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Desperation, Greed, and Indifference: Rudolf Schlichter's "Hausvogteiplatz" – A Vision of a Future Foregone

On hearing the name Rudolf Schlichter, it is the famous paired portraits of Helene Weigel and Bertolt Brecht that immediately come to mind. She, the actress, unforgettable as "Mother Courage," a role she inhabited more than four hundred times on the stage of the prestigious Berliner Ensemble. He, the famous left-wing dramatist who, upon being asked what his favourite book was, answered "You're going to laugh: The Bible." Both of these portraits, key works of the New Objectivity, have been hanging in Munich's Städtische Galerie in the Lenbachhaus since 2017. They show two personages who definitely merit our memorialization. And, obviously, so does the man who painted them, Rudolf Schlichter.

Rudolf Schlichter. Portrait Helene Weigel. 1928. Oil/canvas. Lenbachhaus, Munich. Sold in 2017 at Grisebach for 600,000 EUR

Rudolf Schlichter is often remembered as a brilliant but above all unsparing chronicler of the 1920s. Paul Vogt regarded him as "the sharpest critic of the era of inflation [...] His portraits and studies belong to the best works of his period." Schlichter had an empathetic and broad-minded personality; he could see right down into the dark abyss of human beings – but without disdaining them for it. This world-wise outlook was aptly corroborated by Wieland Schmied: "Throughout his rigorous descriptions of humanity beats the pulse of a natural empathy, of compassion."

The water colour under discussion here is surely one of the most multi-layered creations of this "odd, [...] not overly likable fellow," as Schlichter was described by his friend Paul Alverdes, a frequent visitor to his atelier. "[...] but he can draw like practically no one else." The draftsman's hand had a tight grip on reality. And showed it with a clarity that often was all too stark. Which is exactly how *Hausvogteiplatz* came to be, brimming with a sense of desperation, greed, and indifference. The habitués and passersby, the street, show their true faces. The perspective, flooding deep into the background, blocks the horizon. Everything is hemmed in and obstructed; things are stacked on top of one another; there is no way out. How often did the artist observe and experience this scene – and captured it with razor-sharp precision.

Berlin women smoke on the street to emulate Parisian women. Circa 1930

Lot 21

And at the same time: the things going on in the sky – the sun, Saturn and a fading crescent moon – are noticed only by a child. Open-mouthed, amazed by what is unfolding before him. Everybody else is going about their daily routine and mundane business, packed together and driven along between buildings that block every vantage point, every vista. We are on the plaza Hausvogteiplatz, the epicenter of Berlin's fashion and garment district. And in the middle: the artist. "And so we stagger along, between apocalypse and paradise lost, very close to the former and very far from the latter; between longing and self-hatred [...], lost in dreams and just barely escaped from dreams. And that is what I seek to express in my paintings," he would avow much later, a year before his death in 1955.

1926: The world he inhabited - decadent to the core! Take the two ladies in fashionable couture: One wears a sweeping bow on her hat and a swanky fur scarf, a beauty mark on the left cheek of her heavily made-up face. Her cute pleated collar makes her look as if she is about to step out of the wings onto center stage. And that small leather purse in her right hand – what could be hidden in there? Next to her a thin-lipped colleague, slightly past her prime, with a loud, pirate-style headdress, the fur trim on the collar of her slinky, buttoned-up red coat hugging her neck like a noose. Around both women swirls the world of men, "starched-collar wearers" as Schlichter calls them. Low-lifes in paddy caps, hustlers and knaves with aquiline or squashed noses, beggars, pudgy financial speculators, devious lawyers, along with a down-on-his luck war victim with disfigured face. And all of this bundled under a blood-stained gallows, bundled and tied down on the street, on an urban square. The wave sloshes into the nearby establishments: honky-tonks, bare-breasted girly shows, men leering with wolfish faces, assorted scoundrels, a soldier dragging on his last cigarette. Schlichter's world! He observes, lays bare, records, dissects. The "painter with the scalpel," a moniker actually belonging to Christian Schad, might as well have been Schlichter's, given how he surveys the bitter, unforgiving side of the so-called "Golden Twenties," which were anything but. And looking to the heavens won't help, nor will a prayer: The Parochialkirche church on Klosterstrasse blurs into the background, no more than a shadow. Presiding over the scene instead is Saturn, the gruesome deity who devours five of his children in the famous painting by Francisco de Goya, allowing only one to survive. Add to this the sun and the moon that seem to presage some sort of apocalypse. And all the way on the margin, pushed into the farthest right-hand

Speedy and Rudolf Schlichter conducting strangulation experiments in their studio. Circa 1928

corner, there's a young boy with open mouth and amazed expression. Is he looking up at the sky? Is he asking: "Can't you see what I see?"

