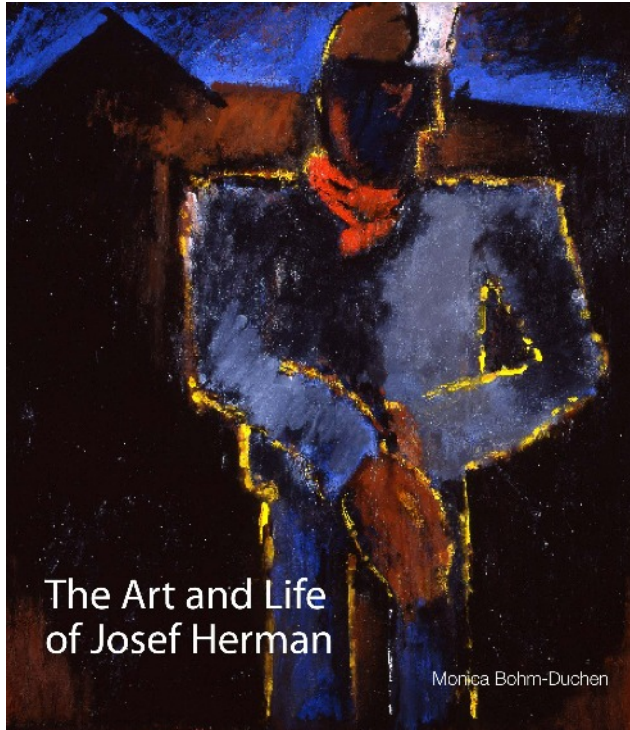


From Warsaw to Wales and Beyond: The Art and Life of Josef Herman

Background Notes

Monica Bohm-Duchen – 16 October 2019



“Some European émigré artists... enlivened and complicated the artistic life of the post-war years for they brought a direct European influence to their adoptive country... Herman is the outstanding painter of this group and his influence is probably the most familiar, because the most easily recognized. He has acquired some of the aura of the legendary wandering Jew, driven by the circumstances of history and the vagaries of chance...”

Eric Rowan, “The Visual Arts”, in Stephens, Meic (ed.). *The Arts in Wales 1950-75*, 1979



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Born in Warsaw in 1911 into a working-class Jewish family, Josef Herman arrived in Britain (via Belgium) in 1940, settling first in Glasgow and then in the South Welsh mining village of Ystradgynlais. By the early 1950s, known mainly for his images of Welsh miners, he had established himself as a major figure in contemporary British art. Throughout his long life (he died in London in 2000) he remained true to his conviction that art and morality should never be far apart, that technique, though important, should always be subservient to subject-matter and that working men and women – whether in Poland, Wales, Suffolk, Mexico or Israel - embody a profound and universal human archetype. Yet, as this seminar will reveal, his oeuvre is far more diverse and complex than even his admirers will have suspected. It precedes the first major exhibition of Herman's work for many years, to be held at Flowers Gallery, London, between 15 November 2019 and 1 February 2020.



Josef Herman, *The Gamblers*, 1938

CHRONOLOGY

- 1911 Mosek Josek Herman born Warsaw, 3 January, eldest of three children of David and Sarah Malkah Herman
- 1924-29 Finishes elementary school. Takes succession of menial jobs, eventually working as typesetter in printing business under Felix Yacubowitch, and then as a graphic artist. Receives art lessons in the evening from Professor Feliks Słupski
- 1930 Enrols at Warsaw School of Art and Decoration. Leaves after c.18 months and works as freelance graphic artist
- 1932 First one-man exhibition, Warsaw, at gallery of dealer Koterba
- 1934-37 Founder-member of Warsaw-based group of artists called The Phrygian Cap
- 1938 Autumn, leaves Poland and moves to Belgium
- 1939 Art critic Robert de Bendere helps organize first exhibition in Brussels; and another in Namur
- 1940 After German invasion of Belgium in mid-May, leaves for France. After German invasion of France in June, reaches Britain. Arrives in Glasgow (via Liverpool) in late June. Takes studio in Grovepark Street, Glasgow
- 1941 October, First exhibition in Glasgow, at James Connell and Sons
Designs costumes for *We are this Land: A Russian Masque*, Unity Theatre, Glasgow
Exhibition at The Centre, Glasgow
- 1942 Through Red Cross, hears news of annihilation of entire family by the Nazis
16 February-14 March, exhibition at Aitken Dott and Son, Edinburgh
Marries Catriona MacLeod
Devises idea of, and designs sets and costumes for *Ballet of the Palette*, staged by Celtic Ballet Club, Glasgow
Helps organize Jewish Art Exhibition at Glasgow Jewish Institute (December 1942-January 1943)
Visits to Isle of Skye and Western Isles of Scotland
- 1943 January (possibly late 1942), moves to London. Takes one of Alma Studios (no.3) in Stratford Road, Kensington W8
February-March, first one-man exhibition in London at Reid and Lefevre Gallery.
- 1944 Summer (June or July), visits Ystradgynlais in Swansea Valley, South Wales.
Sets up studio in the "ballroom" at the Pen-y-Bont Inn, Ystradgynlais
- 1945 Begins to collect miniature African carvings.
Catriona gives birth to stillborn baby. Subsequent deterioration of physical and mental health



