Bahman Mohassess

Human Assemblage



Edited by Anke Kempkes

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CANTZ

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Foreword

Leyla and Rooja Mohassessy
The Estate of Bahman Mohassess

Four years into the Iran-Iraq War (1980–88), when nightly air-raid sirens, bombings, and power outages had become routine, Mohassess, then living in permanent exile in Rome, invited us to join him there. It was precisely that—an invitation. We were under no obligation, and our deaf-mute parents, who looked to Bahman Mohassess as the head of the family, neither discouraged nor encouraged us. We will not enter here into the details of our displacement or the years we spent under the guardianship of Mohassess.

In extending his invitation, Mohassess often reiterated that his offer was not made simply because we were family. It extended, he said, to any child growing up under the oppressive Islamic regime. The fact that we were his brother's children was incidental. He maintained this free and unconventional relationship with us throughout his life, one grounded in generosity and mutual respect.

The portrait often painted of Mohassess, as a recluse in exile, is not entirely accurate. He was discerning about the company he kept, but he was, in fact, deeply sociable. He invariably chose the most visible table in a restaurant and feasted as much on conversation as on good food and the flair of a place. Indeed, he would often refuse to return if the server was not, in his words, "*sympatico*."

He cultivated relationships of every kind—with lifelong friends, casual acquaintances, the fruit seller at Campo de' Fiori, the neighborhood barista, his banker, his doctor, and even the beggar he affectionately called "his florist," who sold wilted roses stolen from gravesites. Everyone looked forward to seeing "*il Professore,*" whose generosity of spirit, wit, and infectious joie de vivre made him unforgettable. He delighted in spirited repartee and a full-bellied laugh. He was an indefatigable letter writer, postcard sender, regular phone caller (often on a weekly schedule), and thoughtful giver of gifts.

Mohassess was a self-made man—a magnanimous and successful artist who shared of himself and his wealth freely with family, lovers, and friends. He cared for those closest to him without hesitation, supporting his two brothers throughout their lives and returning to Iran to tend to his brother Fereydoon during his final battle with cancer. Even in his own years of financial hardship, after the comforts he had once enjoyed were no longer within reach, he continued to send us small tokens of his love—a Pink Panther-themed jar of Nutella, a bag of lentils—gestures whose value far exceeded their cost. The greatest gift he gave us, however, was his expansive and deeply inclusive worldview. He refused labels and resisted every form of tribal thinking. A true citizen of the world, he cared as deeply about local injustices as global ones because, to Mohassess, whatever entered his field of vision became personal. Above all, he was a humanist.

An astute observer and devoted viewer of nature documentaries, he became increasingly conscious of the climate crisis. Late in life, he could no longer bear to eat meat. He lived conscientiously. For so large a personality, his carbon footprint grew ever smaller. During his final decade, we often found him in tears while reading Marguerite Yourcenar or Italo Calvino, reciting from memory a couplet by Ferdowsi or Nima Yooshij, or witnessing the smallest act of cruelty on television. His empathy invariably flowed toward those on the margins of society.

As Italy grew increasingly conservative and intolerant, Mohassess was deeply disturbed by the treatment of immigrants, particularly Senegalese and Ghanaian communities. During several phone conversations, he confessed that he was contemplating moving somewhere in Africa. The truth was that he had become ashamed of the country Italy had become.

It has been the greatest privilege of our lives to have grown up under such an uncompromising ethical model, to have shared in Mohassess's joie de vivre, and to have been privy to the world-making of a fearless and free-thinking master artist.

The derailment of a brilliant world-class artistic career by political upheaval and narrow-minded attitudes toward sexuality has been a sorrow the Mohassess family has carried for decades. It is in the spirit of freedom of expression and a profound love of life in all its forms—the beautiful and the grotesque, the personal and the public—that the Mohassess family and Estate offer these deeply intimate works.

For the past sixteen years, the family has taken the utmost care to prevent these assemblages from being dispersed into private collections. A few have entered prestigious museum collections, but the overwhelming majority have remained with the family and have never before been exhibited publicly. Most were created during the last two years of Mohassess's life, when he was contending simultaneously with illness and financial hardship.

During one of our final phone conversations, he marveled that although his hands trembled constantly, they steadied the moment he picked up a pair of scissors. These works testify to an artistic spirit undeterred by the vicissitudes of fate and undefeated by bigotry. May they inspire this generation of artists and those yet to come.

The Mohassess family and Estate have been fortunate to receive the support of many individuals in bringing this project to fruition. This book would not have been possible without the tireless dedication of Salman Matinfar and his team at Ab-Anbar, including Azadeh Zaferani, Zeynep Koksal, Sophia Setareh Meyer, and Frederick Gerard-Sharp. Gratitude in particular to Zeynep Koksal and Jane McCabe, whose meticulous work as archivist and photographer often carried them late into the night. Salman's profound admiration for Mohassess has been the guiding force behind this undertaking.

Our heartfelt thanks also go to Anke Kempkes, who fell in love with these works at first sight and so thoughtfully curated this project. We are grateful to Clare Davies, Reza Mirzaei, and Maryam Athari for their scholarly contributions to the volume. We also thank Hatje Cantz and Thomas Spallek for shepherding this publication with such care and enthusiasm.

Special thanks go to Ashkan Baghestani for his unwavering support of the Estate over many years, and to HAR Collection for their generous financial assistance.

Throughout this process, we have felt Mohassess's presence as a favorable wind carrying this project home to you, his audience.

This book is dedicated to Mohassess and his loved ones, living and deceased: Banou Shokhat-al-Molouk, Hadj Hossein Khan Rassadi, Mirza Jafar Gholi Khan Mohassess, Banou Mellat-al-Zaman, Fereydoon and Siavash Mohassessy, and Nezhat Mohassessy.

