

HERMANN GROSS: 1904-1988

Hermann Gross was born on the 4th February 1904 in Lahr in Germany which is located less than 10 miles from the French border. This geographical proximity appears to have had a profound effect upon Gross's subsequent life for in many respects Gross saw himself as more French than German in his outlook. When he was six his parents moved to Stuttgart where he became a pupil at the Realgymnasium. From the age of twelve he had lessons in painting and drawing. His father, who had a publishing business, decided that in order to become an artist, Gross would first need a solid grounding in a practical profession. He insisted that his wish be respected: so from 1919 until 1925 Gross attended the Kunstgewerbeschule (Arts and Crafts School), where he learned to become a gold- and silver-smith.

What is significant about the series of apprenticeships served by Gross in these early years is that they were spent, without exception, with some of the most eminent European practitioners in their respective fields. At the Kunstgewerbeschule he was a pupil of Paul Haustein one of a number of leading German designers who worked in a freelance capacity for WMF (Württembergische Metallwarenfabrik). In 1925 Gross enrolled on a one-year course in engraving and metal-chasing run by Waldemar Raemisch at the State Academy of Fine and Applied Arts in Berlin. Working between the two world wars Raemisch had designed, among other things: currency; public memorials; and the bronze eagles at the entrance to the Olympic Stadium in Berlin. In 1926 Gross moved to Paris where he worked with Robert Wlérick whose work had been greatly admired by Guillaume Apollinaire and Auguste Rodin.

Gross had his circle of friends in Paris - mostly young people at the beginning of their artistic careers. Among them was Jean-Louis Barrault, who went on to become one of France's most distinguished actors and directors. It is known that Gross, who lived in Montparnasse, knew both Picasso and Matisse. And it seems highly probable, given the number of years Gross spent in this small Paris district, that he was also acquainted with Chagall, Modigliani and Braque. In 1929 Gross exhibited at the Salon d'Automne in Paris a metal sculpture entitled *Portrait de jeune fille repoussé sur cuivre*

Gross left Paris in 1935 and returned to Berlin. His studio became a meeting place for many people with similar interests. The women journalists Trude Sand and Martha Hillers belonged to this circle of friends. Martha was the anonymous author of *A Woman in Berlin: Eight Weeks in the Conquered City - A Diary* which described the horrors that war brought to the lives of the women in Soviet-occupied Berlin. This book has recently been reprinted and is a bestseller in the USA and UK.

In 1940 Gross was called up and for part of the war served in Hermann Goering's Luftwaffe propaganda unit which was stationed in Paris. His selection would almost certainly have resulted from his specialist knowledge and expertise. Gross's work in the propaganda unit involved him in a wide variety of activities including making sketches of the Atlantic Wall. Towards the end of the war, Gross was posted to Poland and Russia, where he served as a guard for a command headquarters. There he had to endure bitterly cold winters with inadequate clothing and equipment. It is not known how he managed to return to Germany after the collapse of the Eastern Front and the subsequent rout of the German army.

Gross returned from the war in a very poor psychological condition. In 1948 he married Hildegard Rath, a painter, author, teacher and lecturer, and moved with her to the USA living in New York and Vermont. It was in the USA that a long productive period of religious painting began. A number of his paintings were exhibited at the Macbeth Gallery in New York in 1948. In the review of Gross' second Macbeth Gallery exhibition, Alice Louchheim, the art critic for *The New York Times* and the recognised doyenne of New York art critics, saw Gross as a true descendant of the German Expressionist movement, where distortion and exaggeration are used for powerful emotional effect.

A feature of German Expressionism which is clearly evident in Gross's work is the use of intense colour, agitated brushstrokes and disjointed space. He does not attempt to portray objective reality but rather his emotions and responses to objects and events that excite him. It is a highly subjective, personal and spontaneous form of expression. More important to Gross than achieving harmony and form was the need to achieve the highest emotional intensity so that the paintings reflect his state of mind rather than the reality of the external world. We know from his notebooks that he was influenced by the work of such Expressionists as Wassily Kandinsky, Oskar Kokoschka and George Rouault.

However, Gross never quite succeeded in adjusting to America. On returning to Germany he turned up at the home of his friend Hans Haustein in Stuttgart. It was clear that he had lost hope and confidence and was at his wits' end. Haustein wondered how he could help. He then remembered Trude Sand, a journalist who had been a member of Gross' circle of friends in Berlin. By chance Haustein had recently heard her when one of her programmes for children had been broadcast by Radio Stuttgart. By a miracle he found her telephone number and invited her to come round and see Gross. Haustein was convinced that this meeting would prove to be immensely important. And so it proved. Gross did not return to New York. He and Trude Sand rented a studio together. They both continued their work independently and then they moved in together. As soon as they received the divorce certificate from USA they got married.

