

# Modern Art, Prehistory and the Search for a Universal Human Language

## With an Analysis of *Art Brut*

**Abstract** As different and culturally specific as artistic expressions may be throughout human history, there are overarching universals in art. The hand negatives in rock art, which are widespread across all times and continents, are a good example of this. It is no coincidence that modern and contemporary artists have explored the content of prehistoric art in search of a universal human language. In Germany, the Stuttgart painter Willi Baumeister is the most important representative of modern art inspired by prehistory. Subsequently, without wishing to make simple analogies, we have looked at the art of outsiders working in isolation, which generally goes by the name of *art brut*. We were investigating in what content these people are interested in their seclusion without the influence of the art world.

**Keywords** prehistoric art, modern art, human universals, *art brut*


Numerous modern and contemporary artists continue to attempt to develop a primal artistic language. They may achieve such a seemingly archaic position intuitively or sometimes through a concrete interest in the Stone Age. For archaeologists, who are interested in Ice Age art, these artists are exciting because they create a direct access to early art that we as prehistorians do not have with our primarily analytical and less emotional approaches. With their specific interest in archaic themes, gestures and techniques, they thus draw attention to central human universals and thus also enable unexpected approaches to the understanding of Ice Age art.

But what is the interest of these artists? Is it the forms, specific expressions, or the techniques? Is it specific content such as the animal imagery of the Ice Age

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caves, the signs, human figures, the hand, or even geological formations? Is it, in the end, just a longing for a genuine original life without the complications of the modern mechanized world and a search for roots during times of crisis and missing communication?

It is noticeable that most modern and contemporary artists who have a concrete interest in the Ice Age, are fascinated by representations of humans. Hybrid creatures also find their interest. Especially in the recent past, the human-animal relationship has been increasingly dealt with in art. Signs and hand symbols are emblematic themes. In contrast, other features from the Ice Age, such as dwellings or stone artefacts, have been addressed less often in art (Debray et al. 2019).

## The Search for Identity

While 19<sup>th</sup> century historicism still drew a heroic or romanticized image of Ice Age populations, the situation changed at the transition to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For Rémi Labrusse (2019), it was Paul Cézanne who was perhaps the first to take an interest in the content of geology and prehistory. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in times of economic crisis and between two world wars, there was an increase in individual approaches. We can draw attention, for example, to Franz Marc's animal paintings as an innocent rebellion against the militarization and technological armament of the time. It was obviously the search for identity in these uncertain times that made artists develop very personal approaches and look for references to archaic themes. In times of crisis, one especially seeks one's own roots, which is extended to also include the early phases of humanity. We can consider this period as a real restart of art and one is almost inclined to compare this situation to the origins of art altogether, when *Homo sapiens* was in search of identity arriving in Europe during a time when it was still inhabited by the last Neanderthals.

It would be presumptuous to venture into a complete historical outline of the artistic preoccupation with the Ice Age here, especially as this has only recently been undertaken several times (e.g., Debray et al. 2019; Seibert et al. 2020; Faass & Schmidt 2023). In Germany, one of the first artists with a Stone Age connection was undoubtedly Willi Baumeister who was born in Stuttgart. He was a student of Adolf Hölzel and, after a constructivist phase, he found his way to an archaic primeval language at the end of the 1920s. While some authors interpreted this transformation as a kind of inner retreat and escape from the emerging National Socialism, it can be demonstrated that Baumeister's work has a very specific connection to themes of palaeontology and prehistory. We have referred to this aspect in detail elsewhere (Floss 2019; 2020) and can only outline a few key points here. Baumeister visited prehistoric sites in south-western Germany from the late 1920s onwards, assembled a collection of prehistoric finds and replicas and maintained an impressive library of works on Ice Age art. During the Second World War he worked in the underground for the Wuppertal lacque manufacturer Kurt Herberts, for whom he carried out experiments in prehistoric cave painting. His major work, *Das Unbekannte in der Kunst* (The Unknown in Art), published in 1947 (Baumeister 1947), contains numerous examples of prehistoric art. Baumeister maintained intensive contacts with the *escuela de arte* in Altamira, where he also travelled for the first time in 1951. Baumeister was particularly interested in Levantine art in eastern Spain, especially the depiction of an archer from the Valltorta