Entering the Labyrinth
The Assemblages of Bahman Mohassess

Salman Matinfar

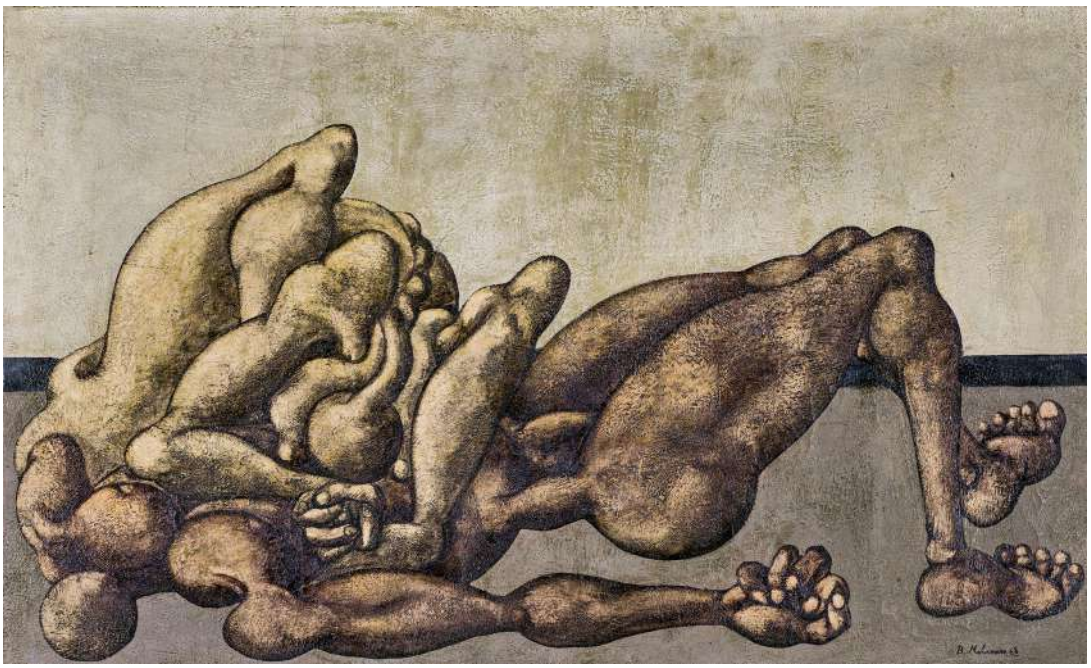


Fig. 1 Bahman Mohassess, *Requiem Omnibus*, 1968, Oil on canvas, 100 × 150 cm.
Private collection



Fig. 2 Bahman Mohassess, *The Execution*, 1979, Oil on canvas, 100 × 150 cm

I cannot remember my first encounter with Bahman Mohassess. It feels as though his work has always existed in my subconscious. Certain figures become so deeply woven into the way one sees and thinks that they no longer appear as discoveries. They feel more like presences that have always been there.

Much of my adulthood was shaped by figures such as Bijan Jalali,[1] Mohsen Vaziri-Moghaddam,[2] and Yarali Pourmoghadam.[3] They belonged to the tangible world. One could sit with them, hear their voices, and speak with them. Mohassess was different. For years, no one seemed to know where he was, or even whether he was still alive. His absence became part of his mythology. People spoke of him indirectly, almost cautiously, as though referring to someone who had withdrawn not only from public life, but from visibility itself. And yet the work remained impossible to ignore.

The sculptures were monumental and severe. The paintings were filled with strange beings that, once seen, could never be forgotten. Creatures that felt both ancient and unsettlingly contemporary. Even in absence, the work imposed itself. Perhaps this was precisely why his sculpture *Fauno Musicante* (Faun Musician, 1973) was removed after the 1979 Revolution from its once prominent place in front of Tehran's City Theater, one of the city's central cultural landmarks. Its arms and legs were cut off before it was abandoned in the basement of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art. Even the sculpture itself seemed destined to undergo the same dismemberment that haunted so many of the bodies in Mohassess's work.

I only saw him once. From a distance, in a gallery in Tehran. A black overcoat. Elegantly dressed. That was all. The image remained fixed in my mind with the strange clarity of something both ordinary and unreal. Years later, after the release of the documentary film *Fifi Howls from Happiness* in 2013,[4] Mohassess became visible to a wider public. But by then, for many of us, he already belonged to another category entirely. Less a public figure, more a lingering presence.

In 2015, when we decided to organize an exhibition of Mohassess's works in Tehran, the process itself already felt inseparable from the phenomenon of "absence."[5] So much of Mohassess existed in fragments. Works dispersed across private homes and collections. Stories repeated through memory. Images encountered through reproductions, archives, and recollections. What we were trying to construct was not simply an exhibition, but a figure assembled from remnants.

Looking back now, it feels difficult not to see that process itself as a kind of assemblage. Piece by piece, through scattered traces and surviving works, an image of Mohassess slowly began to emerge. Incomplete, fractured, but unmistakably present. Perhaps this was always the condition of encountering him.

When I traveled to Northern California to visit Rooja, Mohassess's niece, I did not yet fully understand the extent of what I was about to encounter.[6] Her home, deep in the forest, felt removed from ordinary geography. Over the days I spent there, the distance between California and memory began to collapse. The silence, the dampness of the trees, and the meals Rooja cooked each evening produced the feeling of inhabiting another geography altogether. Rooja often spoke of Mohassess's love of food; how he cared deeply about eating well and could refuse a meal if it wasn't to his liking. Beneath the severity of his work and mythology, one sensed a person intensely attentive to pleasure, ritual, taste, and precision. The food, the conversations, the forest, and the boxes of works scattered throughout the rooms while we were archiving all merged into a single atmosphere. At times it no longer felt as though I was in Northern California, but somewhere closer to the forests of Gilan, where Mohassess was brought up. As if he were there too. Not literally, of course, but as a lingering presence moving quietly among the works, the conversations, and the memories.

The first works I saw were the assemblages. At first, they unsettled me through their scale. Many were no larger than a sheet of paper. After the monumental force of the sculptures and paintings, their intimacy came almost as a shock. But very quickly the scale became irrelevant. The density of the works overwhelmed their size. One image led to another, and soon it became impossible to look at them individually. It felt less like viewing a series of works than like entering a labyrinth.

The longer I looked, the more difficult it became to see these works as marginal or secondary. They felt central. Condensed. As though something essential in Mohassess's vision had found a different and perhaps more direct form here. What appears in this book is only part of a much larger body of work, much of it previously unseen.

Only later did I begin opening boxes of archival material. Documents, slides, personal photographs, fragments of a dispersed life. Among them was a photograph of Mohammad Mosaddegh.[7] But that photograph was not the only image that stayed with me. Among the negatives and scattered photographs were paintings that revealed, each in different ways, Mohassess's relationship to violence, power, and freedom. From the portrayal of birds from poems by Nima Yooshij[8] to the depiction of the death of Martin Luther King in his *Requiem Omnibus* (1968), there is a passion for peace beyond any defined border—from Iran to Palestine, Iraq to Vietnam, or the Civil Rights Movement in the US **(fig. 1)**.

1 Bijan Jalali (1927–2000) was a modern Persian poet. Born in Tehran, he authored several notable works, including *The Color of Water*, *Days*, *Dailies*, *Our Heart and the World*, *Play of Light*, and *The Water and the Sun*.

2 Mohsen Vaziri-Moghaddam (1924–2018) was an Iranian-born painter, sculptor, and educator known as the "pioneer of modern Iranian abstraction" for his Abstract Expressionist works, including innovative sand paintings, with his pieces held in collections such as the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York.

3 Yarali Pourmoghadam (1950–2023) was a Tehran-based playwright, writer, and owner of the famous Shouka Café, a favorite gathering place for Iranian artists and intellectuals.

4 Directed by Iranian filmmaker Mitra Farahani.

5 *Bahman Mohassess in 60 Pieces of a Lost Body*, Ab-Anbar Gallery and Aria Gallery, Tehran, Iran, May 21–June 12, 2015.

