



# Sam Szafran

## Obsessions of a painter

Sam Szafran,  
*Foliage*, 1986-1989,  
watercolour on paper,  
149 x 99 cm  
Private collection

**28 September 2022 – 16 January 2023**  
**Musée de l'Orangerie**

In the privacy of his studio, Sam Szafran single-mindedly pursued the obsessions which inhabit his work. After the traumatic experience of losing family members in World War II and having his world turned upside down, art rooted him in reality. Spurning the vicissitudes and debates of the day, he developed a taste for precision in forms, but allowed them to evolve freely in labyrinthine spiral staircases, studios overrun by vegetation, and boxes of pastels transformed by effects of perspective. In 2018, when Cécile Debray, the Director of the Musée de l'Orangerie at that time, informed the artist that she was keen to organise an exhibition, he was particularly enthusiastic. Not only he felt an affinity with the museum's collections which present artists who reflect his ambition

to revive figurative art, but also his own personal history shaped by his predecessors in the Paris School. The painter's death in 2019 has slightly changed the focus of this exhibition, which is the first posthumous reading of his complete body of work. This work is extremely seducing, but also challenging: it is neither photographic, nor conceptual, nor realist; it is a work of the mind. Szafran's staircases and studios – spaces from which we certainly do not emerge unaffected – instil a “worrying strangeness”.

Claire Bernardi  
Director of the Musée de l'Orangerie

## Biographical highlights

### 19 November 1934

Sami Max Berger, known as Sam Szafran, is born in Paris into a Polish Jewish immigrant family.

### 1939-1945

During World War II, he escapes from the Vel d'Hiv roundup and hides in the countryside. After a brief imprisonment in

Drancy, he is liberated by the Americans, but many family members were executed in Nazi camps.

### 1948

Travels to Melbourne, Australia with his mother and sister, to live with an uncle. He is deeply unhappy there and runs away several times.



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## “Seeing Szafran shows how wonderfully well looking can think.”

(James Lord, “Un regard sur Szafran”, in *Sam Szafran. Aquarelles*, exhibition catalogue, Claude Bernard Gallery, Paris, 1987)

Sam Szafran’s journey is quite unique. Born into a Polish Jewish family, he saw the world rocked to its foundations by war. He was robbed of his childhood. Drawing and painting grounded him in a reality which a life overshadowed by the perils of history had denied him. Self-taught and eager to learn, he clung to his creativity in his own private world. Behind the closed doors of his studio, Sam Szafran doggedly pursued the obsessions which fill his work. He did not engage with the debates of his day. Rather he chose figurative art in an era which had either abandoned it or taken it in quite different directions. A contemporary of the last avant-garde movements, the painter remained aloof while observing them closely. He developed a taste for techniques which were no longer fashionable, such as pastel and watercolour. Szafran developed a vocabulary which faithfully expressed his vision of the world in his immediate surroundings: studios reflecting his mental states, labyrinthine spiral staircases, and interiors transformed into jungles.

**1951**

When he returns to Paris, his precarious existence pushes him into petty crime, but he chooses to pursue art. Szafran lives

by his wits and works in makeshift studios.

