

## The revenge of an underground imagination Laurent Danchin explores the paranoid cities and basilicas of

Translated from the French  
by Colette Horvilleur.

**At a time when** it is fashionable to be a self-taught artist, there are apparently fewer and fewer cases of genuine 'art brut', which makes Marcel Storr's large pencil and coloured ink drawings of churches and cities of the future all the more valuable. A collection of fifty or so of his works were discovered in 1971 by a Parisian couple called Mr and Mrs Kempf, after Storr's wife introduced them to his secret world. His drawings teem with buildings whose spires, towers, domes, pinnacles, minarets reach up into the sky, but it is a world strikingly devoid of thought or feeling, whose population is reduced to ants swarming under fleecy, ominous, weird skies.

Born in Paris on July 3rd, 1911, Storr was an abandoned child, who was subsequently apprenticed in farms, entrusted to nuns at an Alsatian convent, sent down the mines, and who worked at Les Halles market, loading and unloading lorries. In 1964, he

found a job sweeping leaves in the Bois de Boulogne and married. He had been drawing for some time when his wife, a caretaker at a Primary school in rue Milton, in the 9th arrondissement, took advantage of his being away one evening to invite the art-lovers, Mr and Mrs Kempf into her kitchen after a parents' meeting. From under the oilcloth on the table, she pulled out her husband's secret drawings, made mostly in a large spiral copy book.

A year later Storr's wife died, and Marcel enlisted Mr Kempf, who had been his protector, to help him draw up an ad. for a marriage bureau. He described himself as being of 'good temper – loves nature, architecture and doing painting'. We know little about Marcel Storr's character and personality, but it seems that the would-be bridegroom was actually quite different from his description and was apparently rather hot-tempered, nasty, even. He always felt persecuted – probably as a result of the

**above**  
Church,  
c.1964, 30 x 36.5cm,  
ink and pencil on paper,  
photo: J.P. Vidal,  
private collection.





# Marcel Storr

treatment he received in his youth (he was practically deaf from the beatings) and was prone to bouts of anti-semitism. His life story is filled with gaps: he was probably a prisoner of war, but a blank of twenty years suggests that he might also have spent several periods undergoing psychiatric treatment. There is evidence that in 1974, he was an in-patient at the Ville Evrard Hospital day-centre, where he was also an out-patient.

Storr died of cancer in November, 1976, at Tenon Hospital, shortly after being rehoused in an apartment in the run-down neighbourhood of St-Denis. Mr Kempf recalls that he had lived 'in total seclusion, was neurotic, scarcely spoke, and his speech was impaired. (He did not wear a deaf aid until 1961). He was the epitome of a solitary fellow, misunderstood by everyone, and living in his imagination, an underground artist, but conscious of his genius. His work was his only aim, his main source of compensation and his

only passion. He painted neither to please, nor to be exhibited, not for fame and probably not even to entertain himself. He made a gift of his drawings, rather than getting any benefit from them. 'He never showed his drawings to anyone, and though he did trust us with them, it was not to show them off, but so that they could be put away safely. And he never asked to see them again. He was simply driven by an instinct to obey some call of duty. Kempf says.

The drawings and paintings so far identified correspond to different periods of Storr's life. The first are large, pre-war drawings dated 1932, or 1936-1937. They were made on sheets of now yellowed paper and scotch-taped at the back. They feature churches simultaneously naive and realistic; statues are minutely detailed and bricks are meticulously reproduced one by one. The works reveal a surfeit of architecture, uncanny and deliriously interpreted. Some were

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coloured, some only pencilled, others appear to have been worked over in inks, probably in the Sixties, with the introduction of crowds of people and trees in the foreground, a characteristic of his later style. During that early period, Storr's architectural imagination seems hampered by a tendency for imitation and realism, and above all by his slow, finicky technique, and he was also unable to refrain from piling up decorative or architectural elements, in keeping with the swiftness of imagination.

Storr's second period was slack, although he did produce some very large drawings of churches during the Fifties. Following that, there is a grand book of 25 drawings, averaging 30 x 36.5cm, dated 1964. They feature palatial cathedrals, now totally imaginary, and evoking the grandest styles, from the Sacré-Coeur to the Kremlin, from Saint-Sophia to English gothic, Austrian or German baroque. These buildings possess a terrifying beauty. They are all portrayed from the side, their facades warped to the left, according to the Cubist perspective. They feature bunches of spires, weird clusters of

crystals, forests of gigantic mushrooms. He drew them first in pencil, then coloured them in ink, and in the foreground added minute characters moving about in a series of church-squares or wandering between borders of flowers or lawns overhung by trees (mostly cedar). The scenes are dominated by somewhat ominous, cloudy skies. This latter feature obviously betrays the manic-depressive humour of an artist who compulsively hoarded spires, towers, phallic motifs and forests of antennas, which 'scratch the sky' as Mrs Kempf put it. At the same time, the images become more and more distorted, suggesting that the series may have been created while he was resident in the mental hospital.