Gorge, which he interpreted in numerous paintings. The most famous of these is the painting *Läufer* (Runner) (Floss and Ruiz López 2023). He was also influenced by an engraving on a mammoth tusk from the Czech site of Predmosti, and his so-called „ideograms“ closely resemble Neolithic axes found in his archaeological collection. Active as a set designer, the hand in *pochoir* technique also appears in his designs as a clear reference to prehistoric cave art. We have recently also pointed out that there are individual vague references in Baumeister's art of the ivory figurines found in Vogelherd cave in 1931 (Riek 1934).

In Germany, there are other artists who engaged with the Ice Age without having a direct affiliation with Baumeister. Here, of course, one must first mention the great Joseph Beuys. He can justifiably be called the incarnation of an Ice Age shaman. His performances with dead and living animals are legendary. Ralf Winkler even named himself after an Ice Age geologist and became famous under the name A. R. Penck. His crazy worlds of stick figures and signs look like modern cave paintings. Rune Mields would be another striking example.

Even if it is difficult to define basic classifications, it still appears to be legitimate to distinguish two case studies. On the one hand, there are artists who demonstrably exhibit a concrete interest in the subject of the Palaeolithic. These artists include, for example, Willi Baumeister, whom we have dealt with just before and elsewhere more in detail (Floss 2019; 2020; 2022). In various conversations with colleagues, I have gained the impression that such an interest in the Stone Age period is perceived as somehow simplistic and superficial, if not as an act of appropriating cultures that are removed in time and no longer able to defend themselves against such an exploitation. Also implied is the accusation that demystifying the secret language of artists through this kind of research should be avoided. The reader can certainly appreciate that I do not necessarily share such a point of view.

On the other hand, artists seem to be more appreciated when they attempt to arrive at a basic archaic pictorial language without having dealt specifically with the Stone Age itself, particularly artists who are active in the contemporary art world, who ask central questions about who we humans really are and which artistic expressions can provide appropriate answers.

## Human Universals

The question concerning which factors are responsible for the characteristics of cultural expressions and art can be related to numerous criteria, which can of course only briefly outlined here. In this context, we would tend to give preference to specific cultural solutions over deterministic factors, for example, connected to basic biological and cognitive prerequisites of human beings. Of course, we are humans – and not flies – and have certain basic properties. But the cultural characteristics in specific spatial and temporal contexts are far too variable to adequately explain them as the result of general physical and cognitive characteristics of human beings. This already applies to the Palaeolithic, if we think, for example, of the very different forms of Aurignacian art in Europe.

Despite this diversity of human behaviors and products, there are cross-cultural patterns that are common to almost all humans and thus allow comparability. These

common aspects, which are also not necessarily biological, are called ‘universals’ (Brown 1991). For example, according to Durkheim, all humans are social beings (Bogusz & Delitz 2013). They use language, forbid incest or search for order and the meaning of existence. Ethnological research has described up to 200 such universals to date (Antweiler 2009).

## Human Universals and Artistic Expression

In the German-speaking world, the idea of human universals was taken up particularly by I. Eibl-Eibesfeldt and the discipline of human ethology he founded (Eibl-Eibesfeldt 2004) and subsequently extended to the field of art and aesthetics (Eibl-Eibesfeldt and Sütterlin 2007). We support the human ethology approach because it guarantees fundamental comparability of artistic creation between different spatial and temporal contexts. Beyond formal and material-specific aspects, we would like to extend the comparison in this paper to aspects of content. According to this hypothesis, the legitimacy of comparison makes it possible to approach art from the past, for which we have neither the statements of its makers nor written explanations, with art for which we have contextual information. This is best done by comparing prehistoric art with other types of original art apart the art market, such as from hunter-gatherers. Comparisons with such ethnic groups have long been made by prehistoric researchers, based on similarities in subsistence strategies or questions of mobility but these have often been rejected by ethnologists as illegitimate and absurd, as it seems completely obsolete to compare or even equate societies of the Palaeolithic with sub-recent hunter-gatherers simply due to similar subsistence systems. It is only in the recent past that views seem to have become more acceptable, if such comparisons are not used to imply analogies but are understood as purely illustrative material of the diversity of human behaviour.

