

LIFE AND WORKS

Herbert Fiedler (1891–1962)

A Painter's Years of Travel: Fiedler in Berlin and Paris

The roots of his art are in eastern Germany, in his native town of Leipzig and in Dresden where he attended the Royal Academy of Art. Herbert Fiedler was already drawing and painting at the age of eleven. When he finished school, he studied at the Academy in Dresden. While he made friends with some artists during those years, it was not a very fruitful time in terms of his artistic development. From the start, Fiedler's real school was drawing and painting in the open, and discussions with his student friends including George Grosz. In 1912, he briefly shared a flat and studio in Berlin with the latter. They would roam the capital together, drawing the streets, strollers, citizens and prostitutes in their sketchbooks.

In 1913 Fiedler went to Paris, at the time the Mecca of art. There he made friends with the graphic artist Otto Schoff; together with him and George Grosz, who visited him, they made life drawings in the renowned Académie Colarossi. Throughout his life, nude painting was to remain an important theme for Fiedler; countless pencil studies testify to this fascination and his mastery as a draughtsman. In Paris, as in Berlin, he particularly liked going to the suburbs, recording his impressions of the outskirts "where the city ebbs away, where the gasworks are, and old dilapidated huts, new buildings, allotments, railway workshops. An area which I love, which I also loved when I was young." (Fiedler in his diary, 30 March 1942). Towards the end of his period in Paris, he made friends with the painters Karl Hofer and Jules Pascin and was to have received a grant from the Hamburg ship owner's daughter and sculptress Hedwig Jaenichen-Woermann – with whom he had become acquainted through the Swiss sculptor August Suter. But the First World War broke out at this promising point in his life and he had to return to Germany in a hurry. Fiedler was conscripted and returned to Berlin wounded.

The Twenties were not particularly golden years for Fiedler, and at times he kept his head above water by working for the UFA film studios. At the same time, he took part in the Sezession exhibitions and moved in well-known artistic circles. His style of painting became freer and displayed Expressionist influences: a spontaneous, expressive manner predominates in the café pictures, portraits and nude paintings of this time. Together with the sculptor Kurt Radtke – with whom he travelled to Italy in 1926 – Fiedler developed "stone painting" at the beginning of the Thirties; this was a fresco-like technique that caused a sensation in Berlin and earned him a very positive review from Karl Scheffler. In 1931, Fiedler returned to Paris for several months and met his future wife, the Swiss painter Amrey Balsiger.

Artistic Maturity and the War Years: The Netherlands

In 1934 Herbert Fiedler turned his back on fascist Germany. In the Netherlands, he had to practically start from scratch. Until 1940 he lived in the artists' village of Laren close to Amsterdam, where Max Liebermann, William Singer, Piet Mondrian and many others had lived before him. Fiedler, however, had arrived at the wrong time and suffered considerably from the artistic isolation he now found himself in. He missed being in touch with the art of his time and discussions with like-minded people such as he had always known in Paris and Berlin. Holland was and remained a place of exile for him. He loved his own country very much, and regularly commented on its transformation into a fascist, totalitarian state by exclaiming "ma pauvre patrie!" in his diary.

Laren, though, was where he first developed his own individual style. Before his departure from Berlin he had, as a precaution, destroyed his diaries from about 1917 to 1933, and he now also seemed keen to make a clean sweep in his painting. The themes of this period, as a result of his situation, were mainly landscapes, self-portraits, portraits of his wife Amrey and groups outdoors. Like Otto Dix, the painter of people (also born in 1891 and a student at the Dresden Academy), Fiedler might also have said: "I have been banished to landscapes". For Fiedler, however, this was far from a punishment as there was much he could do with the Dutch landscape, with its barns, village streets and houses and vast skies. His pictures from this period are occasionally reminiscent of van Gogh: he draws his subject dynamically and forcefully, and fixes it with rough brushstrokes and shining coloured surfaces. The main precursors of this

