

Max Oppenheimer (Vienna 1885 - New York 1954)

The Hess Quartet

Circa: 1914

“A rhythm pulses through the work,

flowing through the hands of the musicians,

through the violins and bows,

bringing both beat and tone into exquisite hearing.”

Georgi Walter, 1914

Hidden from public view for ninety years, Max Oppenheimer’s monumental painting The Hess Quartet can finally be admired in the original once again. Last exhibited publicly at the Vienna Secession in January 1936, the work was considered lost for decades. Its rediscovery is undoubtedly an art-historical sensation, the painting standing as a pioneering milestone at the very beginning of Max Oppenheimer’s “cult of the musical” (Thomas Mann) – his epochal achievement of translating an acoustic, auditory experience into a painterly, visual one.

Max Oppenheimer and Music

Max Oppenheimer grew up in a Viennese home steeped in the arts, learning the violin at an early age. Through his father, the music publisher Ludwig Oppenheimer, he came into early contact with celebrated composers such as Johannes Brahms. His artistic path, however, led him to painting. He

studied in Vienna and Prague, where he was influenced by Impressionism and the Secessionist style. Returning to Vienna in 1908, he soon became a sought-after portraitist, capturing among others the musicians Arnold Schönberg and Anton Webern. He maintained a close, mutually inspiring dialogue with Oskar Kokoschka and Egon Schiele, with whom he temporarily shared a studio. In 1912, he was granted an exhibition at Paul Cassirer in Berlin and moved to the German capital. Working as an illustrator for the left-wing journal Die Aktion by Franz Pfemfert, he mastered the technique of etching, subsequently promoting numerous of his oil paintings as prints.

New inspiration: Cubism and Futurism

In Berlin Oppenheimer was fascinated by the wealth of international exhibitions, which helped to expand his artistic vision. At his Sturm gallery, Herwath Walden presented works of Italian Futurism and French Cubism by the likes of Boccioni, Balla, Severini and Picasso and Georges Braque, while the Neue Secession in Berlin showcased works of the Brücke painters. Oppenheimer started to experiment with Cubist elements as a new stylistic tool to make the pictorial content more intense and dynamic to experience. In the portraits of the actress Tilla Durieux or of Heinrich Mann, these Cubist splinter-forms emerged in the background for the first time. In the painting The Operation (1912), they dictated the dynamic rhythm of the depiction throughout. It was here that he first developed that circular composition of people around a central point, which he would later adopt for his paintings of musicians. The culmination arrived at the newly founded Freie Secession in Berlin in 1914, where MOPP presented his first musical work: The Hess Quartet, also known as String Quartet I.

The Hess Quartet

Willy Hess (1859–1939) was one of Germany's most celebrated violinists and a gifted pedagogue. As a student of Joseph Joachim in Berlin, he carried forward his new violin tradition, embarking on a remarkable musical career: concertmaster in Frankfurt am Main and in Rotterdam, and a teacher of violin in Cologne and at the Royal Academy of Music in London. In 1904, he became a concertmaster and soloist for the Boston Symphony Orchestra, where he also founded the Boston Symphony Quartet. Following the death of Carl Halir in 1910, Hess succeeded him as professor of violin at the Royal Academy of Music in Berlin and took over the leadership of Halir's established string quartet as first violinist. Emil Kornsad played second violin, Emil Herrmann viola, and Hugo Dechert cello. Willy Hess performed on a violin crafted by Giovanni Battista Guadagnini. Oppenheimer, however, did not depict the quartet in a purely realistic manner: on the violoncello, he immortalised Max Baldner, who had not yet joined the Klingler Quartet until 1916.

Max Oppenheimer likely met the musician shortly after his arrival in Berlin. It is safe to assume that he attended the quartet's concerts numerous times, closely studying the players and their hands. Since music could only be experienced live at the time, posture, movement, and the intense, concentrated gazes of the musicians were inextricably linked to the auditory experience. Oppenheimer, who played the violin himself and owned an Amati, also understood the internal processes and technical skills of the musicians. Thomas Mann, enthralled by the "incredible acoustic effect" of MOPP's musical paintings, astutely observed: "That is exactly how violinists sit when playing, how the left hand grips the fingerboard, how the right wrist bends, and how the head is held…" In their exaggerated, sinewy anatomy and overemphasised knuckles, the hands also recall the expressive, lean, long-fingered limbs found in Egon Schiele's portraits (Puttkamer 1990).

The Acoustic Power of Painting

The Hess Quartet marks the beginning of Oppenheimer's intensive, lifelong preoccupation with

capturing the visual and almost sonic essence of musicians and ensembles. His time in Switzerland between 1915 and 1924 brought about a deepened painterly engagement with musical themes. In 1915, the Klingler Quartet was created, focusing the composition entirely on the choreography of the hands. This was followed in 1921 by the Rosé Quartet, which adopted the composition and facial expressions of the Hess Quartet in an “economical” manner, whilst reducing the Cubist elements in favour of a more objective, realistic style.