The basic idea is thus, when researching the question of the motivation and authorship of Ice Age art, to draw on information from artistic milieus for which contextual information is available and which are equally characterized by an originality of human creation.

## Art Brut

In this context and as a prehistorian, we would like to turn here for the first time to a form of art, more a category than a real movement that is summarized under the term *art brut* (Dubuffet 1947; 1962; Thévoz 1990). For this type of ‘raw art’, we can assume an original and individual search for a primordial, unadulterated, and non-academic expression, which is developed as far as possible without major outside influences. *Art brut* is a genre of art that has unfortunately become highly commercialized in recent years but had originally a genuine character. It refers to art created by self-taught artists, for example lay people or individuals with or without mental illness, by people who are isolated, not socially adapted and do not belong to the established art market. These artists assemble the working materials they use and the artworks from within themselves and not from the categories of established art or the trends that are currently in vogue. The *art brut* movement was popularized by the French artist Jean Dubuffet and is alternatively but not entirely legitimately called ‘outsider art’.

Nevertheless, *art brut* is heterogeneous and controversial as a term that supposedly summarizes similarities. Today, it is understood as the lowest common term for art that has something original about it and that was mostly created by outsiders of the official art scene. Basically, comparable art existed long before *art brut* was established as an art term. It is interesting to note that various artists from the period of classical modernism were just as interested in art forms that were later summarized as *art brut* as they were in content from the fields of prehistory and ethnology. This applies, for example, to artists of the *Blauer Reiter* (e.g., Kandinsky, Macke, Marc, Klee, Jawlensky), who developed a special interest in the art of mentally ill people, but also in the art of children and so-called folk art. Paul Klee, for example, wrote in his diary at the time: „There exist primal beginnings of art, such as one tends to find in ethnographic collections or at home in one’s nursery. Parallel phenomena are the works of the mentally ill“ (Klee 1957, 276). Such statements must of course be viewed with caution from today’s perspective, as they equate non-European populations with children and patients with mental health problems.

With the background of human universals, in *art brut* the aspect of what people outside the art establishment are interested in is important to us. Which themes are important to the artists and how do they implement them? Ice Age art was related to the intimate world of the creators, too. Nevertheless, it is of course problematic to compare these art genres with each other as it is to compare children’s art to cave art, too. Human phylogenies and ontogenesis are still two completely different things. Even more, pathological mental health issues are difficult to put on the same level. Nevertheless, it was important for me to have a look at artists living one way or another in certain isolation and to investigate which themes these people are interested in without being subject to external influences. So, it appealed to me to carry out a quantitative survey on the contents of *Art brut* and to take this opportunity to check whether, for example, female and male artists reproduce similar or different themes in art.

For the survey, I was able to benefit from my own library on the subject as well as from the documentation of special exhibitions of the *Musée de l’art brut* in Lausanne and the *Musée de la création franche* in Bègles for more than 25 years. As far as the survey is concerned, I have adopted an approach that is certainly open to criticism and probably does not stand up to statistical tests. I have taken into account, for each artist included in the survey, the main themes that dominate their work. The invitation brochures of the participating museums for special exhibitions are particularly suitable here, because the curators succeed with excellent expertise in pointing out the main aspects of each artist (Fig. 1).

