

## Report 4 (Christian Weikop)

**A summary of the role of the Leicester collection in introducing British audiences to German Expressionism. The collection narrative that it was the first exhibition of German Expressionist Art in a British public gallery should be established and evidenced.**

### **A Summary of Expressionist Exhibitions held in the UK prior to the 'Mid-European Art' Exhibition of 1944**

The Leicester New Walk Museum cannot make the claim that it was the first gallery to stage an exhibition of German Expressionist art in the UK, but it can claim that it was the first to stage one in a 'public' or 'civic' space rather than commercial gallery. The first venue to hold an Expressionist exhibition was the Twenty-One Gallery in London, which in 1914 hosted a *Der Sturm* touring exhibition of prints circulated by Herwarth Walden entitled 'Modern German Art', including work by Brücke and Blaue Reiter artists. Wyndham Lewis wrote a review of this exhibition, published in the first issue of his magazine *Blast*, one of very few critical responses to contemporary German art in pre-War England. As for a second exhibition devoted to Expressionism, in 1938, Herbert Read, Irmgard Burchard and other members of an organising committee put on a large exhibition called 'Twentieth-Century German Art' at the New Burlington Art Galleries. This was clearly intended as a riposte to the infamous 1937–8 'Degenerate Art' show, which was still 'on tour' in Germany. The New Burlington Art Galleries exhibition was accompanied by the emergence of a subversive anti-Nazi Penguin (Pelican Special) publication entitled *Modern German Art*, written by a Berlin-based Yugoslav émigré Peter Thoene (a pseudonym for Otto Bihalji-Merin). Read was responsible for the introduction. The title of the New Burlington exhibition was originally planned to be 'Banned Art', but the organising committee decided that this was too sensationalist and politically inflammatory and so they agreed on the more neutral 'Twentieth-Century German Art'. This decision incensed the Paris-based exile organisation, Freie Künstlerbund (FKb), chiefly organised by the Jewish art critic and editor Paul Westheim. The FKb (founded in 1937) was a model for the British Free German League of Culture (founded in 1938) that would help 'arrange' the 'Mid-European Art' exhibition at the Leicester Museum and Art Gallery in 1944. In addition to many exhibitions supporting refugee artists, the Free German League of Culture would also arrange a small show at the Wertheim Galleries in London, 'The Exhibition of German Expressionism' (Feb-March, 1940). This would set some kind of precedent for Leicester's 'Mid-European Art' of 1944.

### **The Progressive Vision of A.C. Sewter**

A progressive art collecting policy had been established at Leicester since the 1930s, especially through the appointments of A.C. Sewter, Trevor Thomas and Hans Hess. The 'Mid-European Art' exhibition of 1944 paved the way for further acquisitions of German Expressionist art, and in 1953 an exhibition was staged of Karl Schmidt-Rottluff's drawings, woodcuts and sculptures [the first in Britain] from the collection of Rosa Schapire, who considered this to be one of the most significant events of her life in England.

A.C. Sewter advanced the promotion of modern German art first initiated by Wyndham Lewis and then Herbert Read. In 1935, he was appointed Arts Assistant at the Leicester Museum and Art Gallery where he remained until 1939. During his Leicester years, Sewter also began to write for the *Burlington Magazine*, and secured the job of Editor in November 1939. With the increasing intensity of the conflict, Sewter left London for his native Midlands; in 1940 he was appointed Assistant Director of the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, and he was an Art Adviser to Leicester Gallery Museum and Art Gallery (1948-1949). Sewter also wrote a number of reviews for the *Manchester Guardian* in the 1950s, which promoted some of the earliest exhibitions devoted to Expressionism and Expressionist artists to be staged in the UK, and a number of these reviews praised the abilities of Hans Hess. He also wrote a review of the Karl Schmidt-Rottluff exhibition of 1953 (see below). He was succeeded at Leicester by Trevor Thomas.

