

Editorial: Exile and Migration in Regional Collections

This special issue discusses the role that the diverse experiences of migration play in shaping our regional collections and why this matters. Before introducing the articles featured in this issue, I discuss the how a new painting acquisition to the Barber Institute of Fine Arts and the National Gallery, opens up ongoing discussions as to how people and artworks can help us explore migration histories.

Camilla Smith

We encounter a confident, dark-haired young man, seated on a red chair, set against a neutral-coloured background (fig.1). We focus solely on this intriguing sitter – there are no background details that vie for our attention. The sitter is well dressed in a high-collared white shirt with necktie, a dark-coloured waistcoat and suit jacket. He appears learned, yet affable; eyeglasses sit neatly on his nose. A prominent moustache and dark eyebrows frame his face. In this $\frac{3}{4}$ length portrait, the painting ends just below the sitter's jacket breast pocket and his right arm. The thumb of his right hand appears to rest – somewhat formally – on the lapel of his jacket. The portrait is of the German-Jewish physician, Dr Ferdinand Mainzer, aged twenty-eight years old. It was painted by the renowned German modernist artist, Lovis Corinth, in 1899, and whose signature in the left-hand corner, asserts the artist's unmistakable presence.

Mainzer was a successful physician who worked as a gynaecologist in Berlin's new *Frauenklinik* (Women's Hospital) set up in 1892. It was not just in matters of culture that Berlin was leading the way in the late nineteenth, early twentieth centuries. In sexual reform politics, the city too was making its mark. Corinth's portrait of Mainzer reveals nothing about his profession, his passions or tastes. But it nonetheless depicts a man clearly in command of his field through his resolute composure and confident gaze. Despite the sitter's seemingly quiet demeanour, Mainzer's gently flushed cheeks signal a rich emotional life with many interests. Beyond medicine, Mainzer was a deeply cultured man, who had amassed a collection of classical antiquities, and to the amazement of the German writer,

Carl Zuckmayer, was able to converse in classical Greek and Latin as if it were an everyday language!¹ He also fostered numismatic and zoological interests – and kept a large aviary.

The Jewish liberal middle classes were important patrons of the arts in Germany at this time. The support of the arts propelled them toward the goal of being ‘more German’.² Mainzer was himself born in southern Germany – as were his parents. This important cultural status would quickly change, however, after the National Socialists assumed power in March 1933. The artist of Mainzer’s portrait, Lovis Corinth, had been dead nearly eight years. Yet this did not stop the party branding his artworks ‘degenerate’. His works were removed from public collections and displayed in the 1937 ‘Degenerate Art Exhibition’ that defamed modern German art.³

During the 1930s, Mainzer spent increasing amounts of time at the house of his good friend, the Nazi resistor and political moderate, Wilhelm Solf. Solf died in 1936, but his wife went on to preside over a group of anti-Nazi intellectuals at her salons in Berlin. This group of intellectuals – known as the ‘Solf-Kreis’ (Solf Circle), hid Jews and provided documents to smuggle them out of Germany.⁴ And it was eventually through Solf, that the Mainzer family were able to gain safe passage as German-Jewish refugees to Britain. When exactly they arrived is unknown. But Mainzer would set sail to New York from Southampton in May 1939. He would remain in the States until he died in 1943, aged 71. Some of the Mainzer family paintings also found safe passage to Britain, potentially from the United States, including the portrait that is now owned jointly by the Barber Institute of Fine Arts and the National Gallery. Exactly how and when it arrived in Britain is still unclear.

Corinth’s portrait reveals the diverse ways in which migration narratives have shaped, and continue to shape, our regional collections. Not only is it a portrait of a Jewish exile, forced to flee Germany, the painting itself, potentially moved between continents and survived. Like some of the other objects discussed in the articles in this issue, therefore, the painting is testament to the perilous, but nonetheless innovative ways in which objects were preserved during extreme political situations, and found their way into our public collections.