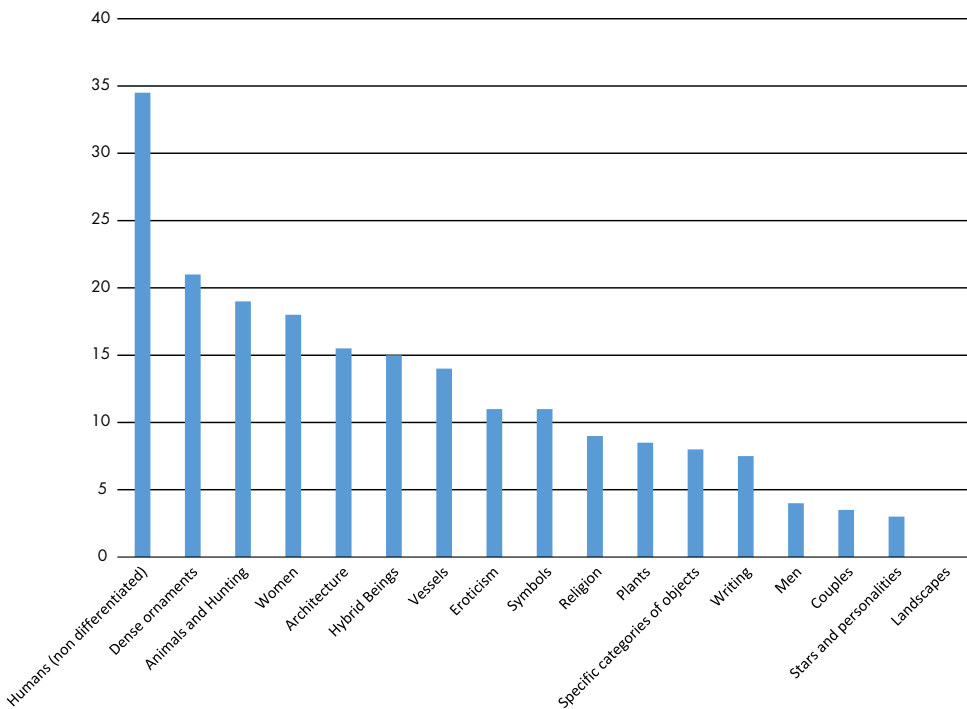
We asked ourselves to what extent our approach is reprehensible and reminiscent of some dark times in history, which applied analytical procedures to diverse minorities. We abhor these inconceivable acts and affirm that we are far from them. We rather follow the idea that human artmaking is not shaped by deterministic factors, but by individual and cultural ones. On the other hand, we consider the existence of human universals across space and time to be conceivable, which in turn makes comparisons possible.

We have analysed the work of a total of 200 *art brut* artists<sup>1</sup>, whose results are reproduced anonymously. 152 of them are men and 48 are women. It would be going too



**Fig. 1** | Painting by Giovanni Galli; title page of a press dossier for the exhibition *Corps* at the Musée de l'Art Brut in Lausanne.

far to consider here the respective social, sexual or – important in this genre – also pathological background that has led to the consideration of the artists in the category of *art brut*. If we look globally at the artistic themes and independently of the chosen techniques (painting, sculpture, collage etc.), the following weighting stands out (Fig. 2). By far the most attention is given to representations of human beings, undifferentiated by sex or gender, which are the focus of the oeuvre of 34.5 % of the artists (Fig. 2). If



**Fig. 2 |** Statistics of the themes dealt with by the *Art Brut* artists.

the representations differentiated by gender (male, female) or couples were added (see below) the proportion of human representations would be over half. After the depictions of humans, depictions of animals are the most frequent (17.5%). Within the animal depictions, those of birds are by far the most frequent, appearing in almost 40 % of the animal pictures. All other types of animals (fish, cattle, horse, pig, elephant, insects, lion, mouse, and dog) play subordinate roles. This is followed in importance by various forms of monsters and hybrid creatures, with familiar themes such as mermaids, unicorns and sphinxes included here. This content category, which in case of *art brut* often leads us into the abysses of the human psyche, can be identified as an important oeuvre in 15 % of the *art brut* artists. Interestingly, the themes of architecture (15.5%) and various types of vessels such as cars, tanks and trains to airplanes and rockets (14.0%) also play a greater role among these artists. Religious, mostly Christian themes occur, but are rather rare with a total of 18 mentions. Various signs and symbols are common, with the Christian cross predominating (n = 10). All other symbols such as star, heart, wheel, cube and swastika are rare. Pictures of landscapes





**Fig. 3 |** Marcello Cammi – without title 1987; red wine and ballpoint pen on a sheet of paper stuck to cardboard. (Source: Collection de l'Art Brut, Lausanne, Inv. No. cab-10854, photo: Amélie Blanc, Ville de Lausanne).

