

## **History as a determinant in the formation of Felix Nussbaum's artistic identity and attitude**

Felix Nussbaum is a Jewish artist of German origin whose early work peculiarly reflected his perceptions of family, society and religion, and at the same time, contrary to the fashionable attitude of the time, was not characterised by the political content of the Weimar Republic. In contrast, his later paintings, with which he documented his exile fate, became a powerful and universal testimony to the Holocaust.

The historical part of the dissertation was written based on the method of researching sources and documents as the primary informational material. The analysis of the paintings, on the other hand, was carried out according to the biographical method, as in this case Nussbaum's life course and artistic stance interfere extremely strongly, and without considering the context in which the individual paintings were created, it would often become impossible to understand them.

An important element of the dissertation became the determination of the temporal and geographical scope of the research. Hence, the periodisation adopted here encompassed, in addition to the years of the artist's life and for a fuller understanding of the subject, issues relating to the history of German Jews in the second half of the 19th century and the early 20th century. Geographically, on the other hand, the subject is centred around Lower Saxony, Berlin, Rome, Ostend and Brussels - areas with which Nussbaum was associated, and therefore the history of these places is more strongly highlighted.

The dissertation presented here is arranged chronologically and problematically, and the most important issues are discussed in the following sections:

- The first chapter orientates the reader to historical events. The background is outlined here, which was the social mood and significant events in the history of the Jews in Osnabrück vis-à-vis the pan-European situation, as well as a characterisation of the fate of the Nussbaum family - parents: Philipp and Rahel (née van Dijk) and Justus, the artist's older brother.
- The second chapter is a study of Felix Nussbaum's biography, including some biographical data of figures who played important roles in shaping his identity and artistic stance. The attempt to establish the exact date of the artist's death became an interesting issue of this chapter, as a document dated 20.09.1944 with Nussbaum's name and camp number has been in the collection of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum Archives for several years. Until now, the date of arrival of the transport from Mechelen to Auschwitz was taken as the conventional date of his death: 02.08.1944.

- The third and fourth chapters contain a study of a series of self-portraits painted between 1925 and 1943. A comparative perspective is adopted here, and references to the history and tradition of this painting genre are made to its most important representatives from different eras and representing various trends in art; masters such as Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, Paul Cézanne, Vincent van Gogh and Max Beckmann are cited. Important concepts, taken from psychoanalysis, appearing in this chapter are: creation, psychologisation, the concept of *self - other* and *we - you*. I would like to point out here that I have not adopted a psychoanalytic method in relation to Nussbaum's work and his psychological attitudes, conditioned by war and the threat to his life. The application of this perspective would have required a quite different approach from the one adopted and would have focused attention mainly on the psychological condition of the creator and the act of creation as a kind of self-therapy.
- Chapter five was developed against the background of and in the face of the events of the Second World War. Its crucial stage became the deduction, through the paintings analysed, of the moment when the artist experienced an inner transformation and stopped treating the threat of losing his life, which was growing daily, in an individual aspect. This is the time when the painter began to travesty his own fears into paintings depicting the suffering of the Jewish people. This aspect is also linked to another important problem, that of Felix Nussbaum's identity.
- The appendix is a detailed interpretation of the artist's last, and very important, well-known painting in his oeuvre. This work is entitled *Triumph of Death* (18 April 1944), which German scholars of his biography have identified as Nussbaum's painting-testament. The myriad elements that make up this work and its elaborate symbolism, which also refers to traditional Jewish beliefs, have directed interpretative processes (in addition to strictly historical references) towards considerations based on religious and mystical texts.

Due to the sporadic interest in the painter's fate for more than thirty years after the end of the Second World War, many important issues still remain unclear. The delay in 'discovering Nussbaum' has given rise to only a few interviews with witnesses who remembered him.

**The motivation** for writing this dissertation was the analysis of the biographical sources of Felix Nussbaum, one of the best-known painters with Jewish-German roots, which has not yet been carried out to the satisfaction of art historians and historians in Poland. Correspondence, documents and a selection of Nussbaum's most important paintings are

the subject of the study. Particular emphasis is placed on the interpretation of works created in Belgium (Brussels), where he lived from 1935 onwards. To date, no separate publication, in the nature of a monograph, focusing on the artist's biography as a direct carrier of the content of his paintings has appeared in Poland. The fundamental **aim of this work**, therefore, became to analyse and focus attention on those historical, social, religious or cultural factors that may have influenced the artist's identity, his psyche and conditioned the subject matter of his paintings. As a starting point, I first of all took it upon myself to study German-language publications and catalogues and to carry out an archival search in the places with which Nussbaum was associated. In this way, I was able to verify the background of the artist's complicated relationship to his Jewish identity. Self-identification, an important element of Nussbaum's thinking and attitude, is an extremely important aspect of my work. By attempting to analyse the painter's complex references to his Jewish origins, his relationship with his family, his attitude and reaction to historical events and, above all, the interpretation of his artistic legacy, I have been able to see Nussbaum's work in the light of a variety of influences fundamental to his painting. It was therefore indispensable to consult surviving correspondence, notes, documents and the recollections of those who knew the artist. When choosing canvases for the dissertation, I was guided by two categories: they had to be in the context of politically charged art and, from the author's point of view, constitute an important element in the process of psychologising the figures. I therefore focused on the interpretation of Nussbaum's self-portraits, as well as on selected paintings painted between 1938 and 1944. The narrative message of these works was strongly influenced by historical events. I have also extended the analysis of Nussbaum's works with the accounts of witnesses who struggled with similar difficulties to Nussbaum's - both acts of aggression, persecution and problems affecting their sense of identity, their relationship to their own Jewish background in Nazi Germany. By introducing a comparative method, I aimed to set Felix Nussbaum's biography in a broader historical context - persecuted, survivors and victims of the Holocaust.

In chapters two and three, I have sketched, as far as possible, a psychological portrait of Felix Nussbaum, an artist confronting through art the crisis of Jewish assimilation in Europe, growing anti-Semitism, acts of aggression and, ultimately, the machinery of totalitarianism. I believe that the most thorough study of the painter's biography can also contribute to a better understanding of the universal attitudes, feelings and choices of the lost generation of Jewish artists born in early 20th century Germany. I have attempted to present a selection of Felix Nussbaum's works, now read as a symbol of the time of the Holocaust. At the same time, in interpreting them, I linked the time of their creation and their subject matter to wider historical

and social events. I was keen to signal the topicality of their subject matter. In researching the paintings, I used the iconological method pioneered by Erwin Panofsky, while the comparative method (as a derivative of iconology) as well as the formal and biographical method proved indispensable in specific works of symbolic content. This methodological choice was conditioned by the eclectic style used by the painter, who mainly adapted formal models from the Renaissance and Baroque periods.

The unveiling in Nussbaum's works of a second reality masked from the outside world, a truth about himself with which he was often left alone, was an important part of the research. Awareness of the disintegration of the personality of a man living in a constant sense of insecurity determined the camouflaged symbolic nature of his paintings, and had a fundamental influence on his work. This aspect of his art is one of the more important problems addressed in the work.

Based on the sources acquired on the artist's biography, gathering information on the fate of his paintings, reaching out to researchers who reached the last surviving members of the Nussbaum family from the Holocaust, using available critical texts, analysing the symbolic content of the works, and setting the necessary facts against the background of historical events, I have produced the first monograph on Felix Nussbaum in Poland. At the same time, I tried to avoid valuing both the artist's life choices and the surviving legacy of his paintings, focusing instead on discussing as objectively as possible the biographical threads and creative motives - witness, participant and victim of one of the most tragic periods in history.

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