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>> OTTO
MUELLER <<

Stiftung **kunst**³

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LWL

Für die Menschen.
Für Westfalen-Lippe.

OTTO MUELLER

(EN) In the publications available on Otto Mueller, there is still a tendency towards stereotypical categorisations. In the discussion of his work, there is also a tendency to attack and condemn more critical views. Viewing his works and his oeuvre is characterised by these controversial perspectives.

The exhibition 'Otto Mueller' looks at the work of the expressionist artist Otto Mueller (1874–1930) from various perspectives. Although his works are represented in international museums and private collections and exhibitions have focussed on different aspects in recent years, a critical view of his work is lacking in the context of current discourse. How can a museum do justice to his artistic uniqueness and at the same time present the current debates?

The occasion for the exhibition at the LWL-Museum für Kunst und Kultur in Münster is the 150th birthday of the artist, who was born in Silesia on 15 October 1874. The museum itself owns four paintings by Otto Mueller, two depictions of bathers, a landscape, a portrait of a Romni and a series of prints, including a sheet from the so-called 'Gypsy Portfolio'

and a hand-coloured lithograph of bathers. These works form the starting point of the exhibition, which will be more than a purely artistic retrospective.

Mueller was not a good self-publicist. There are few clues for interpreting his work. Despite his emphasis on 'My paintings replace any biography, in my works I tell my whole life and experience', the biographical character in his works is not immediately apparent and his works are often difficult to date. He is an artist who is difficult to grasp despite his seemingly easy accessibility.

Otto Mueller was inspired by other modernist artists such as Paul Cézanne, Paul Gauguin and Henri Matisse. Even greater inspiration came from his friendships with members of the 'Brücke' group of artists: Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Erich Heckel, Karl Schmidt-Rottluff and Max Pechstein.

New themes found their way into his work through this collaboration: In addition to the motif of bathers, he created his first independent self-portraits, depictions of masks, woodcuts and murals, and his interest in other cultures grew. Mueller's works also became freer and more spontaneous. He began to collect non-European art and integrated the various influences into his works. Like other artists of the 20th century, Otto Mueller was in search of the supposedly 'original' and 'unspent' and was interested in the occult. In his search for natural and untouched expression, which was attributed in particular to unknown cultures, he created works

that appear highly romanticised from today's perspective.

Mueller's creative period was characterised by social upheaval. It was a time of industrialisation, nudism, the First World War and the German Empire, a European colonial power. The former colonies brought numerous art objects to Europe, which inspired the expressionist artists. They visited the ethnological museums and ethnological exhibitions in Berlin and Dresden or, like Emil Nolde and Max Pechstein, travelled to the colonies themselves. Otto Mueller found his personal 'place of longing' in Eastern Europe, where he thematised the life of the Sint:izze and Rom:nja in numerous drawings, lithographs and paintings between 1924 and 1929.

Mueller's works therefore challenge us in several ways with regard to constellations of views and perspectives: Whose gaze is depicted here? That of a white, male painter, that of the artist and/or that of an era? Who is looking at us from the pictures – who were their models and how self-determined can their depiction be? And finally: How did people look at Mueller's art back then and how do we look at the famous painter's works today?

The resulting ambivalences and contradictions are to be made visible in the sense of a multi-perspective view. An intervention by the Black German scholar Natasha A. Kelly will look at Mueller's work against the background of Black German history, and the depictions of Sint:izze and Rom:nja

will be contextualised and re-evaluated in terms of their stereotyping by works by Roma artists such as Małgorzata Mirga-Tas, Luna De Rosa and Vera Lackova.

In five thematic rooms, the exhibition explores the work and motifs of Otto Mueller.



Room 1

Places of Longing – Between Inspiration and Cultural Appropriation?

The nude in the landscape is one of Mueller's preferred motifs. Throughout his life, he adhered to the motif of slender, elongated, undressed young people. They appear isolated, barely overlap on clearly structured pictures. Mueller seeks direct expression and brings depth to the surface. The mask-like faces are often impersonal and he rarely needed models to express his visions.

»I primarily intend to render my impressions of landscapes and humans with the greatest possible simplicity«. This statement by Mueller reflects his rejection of industrialisation and urbanisation and explains his endeavour to find counter-examples to Western civilisation in nature and indigenous people.

Sojourns on Fehmarn Island, in Bohemia and the Giant Mountains, as well as trips to Southern Europe enabled him to get closer to nature.



Mueller and Ancient Egyptian art

Mueller admired Ancient Egyptian culture. Its paintings and austere relief forms eventually became a source of inspiration for his own works and palette. This is particularly obvious in the elongated limbs of his figures that clearly recall their Egyptian counterparts.

He repeatedly visited the Egyptian collection at Berlin's Neues Museum and may have attended lectures by Johann Heinrich Schäfer, then director of the collection.

