

---

**COMMENTARIES**


---

**Prologue: The Journey Begins****Drawings**

Guided by the German architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's maxim "Less is more" which he encountered during his student years, Folon's quest to create a rich world using only black and white started. During the five years after moving to Paris, he devoted himself drawing every day, as if to store his discoveries and ideas through ordinary life. By sending some of his works to the publishers in New York, he seized the opportunity for his artistic success.

In Folon's imaginary world ordinary trivial things are brought to life, for example, tires transformed into lemons, balloons, or planets. Folon's drawings easily leap over our preconceptions of reality and give us a new perspective. According to Folon, an air of "white humour" rather than black humour lies in the world where scissors and hooks move freely on a white sheet of paper. And this sense of humour and the view towards reality is also evident in his later colourful works. We may say that drawings are Folon's starting point since they shaped his form of expression and gained worldwide success.

**Sculptures**

From the latter half of the 1980s, Folon's imagination spreads to three-dimensional works. First, he was inspired by the tribal arts by the Native Americans and the Africans, then he started to create objects by combining different types of materials such as, wood blocks, nails, screws, or even things found in the flea market. Through his imagination, he tried to create new stories by listening to the voices of each material. In 1990 his retrospective was held at the Metropolitan Museum, he reflected his own two-dimensional works and had a chance to see the sculptures exhibited in the museum. Inspired by this experience, Folon got into making sculptures from then on. With the encouragement of his sculptor friends like Cesar [1921-1998], his materials changed into bronze and stone.

Folon brings life to inorganic things such as spoon, fork, pretzels and propellers, and makes them into human-like figures full of character. Such sculptures are reminiscent of Surrealism, yet somehow familiar.

**Little Hatted Man**

Two dots for eyes, straight line for a mouth, this man is completely covered with a big coat and a hat, as if to avoid depicting details. Reminiscent of figures painted in Rene Magritte's [1898-1967] paintings or a character in the movies of Charlie Chaplin [1889-1977], this man, either big or small, appears here and there in Folon's drawings, watercolours, posters, or in sculptures, sometimes in solitude wandering alone, or in multitude, in a form of dehumanized clockwork machine, or as a life-size bronze, with an individual presence. Because of its simplicity, anyone can overlap themselves to this man. Guided by this man being a "no-body" which allows him to do anything, we can even fly.

**Chapter 1: This Way, That Way, or Some Other Way?****Arrow**

Arrows appear frequently in Folon's works. Folon said that the theme came up to him when he was trying to pass the time during

journeys between Paris and Brussels. He counted all the signs with arrows on them and ended up with a total of 1,268. He also took photographs of reality with flooding images of arrows.

Sharp arrows popping up here and there, winding like a maze, coiling around buildings like snakes, confuse people living in the great maze, cities. On the other hand, do the vase standing against the horizon [no. 291] or the arrows popping out of the figure's head are there only to confuse us? Those arrows may be showing us the freedom to stop and imagine amongst the numerous arrows, and the possibility of making our own free choices.

**City**

From Brussels to Paris and then to New York, Folon's observations of the real world led him naturally to the theme of the city. Born from a rebellion against the study of architecture, Folon's unnamed city is lined with inorganic, skyscraper-like buildings, even the steam is made of hard brick. And the little humans thrown into the city are confused by the arrows and signs pointing in every direction, leaving them with nowhere to go. The spaces of disappointment and alienation seem to be pervaded by the 'urban disease' of modern human, who have been swallowed up by a rapidly changing civilisation and have lost their humanity. At the same time, they may be a warning towards the madness of human itself, which has lost harmony with nature and created a uniform and solitary world.

However, has Folon given up hope for humans? The white door found in the space that goes round in circles, and mild sunlight illuminating the maze, seems like a margin which Folon left us to imagine the future and to find the key to solve the maze which is a huge "?".

**Chapter 2: What Do You Hear?****Watercolours**

Folon, who was drawing only in black and white, began to acquire colour after he met a French artist Collette Portal [1936-] who married in 1961. From around 1964 to the early 1970s, Folon begins to work on coloured ink. Thus he was awakened by the power of colour and encounters watercolour and produces natural and soft colouring expressions. Through his search of expression using light and transparency, Folon recounted that he was inspired by William Turner's [1775-1851] watercolour paintings. The colours, which mingled like living creatures, captured Folon's imagination and enriched the image world on paper.

Giorgio Soavi [1923-2008] of the Italian office machine manufacturer Olivetti was one of the first to realise the appeal of Folon's watercolours. He assigned Folon to create many artworks such as illustration for *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka, and Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles*. If drawing was the starting point of Folon's expression and career, it was his watercolour works that made them more certain.

**Ecology**

Folon was strongly interested in environmental and social issues and raised questions using a variety of media such as watercolours, coloured ink, and even animations. As he said he only takes jobs that only have a theme that moves him, to work with the pro-environmental organization Greenpeace which was founded because of the campaign against nuclear testing, must have been an important opportunity. In *Deep deep trouble* [no. 113], torpedoes instead of fish swim in a beautiful ocean. Also Folon published a portfolio *La Mort d'un arbre (The Death of a tree)* warning deforestation. Folon attracts people by the calm colouring, at the

same time opens the way for people not to turn away but to look at the severe reality. Folon's soft but honest way of communication brings the distance closer between human and nature. Also he might be entrusting us hope and responsibility as humans who live the world now.