In The Hess Quartet, however, Cubist and Futurist elements reign supreme. Prismatically splintered facets dissolve classical perspective and energise the pictorial plane. White sheet music and the rich ochre and brownish-red tones of the instruments lift themselves out from an anthracite background in an intricate, vibrant interplay. The musical staves themselves appear to dance across the pages, and, alongside the bows pointing in opposing directions, brilliantly convey the intoxicating rush of the music. Jagged, luminous auroras hovering above the musicians’ heads, and lightning-like flashes emanating from the eyes of the second violinist, bear witness to the profound internal tension and emotional arousal. This was a stylistic device Oppenheimer – just like Schiele – had discovered in Vienna, stimulated by Rudolf Steiner’s Theosophical teachings.

MOPP was fully aware of the significance of his string quartet painting, making it one of his very first etchings in 1915, printed in a limited edition of 50.

The Odyssey of the Painting: From Avant-Garde to Persecution

Like no other canvas, The Hess Quartet seems to have accompanied the artist throughout his path. He featured it in almost every major exhibition after 1914: first at the Berlin Secession, then in 1915 – coinciding with his emigration to Switzerland – at the Kunstsalon Wolfsberg and the Kunsthalle in Zürich, as well as in Basel and Geneva. It then returned to Berlin, in 1924 finally to Vienna’s Hagenbund, and travelled onward to Prag. Although the Caspari Gallery in Munich and Paul Cassirer in Berlin attempted to sell the painting during solo exhibitions in 1925/26, it remained in the artist’s personal possession. In 1932, he submitted it to the autumn exhibition at the Vienna Künstlerhaus, and retrieved it in the spring of 1933. The painting was seen for the last time at the spring exhibition at the Secession in 1935, this time marked as not for sale.

The Bohemian-born businessman Arnold Glück acquired the painting between 1933 and 1935 in Vienna. Since 1926 Glück had been on the executive board of Hermann Pollack’s Söhne (H.P.S.), the most important textile enterprise of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and possessed the purchasing power required for such a monumental work. Max Oppenheimer was exceptionally well-connected within the Jewish bourgeoisie from the beginning of his artistic career, routinely finding dedicated collectors and patrons within these culturally minded circles. While the artist managed to flee just in time in the fateful year of 1938, escaping via Zürich to the United States, Arnold Glück relocated with the company's headquarters to his home town of Česká Třebová in June 1938 . In 1939, the National Socialists expropriated the textile firm. Tragically, Arnold Glück died in 1944 at the “Small Fortress” in Terezin. The painting survived the Nazi regime in the possession of his widow, Anna Glück. Following her death in 1970, the masterpiece was bequeathed to a distant relative, remaining in private hands until its extraordinary recent rediscovery.

Exhibitions

Berlin, Erste Ausstellung der Freien Secession, 1914, no. 178

Zürich, Max Oppenheimer, Kunstsalon Wolfsberg, 1915, no. 1

Zürich, Max Oppenheimer, Kunsthaus, February / March 1917, no. 80

Basel, Mai-Exhibition, Kunsthalle, May 1917, no. 127

Geneva, Exposition MOPP, Galerie Moos, 1919, no. 1, ill. p. 7

Vienna, Kollektivausstellung Max Oppenheimer. MOPP, Künstlerbund Hagen, 1924, no. 17

Prague, Sonderausstellung Max Oppenheimer et. al., Kunstverein für Böhmen in Prag , Künstlerhaus Rudolphinum-Parlament, 1924, lot 10

Vienna, Bund österreichischer Künstler, VI. Kunstschau, no. 337

Munich, Max Oppenheimer. MOPP, Galerie Caspari, 1925/26, no. 3 (label on the reverse)

Berlin, Max Oppenheimer. MOPP, Paul Cassirer, 1926, no. 8

Vienna, Herbstausstellung, Künstlerhaus, 1932/1933, cat. no. 122 (label on the reverse)

Vienna, Kollektivausstellung MOPP, CXXXIX. Exhibition, Secession, lot 35

Literature:

Georgi Walter, Freie Secession Berlin 1914 in: Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration, vol. 34, 1914, ill. p. 163

Lex Voix, vol. 12, 1920, ill. p. 487

Pages d'Art, 1923, ill.

Max Osborn, „MOPP", in: Veröffentlichungen des Kunstarchivs, no. 25/26, Berlin, p. 7, ill. p. 33

Wilhelm Kleefeld, Kammermusik einst und jetzt, in: Velhagen Klasings Monatshefte, 43, vol. 1, 1928/29, ill. p. 340

Österreichische Kunst, 6/1935, vol. 12, ill. p. 9

Tobias Natter, MOPP. Max Oppenheimer, Jüdisches Museum, Vienna, exh. catalogue, Vienna 1994, ill. p. 29