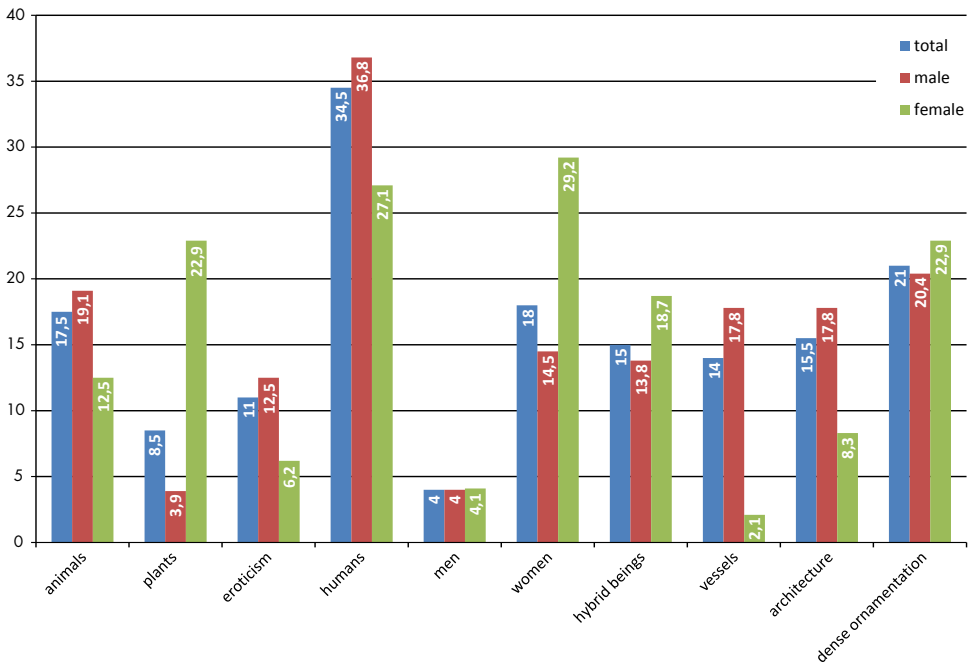
are almost never found. Images of objects do occur, but they are very variable, with no discernible tendencies. At most, images of weapons play a certain role with men in the context of hunting scenes or personal fantasies. *Art brut* artists tend to accompany their works with characters, texts, or numbers, often covering the entire surface, but their share is clearly below 10 %.





**Fig. 4 |** Philippe Dereux – Cassiopée 1968; peelings, oil paint and gouache on paper.  
(Source: Collection de l'Art Brut, Lausanne, Inv. No. ni-3182, photo: Amélie Blanc, Ville de Lausanne.  
© VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2024).

A striking feature, less in terms of content than of form, is the tendency of *art brut* artists to cover their works with dense, often ornamental constructs, in which writing, numbers, figures and signs can also be interwoven. Such patterns, which are sometimes formally reminiscent of Aboriginal representations, are shown by as many as 42 artists, corresponding to 21.0 % of those surveyed (Fig. 4).



**Fig. 5 |** The themes of Art Brut artists (total, male and female artists).

We then carried out a gender-specific investigation, whereby we could only consider a binary division into men and women, following the names of the artists (Fig. 5). And here some very interesting differences emerge that seem to be of gender-specific origin. We would like to list here first those categories where the differences are not very pronounced. The dense ornamentation just described is represented in 20.4% of the cases in men, in 22.9% of the cases in women. The undifferentiated representations of humans are also relatively similarly distributed (total 69 out of 200 = 34.5%, men 56 out of 152 = 36.8%, women 13 out of 48 = 27.1%). Mixed creatures of whatever kind also do not seem to be addressed in a gender specific way (total 30 out of 200 = 15.0%, men 27 out of 152 = 17.8%, women 9 out of 48 = 18.7%).

There is one interesting category that is presented preferentially by women, and that is plants. While with an average value of 8.5% (17 out of 200) plant representations play a role in only six out of 152 cases (3.9%) for men, they take a much higher share with almost 30% (11 out of 48) for women.

