

ART & BORDERS

*Borders in Globalization Review*

Volume 6, Issue 1 (Fall & Winter 2024): 185–193

<https://doi.org/10.18357/bigr61202422225>

# Exile and Art in Time: An Interview with Dominique de Font-Réaulx

Elisa Ganivet



**Exiles: Artist Perspectives**  
<https://www.louvre-lens.fr/en/exhibition/exiles/>



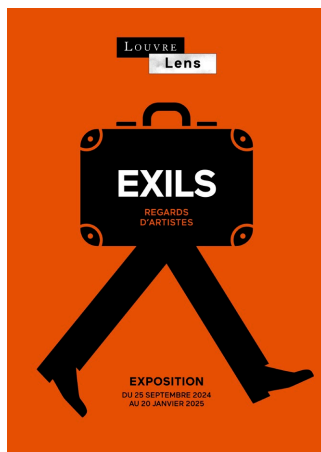
**Dominique de Font-Réaulx**  
© Laurence de Terlin

Explore exile from the perspective of artists who have experienced displacement. A landmark exhibition at the Louvre-Lens, France—**Exiles: Artist Perspectives**—examines how exile has shaped creativity, spanning history and genre, from ancient myth to modern art. It puts into relief the human experience of exile through nearly 200 paintings, sculptures, photographs, and texts. Personal testimonies from Lens residents enrich the show with intimate and communal dimensions; this dynamic interplay between art and narrative invites visitors to reflect on shared human experiences across time and space. In this interview, Art & Borders Editor Elisa Ganivet meets with Curator Dominique de Font-Réaulx to reflect on themes of departure, uprooting, and the role of encounter and hospitality, highlighting exile as a universal human condition and how artistic expression helps to understand it. Translation from the French by Elisa Ganivet. All images subject to copyright (reproduced here with express authorization).

**Dominique de Font-Réaulx** is General Curator, special advisor to the President at the Musée du Louvre. She was Director of the Musée Eugène-Delacroix for several years and editor-in-chief of the Revue *Histoire de l'art* since 2018. She presides over Point du Jour, an art center of national interest in Cherbourg and has curated numerous exhibitions in France and abroad. She is curator of the **Exiles: Artist Perspectives** (*Exils: Regards d'artistes*) exhibition at the Louvre-Lens, autumn 2024. A long-time lecturer at the Ecole du Louvre, she also teaches at the Institut de Sciences Politiques de Paris. She has edited numerous exhibition catalogs, including *Le Louvre Abu Dhabi, nouveau musée universel?* (with Laurence des Cars and Charlotte Chastel-Rousseau, PUF, 2015), *Peinture et photographie, les enjeux d'une rencontre*, published by Flammarion in 2012, reissued in 2020, and *Delacroix, la liberté d'être soi*, published by Cohen&Cohen, which won the Prix Montherlant from the Académie des beaux-arts. She has also written two children's books, *Mythes fondateurs*, and *Artiste!* both published by Courtes et Longues in 2015 and 2024, and the latest guide to the Louvre (Louvre/RMN-GP, 2023).

**Elisa Ganivet:** The history of exile traces human destiny and the creations that mark its path. What inspired the genesis of the “Exiles” exhibition? Was there a spark that led to creating such a generous exhibition? (Figure 1)

**Dominique de Font-Réaulx:** It was less a spark than a slow maturation. For over 30 years, I have been researching the work and life of Gustave Courbet, an artist whose creations continuously fascinate, surprise, and stop me in my tracks. Courbet, as we know, died in exile in 1877 in Switzerland. Having been involved in the Commune, he was accused, after the fall of the independent Parisian government, of dismantling the Vendôme Column. The accusation was, of course, absurd given the monument’s size, but it served as a pretext to denounce the capital’s secession and stigmatize one of its most renowned supporters. Denounced and arrested, Courbet was imprisoned first in Versailles, then in Sainte-Pélagie. He was released for health