The South Seas in Mueller's work

A wall painting that adorned Otto Mueller's atelier in Berlin reveals that the artist was clearly rooted in the colonial context of his time. For this work, he may have taken inspiration from Paul Gauguin's paintings with South Seas subjects, and from the novel *Van Zanten's Happy Days – A Love Story from Pelli Island* written by the Dane Laurids Bruun and published in 1908.

Later on, Mueller also created a woodcut and several watercolours with similar subjects. These works express his longing for a life close to nature, but reproduce European clichés of the South Seas and their indigenous inhabitants and utterly ignore the colonial context of the early 20th century.

Room 2

Models, Partners and Artists

Who are the Nudes in Mueller's works? Most of them are women, and not as anonymous as it may seem at first glance, as we know that several of his partners frequently modelled for him and were among his favourite sources of inspiration.

And when no model was available, he resorted to photographs, or used articulated dolls that he made himself.

Mainly interested in representing people and the human body, Mueller created a wealth of nudes during his career. Painted with flat application of colour, his figures are often simplified, typified and androgynous, so that only three of his models can be clearly identified.



Maria »Maschka« Mayerhofer (1880–1952)

Otto Mueller encountered Maria Mayerhofer, known as Maschka, when she was nineteen, and married her in 1905. She was his most important model and we find her in many of his works.

His later partners often modelled for him as mere substitutes, especially when he was remaking compositions of earlier works figuring Maschka.

She referred to herself as a painter, later also as an interior designer, and earned her living with batik works. Throughout her life, she remained Mueller's closest confidante, selling his works and organising his exhibitions. They maintained a close relationship even after their separation in 1919.

Irene Altmann (1902–1956)

Irene Altmann began studying at the Breslau Academy of Painting in 1918 when she was sixteen. She and Mueller became a couple the following year, when he was her professor. She modelled for some of his most impressive portraits, including one in which he appears as a mask.

Altmann exhibited her own work in several group exhibitions held at Breslau's Lichtenberg Gallery as early as 1920, and at least one of her works has been preserved until today. She moved to Berlin and took painting lessons from Erich Heckel after her separation from Otto Mueller in 1921.



Elisabeth »Elsbeth« Lübke (1902–1977)

In 1922, twenty-year-old Elisabeth Lübke, known as Elsbeth, became Mueller's second wife. They had met through mutual friends and she was also one of his students. She modelled for him but we know nothing about her own artistic work.

Their son Josef was born in 1925, after the couple had separated. She had moved in with Mueller's sister in Berlin while he remained in Breslau. In 1928, one year after their divorce, she married the painter Otto Herbig (1889–1971), one of Mueller's friends.

Elfriede »Fibs« Timm (1904–1979)

In 1927, Mueller met Elfriede Timm, nicknamed Fibs, at one of the many parties organised by the Breslau Academy. She was to be his last partner. Her non-conformist, easy-going manners fitted well with Mueller's own unconventional lifestyle. They travelled together several times, in particular to Paris.

Also a painter, Timm modelled for Mueller's late works. She can be clearly identified in a life-size nude set in a landscape, as well as in several paintings in which she is shown standing, kneeling, or sitting with her legs crossed. However, we know very little about her own artistic production.

Room 3

Otto Mueller in the Context of German Colonisation

German colonisation played an important role for the artists of the »Brücke«. They were strongly inspired by non-European cultures, which they often idealised as ‚original‘ and ‚unadulterated‘. Otto Mueller, who joined the group in 1911, also appreciated the formal simplicity and expressive qualities of objects from these cultures and integrated colonised stylistic elements into his works.

The scholar, artist and curator Prof. Dr Natasha A. Kelly sheds light on the complex and often problematic influences of the colonial era on the art of the »Brücke« and places their works in a critical context with Black German history. The works of Otto Mueller and his colleagues reflect not only a fascination with the foreign, but also the deeply rooted colonial and racist structures of their time, which continue to the present day.



Black Masculinity in the Context of German colonialism

In the German public, Black masculinity was often portrayed as dangerous and hypersexual. For this reason, Mueller and Kirchner may have portrayed themselves as Black men without recognizing the social realities of Black men in their environment.

The biographies of Martin Dibobe, Joseph Ekwe Bilé, Louis Brody and Mdachi Bin Scharifu, four signatories of the so-called Dibobe Petition of 1919, with which they drew attention to colonial oppression and their social disadvantage, illustrate the diverse and often contradictory experiences of Black men in the colonial racist society of the German Empire.

The Role of Black Women in Colonial Germany

The colonial narrative often portrayed Black women as ‚something exotic‘, available for sexual exploitation. Such racist and sexist stereotypes are frequent in works by members of »Die Brücke« artists' group, who shared Black female models, including Nelly and Milli (also spelled Milly). The latter name occurs in various documents in reference to several different women, so we can assume it was a synonym for ‚Black woman‘ in the artists' vocabulary. Nelly on the other hand, was probably a dancer whom Kirchner photographed, several of his fellow artists portrayed, and was known personally to Mueller.



