



Ilona Singer (Budapest 1905 - Auschwitz 1944)

Still Life with Cacti, Rubber Plant and Ball of Wool

Circa: 1928

Ilona Singer was born into a German-speaking Jewish family in Budapest, the youngest daughter of Arnold and Emilie Singer. From 1923 to 1925 she studied in Berlin at the United State Schools for Fine and Applied Art. Under the influence of Alexander Kanoldt, Singer developed her own New Objectivity (Neue Sachlichkeit) style. In 1925/26, she took study trips to Switzerland, Italy and France in and spent several months in Rome.

Singer was a member of the Association of Women Artists in Berlin and exhibited for the first time at the Great Berlin Art Exhibition in 1927. In the autumn of 1930, she took part in an exhibition at the Prague Secession. At the end of the 1930s she married Felix Weinberger and moved with him to his hometown of Hodonín (now the Czech Republic). In 1943 Ilona Singer and her family were deported to Theresienstadt and then, in May 1944, to Auschwitz where they were murdered.

Our still life features a rubber plant whose broad leaves, glassy to the touch, unite two cacti. In front of gray wall, three clay pots – a hallmark of the artist – have an isolated gravity relieved by the blue fabric, pink wool and green table with open drawer.

A chic and original lifestyle accessory, cactuses appeared regularly in Neue Sachlichkeit still lifes. First introduced by Giorgio Morandi in 1917, they combined the exotic with the ornament-free aesthetic of modernism. While portraying their varied shapes and textures, Singer, unlike her contemporaries, used pastel colors appropriate for knitting, a feminine chore.

Newspaper articles in the archives of the Jewish Museum in Prague suggest that Singer was respected during her lifetime. The author of a review of the Berlin gallery exhibition "Czechoslovakian Painting: Exhibition at Wiltshchek" wrote: "Ilona Singer is very talented, whose flowerpot still lifes, with their particularly fine nuances, reveal a remarkable taste." Likewise, in the newspaper article "Berlin Autumn Exhibitions," one reads: "The 'Association of Women Artists in Berlin' has prepared a pleasant surprise for us with an autumn exhibition in the newly renovated rooms of its building on Schöneberger Ufer. (...) Ilona Singer brings a subtle 'New Objectivity' to her delightful still lifes."

Eight paintings by Singer survive, including three still-lives: Still-Life with Cacti (1930) in the Jewish Museum Prague (inv. no. 082.222) and Still-Life with Cacti and Rubber Plant (1929) auctioned at Karl & Faber, Munich in December 2024. Ours is the earliest work of this group.

Singer was forgotten until the 1990s. A selection of her small oeuvre was presented in 2024 in the exhibition "New Realisms" organized by the Prague Municipal Gallery.

Singer's painting has a formal balance and joyful naivete. It is a rare survival that hints at a goodness soon to be erased.

Exhibitions

Great Berlin Art Exhibition, Bellevue Palace, Berlin 1929, cat. no. 148.