Who is drawing all this? Who are the demons lurching across the paper? What life experiences, what outlook on the world and on humanity has been condensed into this outstanding work of art?

To hear Schlichter tell it, he was "thrown through the open window" to his parents on 6 December 1890, in the late hours of St. Nicholas Day, the sixth child of a family of garden laborers in Calw (Württemberg). While the Schlichters were Catholic, the artist's childhood was influenced day and night by the close-minded neighborhood of Protestant-Pietist sectarians. Then Rudolf's father died suddenly, leaving his widow with all the children and too much work on her sewing machine. "It was certainly a wretched and deprived life." Much of what he would carry with him into adulthood began to manifest itself in these early days, either in the form of abject resignation or through subtle acts of protest. He would fill the margins of his school notebooks with doodles from a fevered fantasy replete with striking Biblical imagery such as Christ carrying the cross or the torments of hell: "What I loved to paint the most was blood and fire; right from the start my favorite colour was most decidedly red."

Soon, he would channel his rage into coded visual attacks on hatred and hypocrisy, sanctimony and bigotry, particularly on the demonization of sexuality. The poet Carl Zuckmayer, a friend from university days, and the art historian Wilhelm Fraenger called him "grosser Häuptling Wigwamglanz" (Great Chief of the Shining Wigwam), given his penchant for drawings full of ecstatic streaks and colours that featured marauding, tomahawk-wielding Comanches and Apaches in war paint and cowboys twirling colts and lassos. "In watercolours, I would indulge my love for blood-soaked, Wild West adventure scenes." Soon, sexual fantasies of coercion, violence, and degradation became another topic. In the water colour *Der Künstler mit zwei erhängten Frauen* showing the artist with two hanged women, these fancies manifest as a high button shoes fetish, which would obsess the artist for his entire life. Caught up in his complicated existence as a gifted loner, he liked to shock the public by wearing make-up and eye-shadow, bell-bottomed trousers and women's patent leather boots. "I would saunter along the streets of the city in this get-up, filled with self-satisfied vanity." A scandal. But these antics attracted notice – which was the point – and his drawings started earning praise. When the Berlin art dealership Otto Burchard gave him an exhibition, this was positively received by publicists like Carl Einstein: "It behooves me to draw attention to the highly talented Rudolf Schlichter [...] He is worth more than just some loud phrase. One should seriously engage with him." Which is exactly what happened. When Gustav Friedrich Hartlaub opened the NEUE SACHLICHKEIT show at Mannheim's Städtische Kunsthalle in 1925, Schlichter was among the thirty-two invitees. In the exhibition catalogue, the museum director's remarks could not have been more apposite: "[...] deeply affected by the most violent upheavals and changes impacting our life and its underlying values, the artistic community – disappointed and disillusioned, often resigned to the point of cynicism,[...] – harks back to that which is most certain and sustainable: to the truth and to hand-crafted work."

Lot 21, detail

This certainly held true for Schlichter. He did not want "pretty" pictures. He wanted pictures that were "truthful." This made him a key chronicler of the 1920s, a "New Objectivity" painter who bore witness to the grim aftermath of World War I while shedding light on man's inhumanity to man. He was an accuser, a dogged pursuer of truth, who followed the exacting drafting and painting techniques of the old masters. As were Georg Scholz with his paintings *Kleinstadt bei Tag* and *Kleinstadt bei Nacht*; Karl Hubbuch in his dry-point etching *Jannowitzbrücke*; Otto Dix with his portraits of the scarlet dancer *Anita Berber* and of the monocle-sporting, middlingly successful writer *Sylvia von Harden*. Christian Schad created the portrait of *Sonja*, an elegant, unapproachable, Camel-smoking beauty who frequented Berlin's coffee houses - and Rudolf Schlichter painted the "frantic reporter on the go" Egon Erwin Kisch.

Speedy and Rudolf Schlichter. 1930

Schlichter had another subject as well: the enigmatic Elfriede Elisabeth Koehler from Geneva, whom he nicknamed "Speedy" and who became his muse. They eventually married in 1928 and Schlichter lived through hellish times with her. In summary: By these encounters, Rudolf Schlichter was made to see all situations of life and their contradictions. He lived through them, painting and drawing all the way, and created an oeuvre of lasting importance in terms of its keen insight into the human condition. Christoph Stölzl put it in a nutshell a few years ago: "There are certain works of art that function simultaneously as snapshots in time, as first-hand accounts of a time gone by, and as nexuses between biography and prophecy." That sums up everything we see in, around, and above *Hausvogteiplatz*.