**Figure 1. Original Exhibition Poster in French.** © Louvre-Lens

reasons but was later ordered to pay a heavy fine to the French state. Fearing further imprisonment, he chose exile in July 1873 and never returned to France. This physical exile also coincided with an artistic ostracism from the French scene that had celebrated him just years earlier. Even before this, Courbet, whose life had been split since 1839 between Ornans, his hometown in Franche-Comté, and Paris, experienced a feeling of exile, a melancholy that surfaces in his correspondence, published in 1996 by Petra Ten Doesschate-Chu (Paris, Flammarion). Courbet’s experience of exile, both imposed and internal, led me to reflect on the relationship between exile and creativity. How does exile impact creation? What role

does exile play in artistic conception? (Figure 2)

In parallel, I have long had an insatiable, freely nurtured interest in foundational texts—those of the Bible, shared by the three religions of the Book, *The Odyssey*, *The Aeneid*, *The Ramayana*, among



**Figure 2.** Gustave Courbet, *Château de Chillon* (1874), oil on canvas. Ornans © Musée départemental Gustave Courbet. Photo: Pierre Guenat.

others. All these texts speak of exile, depicting exiled figures—Jacob, Noah, Ulysses, Aeneas, Rama, for example. (Figure 3) Exile, as conveyed by these narratives, seems to signify a common human condition, a horizon of suffering that also elevates us toward self-transcendence. Thus, exile is not presented as a tragic fate imposed on a few outcasts but as an analogy for human life itself. We are all exiles.

**EG:** The notion of exile is rooted in the idea of suffering. We imagine exile is often forced, seldom voluntary, and generally the result of degrading circumstances for the individual or a community. Today, this term resonates with migratory crises, yet you have opened a broader historical and mythical scope. From an artistic perspective, connections emerge. Could you outline the framework of the exhibition?

**DDFR:** I often like to quote this text by Etienne Tassin, a philosopher and professor at Paris 7, who sadly passed away in 2018. I placed it at the forefront of my essay in the catalog, which I dedicated to him:

Exile thus has two faces: on one side it is loss, desertion, dispossession, and this can reach the point of desolation; on the other, it is self-seeking and world-

making, a migration toward a future destiny, an invention of that future, a promise of tomorrow, and already the realization of this world through the exploration of worlds. The leap out of oneself into the world, which is an expulsion from the world, is also precisely what promises a world—or, more accurately, lives from the promise of worlds to come, already realizing this promise in the crossing of boundaries. Worlds emerge from wandering and transgression.

Exile is simultaneously grief and hope, abandonment and renewal, disaster and reconstruction, as Tassin so aptly expressed. My aim is to anchor the exhibition in long history, with both factual and mythical dimensions, coming from a desire to go beyond the snapshot views offered today, to transcend the immediate present and remind us that exile has always shaped, distorted, glorified, and transformed human history. Discussing exile, migration, is indeed a current topic, but I see it as an ever-present reality—yesterday’s, today’s, and tomorrow’s. The long historical perspective of the museum institution allows us to see beyond the current moment. This is not about denying today’s realities, which would be unworthy, but rather about inviting exchange, dialogue, and reflection on what unites and defines us.



**Figure 3.** *Ulysse et les Sirènes* (circa 50BC–50CE), Campana relief. © GrandPalaisRmn Musée du Louvre. Photo: Stephane Marechalle.



**Figure 4.** Antoine Carrache, *Le déluge* (circa 1600–1625), oil on canvas. Paris Musée du Louvre, département des Peintures © RMN-GP Musée du Louvre. Photo Franck Raux.