### **Trevor Thomas and the Mid-European Art Exhibition**

According to a 1971 *Art Review* article by Barry Herbert, entitled 'German Expressionists at Leicester': 'Much of the credit for having prevented what would otherwise have been a national dearth of Expressionist works must go to Hans Hess, who as Assistant Keeper of Art and later Keeper between 1944 and 1947 had the enterprising foresight to secure for Leicester a small but elite nucleus of modern German paintings ...' It was a claim reiterated in Herbert's 1978 catalogue *The Expressionist Revolution in German Art 1871-1933*, and later corrected in the art press by Brian Sewell in his article 'The Expressionist Explosion: Leicester's Scarlet Woman' (1982). While Sewell criticised the authors of the 1978 catalogue for transferring the 'achievements and perspicacity of Trevor Thomas' to Hess, the real targets of his contempt were those reactionary 'worthies of Leicester' who had effectively ousted Thomas from his post in July 1946 over a court case relating to some 'homosexual folly', and who sought to erase his existence from the record. Until the 1980s, Thomas was written out of the Leicester history with respect to the development of the collection. Those initial purchases were *The Red Woman* by Franz Marc, *Behind the Square* by Lyonel Feininger, *The Head* by Emil Nolde, *Bridge at Erfurt* by Max Pechstein, all from the collection of Alfred Hess. In correcting the record, it is important to state that although Hess might not have been formally employed at the Museum at the time, he was involved in assisting Thomas with the purchases from the family collection and with the organisation of 'Mid-European Art' (1944), as revealed by correspondence between Hess and Thomas in the New Walk Museum archive. It was Thomas though who managed to persuade the Museums and Libraries Committee to stage the exhibition and acquire these four works.

According to correspondence in the Leicester New Walk Archive, Thomas was in New York in the summer of 1939 and was 'bowled over by German Expressionism' when he first came across it at MoMA. While in New York, it is also entirely possible that Thomas would have seen an iteration of the 1938 New Burlington Galleries 'Twentieth-Century German Art'. He might well have also seen the exhibition at the World's Fair or as it went on tour with a staging post in Buffalo, the location of his museum internship and where he would work in the late 1950s as a Professor of Art History. Thomas had an opportunity to display such work

after making the acquaintance of Mrs Thekla Hess, the widow of Alfred Hess, who came to Leicester during the war as a Jewish refugee. However, it was not until 21 January 1944, after Thomas's proposal to put on a Feininger exhibition was cancelled that he was authorised to put on a more ambitious exhibition in the following month. It was 'arranged' by the ad hoc Leicester branch of the Free German League of Culture and was called 'Mid-European Art', a group which included Tekla and Hans Hess. In the 'Mid-European Art' catalogue it stated: 'The instability of the period is reflected in the paintings ... The rise of Hitlerism destroyed the schools and the spirit, exiled and suppressed the men and their works. Modern Art was persecuted. Here we can only show and judge what was created before the catastrophe overtook the creative spirit of a continent ... We wish to thank all those who have loaned their pictures, and in the first place have rescued them from certain destruction'. Those lenders included Stefan Pauson, the brother of Tekla Hess, who lived in Glasgow. It was from Pauson that Thomas recommended the purchase of Marc's *Rote Frau* for the sum of £350. The painting alarmed some members of the council, but the acquisition was agreed when Thomas offered to buy the painting himself if the recommendation was declined. One councillor defended his position and argued that as he was a bachelor 'Mr Thomas had better have his scarlet woman'. The committee also supported further purchases from the exhibition, including Nolde's *Head with Red-Black Hair* and Lyonel Feininger's *Behind the Church*, alternatively called *The Square* (1916).