**1954-1959**

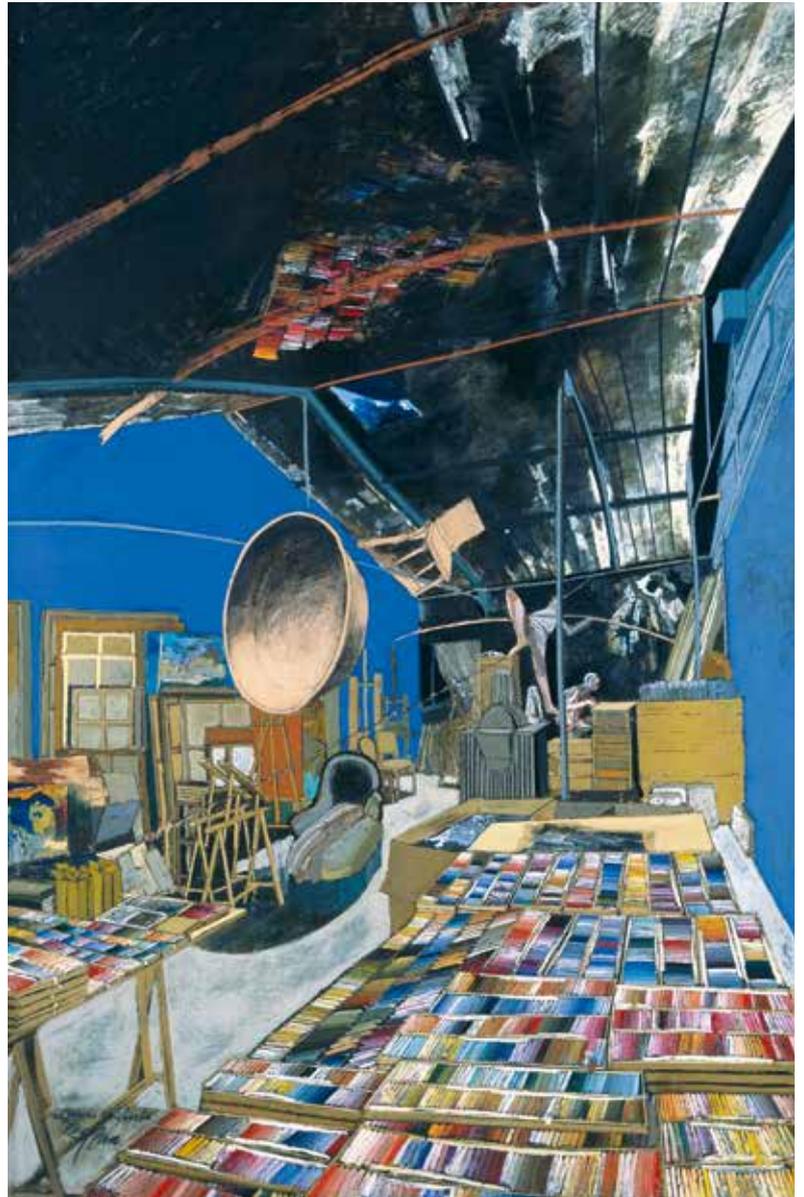
After applying in vain to art schools, he enrolls at evening classes organised by the City of Paris. He occasionally attends the Académie de la Grande Chaumière.

Poets and artists introduce him to painting and literature in the cafes, studios, and galleries of Montparnasse.

He is insatiably curious and has no preconceived ideas. His early works reveal the diverse influences of the School of Paris.

**Tub**

Depicting a studio involves showing the place where work is carried out, but also defining the work metaphorically. The numerous views composed by Szafran are crammed with details and elements which create a personal narrative to which the viewer does not have full access. In the centre of the pastels featuring the rue de Crussol studio, a tub (a large basin for ablutions often made of zinc) is frequently suspended from the skylight. Like a star in the blue sky, it floats above the scene, conjuring up the painter's admiration for Edgar Degas (1834-1917). This accessory for one of Degas' favourite themes – a woman at her toilette – allows Szafran to make a humorous nod to Degas' talents as a pastellist. Through this strange object, he justifies his passion for pastels and his pursuit of virtuosity: "because I have always worked from the principle that if something eludes me in some way, I either give up or persist until I have mastered it. Pastel eluded me for a long time. Which explains why I wrestled with it".

**3****1**

Unknown photographer,  
*Sam Szafran*, circa 1955,  
photograph, 30 × 24 cm  
Private collection

**2**

Didier Gicquel,  
*Sam Szafran in his Malakoff  
Studio*, 2018, silver gelatin print,  
30.5 × 23.9 cm  
Lilette Szafran collection

**3**

Sam Szafran,  
*Rue de Crussol Studio*,  
February 1972, pastel on tracing  
paper mounted on cardboard,  
104 × 75 cm  
Private collection

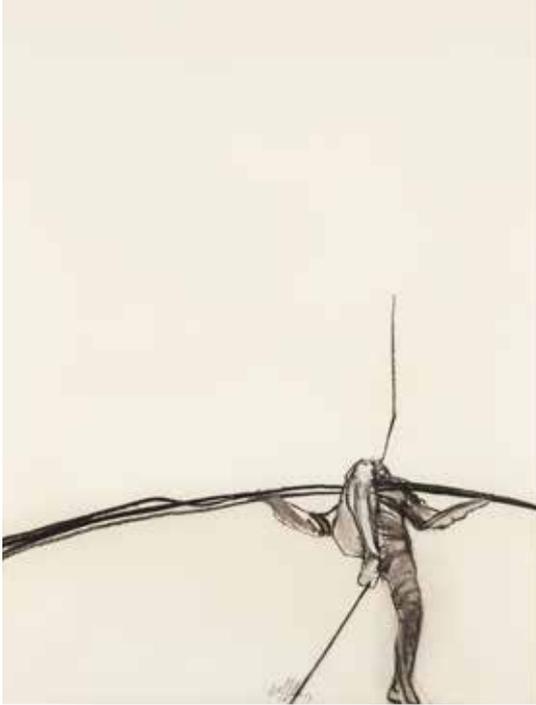
**1960**  
The gift of a box of pastels sparks a passion for this neglected medium.