Among the themes preferred by men, representations of vessels and means of transport should be mentioned, which are represented here with 17.8% while they are almost non-existent among women (2.1%). The same applies to the depiction of diverse architecture, which is also represented in 17.8% of the cases for men, but only in 8.3% of the cases for women.

While depictions of plants are more frequent among women, those of animals and hunting scenes are clearly more frequent among men.

It is interesting to note that any sexualized themes, such as the depiction of erotic images or primary sexual organs, are twice as frequent among men as among women (12.5% compared to 6.2%).

As far as the explicitly recognizable depictions of the themes 'man' and 'woman' are concerned, very interesting results emerge. It can be seen that the topic of women is seen as much more interesting in its presentation than the topic of men. While the subject „man“ is completely underrepresented among both female and male artists and shows almost identical values (total 8 out of 200 = 4.0 %, men 6 out of 152 = 4.0 %, women 2 out of 48 = 4.1 %), women are depicted much more frequently. With an overall share of 18.0 % (36 out of 200), men are perhaps surprisingly below average at 14.5 % (22 out of 152), while women's depictions play a much larger role at 29.2 % (14 out of 48) (Fig. 5).

In the depictions of women by men, psychological complexes and unfulfilled desires often become apparent. Often women are depicted in oversized forms and the men submissively small. Breasts become weapons in the work of Giovanni Galli (Fig. 1), as they would be rockets or as in the so-called Fembots in Austin Powers films.

If we now wish to confront all these findings, with all reservations, with the evidence of Ice Age art, some striking parallels and perhaps even insights emerge: Here as there, there are themes that do not play a major role, such as landscapes and objects.

In view of the discussion about gender roles in the Palaeolithic and here the traditional, but today criticized idea that men hunted and women gathered, it is striking in this survey that the topic of plants is much more frequently addressed by women and the topic of animals more frequently by men. However, there are too many domestic animals depicted to draw any indisputable conclusions from this.

Another possible parallel to Ice Age art is that depictions of women are much more frequent overall than those of men! Women simply seem to be the more interesting, more exciting subject, with a greater appeal in terms of content and painting than men. And this is true for men as well as for women in particular.

Of course, we cannot draw any direct conclusions about Palaeolithic art from these results. Despite their remoteness, *art brut* artists still live in modern times, which can hardly be compared to Palaeolithic conditions. In view of the widespread discussion about who the creators of Ice Age art are, and here in particular the sexualised themes and the so-called Venus figures, it is interesting to note here that in our survey of outsider artists, men are more interested in explicitly erotic themes and women are more interested in the depiction of women as a whole. Thinking one step further, this could, with all caution, lead to the simple conclusion that both men and women are interested in the theme 'woman' and that it is therefore perhaps superfluous to discuss the gender-specific artistic implementation of this theme.

## Conclusion

We have been building up an archive on *art brut* for several decades, with the ulterior motive of one day attempting an evaluation. We are aware that a comparison of this art with Palaeolithic art is problematic. There are many unanswered questions about Ice Age art because it is of course no longer possible to ask their makers about it. For this reason, we are attempting to draw on art genres that are as uninfluenced by the outside world as possible in order to find a genuine human language that can be understood despite all the differences across space and time.