6 Rooja Mohassessy and Leyla Mohassessy Azmoun are the nieces of Bahman Mohassess and serve as the directors of the Bahman Mohassess Estate.

7 Mohammad Mosaddegh was the democratically elected prime minister of Iran from 1951 to 1953 who was widely celebrated for nationalizing the country's British-controlled oil industry, before being overthrown in a coup orchestrated by the US and UK.

8 Nima Yooshij was a contemporary Iranian poet who pioneered *"She'r-e Now"* (New Poetry), fundamentally breaking free from the constraints of classical Persian rhyme and rhythm to become widely recognized as the father of modern Persian poetry.

One negative showed a reclining, perhaps dead, figure, while another armed figure stood above it **(fig. 2)**. The image immediately recalled a photograph by Abbas Attar[9] taken in the aftermath of the revolution, showing the body of Amir-Abbas Hoveyda[10] in a morgue surrounded by armed young men. The resemblance was difficult to ignore. Another image depicted a boy urinating on the flags of America, Europe, and the United Nations. In yet another, a white dove and a bouquet of lilies appeared beside graffiti reading "Long Live Palestine" **(fig. 3)**.

Together with his admiration for Mohammad Mosaddegh and Nima Yooshij, these images suggested a more complex portrait of Mohassess **(fig. 4)**. Not an artist tied to a party or rigid ideology, but a profoundly independent mind committed above all to intellectual freedom and resistant to violence. Looking back, it feels impossible not to connect these images to an early drawing Mohassess made shortly after the 1953 Iranian coup d'état. The drawing, recalling Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*, marks a shift from formal experimentation toward confrontation with historical rupture **(fig. 5)**.



Fig. 3 Archival photograph of Bahman Mohassess, *Viva La Palestine*, late 1970s, Oil on canvas, dimensions unknown. Photographer unknown

The assemblages continue this way of seeing. They are not simply compositions, but forms of visual historiography. Political events, war, ecological anxieties, media imagery, fashion photography, architecture, and anonymous bodies all enter the works as fragments. Mohassess insisted on calling these works "assemblages" rather than collages, and the distinction matters. Collage still suggests an image assembled on a flat surface. Assemblage insists on material presence, on fragments that resist fully dissolving into a unified image. Even within a two-dimensional format, these works possess an almost sculptural quality. Mohassess does not simply compose images. He constructs objects. Bodies seem to press against the surface. Fragments acquire weight.

At the same time, many of these figures exist within spaces drawn from interior design publications and worlds of luxury and refinement. Into these polished environments, Mohassess inserts beings that clearly do not belong. Hybrid anatomies, grotesque creatures, bodies suspended between elegance and decay. The tension this creates feels deeply theatrical.

Mohassess was not only a painter and sculptor. He was also a translator, theater director, and stage and costume designer. He translated several major works of modern European literature into Persian, works that today seem impossible to separate from the world of his own images. In Italo Calvino's novel *Il visconte dimezzato* (The Cloven Viscount)[11] we encounter a divided body and a fragmented self strangely close to Mohassess's own dismembered creatures. In Luigi Pirandello's *Enrico IV* (Henry IV) the boundaries between madness, performance, and identity begin to collapse. Eugène Ionesco's *Les Chaises* (The Chairs)[12] constructs a world in which absence acquires a heavier presence than the figures themselves. In Jean Genet's *Les Bonnes*

9 Abbas Attar, known mononymously as Abbas, was an acclaimed Iranian-born photojournalist and a full member of Magnum Photos, who was globally renowned for his black-and-white coverage of political conflicts and his extensive, sustained essays chronicling the role of religion in society.

10 Amir-Abbas Hoveyda was the prime minister of Iran from 1965 to 1977 under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. He was later executed by the Islamic Republic in 1979 after being convicted of "spreading corruption on earth."

11 *Il visconte dimezzato* is a 1952 fantasy novel by Italo Calvino about a nobleman split into halves by a cannonball, one evil and one good, who then pursue rival adventures and romances before being reunited to become whole again.

12 *Les Chaises* is a 1952 absurdist "tragic farce" by Eugène Ionesco in which an elderly couple frantically arranges chairs for a succession of invisible guests who arrive to hear the Old Man's final message to humanity, only for the message to be delivered by an orator who turns out to be deaf and mute.



Fig. 4 Archival photograph of Mohammad Mosaddegh, former prime minister of Iran, undated. Photograph by author

(The Maids) one finds role-playing, violence, and identities in constant transformation. And throughout his works, the body, violence, and moral collapse remain central obsessions.

All of these themes reappear, in different forms, throughout Mohassess's work. For him, translation was never merely the transfer of language. It was also a process of selection, displacement, and rearrangement. Much like the assemblages, where fragments are removed from one world and repositioned within another, the translated texts appear chosen as extensions of his own sensibility. Perhaps the assemblages resemble a theatrical stage more than anything else. A space where the entire world of Mohassess, with all its bodies, texts, voices, and images, briefly appears at once. A place where the painter, sculptor, translator, man of theater, and intellectual all collapse into one another. Perhaps this is why encountering these works still feels like entering a labyrinth. Not because they conceal a final meaning waiting to be uncovered, but because they resist resolution altogether.

This book offers only a glimpse into a lesser-known dimension of Mohassess's oeuvre. It is not intended as a comprehensive catalogue raisonné, but rather as a contribution to a much broader field of inquiry. The trajectory of this project has been, for me, a solitary pleasure; however, rendering its discoveries accessible to a wider audience has been a decidedly collective endeavor.

I approached Anke Kempkes in light of her curatorial and scholarly expertise in transnational and queer modernism to contribute to the book reading Mohassess's work through the lens of contemporary queer discourse. As our conversations deepened, the Estate and I invited her to serve as the editor of this monograph.

Anke proposed the book's title *Bahman Mohassess: Human Assemblage* to connect the prominence of assemblage in the artist's later work with the existentialist dimensions of his postwar practice and his deeply felt humanist and political concerns:

> Just as Mohassess described his own creations, in their late-modern condition of alienation, as 'corporeal assemblages,' the notion of the *human assemblage* also evokes the artist's own lifelong condition of exile. Simultaneously shaped by and estranged from the cultural and political landscapes of both his homeland and his adopted surroundings, Mohassess emerges as a figure suspended between belonging and displacement—a voluntary as well as enforced cultural nomad, as much a flâneur as an exile.[13]

We approached Reza Mirzaei, Clare Davies, and Maryam Athari, leading international scholars and curators who explore how Mohassess negotiated political dissent, modernism, posthumanism, and ecological crisis across postwar Iran, Central Europe, and Rome. These thought-provoking essays position Mohassess's work within transnational histories of modernism while demonstrating its continued resonance and relevance within contemporary artistic practice and critical debate.