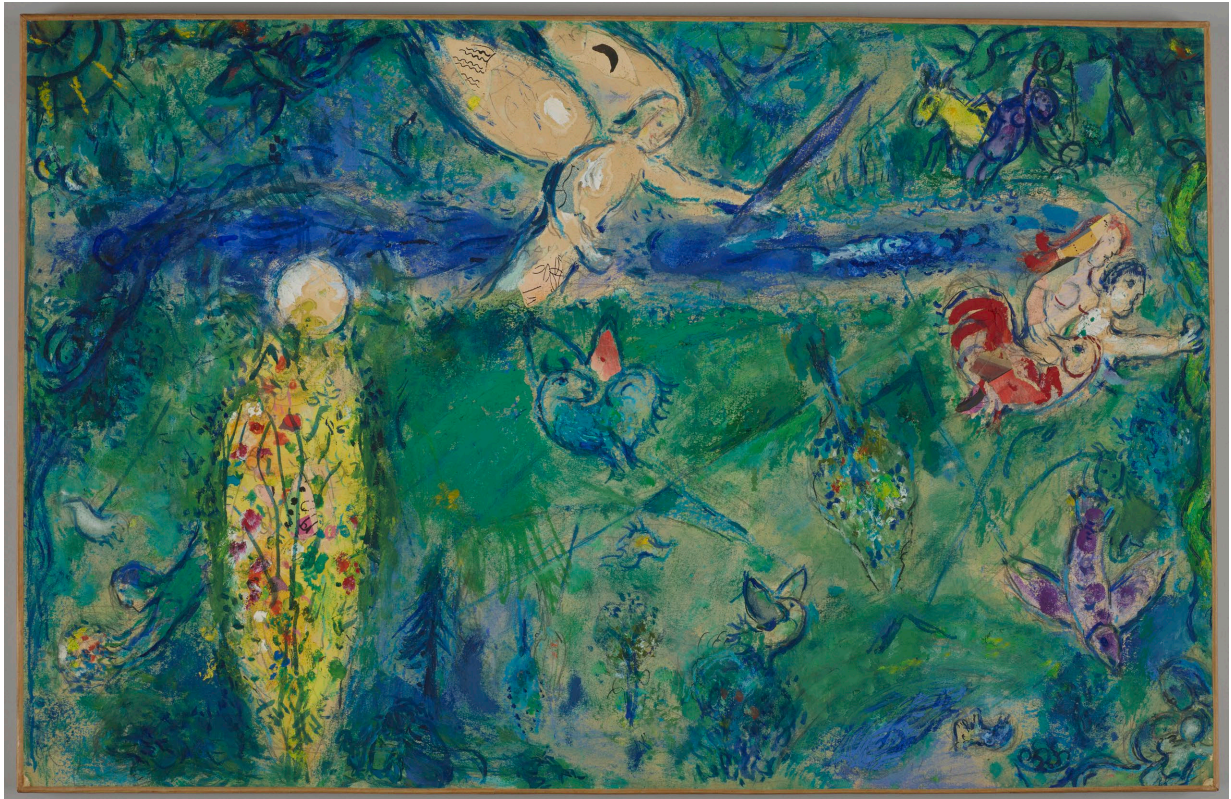
For this reason, I envisioned the exhibition as a fine arts showcase, supported by outstanding ancient and contemporary works. The resonance between old and new works—the treatment of the Flood by 16th and 17th-century artists such as Leandro Bassano and Antoine Carrache (**Figure 4**), by Marc Chagall in the 20th century (**Figure 5**), and by Barthélémy Toguo (**Figure 6**) and Enrique Ramirez today—is particularly compelling to me. Each of these artists did not mimic but instead subtly echoed and illuminated each other’s works.

“Exiles” unfolds along a thematic, narrative thread that highlights both individual and shared stories. The first section, “Exile, a Human Condition”, underlines the enduring impact of foundational texts on artistic creation, showing how artists today, as in the past, never view exile from a distance, whether they’ve experienced it personally or not. This serves as an introduction to the exhibition, offering a contemplative experience based on the beauty of the chosen works. The other sections radiate from a central space, designed by the Maciej Fiszler studio, the talented scenographers of the project. This central space allows each visitor to create their own path, to wander at their own pace, to revisit. I felt it essential to avoid a dogmatic, didactic approach but rather to invite each visitor to form their own reflections in a poetic, sensitive dimension. This singular journey

was inspired by lines from Pablo Neruda, placed at the forefront of the exhibition, describing exile as a circle:

