

From Osnabrück to Berlin

From 11 Schloss Street, Osnabrück, to Berlin

Born in 1904, Felix Nussbaum enjoyed a sheltered upbringing in Osnabrück. His father, a prosperous businessman, had a gift for music, was enthusiastic about the theatre and interested in art; he supported his son's attraction to painting. Conversations about art played a vital role in the Nussbaum household. His father especially admired Vincent van Gogh. When Felix Nussbaum left Osnabrück in 1922 he went to Hamburg, and then on to Berlin, to study art. In Berlin he had his first success, obtaining the "Rome-prize" and winning a coveted scholarship to the Villa Massimo in Rome.

Artistic emancipation

During his time in Berlin, Nussbaum formulated an artistic stance, one in conscious opposition to the artistic opinions of his academic "fathers". Nussbaum was relatively unimpressed by the established avant-garde. Instead he turned to van Gogh and Henri Rousseau as painter-models and studied the *Pittura metafisica*. Through this artistic debate, Nussbaum developed a personal style, in which allegorical representations were important. Nussbaum also started using his art to express his emotional – inner – reality.



Portrait-group, 1930



Süsterstraße, 1927

Uncertainty, Flight, Exile

The shuttered horizon

In 1932 Nussbaum left Berlin to take up his scholarship in Rome. He never entered Germany again. By way of Switzerland and France he emigrated, in 1935, to Belgium. After German army entered Belgium in 1940, Nussbaum was arrested and interned in the camp Saint Cyprien in southern France. He escaped from barracks in Bordeaux and in 1942, he disappeared with his wife in Brussels. Nussbaum was an illegal, living with the Belgium underground. He passed the time in quiet isolation; the years in Belgium were characterised by a growing sense of hopelessness and loneliness.

Painting as a reflection of the soul

Painting became increasingly significant for Nussbaum: his art absorbed his experiences, and painting became a reflection of his soul. Nussbaum developed a personal language of metaphors and colours to express his inner world. A motif often used by Nussbaum is the mask: once upon a time he had used it to reveal his split personality, but in "Masks and Cat" (1935) they acquire new associations of disguise and camouflage, specific to his flight from persecution.



Masks and Cat, 1935

Refuge in art



Self-portrait at the Easel, 1943

A German painter

Felix Nussbaum is recognized for the most part as a painter of the "Jewish fate", and his paintings are seen as "Jewish art". Yet this view is too limited, because it loses sight of Nussbaum's paintings as paintings, and does not adequately measure the artistic value of his work. Above everything else Nussbaum is a painter, and a "German painter" at that. His famous "Self-portrait with Jewish Identity Card" (1943) should not be considered primarily as a declaration of his Jewishness but as a sharp observation of the situation in which he found himself. Nussbaum saw himself as an artist, as many of his works plainly show.

The internal dialogue

This is especially clear from "Self-portrait at the Easel" (1943), painted shortly before his death. In this reflection Nussbaum the Painter presents himself as cool, self-conscious and relaxed, with all the attitudes and disguises removed. In spite of his melancholy he remains assertive. The large number of self-portraits indicate how indispensable they were to Nussbaum as reassurance and affirmations of his standpoint. In the "internal dialogues" with his mirror image Nussbaum renders an account of himself – and confronts the spectator with an open view into the artist's soul.

Mortal fear and certainty of death

In the last years of his life mortal fear crystallizes into a certainty of death. He knows he will not survive and yet he resists by, with, and through his art. Nussbaum's most impressive works emerge while facing the inevitability of the waiting catastrophe – Auschwitz.

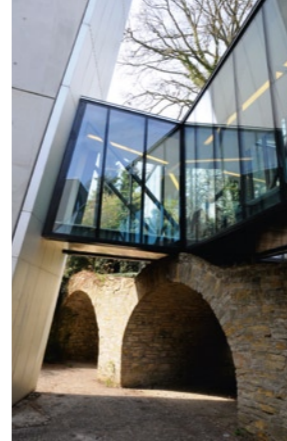
Painting as an act of liberation

In the "Triumph of Death" – his last known painting – Nussbaum successfully freed himself from fear and eternal resignation by an artistic act of liberation. In this painting the 39 year-old Nussbaum describes the end of civilisation as an early-modern-age *dance macabre*. The world is depopulated and in ruins, but it has not reached the end – the dance of death goes on, redemption is not in sight. Painting alone comforts; it is the only tool capable of self-assertion amid all the barbarity. Nussbaum tries in his paintings to give the incomprehensible a form, a human form, and thus to accord it a dimension which is endurable.



Triumph of Death, 1944

Camp, Hiding, Extermination



Felix Nussbaum

A German Painter

A building baring a message

The architecture of the Felix-Nussbaum-House reveals a lot about Nussbaum's life and fate through its use of materials and the layout of the interior. The museum consists of a narrow and high Nussbaum-corridor, the main-section and the so called Nussbaum-bridge. The three parts are clearly distinct from each other by virtue of their colours and materials.

The long, windowless Nussbaum-corridor is made of raw concrete.

The main-section is covered with German oak, while the Nussbaum-bridge is faced with zinc. The growing coldness of these materials suggests Nussbaum's fate.

The layout of the building, based on a system of lines pointing towards places of importance in Nussbaum's life, is also informative. The main-section looks towards the Alte Synagogenstraße where the old synagogue once stood; it was burnt down in 1938 during Kristall Nacht. The Nussbaum-corridor, symbolising the way into exile faces directly the place from which the NSDAP directed terror from 1933 until 1945.

On the occasion of the opening of the Imperial War Museum North in Manchester Libeskind wrote in 2002 in an article in "The New Statesman": "Architecture is a communicative art. All too often, however, architecture is seen as mute. Buildings are understood as disposable consumer items whose sole fate is to disappear with their use. [...] I am determined to get away from this over simplified view of architecture's tradition."

Libeskind's idea was realised four years before this article appeared, for in 1998 the Felix-Nussbaum-House, his first building to be finished, was opened in Osnabrück.



Rooms against Forgetting

A Place for Nussbaum The Museum by Daniel Libeskind

Architecture elevates art

Daniel Libeskind, the architect of the Jewish Museum in Berlin, who has been commissioned to develop Ground Zero in New York, has created in Osnabrück a touching memorial to the artist's life and work. It is the Felix-Nussbaum-House, the "Museum without Exit". In the Felix-Nussbaum-House the architecture enters into a dialogue with the artist, his work and biography in a unique way. The architecture "carries" the art, it intensifies the paintings' themes and statements – and: It is art in itself.

More than a visual experience

Libeskind challenges the visitor with oblique-angled walls, sloping windows, structures dividing the rooms, angular niches, holes between the floors, covered only by gratings. The feeling of orientation lost, and hope gone, becomes physical to the visitor. Here art is not just a visual experience but a subtle communicator on other levels too.



1998 FELIX NUSSBAUM HAUS

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