At the center of the publication, we present an extensive plates section of more than 250 assemblages selected from a substantially larger body of work. As Mohassess meticulously dated every sheet with the exact day, month, and year of its creation, we present his assemblages in chronological order, allowing them to unfold like the pages of a personal diary. His motifs evolve through the contingencies of observation, the urgency of daily emotional response and reflection, and are set against the backdrop of contemporary events:

13 Anke Kempkes in conversation with Salman Matinfar, June 2026.

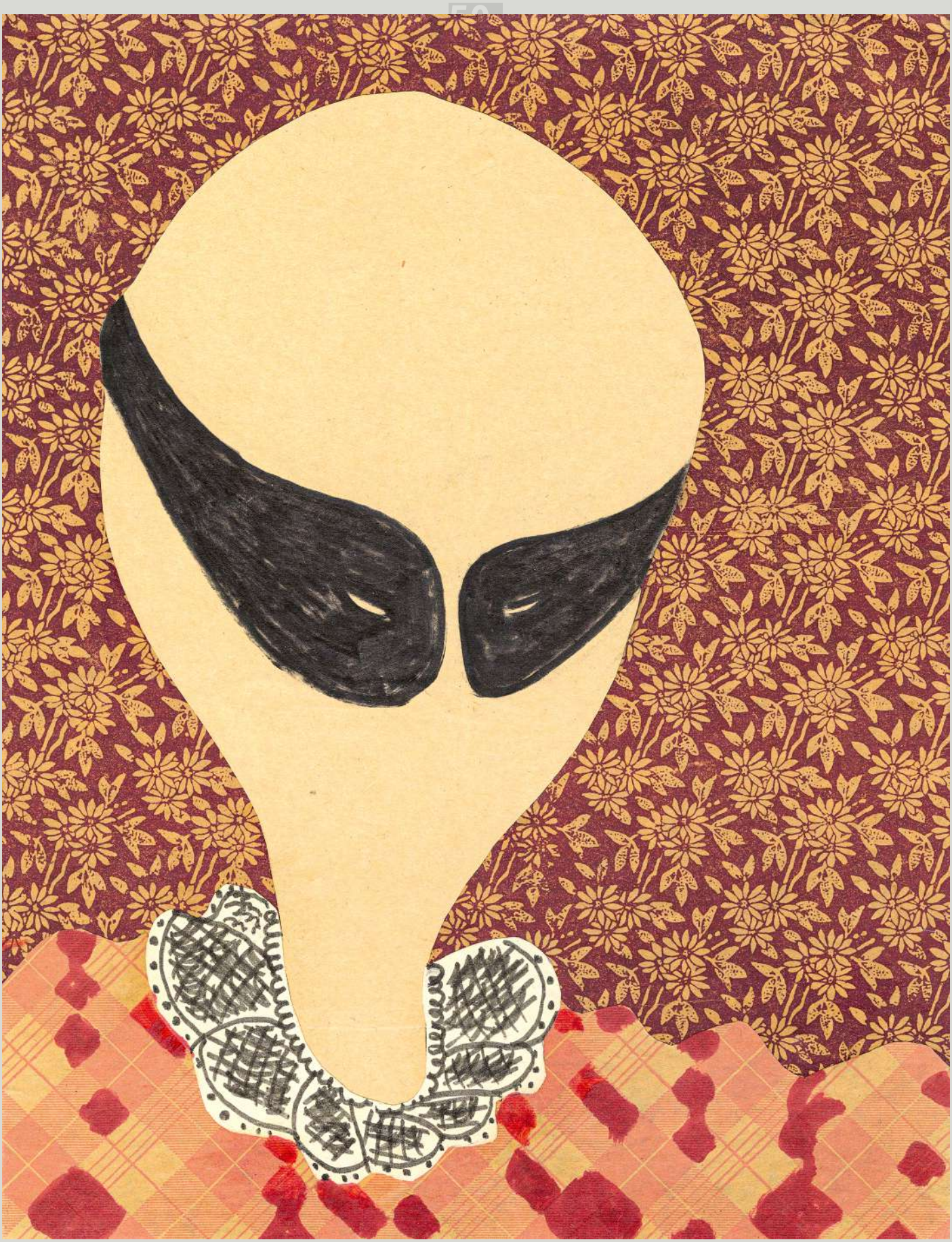


Fig. 5 Bahman Mohassess, *Untitled*, 1953, Pencil on paper, 20 × 20 cm

satirical and grotesque figures; homoerotic tableaux and subcultural imagery; exploited and displaced bodies in war-torn landscapes and ominous warriors; hybrid creatures and fossils; haunted interiors; ecological catastrophe and endangered animals; nocturnal landscapes and polymorphous still lifes. Many figures and creatures—fishes and birds in particular—appear as alter egos or avatars of the artist himself. The assemblage we chose for the book's cover, *06-IX-08* (2008), depicting a stranded fish fashioned from a worn pale pink Louis Vuitton leather pouch, perfectly encapsulates Mohassess's singular artistic universe. At once absurd, melancholic, and politically charged, it condenses many of the themes that run throughout his late work.

In closing, I must acknowledge that this publication would not have materialized without the trust and generosity of Rooja Mohassessy and Leyla Mohassessy, nor without the rigor, enthusiasm, and unwavering commitment of Anke Kempkes. To all three, I offer my deepest gratitude.