**1963**  
Marries Lilette Keller.

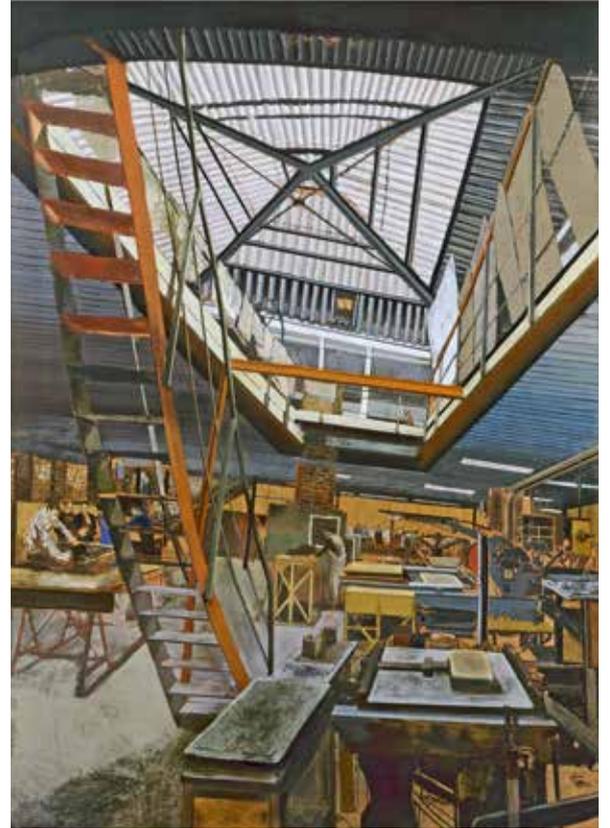
**1964**  
Birth of their son Sébastien, who is severely disabled.

**1965**  
Art dealer and collector Jacques Kerchache organises Szafran's first solo exhibition.

From then on he is then represented by the Claude Bernard Gallery.



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### 1967-1975

The painter's work begins to focus on themes from his everyday life: his studios, the Bellini print workshop, and the staircase at 54, rue de Seine.

### Late 1970s

The first foliage pictures in watercolour make their appearance. A keen experimenter, he begins attempts to combine watercolour with pastel.

### 1990s

His formats get larger; he adopts Chinese silk as a support for his watercolours and later on creates

large-format urban landscapes.

### 1993

Szafran is awarded the Grand Prix des arts de la Ville de Paris.

## Tightrope walker

"Being a tightrope walker is not a profession, it's a way of life," claimed Philippe Petit, who had dreamed of escape since childhood, and of exploring and conquering new horizons. As a teenager, he discovered the world of the circus, and of high-wire artists in particular. These "cloudwalkers" fascinated him. However, Petit did not want to join a circus troupe. He followed his own path and like Szafran, was self-taught. It was perhaps this taste for freedom or for vertiginous spaces which drew the men together and cemented their friendship. Szafran had immortalised Petit even before he embarked on his crossing between the twin towers of Notre Dame cathedral in Paris in 1971. A few lines crisscross the space and Petit is lying on the wire with his pole on his torso. Using this pole, Philippe Petit is attempting to get his balance in space – just like the draughtsman and the movement of his pencil probing the blank page.

## Polaroid

In the 1970s, certain artists became interested in the opportunities offered by photographs produced using the Polaroid brand's instant development film. Sam Szafran created albums of these images which reveal his in-depth study of light and how it is perceived in series of photos forming sequences. We can identify two approaches. On the one hand, there is a minimalist juxtaposition of photographs in succession which record the most infinitesimal variations in light and framing and, on the other hand, photographs are grouped in the manner of a collage to form clusters in which the object depicted is revealed in its entirety through an accumulation of points of view.

## The Bellini print workshop

In 1970, four associates, including Sam Szafran, set up a workshop at 83, rue du faubourg Saint-Denis, in a former lithographic atelier. Lithographs by the poster artists Steinlen, Chéret and Toulouse-Lautrec were produced here in the late nineteenth century and, subsequently, cinema posters. Szafran chose the name as a tribute to the Renaissance painter Giovanni Bellini. The print workshop was a key feature of the Parisian artistic landscape in the 1970s when multiples were in vogue. It produced a variety of images ranging from commercial posters and lithographs to original prints by prominent young artists. Szafran accurately depicts the skylights, printing presses, tools, baths, and lithographic stones, and also friends and workers going about their activities. The influence of film is clear as the artist embraces the space by capturing different perspectives with a sort of "tracking shot" approach.

