

GREY ART NYU GALLERY

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GERMAN JEWISH ARTIST REDISCOVERED AFTER WARTIME PERSECUTION

Fritz Ascher: Expressionist

On view at New York University's Grey Art Gallery
January 9–April 6, 2019



Fritz Ascher
Female Nude, 1916
White gouache over graphite,
watercolor, and black ink on paper
17 3/8 x 12 1/4 in.
Private collection
Photo: Malcolm Varon. © Bianca
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Fritz Ascher: Expressionist is the first-ever retrospective of an overlooked but significant German artist. Characterized by the Nazis as “degenerate” (along with other artists who were banned and persecuted), Fritz Ascher (1893–1970) survived two world wars, and then remained in Berlin where he lived and worked. In addition to painting and drawing, he turned to writing poetry later in life. Organized by the Fritz Ascher Society for Persecuted, Ostracized and Banned Art, Inc., the exhibition comprises some 75 paintings and works on paper, ranging from early academic studies and figural compositions to the artist’s late colorful, mystical landscapes devoid of human presence. ***Fritz Ascher: Expressionist* will be on view at New York University’s Grey Art Gallery from January 9 through April 6, 2019.**

Ascher developed his bold and colorful Expressionist style early in the 20th century. Taken under the wing of the prominent painter Max Liebermann, Ascher studied at the Königsberg Art Academy, and then in Berlin with the artist Lovis Corinth. In 1914 he travelled to Oslo, where he met Edvard Munch. During a prolonged stay in Munich, he associated with the artists who contributed to *Simplicissimus* magazine, including George Grosz and Käthe Kollwitz. Back in Berlin, he fell in with the artists of Die Brücke. Rachel Stern, curator of the show and director of the Fritz Ascher Society, observes: “Ascher belongs to a large group of prolific artists who were silenced by the Nazi terror regime, unable to work, exhibit, or sell their art. This exhibition explores the situation of a German Jewish artist working in the face of political oppression.” Lynn Gumpert, the Grey’s director, adds: “*Fritz Ascher: Expressionist* fits our mission to bring to light artists whose works have not received the exposure they deserve. By situating Ascher’s art within historical, social, and cultural contexts, we can examine how one artist responded to conditions of political tyranny and extreme duress, a situation that, alas, is all too relevant today.”

Exhibition

Fritz Ascher belongs to Germany's "Lost Generation"—artists whose careers were interrupted or destroyed by the Nazi regime, and whose work has largely been underrecognized. Born in Berlin in 1893, to assimilated Jewish parents, Ascher showed interest in art at a young age and enjoyed early success. Supported by Liebermann, Ascher entered the Königsberg Art Academy in 1909, at the age of 16. By 1913 Ascher was back in Berlin, where he mingled with artists such as Ludwig Meidner, Emil Nolde, and Jakob Steinhardt, along with Max Beckmann, while developing his own Expressionist pictorial language. The exhibition, which is installed chronologically, begins with some of Ascher's black-and-white drawings from this early period, which demonstrate his virtuosic approach. These sketches often feature a dominant, linear central human figure in the foreground while the background dissolves into abstraction. After Ascher traveled to Norway with his friend and fellow painter Franz Domscheit and met Munch, he set off for a prolonged stay in Bavaria where he met the contributors to the weekly magazine *Simplicissimus*, who included George Grosz, Käthe Kollwitz, Alfred Kubin, and Gustav Meyrink. Back in Berlin, Ascher befriended members of the Die Brücke (The Bridge) artists' group.

With the onset of World War I, Expressionist artists embraced religious themes, and Ascher followed suit. Many of his works from this time convey an emphatic religiosity along with an interest in old sagas and myths. Ascher sketched many scenes of Christ's passion as well as contemporary street fights. Another favorite motif was the golem, a creature from Jewish folklore that is magically animated from clay or mud. Usually brought to life by a rabbi who intends to control the anthropomorphized being, the golem could be used to protect Jews from persecution—or it could fly out of kilter, with tragic consequences. Ascher also frequently depicted Bajazzo (Clown), first inspired by the jealous title character in the opera *Pagliacci* by composer Ruggero Leoncavallo—while his later clowns are increasingly anxious, shown in isolation from the society around them. Into the 1920s, Ascher painted nightmarish visions of damnation, infernal torture, and writhing bodies, using jarring colors to render such well-known religious subjects as the Temptation of St. Anthony.

In 1933, Hitler assumed power. Though Ascher had been baptized as a Protestant, the Nazi regime classified him as a Jewish modern painter with a liberal political stance. Thus targeted as a dissident, he could no longer produce, exhibit, or sell his art. Soon he was forced into hiding, constantly moving from house to house. In November 1938, during "Kristallnacht" (Night of Broken Glass), Ascher was one of nearly 3,000 Jewish men who were arrested and deported to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp. After internment there and incarceration in Potsdam prison, Ascher lived "free" for several years, but was required to report every week to both the local police station and the Gestapo. In 1942, he was warned about the mass deportations of Berlin Jews and went into hiding in the Grunewald neighborhood. Unable to paint or draw, he turned to writing poetry. Until war's end in 1945, he composed numerous poems, many of which are steeped in visions of love and divinity, evoking nature as a place of refuge and a spiritual home. Many of Ascher's artworks, which he left with friends during the war, were destroyed in Allied bombings.