The last series, unfinished and dated 1969-1975, stems from the same neo-Babylonian exaltation as before. Some of the 19 or so sketches of unusual cities or buildings evoke the Temple of Angkor Wat, Ceausescu's megalomaniac Palace, and the architectural phantasies of *le Facteur Cheval*. Most of these buildings have the awkward and clumsy perspective effects created by high and low angle shots to emphasise the





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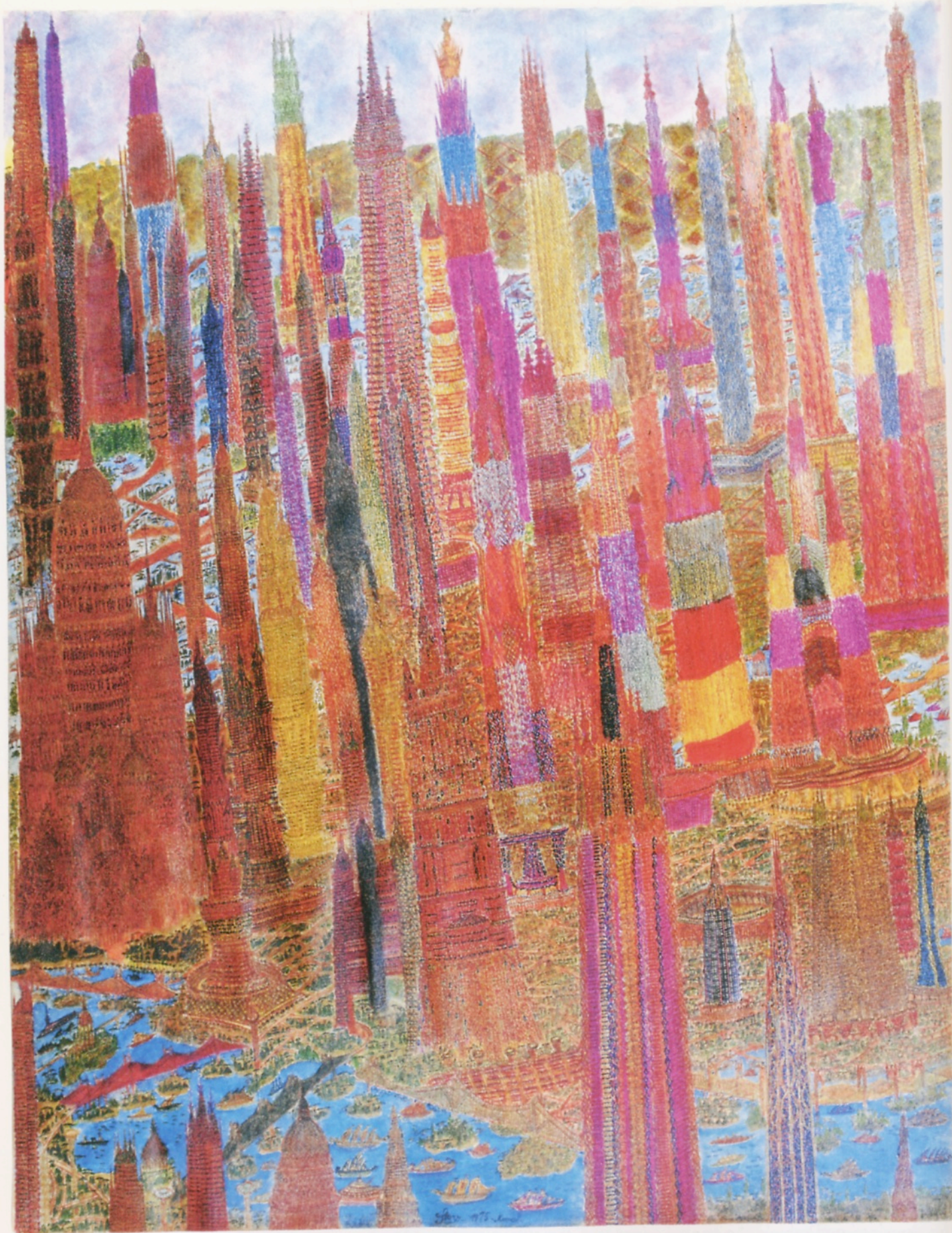
effect of gigantism or underline the flight of towers towards the sky. 'Storr thought he had a mission in life' Mr Kempf tells us. 'He was convinced that Paris would be destroyed and that the President of the United States would come in person to visit him in order to borrow his drawings and rebuild the capital exactly according to his plans' Because of working in the Bois de Boulogne, the road-sweeper had the time and leisure to spy on the Towers of La Défense rising in the distance above the tops of the trees. To his inventor's brain, Old

Paris was totally out of date.