It is curious that at the end of this four-page catalogue, a credit line reads in block capitals: 'THE EXHIBITION HAS BEEN ARRANGED BY THE FREE GERMAN LEAGUE OF CULTURE'. This would seem to place 'Mid-European Art' in a grouping of other exile exhibitions that were arranged by the FGLC, the foremost organization representing anti-Nazi German refugees in Britain during this wartime period, which put on exhibitions such as the 'Artists Aid Jewry Exhibition' at the Whitechapel Art Gallery; however, the Leicester exhibition was of a different character to these other London-based shows that were often dedicated to Jewish artists who 'endeavoured to show works relating to Jewish life and problems.' The inclusion of Fred Uhlman's work in this exhibition is intriguing because while he was known outside of refugee circles and was a central figure in the FGLC, his work in many respects exists on the margins of the Expressionist tradition that united the others. However, his inclusion helped legitimize the 'anti-Nazi' credentials of the exhibition, and was probably important in providing a potential defence for staging such an exhibition of German art at all, especially in the event of public outcry. Kokoschka reviewed 'Mid-European Art' for the house newspaper of the FGLC, *Freie Deutsche Kultur*, in which he praised Leicester for providing a safe haven for this art whilst suggesting that Expressionism was alien to the British public, a public more familiar with German music than art, possibly due to a lack of international publicity for the movement.

### **Hans Hess and Leicester: An Important Family History**

The Hess family history is important because Hans's father, Alfred, was the most prominent collector of Expressionist art in the 1920s, and his Erfurt house became a meeting place for artists, critics, art historians, and museum directors during the 1920s. Alfred died unexpectedly in 1931, and after the collapse of the Weimar Republic and the consolidation of the Nazi regime in 1933, Hans would flee Germany and take refuge in Paris and then London. Some of the Hess Art Collection was sold at auction, some was smuggled out of

Germany, some remained in Germany, some ended up in Switzerland, and critically some of it ended up in Leicester.

An incredible woodcut portrait of Alfred Hess from 1919, by former Brücke member Max Pechstein, is on long loan at Leicester. Hess was initially advised by Edwin Redslob (1884-1973), director of the Städtisches Museum in Erfurt (today the Angermuseum) from 1912 - 1919. Hess started to collect Kirchner paintings by 1918 with the aim of giving them to the museum along with other works from his growing collection. In 1920, the art historian Walter Kaesbach (1879-1961) became the new director of the museum. In the little volume *Dank in Farben* (1957), published by the famous R. Piper & Co. Verlag Munich, Hans recalled how he came into daily contact not only with outstanding works of art, but also with the artists who came to stay under their hospitable roof. This fascinating volume, based on the family guest book (started in 1907) with its various dedicatory inscriptions, lively drawings and watercolours, reveals how the Hess family were on friendly terms with the leading cultural personages of the *Kaiserreich* and Weimar Republic. Redslob, who was appointed the director of the 'Reichskunstwart' in December 1919, would later reflect that the Hess collection was 'probably the best collection of German Expressionists that ever existed'. Other important cultural figures who frequented the Erfurt house included: Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Lyonel Feininger, Christian Rohlf, Otto Dix, Kurt Weill, Martin Buber, Charlie Chaplin, Ludwig Justi, Wilhelm Worringer, Rosa Schapire, Paul Westheim, Herbert Read, as well as many others.

Following the death of Alfred Hess in late 1931, and the rise of Hitler in 1933, the Hess family was eventually forced to leave Germany. Hans Hess's employment at the Ullstein-Verlag in Berlin, where he was based in the so-called 'Magazine Propaganda' in the department of modern photographic journals was terminated in June 1933 for racial and political reasons. He prepared for his emigration after the publication of the 'empowerment laws' and the new Reichstag (parliamentary) elections. He first travelled to Paris where he took a job in advertising, then in 1935 to London where he worked for the German-Jewish Refugee Aid Committee and as an editor of the magazine *Inside Nazi Germany*. Interned in 1940, he came back from Canada in 1942 to work on the land and became a founding member of the Free German League of Culture. From January 1944, Hans worked at the Leicester Museum as an art assistant at the instigation of the progressive director Trevor Thomas, and was able to support his family and his mother, Thekla Hess, who lived with him. In 1944, the Leicester Museum staged an exhibition of mainly German Expressionist art, entitled 'Mid-European Art' to avoid stirring up wartime feeling, and to which items from the Hess Collection and those of other local émigré collections were lent. The collection continued to develop through purchase, gift and bequest and has now become one of the finest collections of Expressionist art in the UK. After Leicester, Hans moved to York where he was made curator of the City Art Gallery in 1947. He did not lose contact with the Leicester Museum though, and his touring exhibition 'The Expressionists: An Exhibition of Works by the German Expressionists from One Private Collection' held at York from May-June 1953, was also shown at Leicester, as well as travelling to Scotland under the auspices of the Scottish Committee of the Arts Council. This included works from the 1944 exhibition and many more besides, and is yet another indication of how a public far from London would have opportunities to see Expressionist art. Hess spent twenty years working in York before