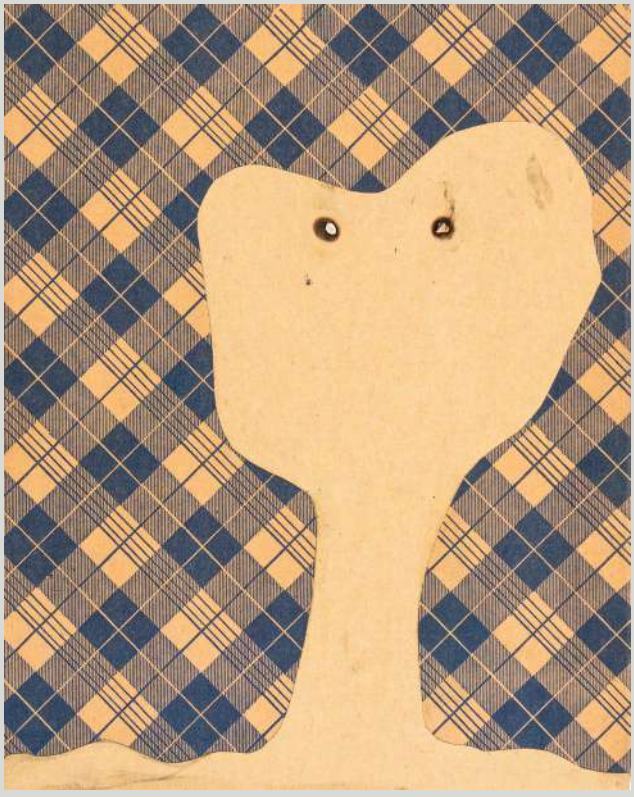
Bahman Mohassess: Assemblages 1964–2010



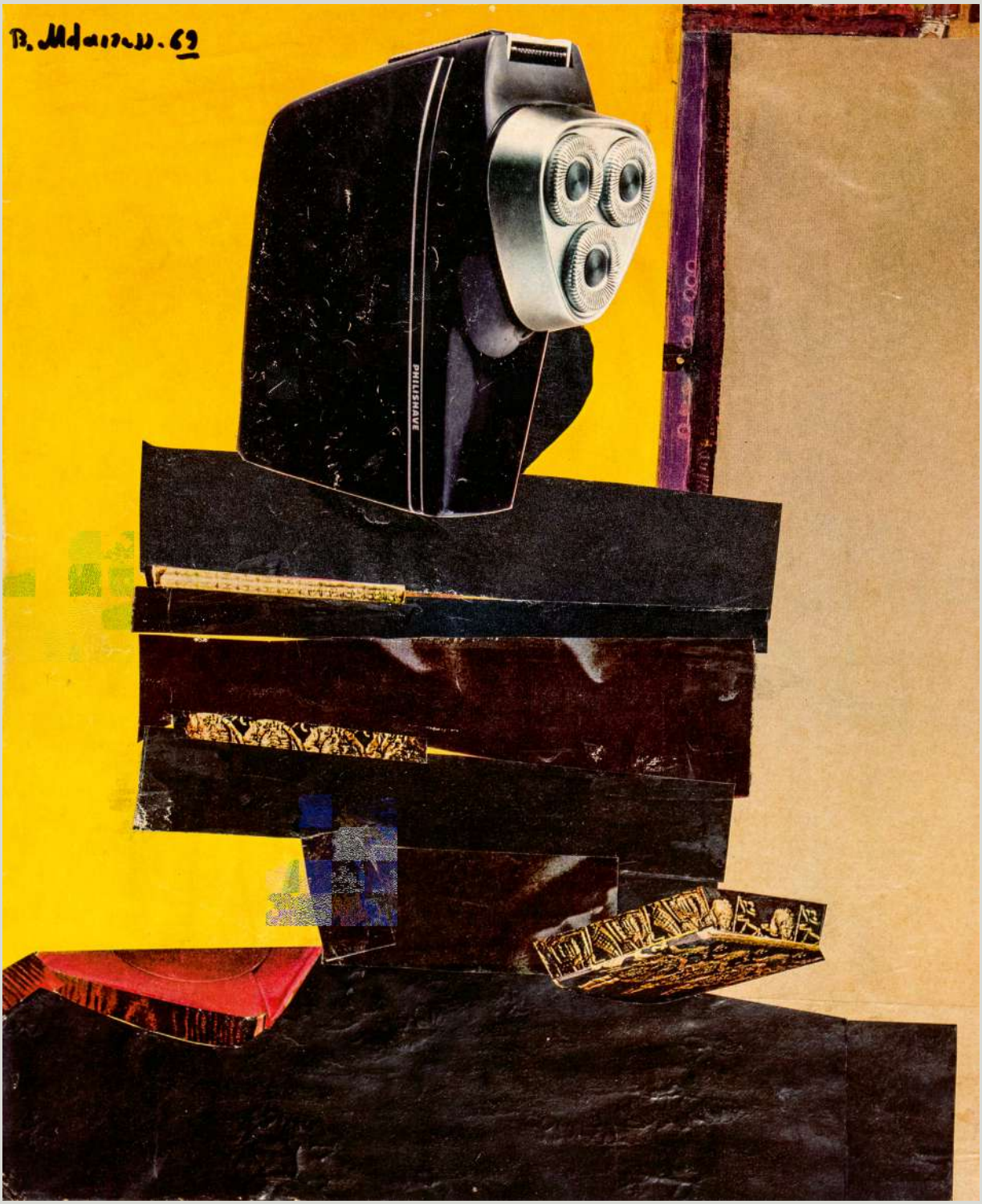
Arlecchino, 1964
Assemblage and marker pen on cardboard, 24 × 19 cm



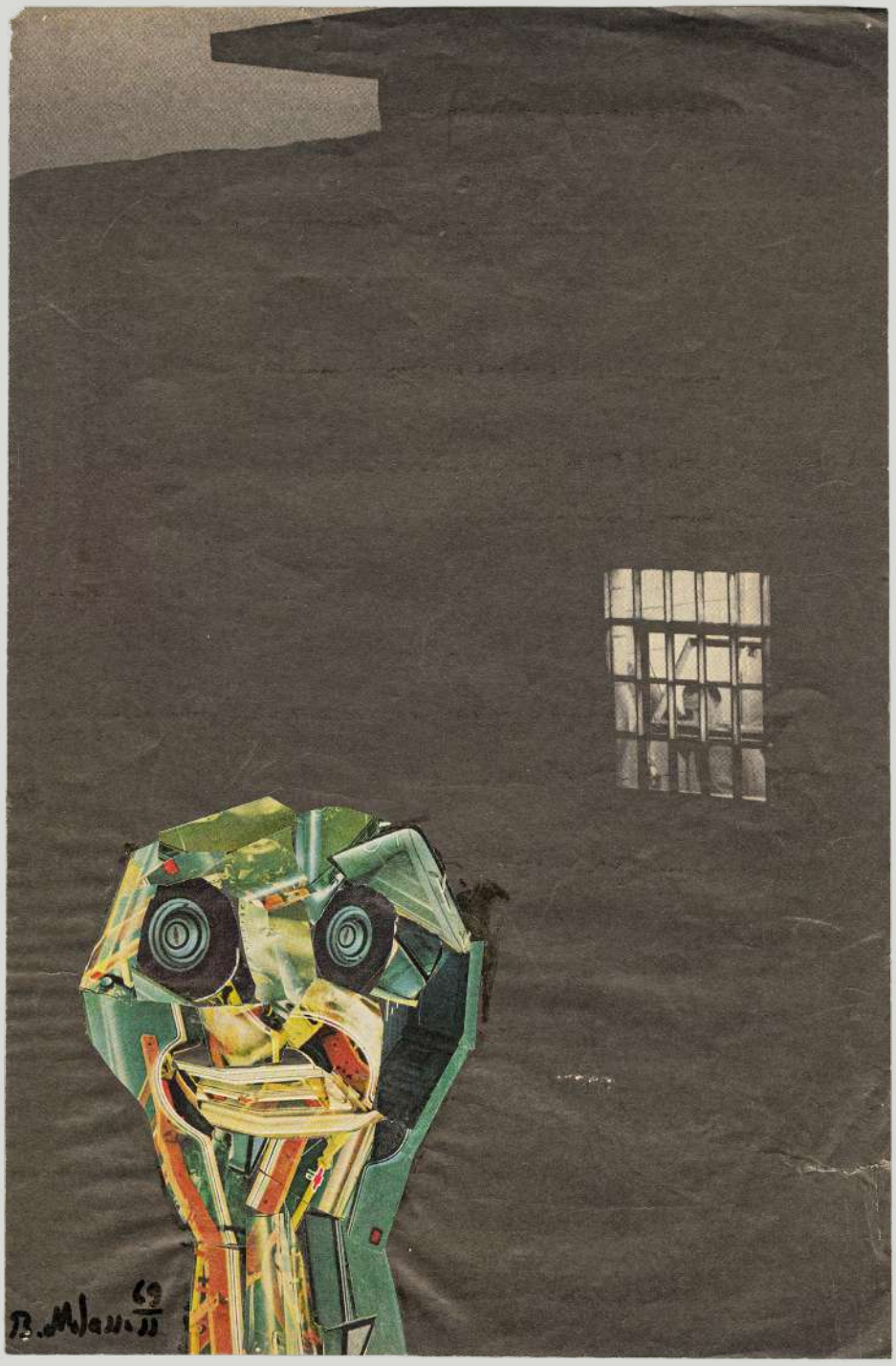
Untitled, ca. 1960
Assemblage and marker pen on paper, 20 × 15 cm