Room 4

Bathers – A traditional subject?

Mueller focused on just a few subjects. Human bodies (especially female nudes) in natural settings remained frequent in all his creative periods.

These works show simplified, resting figures, usually without any erotic connotation. The often androgynous bodies appear either monumental in close-up, or as incidental figures in the landscape.

Mueller belonged to Die Brücke artists' group. But while works by other members stand out for their abstract forms and expressive colours, his palette is muted and less intense: delicate shades of blue, yellow, green and brown dominate in his paintings. He developed a new technique (painting with mixed distemper on coarse fabric) that generates the impression of direct contact with the figures. The sharp contours of the bodies, the postures, and the mask-like faces of his models clearly recall Egyptian art as well as works by Paul Cézanne and Henri Matisse.



Die Brücke

The members of the Die Brücke artists' group founded in Dresden in 1905 rejected academic tradition, advocated an innovative and direct approach to painting, and endeavoured to invent ways of working and living beyond the bourgeois conventions of their time. Artists of the Dresden group and its Berlin counterpart were not interested in developing a common style, and accepted differences between one another from the outset. Their intention was to render reality directly and without distortion.

Female expressionistic gaze

Dorothea Maetzel-Johannsen (1886–1930) was among the founders of the Hamburg-based Secession group in 1919. Works by Paul Cézanne and members of the Die Brücke artists' group inspired her own expressive style.

Like Mueller – who participated in exhibitions presenting works by the Secession group – Maetzel-Johannsen favoured female nudes. The painting *Two Nudes with Crescent Moon* ranks among her major works. Showing two unclothed women of different sizes and appearances standing close together, it is notable for its strong colours and the angular contours of the female bodies. We know nothing about the two models, however.

Room 5

Otto Mueller and the Romani People

Mueller was interested in the Romani people and visited Eastern Europe repeatedly from 1924 onwards. The drawings he created and the photographs he took there served as the basis for paintings and lithographs that he produced at home after each visit.

Today, it is no longer possible to trace Mueller's relationships with members of the Romani people, as no records are available. However, we know that the artist associated this community with the free, non-conformist lifestyle that he was striving for. In his mind, the Romani people embodied an idealised, quite romantic image of the Other that he was eager to transfigure in his works.

In the present exhibition, the Romani artists Małgorzata Mirga-Tas, Luna De Rosa and Vera Lacková present films and textile collages that take a critical look at Otto Mueller and question his works: Where is the limit between source of inspiration and cultural appropriation? Who defines what is foreign, different, or natural, and which lifestyle is superior to another? What can be stated as fact is that Mueller's works often show anonymous, unclothed female bodies and convey stereotypes that have been spread for centuries about the Romani people living among us.



Małgorzata Mirga-Tas (*1978)

Works by Małgorzata Mirga-Tas communicate an emancipated and self-confident image of the Romani people. Morning Tea, for example, directly refers to Mueller's painting Two *Gypsy* Women with a Cat (1926). But instead of unclothed women, the work by Mirga-Tas figures her mother and her sister, well-dressed and enjoying a cup of tea, thus giving them a voice and boosting the community's image.

Luna De Rosa (*1991)

The artist and activist Luna De Rosa reveals the historical context of the discrimination against Romani people. Her textile collages that incorporate texts and pictorial elements illustrate the complexity inherent in social problems and in the tensions between religious and ethnic groups. They also deal with exclusion, stereotypes and persistent misunderstandings from the perspective of a Romani woman.



Vera Lacková (*1989)

Vera Lacková makes documentary films about the history of the Romani people, in particular their persecution and the Roma holocaust committed by the Nazis. In 2015, she founded Media Voice, a production company that focuses on films dedicated to little-known stories.

save space e.V.

The save space e.V. association is committed to promoting democracy and plurality on the basis of a socio-critical perspective. Various individuals, initiatives and associations are organised in save space e.V. Roma, Sinti, Jewish and Black people are just as much a part of this organisation as Coptic, Yazidi, Muslim and Alevi people, neurodivergent individuals and people with disabilities.

Sara Bahadori and Amdrita Jakupi from save space e.V. made a statement video and thus stimulates a necessary discussion about the representation of racialised people in art. The interviewees describe how Mueller's images affect them and report on the injuries that can be caused by racist titles.

The video contributes to a comprehensive reflection on the impact of Mueller's work on the affected communities.



Room 6

Mueller's Self-promotion and Perception by Others

Mueller was not particularly good at promoting his own work, and made very few public statements about himself. However, those around him agreed that he was stubborn and non-conformist. The numerous portraits of him made by fellow artists evidence that his colleagues appreciated him, but had difficulty understanding his personality.

Throughout his artistic career, he portrayed himself together with his partner of the time. Ten self-portraits – in mixed technique, watercolour and lithography – provide insight into his moods and how he perceived himself at certain difficult moments of his life.



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