



**Jankel Adler (1895 - 1948)**

### **The Artist**

Circa: 1927

100.33 x 65 cm (39 1/4 x 25 5/8 inches)

1927

Broad-shouldered and thin-waisted, Jankel Adler in this self-portrait could easily be mistaken for a boxer or circus strongman rather than an artist from a Hassidic background. A contemporary of his wrote “He was of a small, tough stature, unforgotten are the beautifully formed head with the curly black hair and the dark brown eyes of the Oriental, which always looked so melancholy yet also had something questioning and probing about them.”

Born in 1895 in Tuszyn near Lodz, Poland, the eighth of twelve children, Adler received early training from an uncle, an engraver in Belgrade, followed by schooling in applied arts in Barmen, Germany. He spent 1918-19 back in Lodz, exhibiting with the Jung Jiddische (Young Yiddish) artist group and contributing to the magazine they published. While in Poland, Adler grew a beard, spoke Yiddish and wore Hassidic clothing. Adler’s attempt to combine the innovations of the European avant-garde with Jewish subjects and motifs became a lifelong goal.

Unlike many Eastern European Jewish artists who chose to work in Paris, Adler returned to Germany in 1920, establishing himself in Düsseldorf by 1921. The prominent artistic personalities there were Otto Dix and the gallery owner Johanna Ey. Adler exhibited with the Young Rhineland group that was based in Ey's gallery, and had contacts with artistic circles in Cologne and Berlin.

The Artist is a rare, large scaled figural work to survive from these years. A move away from expressionist subjects and styles – a return to order or classicism – was common throughout Europe in the twenties, exemplified by Picasso's heavy limbed, slow moving figures. Here, Adler added sand to his pigment to suggest a plaster wall and introduced a shadow that is incised with the back of his brush. The shallow background with a fragment of decorative wainscoting and incongruous shutters – one painted white with floating clouds – intensify the quiet drama.

Equally astonishing is the frank sensuality of the figure. Adler wears a striped shirt, baggy trousers and a bowler hat stuck with a flower. His large hands and powerful torso – painted with expressive brush strokes – cannot hide a self-mocking irony. This playful and tender humor, both with himself and the world around him, was surely helpful to a Polish Jewish artist in Germany.

After working alongside Paul Klee at the Düsseldorf Academy of Art, Adler left Germany in 1933 never to return. He traveled in France, Poland, Russia, the Balkans and Spain, before joining the Polish Army in 1940. Evacuated after the battle of Dunkirk, Adler was in Glasgow for two years before moving to London where he continued to paint and exhibit, the only survivor of his family.

### **Exhibitions**

Städtische Kunsthalle Düsseldorf; The Tel Aviv Museum and Muzeum Sztuki, Łódz,

November 1985 - April 1986, Jankel Adler, no. 26 (illustrated).

London, Barbican Art Gallery, Chagall to Kitaj, Jewish Experience in 20th Century Art, October 1990 - January 1991, p. 47, (illustrated, fig. 34). □ p. 184, no. 9

Wuppertal, Von Der Heydt-Museum, Jankel Adler und die avantgarde, April 15 – August 12, 2018, cover, p. 289.

### **Literature:**

"Picasso in Yiddish," Bamahane, 8 January 1986 (illustrated).