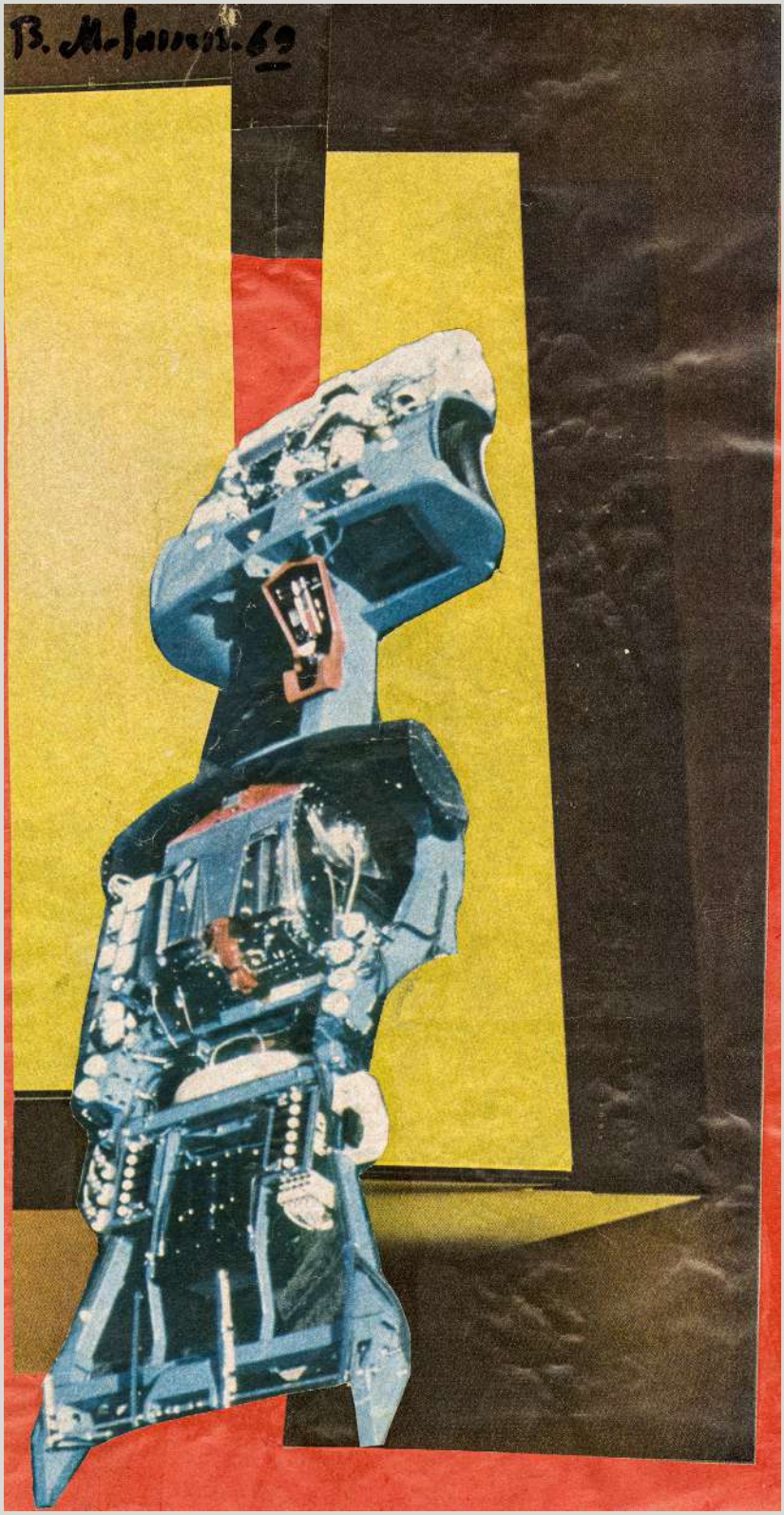
Untitled, ca. 1960
Assemblage on card, 19 × 15.5 cm