Exile is round in shape,  
 a circle, a ring.  
 Your feet go in circles, you cross land  
 and it's not your land.  
 Light wakes you up and it's not your light.  
 Night comes down but your stars are missing.  
 You discover brothers, but they're not of your blood (...)  
 (From “Black Island Memorial”)

This central space (**Figure 7**) was also conceived as a place for gatherings and exchanges, with books available, recordings of texts from ancient and contemporary literature, and even children’s literature, which is often so poignant and insightful. The written and spoken mediation—especially the two audioguides crafted by the Louvre-Lens team—was created with special care to provide visitors with both factual and subjective insights into the works and the exhibition’s journey. The five sections radiating from the central space, with passages allowing the freest movement, are as follows: “Welcoming”, which emphasizes the importance of hospitality in both the reality and perception of exile and how exile concerns us all, as we are always both hosts and guests at times; “Passages and Severance”, which addresses the complexity, hardship, and tragedy



**Figure 5.** Marc Chagall, *Esquisse pour Adam et Eve chasses du paradis* (1961), oil on canvas. ADAGP Paris 2024 © RMN Grand Palais. Photo: Stephane Marechalle.



**Figure 6.** Barthélemy Toguo, *Exodus* (2013), mixed media. Courtesy Bandjoun Station et Galerie Lelong, © Adagp Paris 2024, © Galerie Lelong, all rights reserved, 2012.



**Figure 7.** Visitors exploring the exhibition, Exiles: Artist Perspectives. © Louvre-Lens. Photo: F. Lovino.

of exile journeys, highlighting the aspirations that motivate exile; “Creating in Exile”, which brings together works from artists who have known real or internal exile, including Jacques-Louis David, Victor Hugo (**Figure 8**), Eugène Delacroix (**Figure 9**), Gustave Courbet, and Pablo Picasso; “Memories of Exile”, which aims to show that the experience and memory of exile endure in artists’ thoughts and creations—in this section, we invited residents of Lens and the region, who have experienced exile or whose parents and grandparents have, to lend an object that symbolized exile to them, and to share their stories orally and in writing. This section was co-created with students from the École du Louvre. Finally, “Nowhere” evokes detention camps—spaces that are neither the country left nor the desired destination, but in-between spaces where many still live. In these spaces, life persists, as highlighted by works from artists such as Mathieu Pernot and Gilles Raynaldy. (**Figure 10**)

**EG:** Exile is not a subject on its own (an artist cannot depict it literally), yet the word evokes numerous concepts that are reflected here. Artists, as sensitive receptors, make us witnesses to their exile (geographical, personal) and activate a universally understood language. Which aspects or works have most captured your attention?

**DDFR:** That is a fascinating question. Indeed, there is no specific “art of exile” as such. Artists, as we mentioned, never see exile from a distance, regardless of their personal situation. It’s a topic they approach with their own intimate feelings and perspectives. Still, there are representational themes, motifs, and illuminations that underpin



**Figure 8.** Charles Hugo, *Victor Hugo sur une roche pris du coteau surplombant la jétée vers* (circa 1853). © Grand Palais Rmn, Musée d’Orsay. Photo: Herve Lewandowski.



**Figure 9.** Eugene Delacroix, *Bouquet champêtre* (circa 1850) Palais des Beaux-Arts. © Grand Palais Rmn, PBA Lille. Photo: Rene-Gabriel Ojeda.



**Figure 10.** Gilles Raynaldy, *9 mai—Salon et cuisine d'un groupe d'habitation soudanais, zone nord Technique* (2015–2016), photography. Rouen collection, Frac Normandie. © Gilles Raynaldy.