## War

Folon appeals not to turn away but to imagine the cruelty in the theme of war. In his drawings, sunlight and bird in a cage is transformed into missiles and dove which is a symbol for peace carries cartridge belts with a series of missiles. Facing those misalignments of images, we may stop and frown. By the direct symbols of Nazi and Cold War, and extensive use of vivid vermilion and disturbing staining of watercolors, we can see Folon's stance of openly criticizing the consequences of war and its violence. War is not a pipe dream, it is caused by someone, at a certain place. Folon, who reflected the absurdities of this world in his works, was aware of the repercussions his works would cause in the world, and was prepared to accept the contradictions and absurdities of the times with sincerity. And imagining the war still occurring in the future, he says, "A drawing is useless; it's like a tree or a flower, it's useless. But without trees and without flowers, we would all be dead."

## Space

Astronomical observation scene frequently appears in Folon's works. With a never-ending curiosity towards unknown planets beyond the universe, what do people see through a telescope? The unknown world where Folon depicts, surprisingly has a lot in common with the world in which we live. On the contrary, there are some drawings that makes us think that the planet people are observing is actually the earth, if you look closely. In 1987, Folon illustrated Ray Bradbury's *Martian Chronical*. Moved by its rich visuality and lyricism, as well as its cynical view of the reality of the story which is about humans who moved to Mars, Folon personally offered to illustrate the book to the author.

Today, going to space is becoming a familiar reality, and our imagination go beyond the planets. At the same time, Folon seems to question us how we should live as living organisms that make up this interconnected universe.

## **Chapter 3: What Should We Talk About?**

### Universal Declaration of Human Rights

In December 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted, officially recognizing the fundamental human rights of all people for the first time in the world. In 1988, Amnesty International decided to publish a book of UDHR for its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary and asked Folon to illustrate each article.

What Folon found appealing about illustrating books was not that he wanted to represent poetry as it was, but rather that it allowed him to expand his imagination in new ways. Also he thought that nobody reads the UDHR and declarations do not create imagination. However Folon tried to produce 19 watercolour illustrations out of 30 articles. Most of them symbolically represented the world that still exists in reality, where rights and freedoms are neglected. By using expressions that could be interpreted as a kind of accusation, Folon may have tried to draw attention to the unfulfilled declaration and focus our attention on the future we should envision.

### Magazines

Folon moved to Paris from Brussels at the age of 21 and gradually gained jobs, he send some of his works to several publishers in New York aiming for more success. Then one publisher bought four works. Using this as a foothold, from the late 1950s, he illustrated the cover of many magazines such as, *Horizon*, *Esquire*, *The New*

*Yorker*, and *Time*. His early works depicting city flooded with signs and brick buildings may seem to connect the imagery of New York, the symbol of new city.

Cover of magazines, the media that are delivered to 8 million people worldwide on the same day, will be etched in the memory of those who see, even they are burnt in fireplace on the next day. The idea of creating a simple yet impactful design that could be understood worldwide led to the creation of posters.

### Posters

For Folon who aimed to create a "open painting" which the interpretation is open freely to the viewer, like the works of Giorgio Morandi [1890-1964] and Paul Klee [1879-1940], posters, that allows to appeal directly to a large number of unspecified people, were a media that he was meant to meat.

From Olivetti's poster for a typewriter [no. 200], movie which he also appears in [no. 210], 1996 winter Paralympics [no.216], to world peace appeal poster of Amnesty International [no. 220], Folon created more than 600 posters through his life. We can instantly recognize them as Folon's works when we find familiar motifs like arrows, giant eye, and little man in the hat. These symbols allow us to enter Folon's poetic world and open the doors to our imagination.

### **Epilogue: Where Do We Go from Here?**

#### Horizon

From the point he set his studio in Burcy in France in 1968, he began to depict horizon as if inspired by the land. The sun or the giant eye over the horizon which leads our view and thoughts towards far away, may be the existence that is beyond reach, or whom look over us with great love, or maybe a mirror that reflects ourselves.

Also it is said that the time he spent in Monaco from 1985 inspired him the ocean horizon and ship. In the series of works titled *Voyage* [no. 271–273], he depicted ship on the horizon using oil paints directly painted on wood blocks and pasted paper and cloth. By assembling readily available materials, it is as if Folon is sublimating his imagination born in a private space into artworks. Moreover, in watercolour paintings, the ship no longer belongs to Folon alone. A single ship floating alone on the horizon become a vehicle for each of us, leading us on a free journey beyond the painting, along with the solitude of being thrown into a magnificent world.

#### Bird

Birds were Folon's admiration. A little figure with colourful wings rising in the work *Arcangelo* [no. 287] which has his name depicted on the top, may be the artist himself who dreamed to become a bird.

It is the wind that brings us on our journey of freedom. It may be a gust of wind that pulls us into a whirlpool of arrows, or a wind that push forward birds and ship beyond horizon. These images such as a tightrope walker (reminiscent of street performer Philippe Petit [1949-]) walks through the air while maintaining exquisite balance [no. 130], and the little man in the hat observing stars and planets and even reaching the space makes us feel the sense of zero gravity.

Folon's words, "I have always wanted to fly freely, to talk to the wind and the sky" are also an expression of his gaze toward the unknown world of space and the yet-to-be-seen future. Together with Folon's birds and the little man in the hat, rather than being swallowed up by the wind, we can use our feet and play with and ride the wind, over the horizon, and head toward our own journeys in life.