Storr's churches, with their swarms of domes, spires, flying buttresses, pinnacles, outside porches, sheaves, and palm trees made of stone, each had a key colour – yellow or green, orange or black – whereas the cities are steeped in an orange glow that suffuses perspectives smashed to smithereens, obelisks like high watch-towers, and tiered columns of ziggurats. They are like so many colossal stalagmites, sometimes interconnected like the Watts Towers in Los

**above**  
*Untitled*,  
between 1969–1975,  
55 x 45cm,  
ink and pencil on paper,  
photo: J.P. Vidal,  
private collection.





**above**  
*Imaginary City*,  
between 1969–1975, 53 x 48cm,  
ink and pencil on paper,  
photo: J.P. Vidal,  
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Angeles. Basilicas and cathedrals suggesting the spiritual ambitions of bygone days, are superseded by a new, much more complex mental space: urban, giant-like, and futuristic, the craze for sky scrapers reaching its climax. Such a craze, incidentally, was being rekindled during that same time period in the Pharaonic projects of South East Asia with their tower-city Utopia.

Totalitarian architecture, science fiction dreams: such are the cities of Marcel Storr! He must have laboured on them for hours in the solitude of his small government lodgings. They became real to him, as is the case with those novelists who by telling stories, eventually believe in them. 'You'd only need to film them, it's real' he would sometimes say, or else: 'You're going to film it and it will come alive, it will exist!' he would say to Mrs Kempf as he showed her his grand project: floating cities with rivers spanned by suspension bridges as in Tancarville, caravels, amphibious vehicles, futuristic vessels, and rows of luminous trees on some kind of gangways. He would say: 'I dig all around and I add water. Just you wait, the lights are coming on, the snaps you're going to take are to be as valuable as the drawings!' A mastermind overpowered by the force of his invention, he would give still more value to that idea than to the reality of his work.

As he analyses an unfinished piece of Storr's work, Mr Kempf recalls: 'We noticed that when Storr was drawing, he would start from an angle and fill in the sheet as he went, without any previous sketch or outline in pencil. Most of the time he progressed on the work with his nose on the paper, without any real preconceived plan. He was inside the drawing, within its space, and only became conscious of it once his progress was over. The 'distance' between him and his work is different from that of a professional artist, but more like a miniaturist or a naive artist, fanatical about detail. In these incredibly delicate churches with their Lilliputian characters in the foreground and their whole paraphernalia of steeples, pinnacles, stairs or chequered floors, the author was entirely wrapped up in his work, concentrated on his task to the point of forgetting all else.

He achieved such precision by using hard lead pencils shaved as sharp as needles. They actually engraved the paper. At the end of his life, he started straight off with a pen, without any underlying rough sketch, but using coloured inks – much to Kempf's surprise, because – to encourage the artist, he had presented him with black Indian ink, thinking it would help to make the outlines more forceful.

'I like drawing best of all' the underground artist confessed to his two fans. In the second phase, he had used coloured ink, covered with a thick layer of varnish smoothed

down with a hot iron. What type of varnish? 'It's my secret!' he retorted, like a cunning craftsman, keeping his recipe to himself. When portraying what he was most familiar with – trees – he revealed a preference for conifers, evergreens, because their leaves made no mess and therefore meant less work for the road sweepers of the Bois de Boulogne – he used a pointillist technique, showering the leaves with dots of colour.

When everything seemed to him to be complete, the practically illiterate painter would sign his works. But there are often two signatures. Did he sign the structure of the drawing first, and then sign the completed picture once the colouring was done? As we know he worked in two stages, we assume he did. There also remains the question of why he was so fond of drawing churches? The simple answer undoubtedly pivots on the fact that he had felt content only once in his life, when at the age of fifteen he was cared for by nuns. Since that time, he set great store in these religious edifices which enabled him to get his bearings, and were the only anchor point in his existence.

Marcel Storr's enigmatic works have never been exhibited, yet they reveal all the characteristics of pure 'art brut': their author appears semi-autistic, he shows a lack of definite artistic roots but evidence of spontaneous inspiration linked to a mania for precision, and a compulsive and somewhat unchanging theme. Though he worked 'underground', he was nevertheless highly conscious that his work was unique. The oeuvre derives from a paranoid vision of reality and a sort of dissidence at the core of the mind which yields a theory – no doubt delirious but somewhat consistent – about the world at large. Every element of his work, the scarcity of means, the simple details of his apparently complex constructions, the compulsive, patient, care, the recurrent motifs, the identical step-by-step development of the general sketch, and the fundamentally clumsy technique, were all atoned for by the artist's force of expression and his creative schemes for substitutes. Everything contributed to a meaningful lure so akin to outsider pictures whose style we can immediately recognise.

Marcel Storr's colleagues mocked him and called him a 'naive' chap. But as with Ferdinand Cheval or Raymond Isidore, a man who creates temples, cathedrals and whole cities, in the stifling silence of solitude, was making up for his wretched destiny with a symbolic attempt at creating a parallel world, a different and a better world, a world of which he was the creator. That is the world that appears to us today in the strange beauty of a few coloured plates: the underdog's ultimate revenge. 🐾

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