



40^N Arthur Segal

Jassy 1875 – 1944 London

“Selbstporträt”. 1921

Oil on canvas. 70 × 50 cm (with frame: 84.5 × 64.5 cm) (27 ½ × 19 ¾ in. (with frame: 33 ¼ × 25 ¾ in.). Signed and dated lower right: A. Segal. 1921. Titled, signed and inscribed on the reverse: Portrait A Segal Charlottenburg N [by the artist?:] 75. On the stretcher a label of the Große Berlin Kunstausstellung and of the Hamburger Kunstverein. Catalogue raisonné: Liska 257. [3273] In the painted artist's frame.

Provenance

Marianne Segal, daughter of the artist (until 1970) / Private Collection, Great Britain (acquired 1970 at Sotheby's) / Private Collection, Great Britain

EUR 150,000–200,000

USD 179,000–238,000

Exhibition

Retrospektiv-Ausstellung (1896–1921) von Arthur Segal. Berlin, Kunsthandlung and Antiquariat Josef Altmann, 1921/22, no. 47

Literature and illustration

Hermann Exner: Arthur Segal. Dresden, Verlag der Kunst, 1985, p. 15, ill. 6 / auction catalogue: Twenty-Five Works by Arthur Segal Between the Years 1911–1944. The Property of Miss Marianne Segal. London, Sotheby's, 16.4.1970, cat. no. 6, ill.

- A rare self-portrait of the artist from his most important creative phase after the end of World War I.
- Arthur Segal was one of the most influential figures of the November Group in Berlin.
- A realization of the artistic concept of “equi-balance” (*Gleichwertigkeit*) among all picture elements, including the frame.

When it comes to the history of 20th century painting in general and of Modernism in particular, the oeuvre of Arthur Segal stands out as one of the few whose stylistic variety resulted not from a meandering search for the “definitive” form, and instead from the artist’s programmatic dedication right from the start to an open-ended visual aesthetic. Although the term *Gleichwertigkeitsbild* (equi-balanced image) refers to the group of works in which all pictorial elements are accorded equal value by being prismatically teased apart, such as our self-portrait, it fundamentally can be applied to Segal’s entire oeuvre, which bears impressive witness to his open attitude towards questions of style. Segal was firmly convinced that one had to see “whatever is there,” without preconceptions, and without weighting the phenomena of reality. Only then would one be in a position to perceive things in their true significance. This explains the “equal value” he assigned to the diverse painting techniques at his command, which ran the gamut from pointillistic experiments, prismatic cascades of colour, and hazy blurring to the most painstaking naturalism. In this self-portrait from 1921, the painter effortlessly integrates surface, space, colour modulations, and even the picture frame, the boundaries of which he crosses by simply painting over it. He presents himself to us in a three-quarter view, enlisting our visual experience to suggest three-dimensionality by contrasting the figure against the image’s overall flatness. In fact, nothing is really rounded here. Segal has instead broken everything into fan-like segments using colour-graduated stripes, thereby imbuing the entire image surface, including the frame, with a sense of rhythm. Since most of the stripes along the frame do not dovetail seamlessly with those on the inside surface, it remains recognizable as a separate area of the picture, one whose function it is to mark the transition to the real space inhabited by the viewer. That is innovative and “equi-balanced,” since the viewer’s gaze takes in all elements of the picture in a non-hierarchical manner and is jolted to and fro by the striped segmentation. So what we have here, with the artist himself at its centre, clearly is a programmatic work, in which Segal is underscoring his claim to being an unbiased explorer of reality. Segal elicited rather more confusion than enthusiasm with these kinds of paintings. Even many of his colleagues had a hard time accepting this way of looking at things. The penetrating but also brooding gaze which we encounter in the portrait shows that the artist was perfectly ready to face such resistance. But in spite of it all, Segal was, and always remained, a highly valued promoter of the most diverse artistic projects and endeavors, whether as a dynamic member of the November Group or as an early champion of stronger public-sector support for arts and culture. But perhaps his most important role is also one of his less recognized services to people. As teacher to a large body of students, he gave many young artists a strong grounding by teaching them the various creative possibilities inherent in painting. He did so without ever expecting them to favor one style over the other, or pressuring them to take a specific path. Above all, it was Segal’s open-minded personality as an artist and a human being that made his mentorship so fruitful. MS