accepting a lectureship at the University of Sussex in 1967, where he co-founded the History of Art Department

In November 2006, the Hess name attracted a great deal of media attention and prompted a fierce debate, when Kirchner's *Berlin Street Scene* (1913-14) sold at Christie's New York for 38 million US dollars, the highest price to date for a work by the artist. Under restitution laws, the painting was transferred by the Berlin senate to Hans Hess's daughter, Anita Halpin Hess, the chairman of the Communist Party of Britain, and the sole surviving heir. After the painting was restituted to Ms Halpin, it was bought at a Christie's auction on behalf of Ronald Lauder's Neue Galerie in New York.

### **Peter Tomory and the Karl Schmidt-Rottluff Exhibition of 1953**

According to his obituary in *The Independent*, Peter Tomory became interested in art history after visits to the Tate and British Museum, as well as to the Alte Pinakothek in Munich. In 1946, he started as an undergraduate at Edinburgh University, where Herbert Read had been Watson Gordon Professor in the early 1930s, and it was under Read's successor, Professor Talbot Rice, that Tomory majored in Art History. As David Alexander pointed out, 'Tomory's visit to Munich and his knowledge of Peter Thoene's Penguin *Modern German Art* [...] impressed Hans Hess, the formidable curator of York City Art Gallery, where Tomory began as Assistant Curator in January 1950'. At the end of 1951, with the full backing of the York Director, who had of course worked there himself in the 1940s, Tomory was appointed to a more senior post at the Leicester Art Gallery. His most important contribution to the Leicester German Expressionist art narrative occurred in 1953 with his organisation of an exhibition drawn from Rosa Schapire's collection of Schmidt-Rottluff's prints (a number of which formed the 1955 Schapire bequest), supplemented by stone carvings sent directly by the artist, the basis of the first exhibition devoted to any Brücke artist in the United Kingdom.

It is possible that Schapire came to be introduced to Leicester and Tomory through Hans Hess. After all, she had visited the Hess Erfurt villa in the 1920s, and was certainly acquainted with Alfred and Thekla Hess, and most likely Hans too. In 1939, with the sponsorship of Fritz Saxl at the Warburg Institute, Schapire fled Nazi Germany just two weeks before the outbreak of war. Before she left she burnt all her correspondence with artists considered to be degenerate by the National Socialists, most notably the letters of Karl Schmidt-Rottluff between the years 1908 and 1939. She worked as a correspondent and contributor to various publications and became a research assistant to Otto Neurath, and also the émigré architectural historian, Nikolaus Pevsner, working on his long-term project *The Buildings of England*, and of course it is possible that Pevsner recommended Leicester as a destination for her collection as he had been a visiting speaker at the museum. Another key figure for Schapire would have been Gustav Delbanco (the other executor of her will alongside Pevsner). There was a touring exhibition of works lent by Dr H.M. Roland on 'English & Foreign Modern Artists' with staging posts at York City Art Gallery and Leicester Museum and Art Gallery (6 June - 9 July 1950) and other venues, an exhibition that included work by German artists such as Barlach, Ernst, Feininger, Heckel, Macke, and Nolde. Furthermore, Roland, Browse and Delbanco also staged a small exhibition titled 'Expressionist Painting' in 1952. Frustrated by her dealings with Tate and British Museum in London, it is likely that Schapire was looking to make contacts with more sympathetic figures and institutions in the regions. Tomory happened to be the right man in the right place at the right time.