Caterina dei Medici, 1969
Assemblage on paper, 32 × 26.5 cm



Untitled, 1969
Assemblage on paper, 29 × 19.3 cm



Untitled, 1969
Assemblage on paper, 25.5 × 12.8 cm



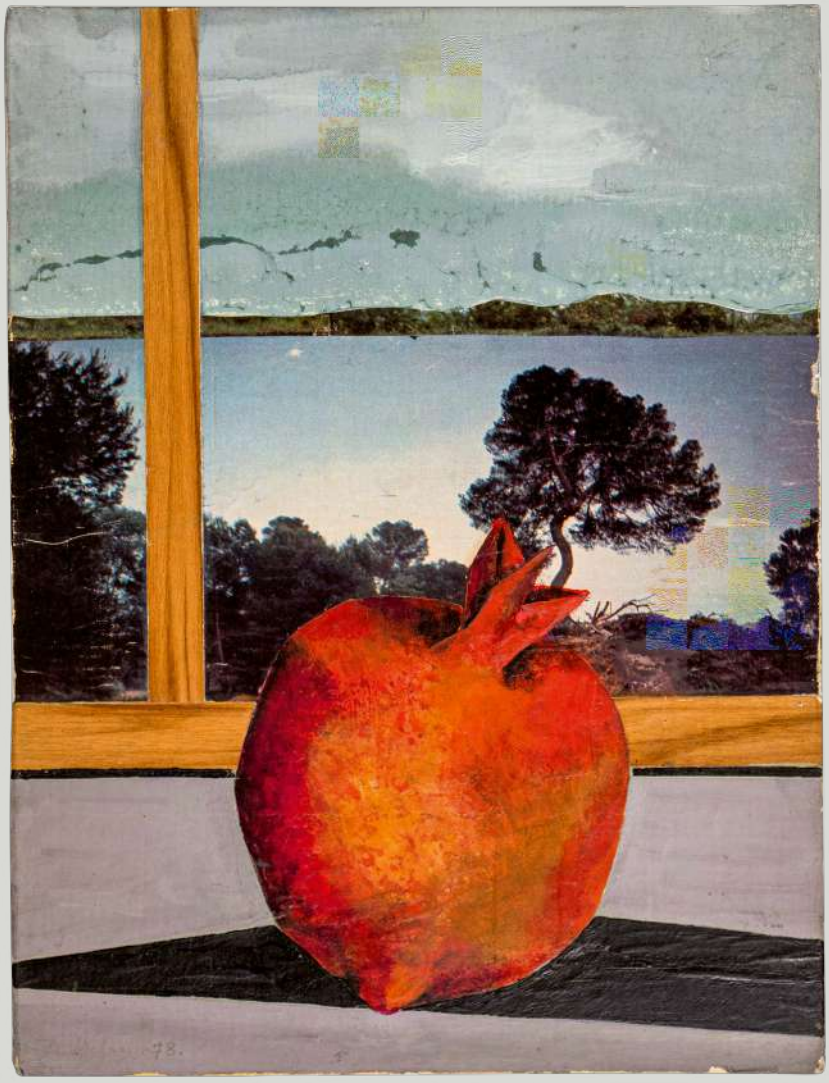
Untitled, 1970
Assemblage on paper, 24.5 × 21 cm