type of painting are French, with Cézanne, Degas, Daumier and Rouault coming to mind. It was Fiedler's goal to accomplish an ultimately "spontaneous" effect by means of a thorough mastery of composition: "Everything in a picture is about building forms with colour" (Diary, 25 April 1942). For him, the prerequisite for the ease and confidence he desired was the art of drawing, which he practised unceasingly. His extreme self-criticism was surely one reason why he had to wait so long for success: he was not able to "sell" himself with enough self-confidence, and repeatedly scratched his pictures off with a wire brush in order to repaint them. In his eyes, a picture was almost never finished. With his type of painting, he fundamentally bypassed all the artistic trends of his age, and even in the Berlin of the Twenties this had ensured a certain isolation. Fiedler's "realism" is also timeless in the sense that it is rooted in the great European tradition of representational painting. One of his characteristics is a constant search for a new visual idiom, for new means of expression. In the process, his themes are as varied as his painting techniques: on the one hand classical genres such as nudes, portraits, landscapes, still lifes, on the other hand contemporary themes such as circus artistes, cafés, prostitutes, farmers' heads, and his family and groups outdoors, which Fiedler called "the small world".

Many of his pictures depict Amsterdam, the city where he lived from 1940 until his death in 1962. Initially his fortunes were still at a low ebb. During the War, Fiedler ended up in the strange position of being caught up with by the Third Reich which he had fled from, while at the same time many Dutch looked askance at him because he was German. But he also made friends during these first years in Amsterdam; these included a circle of (mainly younger) Dutch artists who looked up to Fiedler, together with other exiled Germans such as the poet Wolfgang Frommel, Max Beckmann with whom he had already become acquainted in Berlin in 1912, and Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildewart. In 1943, Beckmann painted a portrait of the four of them. During the War Fiedler became a member of "De Onafhankelijken" (The Independents), a group of Dutch artists, and in 1948 of the newly founded group, "De Realisten". Despite this, it was not always easy for him in the Netherlands: after the War he was forbidden to paint for a short while, and a fellow painter prevented him from taking part in an exhibition in the Stedelijk Museum in 1946. The Fiedlers were poor and in despair. Not until the beginning of the Fifties did he gradually become successful, and in 1962 he was finally to have his retrospective in the Stedelijk Museum. But it came too late: when the first preparations for the exhibition had already been made, Fiedler unexpectedly died of a heart attack. What was to have been a retrospective became a commemorative exhibition.

Herbert Fiedler: Bearing Witness to the Times in Pictures and Words

His was to a certain extent the classic fate of the artist: abject poverty, adverse circumstances, but despite this continually working and polishing away at an extremely individual style of painting, and finally true recognition not coming until the end of his life. Herbert Fiedler was a loner like George Grosz and Max Beckmann. They, however, had already made names for themselves in Germany in the Twenties; Fiedler, in contrast, was a late developer, and did not mature properly as an artist until he was in exile (while Grosz scarcely produced anything of significance in the United States). At first, however, there were other things to worry about in the Netherlands. Even later on, there was only limited interest in the art of this German immigrant. It fitted in better with his old rather than his new homeland, the Netherlands, where there was at times little leeway between photorealism and abstraction. By the time representational art was rediscovered in Neo-Expressionism, Fiedler was no longer alive.

Due to the circumstances of his life and the age he lived in, Herbert Fiedler was an extremely interesting witness to an eventful time: in Paris he experienced the heyday of the avant garde there, in Berlin the turmoil and artistic diversity of the Twenties, in the Netherlands the war years and the post-war controversy of abstract versus representational art. His personal experience of these things is reflected in his varied works and unmistakable style of painting. And it is also found in his diaries, which are most interesting documents of the age. Despite war and poverty, artistic isolation and family crises, Fiedler never stopped painting. For him, painting was more than an occupation or means of communication, it was a necessity.

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