Camphill

Life seemed settled until a friend of Trude who lived in Scotland happened to show Dr Karl Koenig, the founder of the Camphill Movement, some of Gross's work. After some time had elapsed a meeting was arranged between Koenig and Gross. They were eventually to meet on the shore of Lake Zürich. In 1963 to the total bewilderment of all his friends, Gross decided to leave Stuttgart and move to Scotland. The time spent living and working in the Camphill community was the last chapter in Gross's biography.

Gross lived in Camphill very much as an artist in residence. Working in this setting became a source of inspiration to him, and those who lived in the community. Both for the founders of Camphill and for Gross, the search for new social forms was never an abstract idea - it was an urgent necessity. As the community gave his work new life, so he offered new life to the community. It had always been one of the aims of the founders of Camphill to foster social art. Gross began a process whereby people were challenged to look at their surroundings in a new way. This stimulated an interest in what was put on the walls in houses and meeting rooms, and in the gardens. Gross made a significant contribution to the community's understanding of the purpose and value of art, not simply by making his work available to the community, but by ensuring that the art-making process itself was accessible and visible and not some precious and exclusive activity. In essence, he was engaged in the demystification of the process - but not of the product.

Gross made clear that he did not consciously set out to paint in an abstract manner. What he sought to do was to simplify the connections between the various elements of a picture and then slowly crystallise them into their simplest form. He would then search in that abstract form for the subject that lay dormant there. He might see a head and then, only then, would he put in a symbol for it. For Gross this was the critical moment. He then gradually progressed from the abstract construction of the coloured areas and lines to the creation of a face. Gross constantly questioned his own methods: in particular the way in which different colours could be employed, their interaction with each other as well as within the total structure of the work.

Gross's work is unique in one particular respect in that there are relatively few examples of children as subjects in either classical or modern art. Usually children are incidental or background figures. Not only does Gross take children as his principal subjects, but he goes one step further and encourages the viewer to reflect upon the transient nature of childhood and all the vulnerabilities

inherent in it. Gross, like Koenig, was aware that the kind of social renewal they sought could only be achieved by creating a world that was more responsive to the needs of the child. This is what constitutes social art, where the medium is being used to convey an ethical message, not simply about how one should care for and protect children but how societies, in general, should treat all vulnerable groups. The challenge for the artist here is to be able to convey that message without recourse to the cloyingly sentimental images that characterised much of Victorian art when attempting to address the theme of childhood.

Whilst the content of his paintings has a particular resonance within the context of a Camphill community, it can be argued that their message needs to be communicated to a far wider audience. The question arises as to why Gross's work is not more widely known. Part of the answer lies in his decision to spend the latter part of his life in a Camphill community in Scotland. When Gross came to Scotland he abandoned a career in the ordinary sense of the word, for a large part of an ordinary artist's life is taken up trying to find a market for his work. Freed from concerns about remuneration, Gross no longer saw his works as commodities for sale.

The time is long overdue for Gross's great talents as a painter and sculptor to be more generally recognised. Whilst no extravagant claim is being made that Gross was a major artist on the same level as his more celebrated contemporaries in the Paris of the 1920s and 1930s, he was, nevertheless, highly original and gifted. And his most productive period appears to have been when he was working modestly as an artist in a Camphill community in the North East of Scotland remote from the artistic and intellectual heartlands of Paris and Berlin.

And it was in this Camphill community that Hermann Gross died on 1st September 1988.

This is an abridged and edited version of an article that was published in the *Aberdeen University Review* (LXI, 4, 262-278; 2006) entitled '*Hermann Gross: an artist's odyssey from Berlin via Paris to Bieldside*'.

Further information about Hermann Gross can be found in:

Robin Jackson (Ed.) (2008) *Hermann Gross: Art and Soul*, Edinburgh: Floris Books.

Robin Jackson (2011) Hermann Gross: subversive Luftwaffe artist. *War, Literature & the Arts: An International Journal of Humanities*. 23.

Robin Jackson (2009) Representation of children in art: Hermann Gross, *Relational Child and Youth Care Practice*, 22(3), 20-29.

Robin Jackson (2008) Hermann Gross: War Artist, *Scottish Society for Art History Newsletter*, 4-7, Spring/Summer.

Robin Jackson (2007) Remembering Hermann Gross (1904-1988), *Camphill Correspondence*, 3-4, May/June, (Special issue on Hermann Gross)