Rothmans
KING SIZE

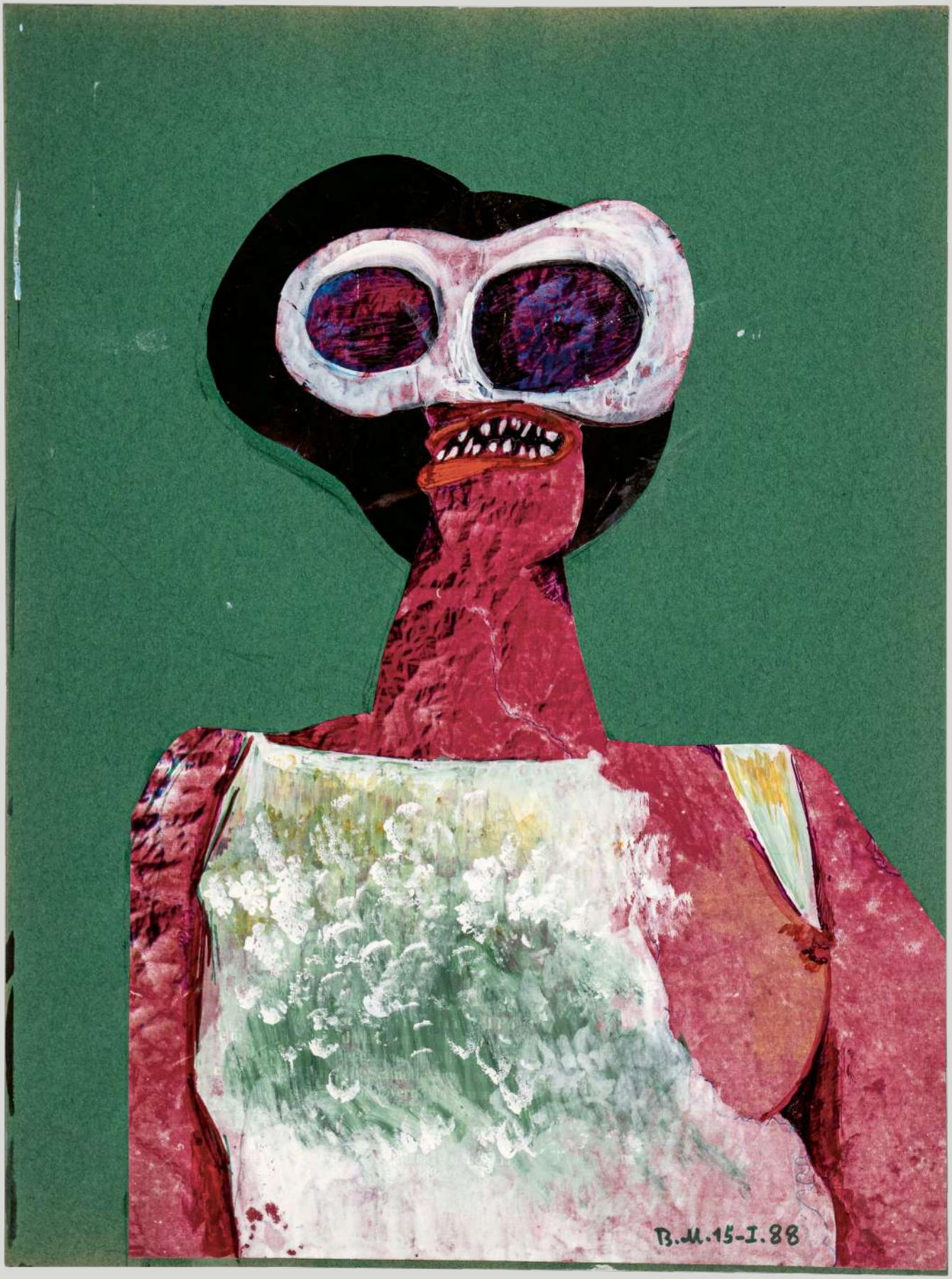


Humanitarian Aid, 1970
Assemblage on paper, 35 × 50 cm

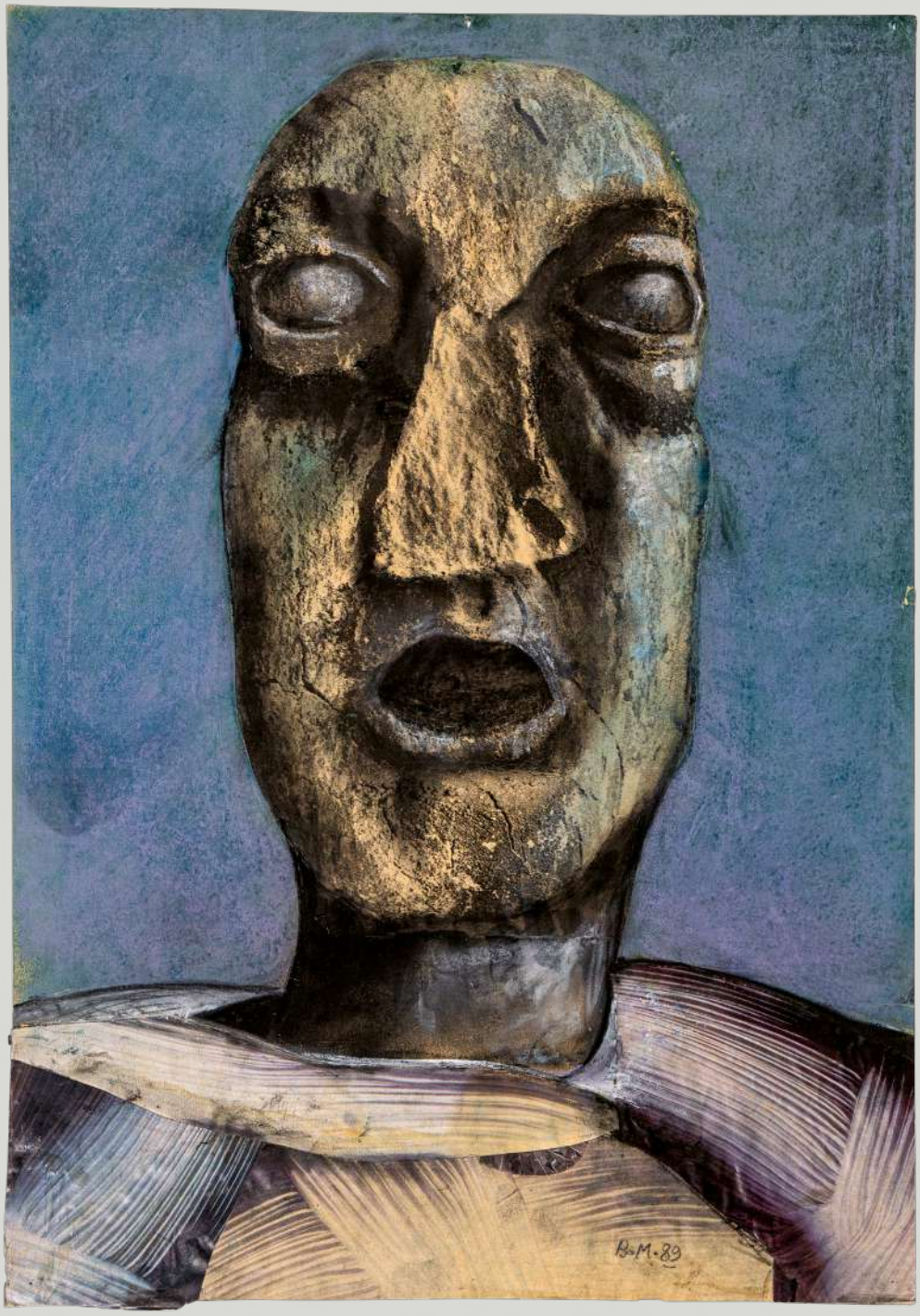
Untitled, 1971
Assemblage on paper, 37 × 26.5 cm



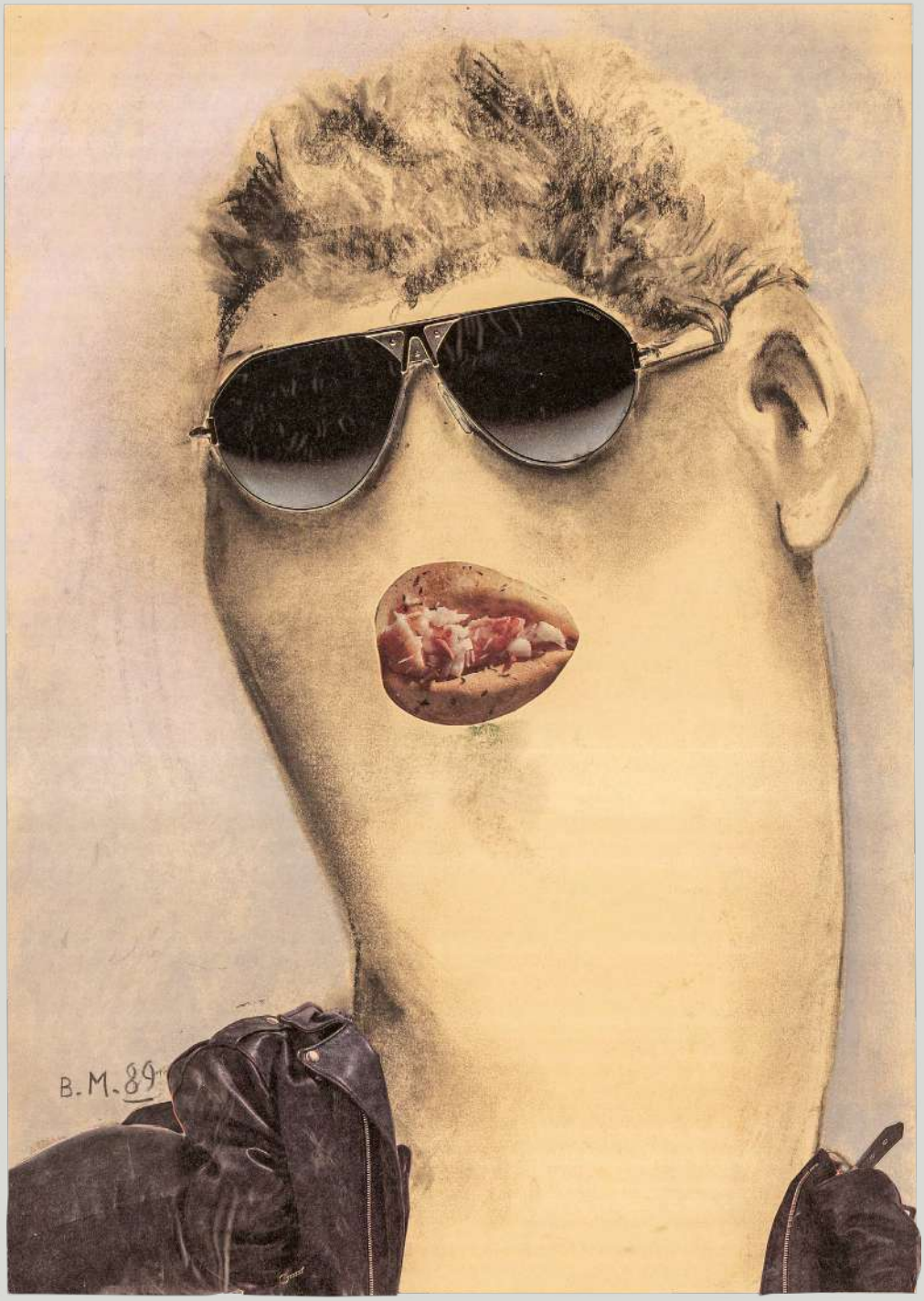
Untitled, 1978
Assemblage and acrylic paint on canvas board, 40 × 30 cm



Manager, 1988
Assemblage and gouache on board, 32 × 24 cm



Tiresias, 1989
Assemblage, acrylic paint, and marker pen on paper, 49 × 34.5 cm



Bullo, 1989
Assemblage on paper, 48.8 × 34.5 cm.
Collection of Centre Pompidou, Paris