



Gloria Köpnick **Unrestrained, the light floods and foams – how Emil Nolde created a sea of colour with his “Asteren”**

In a riot of red, pink, and purple, white, and yellow, Emil Nolde depicts a sea of asters filling the entire canvas. Without needing to be meticulous in detail, the artist skillfully captures the characteristic shape of the flowers and leaves. The large flowers are arranged dynamically, almost in a spiral: light in the center, growing darker toward the edges. At the edges, the yellow blooms are still in bud. The viewer's gaze remains restless, wandering through the horizonless painting. An exceptionally powerful masterpiece by the North German Expressionist.

Even the artist's contemporaries were enthusiastic about the painting. After it was first shown in Weimar, it was part of the Nolde exhibition presented at the Leipzig Kunstverein from June 5 to July 3, 1921. In the "Leipziger Tageblatt," an enthusiastic review of the exhibition by Otto Holtze states: "Often, in a free-flowing manner, more improvisationally, he allows the colour values to separate, mix, and merge again, bursting into urgent, dynamically driven movement. He is inexhaustible in his invention of new combinations. How simple, beautiful, and powerful are his floral pieces, such as the dark red and blue asters that shine forth from the brown clod of earth!" (Otto Holtze: Leipzig Kunstverein. Emil Nolde – Schwedische Graphik, in: Leipziger Tageblatt No. 281, June 15, 1921). The young art historian Holtze, who had studied under Paul Frankl in Halle, was immediately smitten with Nolde's work. As an assistant at the Landesmuseum Oldenburg, he promoted the Expressionist's art and wrote the introductory text for the catalogue of the major Nolde exhibition in 1925 at the Augusteum in Oldenburg.

It seems to have been a similar story with the Mannheim museum director Fritz Wichert. Nolde had already promoted an exhibition in Mannheim as early as 1911 – apparently without success at first: "Perhaps my art is unknown to you, but I would like you to get to know it. At first I stood entirely alone with my vision, but gradually the circle of those who understand and appreciate it is growing" (Emil Nolde to Wichert, letter of March 6, 1911, Mannheim City Archives, Fritz Wichert Estate, Zug.22/1980, No. 562). And indeed: in 1919, Nolde's first solo exhibition took place in Mannheim. A second exhibition followed as early as November 20 through December 11, 1921. This marked the third time that year that our painting "Asteren" was included in an exhibition. The show was enthusiastically presented to the public: "Emil Nolde is one of the pioneers of modern art in Germany, particularly in the fields of painting and graphic art. [...] His later works – figurative scenes of a religious and secular nature, still lifes, and above all landscapes – demonstrate how the artist, through a strenuous struggle, arrived at a novel form of expressive art" (Mannheimer General-Anzeiger, No. 540, November 21, 1921, p. 4).

Our museum-quality painting was created in the summer of 1919. It was the first year of the young Weimar Republic. The signs pointed to a radical new beginning: as early as November of the previous year, the Workers' Council for Art had been founded, and Nolde was elected to its executive committee. With his war paintings, Otto Dix created shocking moments of the dawning New Objectivity. In April 1919, the State Bauhaus in Weimar opened, and with Höch, Hausmann, and Grosz, Berlin was becoming a center of Dadaism in those days. In the passionate spirit of the time, Emil Nolde was also discovered as a representative of a new,



Claude Monet. "Massif de chrysanthèmes". 1897. Oil/canvas. Kunstmuseum Basel

contemporary art: "In Nolde's paintings, the unleashed colours awaken to a fantastical life. [...] I know of nothing more magnificent than Nolde's maritime romanticism and garden lyricism. [...] Colour reigns unchecked and majestically. Light floods and foams uninhibitedly. [...] A Dionysian fireworks display of colour explodes with stunning intensity!" (Hans Harbeck: Emil Nolde, in: Deutsches Volkstum. Monthly Journal for German Intellectual Life, Vol. 21 (1919), March issue, pp. 93–95).

In these turbulent times, 52-year-old Nolde – apart from brief trips to Berlin, Dresden, and Hamburg – was drawn from May 1919 onward to the tranquility of Utenwarf near Tondern on the German-Danish border: "The garden at Utenwarf, sloping down the mound in a position at an angle to the sun, was particularly beautifully overgrown and unusually rich in flowers," recalls Emil Nolde of the farmhouse on the land bridge between the North Sea and the Baltic Sea, where the painter had moved with his wife Ada in 1916 (quoted from: Emil Nolde: Mein Leben, Cologne 2008, p. 361). "The bright red roses lay in waves down the south-facing slope, and above, around the narrow pond, which was teeming with fish, the most beautiful perennials bloomed," he writes in his memoirs, and continues: "It had become a sight to behold. 'A small paradise,' people said. A very small paradise!"