Schapiro, a distinguished and prolific specialist in the field of Expressionist studies, gave a lecture at the opening of the exhibition on 7 September 1953. On her birthday two days later, she would write to Schmidt-Rottluff declaring the exhibition to be a great success. The exhibition was given a positive review by A.C. Sewter for the *Manchester Guardian* on September 24, 1953. This was not entirely impartial as Sewter had of course worked at Leicester City Museum in the 1930s. Furthermore, the Leicester exhibition was covered in the German press. On October 14, 1953 Schmidt-Rottluff sent Schapiro articles from the following German newspapers: *Die Welt*, 1.10.1953, *Westfalenpost*, 1.10.1953, *Lüdenschneider Nachrichten*, 2.10.1953 and the *Hamburger Echo*, 9.10.1953. Schapiro also wrote a short illustrated piece for the art journal *Weltkunst* entitled 'Deutsche Expressionisten in Leicester'. However, the exhibition lacked more extensive coverage in the UK. Just one year later, Tomory would move on from Leicester to the Arts Council in London, working on touring exhibitions. Later he would work as Director of Auckland City Art Gallery and as a Professor of Art History in Melbourne.

### **Barry Herbert and the Expressionist Revolution in German Art**

At Leicester, while more German art works were acquired from the late 1940s onward by purchase, gift, and bequest, some argued that there had been a certain lack of curatorial missionary zeal to really capitalise on early gains. In 1985, Brian Sewell bemoaned this situation in an *Evening Standard* review of Leicester's loan exhibition to Agnew's: 'If only they had gone on buying in this far-sighted way, but they didn't. They could have, for German pictures fetched nothing in the post-war London art market; the Germans were destitute, the Americans returned to the backwoods, and the British took more than a decade to pull themselves together.' However, a boost to the Leicester collection of modern German art came about through the appointment of Barry Herbert, Keeper of Art from 1971-1978. During his tenure, the German collection expanded by some 40 works, and he was the driving force behind the publication of an important museum catalogue on German Expressionism, published in 1978, a significant contribution to the English language literature in the field. A reviewer of the catalogue stressed that 'Leicester now boasts the largest representative collection of German Expressionism in the United Kingdom.' There were further exhibitions of the collection in the 1980s and early 1990s with good in-depth coverage in the local press, such as the *Leicester Topic* and *Leicester Mercury*. In 1985, N.A. Pegden, Assistant Director of the Leicester Museum and Art Gallery met with Anita Halpin (née Hess) to discuss the loan to the museum of more works from the Leicester collection, with a long loan of 27 Expressionist artworks being agreed, including a copy of 'Dank in Farben', the visitors book of Alfred and Tekla Hess.

### **Simon Lake and Journey out of Darkness**

The 2009 exhibition 'Journey out of Darkness' curated by Simon Lake was important in raising awareness of a further expanded collection. It had an excellent web presence and openly and instructively addressed multiple issues including degenerate art and restitution law. The exhibition underscored the importance of Trevor Thomas's visionary role in establishing the nucleus of the Expressionist collection, and also emphasized the fact that

Marc's *The Red Woman* remains the only oil painting by Franz Marc in a UK public collection. The extraordinary painting, very rare in that it shows the artist's treatment of a human rather than animal subject, has been referred to as 'probably the greatest single work in the collection ... certainly the most important in this country by the leading member of the celebrated Munich Blaue Reiter'. The challenge for the New Walk Museum and Art Gallery in the future will be to ensure that the profile of the collection remains high and receives coverage in the national as well as regional press. One way of achieving this objective would be through thematic exhibition making, supplementing the excellent permanent collection with loans from other sources.