

The Art Collection

“ I am certain that the themes of the pictures will move the hearts of all who see them—their creators will invoke feelings of awe, as people who sanctified God’s name in order to leave us a heritage of supreme spirituality and a sense of identification of the lone individual with the destiny of the entire nation”

Dr. Arieh L. Kubovy, former Chairman of Yad Vashem, 1959

The Yad Vashem art collection is the largest and most comprehensive of its kind. But size is not its defining factor. What makes it unique is the different perspective of the Holocaust it provides, based on the individual’s experience. Most of the collection’s 7,000 pieces were produced during the Holocaust, between 1933 and 1945. Others were produced between 1946 and 1948, by survivors who renewed their creative efforts following liberation,

wishing to commit their experiences to paper and tell the world their story and that of those who were killed.

The art collection began as an integral part of the general Archives, reflecting the early belief that Holocaust art was defined, first and foremost, by its importance as documentary material. The first piece was officially recorded on 25 February 1958. By 5 May 1959, an art exhibition was opened in the administration building, showcasing some 70 works out of the total collection of 750 paintings and drawings.

In the early 1960s, a series of permanent exhibits was displayed in the administration building, forming the basis for the establishment of the Historical Museum and the Art Museum. The first floor of the building, known as the Exhibition Hall, housed temporary exhibits by different artists. In 1962, the art collection merged into a department unto itself, known as the Museums Division, which included photographs, cinematographic material, and artifacts. Soon after, in April 1965, key issues like preservation and restoration were introduced and a conservation laboratory was established.

For its first 30 years, Yad Vashem assembled a unique and original collection of Holocaust art. In 1982, the Art Museum—including exhibition halls, an Auditorium, and a Sculpture Garden—was inaugurated in the presence of then French President, François Mitterand, and President of Israel, Yitzhak Navon. In 1986, a catalogue of selected works from the collection

Art

for Art’s Sake

was published, and by 1995, the Art Museum had hosted some 44 art exhibits.

From the mid-1990s until today, the art collection continued to expand. Research was intensified on the provenance of works of art, the biographies of the artists, and material pertinent to the subject of the works of art (i.e. place, person depicted, etc.). A focus was placed on the preservation of previously acquired works. In addition, plans were formed to build a new Museum Complex, comprising a new Holocaust History Museum, a Museum of Holocaust Art, and a Pavilion for Temporary Exhibitions.

The New Museum of Holocaust Art

“The request of the artists was—display them, so the world will know the consequence of hatred and bigotry, to serve as an omen and a warning”

Dr. Yitzhak Arad, former Chairman of the Yad Vashem Directorate, 1982

In most exhibition and museum displays, Holocaust art is used as a didactic tool, to enhance the historical narrative of the *Shoah*. Thus, historiography plays a pivotal role in selecting the works of art to be exhibited

and determining how they are displayed. While the new Holocaust History Museum will interlace artworks with other documentary materials as part of the exhibition’s historical narrative, the Museum of Holocaust Art’s display will adhere to a different concept. Holocaust art will be selected and presented for “art’s sake”—to underscore the artistic merit of the pieces, while acknowledging the fact that many are true masterpieces. All the works that will appear in the approximately 3,000-square-foot display space were created between 1933 and 1948 exclusively. Post-Holocaust works by survivors and others will be exhibited in the new Holocaust History Museum and the Pavilion for Temporary Exhibitions.

The exterior of the new Museum of Holocaust Art was designed by Moshe Safdie as part of the new Museum Complex; its interior was designed by Itai Shechory. The interior will reflect the intimate nature of the pieces—most of which are small-scale drawings and works on paper, due to the circumstances under which they were created. The exhibition will highlight the singularity of the creative impetus under the ruthless conditions of the Holocaust—art fashioned out of the will to survive. It will facilitate the understanding of the role of artists in documenting their own



Felix Nussbaum (1904-1944), Portrait of an Unidentified Man, 1941, oil on canvas. Gift of Dr. Paul Freund in memory of his wife Hilda

The Collection and New Museum of Holocaust Art



Sarah Glikman-Fajtlowicz (b. 1910), Bridge in the Lodz Ghetto, 1943, oil on canvas



Charlotte Salomon (1917-1943), Self-Portrait, 1939-1941, oil crayon on paper. Gift of Otilie Gobel Bourne

history and that of their community. Above all, it will enable visitors today to “see” the events of then, through the subjective perspective of the Jewish artist/victim.

A central component of the permanent display will be portraiture. Through portraiture, Jewish artists were able to focus on the individual sitting before them at a certain moment in time, thus supplanting the anonymity inflicted upon the Jews by the Germans. The rich collection of portraits on display in the new Museum of Holocaust Art also serves as a commemorative

tribute: to the artists, models, and Jewish victims.

The inner strength exhibited by Holocaust artists—who did not succumb to the harsh circumstances that demanded all of their energies for survival—will be highlighted by the life and works of certain distinguished artists, among them: Charlotte Salomon and Felix Nussbaum. The ultimate fate of these artists was identical to that of their brethren—persecution and ultimately death. These special exhibitions are not intended as a mere commemorative display. They help visitors appreciate Holocaust art for its aesthetic

and intrinsic value on the one hand, while demonstrating the artists’ drive to create despite the horrifying conditions, on the other. In this manner the exhibitions are an affirmation that it was possible to spiritually rise above the enemy.

Visitors to the Museum of Holocaust Art will engage in a unique encounter with pieces of paper that encapsulate—in a few simple lines—all that Holocaust artists endured.

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