**Figure 11.** Odilon Redon, *La Fuite en Egypte* (circa 1840 and 1919), Musée d'Orsay, Paris. © Grand Palais Rmn, Musée d'Orsay. Photo: Herve Lewandowski.

many artistic conceptions. The depiction of exiles as a line of anonymous, undifferentiated figures—a motif found as early as the reliefs of the Palace of Sargon II in Khorsabad, 700 years before our era; the relationship to darkness, both literal and symbolic, as a passage to future light, masterfully portrayed by Odilon Redon in his “Flight into Egypt” (Paris, Musée d'Orsay) (Figure 11) and Abdoulaye Barry in his series of photographs taken in central Africa in 2019, “Such a Great Lake” (Paris, Musée du Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac) (Figure 12); or the way the sea is depicted as powerful, dangerous, both essential for travel and terrifying for those who cross it, from Ulysses to today's exiles.

Sometimes, too, artists—even those who have endured the harshest exiles—keep a distance from any immediate, literal evocation. By gathering in one room works by Raoul Hausmann—the photographs he took in Ibiza in the 1930s while fleeing Nazism (Figure 13)—Jean Arp's “Mediterranean Sculpture”, conceived in Marseille,



**Figure 12.** Abdoulaye Barry, *Une famille réfugiée nigérienne: Serie intitulée 'Un si grand lac'*, 2019–2020, Paris, musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac © Abdoulaye Barry © musée du quai Branly, Jacques Chirac, Dist. GrandPalaisRmn / image musée du quai Branly, Jacques Chirac



**Figure 13.** Hausmann Raoul, *Can Reco de la torre Ibiza, Benimusa* (1936). © Musée d'art contemporain de la Haute-Vienne, Château de Rochechouart.

Zao Wou-Ki’s abstract painting from the time of his naturalization as French, Josef Koudelka’s photographic series “Exiles”, and Mohssin Harraki’s “The Song of the Shadow”, which combines a Moroccan poem with images of stones gathered by the artist, I wanted to suggest the way these great creators chose to represent material, telluric objects—things typically considered lifeless—to embody their creative relationship with exile, far from any figurative representation. The beautiful verses of Ovid, exiled by the Roman Emperor Augustus to the edges of the known world, continue to resonate:

(...) I write from a place of exile and a barbarian land  
 In uncertain times and adversity  
 And the most amazing thing is that I still write  
 That my sorrowful hand traces these marks (...)

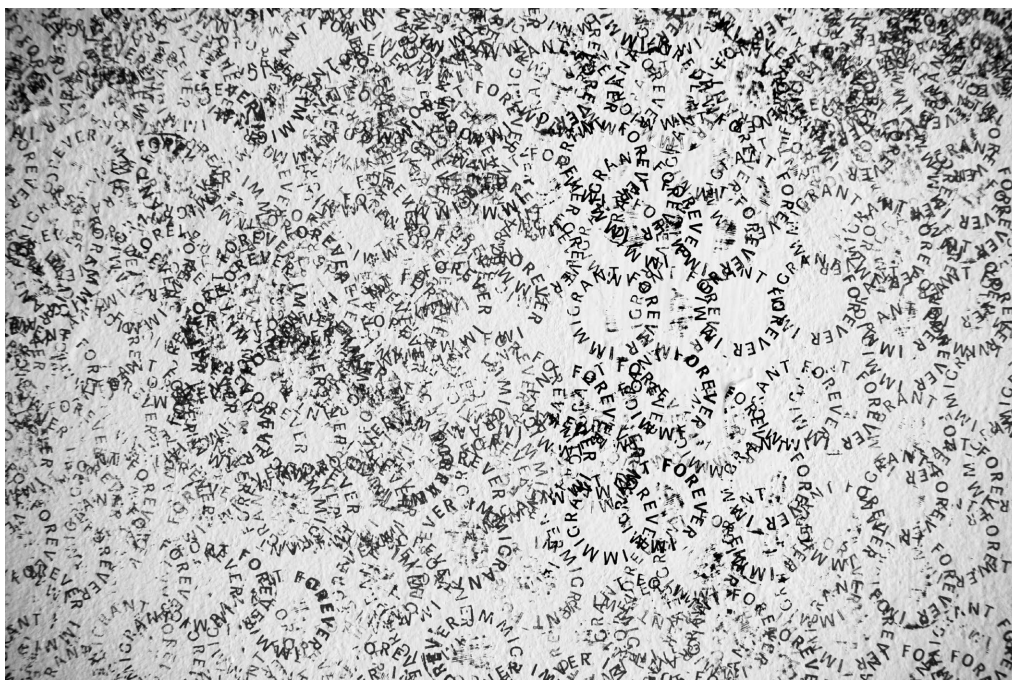
**EG:** The originality of this exhibition route also lies in the inclusion of testimonies from the inhabitants of Lens and the surrounding areas, places in transition. How did you approach these personal stories?