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## Appendix

### 1: Female and male artists in the survey (in alphabetical order)

Abella, Josef; Abrignani, Giovanni; Amar, Paul; Angkasapura, Noviadi; Arl; Arneval, Benjamin; Bachelard, Alexandre; Bachler, Josef; Badari, Fausto; Bailly, Carol; Bartlet, Morton; Beaudelere; Bentivegna, Filipo; Bertanzetti, Daniele; Bertoliatti, Dominique; Biazin, Clément-Marie; Blackstock, Gregory; Bojnev, Boris; Bonjour, Benjamin; Boschey, Édouard; Bosco, Giovanni; Bossert, Hermann; Boudin, Michel; Boussion, Charles; Bouttier, Marie; Braillon, David; Braz, Albino; Brunet, Guy; Brunetti, Luigi; Burland, François; Burnat-Provins, Marguerite; Byam, John; Carbonel, Pierre; Carles, Tolra; Carlo, Ignacio; Carré-Gallimard, S.; Chaissac, Gaston; Chand, Nek; Chawan, Kashinath; Corbaz, Aloise; Coulon, Berthe; Crepin, Fleury Joseph; Dammer, Aaltje; Darger, Henry; Dave, Michel; Delauney, Serge; Dereux, Philippe; Desmoulin, Fernand; Diego; Dubuffet, Jean; Ducollet, Philippe; Dudin, Jules; Duf, Gaston; Dufrène, Gael; Duhem, Paul; Elijah; End, Paul; Evans, Minnie; Fleuri, Yves; Florent; Forestier, Auguste; Fusco, Sylvain; Gabritschevsky, Eugen; Galli, Giovanni; Gallieni, Jill; Genk, Willem van; Gill, Madge; Gimel, Patrick; Gironella, Joaquim; Glastra, Siebe; Godi, Jules; Goetze, Helga; Goffin, Véronique; Gordon, Ted; Goux, Claudine; Grgich, Anne Marie; Grünenwaldt, Martha; Gualino, Patrick; Guo, Fengyi; Guyodo; Haus, Oscar; Hauser, Johann; Helmut; Hérion, Dominique; Herrera, Magali; Hertig, Werner; Hipkiss, Chris; Hirschter, Dunya; Hodinos, Emile; Hofer, Josef; Hollander, Jeroen; Iriarte, Joelle; Jacqui, Danielle; Jakic, Vojislav; Jonkers, Bertus; Juva; Kardol, Truus; Katharina; Kocher, Pierre; Koochaki, Davood; Koopen, Marian; Koscy, Rosemarie; Krüsi, Hans; Lamy, Martine; Lanca, Bonifacio; Lanz, Madeleine; Lattier, Gérard; Lecocq, Sylvain; Lemaire, Philippe; Leonov, Pavel; Lesage, Augustin; Lib, Stanislas; Lobanov, Aleksander; Lonné, Raphael; Lorand, Joel; Maisonneuve, Pascal; Manca, Bonaria; Marcomi; Marye, Simone; Matsumoto, Kunizo; Merle, Auguste; Messou, Ezekiel; Metz, Reinhold; Miller, Daniel; Moindre, Joseph; Monsiel, Edmund; Moret, Marc; Morf, Jakob; Motooka, Hidenori; Müller, Heinrich; Naeff, Linda; Nedjar, Michel; Ni, Tanjun; Nikifor; Nitkowski, Stani; Oko, Ataa; Pankoks, Michael; Pelosi, Marilena; Perez, Nathalie; Perugi, Italo; Pietquin, Dimitri; Pigeon, Laure; Ploos van Amstel, Han; Podesta, Giovanni; Portrat, François; Pujolle, Guillaume; Raak; Ratier, Emile; Raugé, Marco; Robert, Yvonne; Robertson, Royal; Robillard, André; Roos, Brigitte; Saban, Ody; Salingardes, Henri; Sanfourche, Jean-Jos; Santoro, Eugenio; Savoy, Gaston; Schäfer, Gustav; Schöpke, Philipp; Schröder-Sonnenstern; Sendrey, Gérard; Shuji, Takashi; Silvin, Pierre; Simon, Victor; Smith, Lewis; Smith, Richard C.; Sorgente, Palmerino; Teuscher, Gaston; Titov, Yuri; Torre, Giuseppe; Turlonias, Jean; Traylor, Bill; Tripier, Jeanne; Tromelin, Comte de; Trösch, Johann; Tschirtner, Oswald; Tsuji, Yuji; Valeiras, Ofelia; Victor, François; Vignes, Pépé; Vuitton, Pierre; Wagemann, Theo; Walla, August; Way, Melvin; Wenzel, Roy; Weree, Johnson; Wey, Alois; Wittlich, Josef; Wnek, Maria; Wölfli, Adolf; Yeomans, Brooks; Zablatnik, Erich; Zemankova, Anna; Zephir, Henriette; Zinelli, Carlo.