### 4

Sam Szafran,  
*Tightrope Walker (Philippe Petit)*,  
1969, charcoal on paper,  
79 × 58 cm  
Irène and Jacques Elbaz  
collection

### 5

Sam Szafran,  
*Bellini Print Workshop*,  
July-September 1972,  
pastel on tracing paper mounted  
on cardboard, 139 × 100 cm  
Private collection

### 6

Sam Szafran,  
Album of preparatory  
photographs, late 1970s,  
polaroid photographs mounted  
on paper, 38 × 65 cm (open)  
Lilette Szafran collection

**1999-2001**

The first retrospectives are organised at the Fondation Gianadda in Martigny, the Fondation Maeght in Saint-Paul-de-

Vence, and the Musée de la Vie romantique in Paris.

**2006**

Szafran designs two monumental ceramics with the ceramicist Joan Gardy Artigas for the Fondation Gianadda.

**2010-2011**

Retrospective at the Max Ernst Museum in Germany.

**2013**

Major Szafran exhibition at the Fondation Gianadda.

**14 septembre 2019**

Death of Sam Szafran.



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**7**

Sam Szafran,  
*Staircase, 54 rue de Seine,*  
1990, watercolour on silk,  
205 × 107 cm  
Private collection

**8**

Sam Szafran,  
*Lillette in the Plants, 1987,*  
charcoal, watercolour and pencil  
on paper, 121 × 80 cm  
Lillette Szafran collection

**Staircase**

As a transitional area between two spaces, staircases are a motif which is used much more frequently in film than in painting. They feature in various types of familiar scene: chase sequences, the net closing on a character, and as a place for machinations and falls. *The Battleship Potemkin* (1925), a Soviet era silent film directed by Sergei Eisenstein, and the American film *Vertigo* (1958), directed by Alfred Hitchcock, are two iconic examples. Staircases are usually the setting for the most nerve-racking events. Sam Szafran, who was steeped in film culture, set himself the task of retranscribing the dizzying sensation induced by a staircase into a static image. He described his method: “To create the overall shape, I had to move around. I had to identify with a spider which goes up and down on its thread in the stairwell and can see from above and below [...]. I therefore began to act as if I were a camera, moving and turning...”

**Philodendron**

In a pivotal moment in the spring of 1966, Sam Szafran discovered a philodendron in the Paris studio lent to him by the Chinese painter Zao Wou-Ki (1920-2013): “I was totally incapable of working there: I was fascinated by a magnificent philodendron gleaming under the skylight, which I found impossible to draw. This impotence became an obsession”. For half a century, the artist returned tirelessly to the depiction of a few plants, notably *philodendron Monstera* and *aralias*. They offered scope for compositions featuring proliferation, especially in watercolour which could be used for large-format works. While attempting to transcribe both the state of evolution and transformation of vegetation, Szafran noted: “When I draw my plants, I am overwhelmed by creativity itself, the creativity before me, and I am in awe of nature. Of its madness, its violence and its fierceness too, of its calm, and of everything about it. When I think I have achieved my goal, I realise that there is more. It is indeed never-ending.”





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## Cosmos

In the 2000s, Szafran used watercolour in pursuit of monumentality. This culminated in a jungle which he dedicated to his friend Jean Clair, a member of the Académie Française, “As a metaphorical experiment relating to the exhibition organised by Jean Clair around the theme of the sky, the cosmos, the idea of space and light which has existed in paintings over the centuries. In short, the issue of space ultimately, through light. [...] This project has the aspects I like, namely a mixture of disciplines and of scientists and artists. Moreover, before the invention of photography, when scientists used to set off on expeditions, they would take an artist along to reproduce their finds. There was a real crossover between disciplines, which I think is wonderful”.

### Curators

**Julia Drost**, Director of Research, German Center for Art History, DFK Paris  
**Sophie Eloy**, Head of Documentation, the Library, Archives, and Research, Musée de l'Orangerie, Paris

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**EPMO**

ÉTABLISSEMENT PUBLIC  
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Jean-Louis Losi and Sam Szafran : © Adagp, Paris, 2022

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Sam Szafran,  
*Homage to Jean Clair for His Exhibition "Cosmos", 2012,*  
 watercolour and pastel on silk,  
 237 × 318 cm  
 Collection particulière

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 for Art History (morning),  
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### Exhibition catalogue

Musée de l'Orangerie / Flammarion  
 joint publication, 192 pages, €39



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