**DDFR:** This project of gathering and meeting with residents of Lens and its region was part of the exhibition’s design from the beginning. It seemed essential that, in a region built by successive waves of exiles from Europe, North Africa, and sub-Saharan Africa, the voices of residents would be heard—those who have themselves experienced exile or whose parents or grandparents have. This effort was implemented by working with associations in the mining basin, already known to the museum

team, and by inviting a group of ten students from the École du Louvre to co-curate the exhibition with me. Through the associations, links were established with individuals involved in these groups. These people were invited to join the exhibition project, which was introduced to them, and asked to lend an object symbolizing exile for them. All these objects were very precious to them, not always in their market value but in their symbolic worth. This symbolic value was expressed in a written and oral testimony, received by the students and presented in the exhibition and catalog. The challenge lay in the uniqueness of the experience: exhibiting artworks and everyday objects, like football jerseys, a fly swatter, or plates, in the same space.

Such an endeavor is rarely undertaken in a fine arts museum. Its success, praised by all, was based on the careful guidance of the students, the involvement of the participants in the overall project—they attended the exhibition’s assembly, collaborated on Marco Godinho’s participatory work “Forever Immigrant” (**Figure 14**), and were invited to a special visit at the opening. The success was also supported by the scenography designed by the Fiszler studio, which showcased the objects in the “Memories of Exile” section by placing them on a platform resembling an island. This was a powerful, emotional human adventure that firmly rooted the entire exhibition in its territory.

**EG:** Did you receive feedback from visitors on their experience?



**Figure 14.** Marco Godinho, *Forever immigrant* (2012) © Marco Godinho.



**DDFR:** Visitor feedback on the exhibition often reflects the emotion felt during the journey through the artworks. Many were particularly moved by the freedom of movement offered, allowing them to navigate from one section to another. They appreciated the association of old and contemporary works, noting the high quality of the pieces and the presence of masterpieces that embody and transcend the theme. For most, the **Exiles: Artist Perspectives** exhibition was a surprise. Its approach, emphasizing artistic creation, distinguished it from other more sociological or historical events that are more documentary in nature. The connection made with literature, both ancient and contemporary, and the reminder of the narrative dimension, crucial in any experience of exile, resonated deeply with many.

**EG:** Exile is a form of survival. This trauma can be processed if the individual is well understood and welcomed, leading to an acceptance of otherness. What do you think of Levinas’s idea: “as soon as the face of the other appears, it compels me” (from

“Ethics and Infinity”), and how, when exposed to another, we become responsible for them?

**DDFR:** Yes, the notion of welcome, of hospitality, is crucial. It profoundly changes the relationship with exile, whatever its nature. I fully share Levinas’s perspective. The “Welcoming” section of the exhibition recalls the ontological, foundational power of the aspiration to hospitality. I selected three works from different periods (a work by Domenico Piola, a work by Rembrandt, and a work by Chagall) that depict the same biblical episode—the moment when Abraham welcomes three strangers to his table. These three unknowns turn out to be angels, messengers of God. By receiving them, Abraham sees his deepest wish—that his wife Sarah will bear him a child—granted. The ancient texts offer a beautiful metaphor: it is through welcoming the other that your legacy is born. It is thus in the recognition of the other, depicted by Rembrandt as an old, dirty, twisted man, that we come into being. **(Figure 15)**



**Figure 15.** Rembrandt, *Abraham reçoit les trois anges* (1656), engraving. Paris Musée du Louvre. © Grand Palais Rmn, Musée du Louvre. Photo: Gerard Blot.