**Josef Herman, *Leaving Home*,
1938(?)**



**Josef Herman, *The Cobbler (or My
Father)*, 1943**



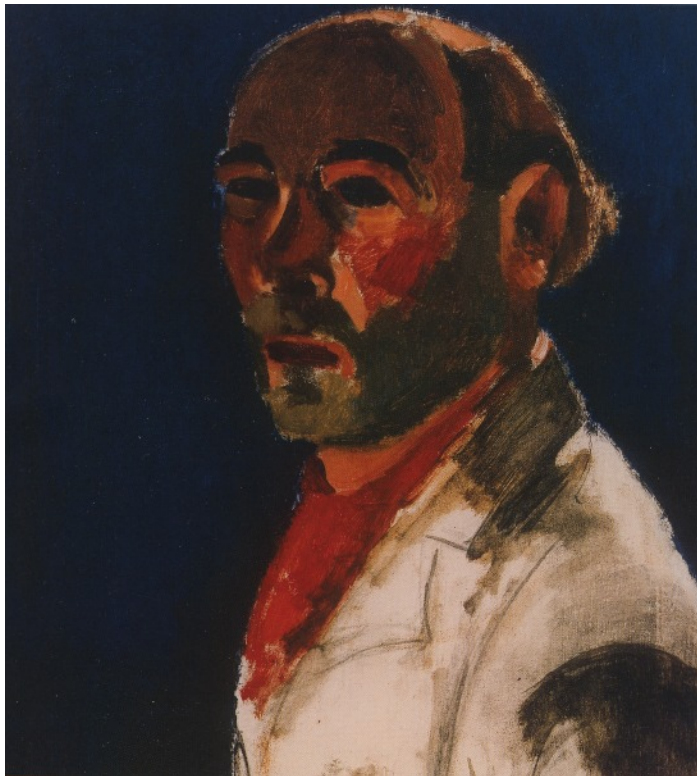
Josef Herman, *Mike*, 1945



Josef Herman, Set Design for Ballet of the Palette, Celtic Ballet Club, Glasgow, 1942



Josef Herman, *Pen-y-Bont Inn, Ystradgynlais*, c.1949



Josef Herman, *Self-Portrait*, 1946

- 1946 First one-man show, entitled *Welsh Miners*, at Roland, Browse and Delbanco, Cork Street, London. Leads to first sale of work to British public collection
- 1948 Becomes naturalized British subject
Buys derelict pop factory at 38 Rhestr Fawr, Ystradgynlais [at time known as Gough Buildings] which he and his wife transform into living space and studio
First post-war visit to Europe (France, Italy, Belgium). Visits Paris, where through old family friend, Pearl, finds out more about circumstances of his family's murder
- 1951 Commissioned to produce *Miners* mural for Pavilion of Minerals of the Island, Festival of Britain.
Contemporary Art Society prize
Gives lecture on "Jewish Art" at Festival of Jewish Arts, Glasgow
Falls ill; on advice of doctors, travels extensively to "sunnier lands" (Spain, Portugal, Greece, Italy and France, 1951-55)
- 1952 Invited to become member of the London Group.
Separates from Catriona. From now on, spends more time abroad or in London than in Wales.
Visit to Israel (autumn)
- 1953 Awarded prize by Contemporary Art Society
- 1955 Returns to live full-time in London. From 1954(?), rents studio at 85, Fellows Road, NW3; keeps this until 1956
February, meets Dr. Nini (Eleanore) Ettlinger
Acts as sponsor for touring exhibition of *The Hiroshima Panels* by Iri and Toshi Maruki, under auspices of Artists for Peace
- 1956 Buys house at 120, Edith Road, W14, London
Awarded prize, John Moores Exhibition, Liverpool
- 1957 April, birth of son David
- 1958-59 Spends six months in Andalucia (leaves England autumn 1958)
- 1960 Granted divorce by Catriona
Nini and David move into Edith Road
- 1961 11 March, marries Nini Ettlinger
- 1962 May, birth of daughter Sara
Family moves to Holly Lodge, Little Cornard, near Sudbury, Suffolk
Awarded gold medal for services to Welsh art by Royal National Eisteddfod, Llanelli
Trust House Award
Royal Ballet drawings
- 1963 First exhibition in USA
- 1965 Nine week visit to Mexico (returns February 1966)
- 1966 Major depressive breakdown
May, death of daughter Sara

- 1967 Adoption of daughter Rebekah (Becci), age 6 months
- 1968 Produces Kirov Ballet series
Invited to open Scottish Arts Council exhibition *New Painting in Glasgow 1940-46*
- 1971 Family moves to Hundon, Suffolk, 20 miles north-west of previous home
- 1972 Moves from Suffolk back to Edith Road, London; this remains Herman's home for the rest of his life
Several visits to New York
- 1972-74 Nini and children move to London; but live in Barnes
- 1975 Nini and children join him in Edith Road
Publication of autobiography *Related Twilights* (revised edition published in 2002)
- 1981 Awarded OBE for services to British art
- 1982 Purchases house next door; two properties are knocked into one and garden is created
- 1987 Death of Catriona
Birth of first grandchild, Rebecca
- 1989 Birth of second grandchild, Katya
Trip to Egypt (January)
- 1990 Trip to Tunisia (spring) and to Corfu (June)
Elected Honorary Senior Royal Academician
- 1992 Awarded Silver Medal by Contemporary Art Society for Wales (for international artist living in Wales)
Visit to Taos, New Mexico
- 1994 Birth of third grandchild, Josef
- 1999 Publication of limited edition artist's book *Song of the Migrant Bird*
- 2000 Dies in London, 19 February, age 89
21 May, memorial service held at St. James's Church, Piccadilly, London
12 December: Auction of Josef Herman Collection of African Art, Christie's, Amsterdam
- 2005 May Day, Josef Herman Art Foundation established in Ystradgynlais

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Josef Herman, *Pruning the Vines*, 1952-3



Josef Herman, *Untitled*, 1985-6

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