In this paradise at the end of the world, Nolde had created a colourful flower garden, and he recalls that people made a pilgrimage "along the summer dike past the garden, standing, gazing" (ibid.). Here, at Utenwarf, in the summer of 1919—and thus years before the countless flower paintings the artist would later create in Seebüll – our vividly coloured painting "Astern" was created: Covering the canvas in a fascinating all-over pattern, Nolde directs the viewer's gaze toward the densely overgrown flower beds glowing in intense colours and uses the natural motif as the inspiration for a symphony of colours. While 1919 was a prolific year with a total of 65 paintings, only six additional flower paintings were created—one of which was presumably destroyed during the war, most are in private hands, and "Blumengarten am blauen Zaun" has been counted among the masterpieces of the Wilhelm Hack Museum in Ludwigshafen since the 1950s.

Nolde had discovered the subject of flowers for himself many years earlier, as he notes in his autobiography, looking back on the summer of 1906: "It was on

Alsen in the middle of summer. The colours of the flowers drew me irresistibly, and almost suddenly I was painting. [...] My first small garden paintings were created. The blooming colours of the flowers and the purity of these colours – I loved them. I loved the flowers in their destiny: sprouting, blooming, glowing, radiant, bringing joy, bending, withering, ending up discarded in the pit" (quoted from: Emil Nolde: Mein Leben, Cologne 2008, p. 164). Yet while the brushwork in his early works still recalls the storms of colour in Vincent van Gogh's paintings, Nolde eventually developed a distinctive, masterful style that also characterizes our painting.

The artist's focused working process is characteristic: "When Nolde walked from shrub to shrub in the garden, searching and examining the flowers closely, we knew from Mrs. Nolde that we were not to speak to him then," recalls the artist's former gardener Thomas Börnsen (quoted from: Michael Breckwoldt, Seebüll, in: Historic Gardens in Schleswig-Holstein, ed. by Adrian von Buttlar and Margita Marion Meyer, Heide 1996, p. 568). The Nolde collector and biographer Gustav Schiefler also writes about an impressive visit to Nolde's garden on Alsen, where the artist had once begun developing the subject matter for his flower paintings: "The garden overflowed with an abundance of flowers; it was the time when the beautiful, vividly coloured flower paintings were created. Nolde did not like it when anyone watched him work. But once – there had been some curious guests, and he was glad to have gotten rid of them – he set up his easel in the garden, right in the midst of the riot of asters and stock, zinnias and marigolds, carnations and mallows, and began [...] to paint" (quoted from: Festschrift für Emil Nolde anlässlich seines 60. Geburtstages, p. 29).

The flower paintings constitute – to this day – one of the artist's most important and at the same time most popular groups of works. Alongside biblical scenes, still lifes, and landscapes, Nolde's flower paintings found their way into museums open to modern art before 1933, only to be confiscated there in 1937 as "degenerate" – despite Nolde's personal enthusiasm for National Socialism: As early as 1918, the Hamburger Kunsthalle had acquired Nolde's painting "Rittersporn" (1917). In 1926, the Altonaer Museum acquired the painting "Feuerlilien" – also created at Utenwarf – the Dresden State Painting Collection acquired the painting "Sonnenblumen im Wind" (1926), the Kunsthalle Kiel acquired "Blumengarten X" (1929), and the museums in Erfurt acquired "Begonien" (1929). In the museums of the Weimar Republic, Nolde's paintings embodied the new, powerful painting of the present. The flower painting is the original source of Emil Nolde's colourful style.



Lot 29

29 Emil Nolde

Nolde 1867 – 1956 Seebüll

"Aster". 1919

Oil on canvas. 74 × 88,5 cm (28 7/8 × 34 7/8 in.). Signed lower right: Emil Nolde. Signed and titled on the stretcher: Emil Nolde: „Aster“. There too a label from the 1979 Bremen exhibition (see below). Catalogue raisonné: Urban 843. [3206] Framed.

Provenance

Niels and Emil Bonnichsen (nephew of the artist and member of the curatorship of the Stiftung Seebüll Ada und Emil Nolde), Bylderup Bov / Wilhelm Reinhold, Hamburg (1959) / Galerie Grosshennig, Düsseldorf / Graphisches Kabinett Kunsthandel Wolfgang Werner, Bremen (1979) / Private Collection, Northern Germany (acquired 1979 at Wolfgang Werner)

EUR 600,000–800,000

USD 706,000–941,000

Exhibition

Emil Nolde. Gemälde, Aquarelle, Druckgraphik. Weimar, Kunstverein; Leipzig, Kunstverein, and Mannheim, Kunsthalle, 1921 / Emil Nolde. St. Gallen, Kunstverein, 1922, cat. no. 3 / Emil Nolde. Tondern, Museum, 1951, cat. no. 37 / Emil Nolde. Odense, Fyns Stiftsmuseum, 1956, cat. no. 24 / Emil Nolde. Frankfurt a. M., Kunstverein, 1958 (outside catalogue) / Emil Nolde. Bremen, Graphisches Kabinett Kunsthandel Wolfgang Werner, 1979, cat. no. 6, ill.

Literature and illustration

Auction 34: Moderne Kunst. Stuttgart, Stuttgarter Kunstkabinett, 1959, 20./21.11.1959, cat. no. 624, ill. / Weltkunst, vol. 45, no. 20, 1975, p. 1651, ill. / Roman Norbert Ketterer: Dialoge. Bildende Kunst, Kunsthandel. Stuttgart/Zurich, Belser, 1988, p. 326, w. ill.