After Hitler's defeat, Ascher continued to live in Berlin with his mother's friend Martha Grassmann, across the street from his former hiding place. He



Fritz Ascher
Untergehende Sonne (Sunset), c. 1960
Oil on canvas, 49 1/4 x 50 in.
Private collection
Photo: Malcolm Varon. © Bianca Stock

immediately returned to making visual art, while remaining largely withdrawn from society. Initially, he repainted some of his existing works with colorful dots and streaks in an expressive version of pointillism. Turning away from his figurative compositions of the Weimar era, he then painted vibrant and richly textured landscapes inspired by the nearby forest of Grunewald. His bold forest scenes depict weathered oak and pine trees as symbols of resilience and hope. Other works from this period represent meadows, sunrises, and sunsets. His expressionist impulse reappeared in bright colors and intense brushstrokes. Close viewing reveals lush concentrations of color juxtaposed with raw canvas and unbridled splashes of paint. Thick impastoed areas are juxtaposed with thin liquid washes. Ascher's powerful images of sun, trees, and flowers celebrate survival and the continuity of nature.

During his lifetime, Ascher enjoyed only one large retrospective exhibition, which opened at Berlin's legendary Rudolf Springer Gallery in 1969, a few months before his death. Like most of his early works, very little exhibition documentation and other archival materials survive. Much of the biographical information presented in the exhibition and publication was gleaned from Berlin's Reparation Files at the State Office for Civic and Regulatory Affairs and the Centrum Judaicum. Nearly all the works on view are lent by private collectors in Germany, the U.S., and Canada. Thus *Fritz Ascher: Expressionist* helps fill the gaps in German art history, a task begun with the inaugural *documenta* in Kassel in 1955, which acknowledged the first generation of modern artists deemed "degenerate." Not until 1989, however, with the fall of the Berlin Wall and reunification of Germany, did heightened interest trigger more extensive research into less-well-known artists such as Ascher. NYU's Grey Art Gallery is the first American museum to exhibit his work, following highly acclaimed presentations in Germany at Felix-Nussbaum-Haus in Osnabrück (2016–17); Kunstsammlungen Chemnitz (2017); Museum Charlottenburg-Wilmersdorf at Villa Oppenheim, Berlin (2017–18); Potsdam Museum–Forum für Kunst und Geschichte (2017–18); Museum Schlösschen im Hofgarten, Wertheim (2018); and the Kallmann-Museum in Ismaning (2018).

Exhibition Catalogue

Fritz Ascher: Expressionist is accompanied by a 300-page bilingual catalogue. Published by Wienand, Cologne, in 2016, the catalogue includes essays by Rachel Stern, the founding director and CEO of the Fritz Ascher Society for Persecuted, Ostracized and Banned Art, Inc., New York; Jörn Barfod, curator at the Ostpreußisches Landesmuseum, Lüneburg; Ingrid Mössinger, former director of the Kunstsammlungen Chemnitz; Ori Z. Soltes, professor at the Center of Jewish Civilization, Georgetown University, Washington DC; and curator and art historian Eckhart Gillen. Also included are selections from Ascher's poetry.

Sponsorship

Fritz Ascher: Expressionist was organized by the Fritz Ascher Society for Persecuted, Ostracized and Banned Art, Inc. and curated by director Rachel Stern. The exhibition is part of Wunderbar Together: The Year of German-American Friendship 2018/19, an initiative of the Federal Foreign Office of Germany and the Goethe-Institut, with the support of the Federation of German Industries (BDI). Support for the catalogue was provided by Reinwald GmbH, Leipzig. The presentation at the Grey Art Gallery is made possible in part by the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of Governor Andrew M. Cuomo and the New York State Legislature; Ruth Ivor Foundation; Charina Endowment Fund; Violet Jabara Charitable Trust; Abby Weed Grey Trust; and the Grey's Director's Circle, Inter/National Council, and Friends.

About the Grey Art Gallery

The Grey Art Gallery is New York University's fine arts museum, located on historic Washington Square Park in New York City's Greenwich Village. It offers the NYU community and the

general public a dynamic roster of engaging and thought-provoking exhibitions, all of them enriched by public programs. With its emphasis on experimentation and interpretation, and its focus on studying art in its historical, cultural, and social contexts, the Grey serves as a museum-laboratory for the exploration of art's environments.

Exhibitions organized by the Grey have encompassed all the visual arts: painting, sculpture, drawing and printmaking, photography, architecture and decorative arts, video, film, and performance. In addition to producing its own exhibitions, which often travel to other venues in the United States and abroad, the Gallery hosts traveling shows that might otherwise not be seen in New York and produces scholarly publications that are distributed worldwide.

General Information

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Hours

Tuesday, Thursday, Friday: 11 am–6 pm
OPEN LATE Wednesday: 11 am–8 pm
Saturday: 11 am–5 pm
Closed Sunday, Monday, and major holidays

Admission

Suggested donation: \$5; free of charge to NYU students, faculty, and staff