The articles in this issue span a wide range of art objects and geographical location, but are bound by their discussion of how migration – forced or otherwise – has informed the way works are conceived, received and acquired by galleries and museums. Elizabeth Lamle discusses how the innovative gallery displays at The New Art Gallery Walsall showcase the network of émigrés in Britain around Jacob Epstein, that informed his own artwork and the international perspectives found in his collection. This collection, she argues, acts as an important way of opening up Black Country migration histories, with its largest Punjabi community in England outside of London. For example, the spiritual teacher *Rabindranath Tagore* (1861–1941), a Bengali polymath – poet, writer, composer, philosopher, painter, and social reformer – inspired the work of Epstein and the early education of his fellow artist friend, Lucian Freud, which Lamle explores in more detail.

Carolyn Bushell examines the ways in which exile, migration, and inner emigration, intersect with gender. Women artists and collectors are crucial in the formation of Leicester Museum and Art Gallery’s modern German art collection. Together, works by women artists demonstrate the complex positionality those affected took in relation to an authoritarian regime. Some artists fled and record the experience of internment in their works, others remained in the country as ‘inner émigrés’, taking up a position of quiet dissent in their artworks.

Adi Noy traces the different ways in which migration has informed works from the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum in Coventry, by bringing together artworks and objects in a virtual art trail. From video interviews by Sophie Ernst exploring personal stories recalling the forced migration from India in 1947 as a result of the partition, to Sofia Karmin’s work of protest regarding the oppressive treatment of East Asian migrants in the UK today, Noy reminds us the extent to which contemporary art is an important means of foregrounding migrant voices. In a conversation with contemporary photographer and publisher, Chris Neophytou, Camilla Smith asks how far his Greek-Cypriot roots inform his photographic practice and particular interest in capturing Birmingham and the West Midlands. The centrality of ‘place’ is crucial to Neophytou’s work, which has grown, in part, from his being second-generation diaspora. Objects – like fig trees, for example, are planted in the West Midlands in order to maintain a connection to ‘home’ in a new place. Neophytou explores

the positive ramifications of migration, in terms of the choice of movement from one place to another.

The articles in this issue demonstrate that the movement of people across borders and between countries and cultures is certainly not new. Yet as I write this, mass forced migration as a result of conflict and colonial encounters continues unabated. Fighting in Sudan has forced some 100,00 people, including Sudanese as well as (returning) refugees and migrants from other countries – to leave the country since the conflict began on 15 April 2023. The major escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian War, which began in 2014, with renewed Russian invasion in February 2022, has seen almost six million individual refugees (from Ukraine) registered across Europe.⁵ As curators, educators, artists, practitioners, and writers, we have a duty, therefore, to continue to open up critical discussion of the experience of migration, in order to try to understand the complex and diverse experiences the movement of people has on our relationships to culture.

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Heartfelt thanks goes to Chris Neophytou who designed *Midlands Art Papers*, 6, (2023) as a publication with 'Out of Place Books' and to printer Joseph Lilley for producing the first hardcopy issue of the journal.

List of Images and Captions:

Fig.1 Lovis Corinth, *Portrait of Dr Ferdinand Mainzer* (1899), oil on canvas, 75 cm x 58 cm
Accepted in lieu of Inheritance Tax by HM Government from the estates of Evan and Gisela Stone and allocated jointly to the National Gallery and the Barber Institute of Fine Arts
Image: © The National Gallery, London

Endnotes

¹ Carl Zuckmayer, *Als wär's ein Stück von mir – Horen der Freundschaft* (Frankfurt: Fischer Verlag, 1975).

² Kerry Wallach, *Passing Illusions: Jewish Visibility in Weimar Germany* (University of Michigan Press, 2017).

³ For Corinth's inclusion: Stephanie Barron ed., '*Degenerate Art: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany*' (Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1992).

⁴ Peter J. Hemenstall & Paula Tanaka Mochida, *The Lost Man: Wilhelm Solf in German History* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2005).

⁵ <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine/location?secret=unhcrrestricted> (Accessed 3 June 2023).