundaries between image and text, and deliberately provoked bourgeois moralism.

With the outbreak of the Second World War, Toyen remained in Nazi-occupied Prague. Following the death of Štyrský in 1942, she entered into a close creative and personal partnership with the poet Jindřich Heisler, who was living in hiding as a Jewish writer. Toyen sheltered Heisler in her apartment for the entire war - an act of profound solidarity and resistance. Together, they produced some of Surrealism's most iconic book works, including *Les Spectres du désert* (The Spectres of the Desert, 1939), *Střelnice* (The Shooting Gallery, 1939–40), and *Schovej Se, Válko!* (Hide, War!, 1944). These were powerful visual acts of resistance shaped by the trauma of war and the urgency of concealment and stand as some of the most important Surrealist statements against Fascism.

In 1947, Toyen relocated permanently to Paris with Heisler, and became one of the few women deeply involved in Surrealism's postwar resurgence. She signed key group declarations, exhibited widely, and maintained close friendships with Breton and Benjamin Péret. Her presence in Paris marked a shift in her relationship to bookmaking: no longer a means of survival, it became an intimate, collaborative and poetic practice.

She focused largely on illustrating works by close friends and collaborators - poetry, philosophy, and theory - often published in limited-edition fine press books. These works were never secondary but formed an integral part of her output, regularly exhibited alongside her paintings.

RICHARD SALTOUN

In the final two decades of her life, Toyen formed a deep artistic and intellectual bond with the poet, philosopher and fellow Surrealist, Annie Le Brun. Their collaborations, including *Sur le champ* (1967), *Le Puits Dand La Tour*, *Débris de Rêves* (1967) and *Annuaire de lune* (1977), are some of the most conceptually refined and emotionally resonant works in Toyen's graphic oeuvre. In her catalogue essay for *Toyen: L'écart absolu* (Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris, 2021), Le Brun wrote: "What distinguishes her, is that she never gave up either her revolt or her dreams".

For Toyen, the book was a space of transformation - her visual interventions haunt rather than illustrate; they dissolve the boundaries between word and image, reader and viewer. *Dreaming in the Margins* reclaims a vital thread of the artist's legacy. Through this extraordinary body of work, the exhibition traces an artist who placed freedom at the heart of her practice, and who used the book as a space to dream new forms of life, language and connection into being.

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