

# Rainer Stamm How Emil Nolde made "Hohe See" into a Soulscape

The horizon line and the crests of the huge waves in the foreground divide the picture into two halves: Above, the sky, shifting colour from sulfur-yellow to red-dish brown; below, a churning ocean in dark greens and blues. The only elements interpolating between these two planes of colour are the white spume of the billowing surf and the sky's reflections on the water: This almost turns the image into a colour-field painting, although it most decidedly remains a soulscape.

There is no extraneous detail here to distract from the primordial forces of turbulent sea and endless sky. If not for the presence of that third element, the one evidently paramount to the painter: the colour. Emil Nolde was uninterested in non-representational art and tended to avoid it as a creative vehicle. Yet it is in the highly abstracted seascapes and the late watercolours which he called his "unpainted pictures" that the artist seems to be most at one with his inner self and with his material.

The radical nature of these images became evident as early as 1910, when the artist, who hailed from the village of Nolde near Tondern at the Danish border, first devoted himself fully to the seascape motif in his cycle of almost totally abstract "autumn seas." Only a few years earlier, he had finally begun to obtain the recognition he had long desired from his fellow artists of the Brücke group as

well as from friends and the first collectors to show interest in his work: "The painter had found himself; the colours had become his language. [...] Colours, the painter's material: colours endowed with a life of their own, weeping and laughing, colours of dreams and happiness, hot and holy, like love songs and eroticism, like sung chants and majestic chorales" is how Nolde would later recall this period of artistic breakthrough (*Emil Nolde: Jahre der Kämpfe*, Berlin 1934, pp. 179, 181).

Without intending to, Nolde thus had begun to skirt the borderline between representation and abstraction during these years. And what motif was more appropriate for this than the sea? Fixing his gaze on the horizon, on the interplay among water, clouds, and spray in their untamed fury allowed the artist to throw overboard the conventions of academic painting, such as the need to observe correct proportions, spatial depth, or the demarcation between foreground and background.

The unusual force of these unprecedented pictures did not escape the discerning eye of Botho Graef, a prominent art historian, collector and archeologist from Jena who had seen them at an exhibition in 1911: "We already recognized last year that the sea had begun to play a role in the artist's creativity," he wrote in his review. "But now it has become a main preoccupation and, characteristically for Nolde, he depicts it exclusively as gloomy, tempestuous, and formidable. The outward, purely painterly means with which Nolde comes to grips with the visual manifestation and heightens it to harmonious artistic effect is the colouring, which is so much more austere, so much simpler and stronger in these images than in any of his earlier paintings; but the essential thing, ultimately, is the acute spiritual tension with which the artist personally experienced this spectacle of nature, and which impels these booming sounds of colour to surge out from his inner depths." (*Botho Graef: Kunst-Ausstellung in: Jenaische Zeitung*, June 21st, 1911 issue).

Whereas the "Autumn Seas" painted by Nolde in his early years were still constructed out of thick impasto brushstrokes – as in the style of the Postimpressionists – the seascapes dating from the subsequent years would become smoother and more monumental. As if in a creative fury, Nolde would not just use



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a brush but sometimes would spread the paint onto the canvas with a rag or directly with the base of his thumb. "Nolde knows the sea like no other artist before has known it. He sees it not from the beach or from a ship, he sees it just as it exists in and of itself, untethered by any link to man, as that ever-shifting, ever-changing divine primordial being which, living out and spending its existence within its own bounds, still retains the untamed freedom of the first day of creation" – this was the rapturous description provided in 1921 by one of Nolde's friends, the Hamburg museum director and art historian Max Sauerlandt. "The seascapes from these years are entirely bereft of human detail. The solitude of the scene is a theme that recurs repeatedly in Nolde's art. He has painted the ocean in all its possible modes of being, but most often in a state of violent agitation or billowing dramatically with broad swells edged with white foam, crashing back onto itself under heavy, lowering clouds, behind which the evening sky of autumn bleeds red and deep-orange hues." (*Max Sauerlandt: Emil Nolde*, Munich 1921, pp. 49 et seq.).

Nolde's seascapes are not merely representations of "God's creation," they are artistic creations in their own right. They never focus on the "primordial essence" alone, but always reveal the artist as well. "A work of art is a piece of nature as seen through a temperament," is how Émile Zola so aptly put it. If we apply this to Nolde's seascapes, we can say that they each are a piece of his soul.

This fascination that Nolde had with the indomitable, elemental force of the ocean was to last over thirty years. By 1937, the collector Adalbert Colsman had set his sights on acquiring one of these great sea paintings, having already purchased Nolde's painting *Weisse Wolken* a decade earlier, following countless of the artist's watercolours and graphic works.

It was probably whilst paying a visit to Nolde at his estate in Seebüll that Colsman eventually decided on *Hohe See*. The painting arrived in early June 1940 in his villa in Langenberg. In a letter to Nolde dated June 12th, 1940, he reports his excitement at taking delivery of the work, "On Sunday we unpacked the painting and were very much impressed by its beauty." He goes on to explain that he was looking for a bright spot in the house that would allow the painting's "wonderful colourations" and dramatic "stormy mood" to be displayed to best advantage. Another enthusiastic missive from Colsman to Ada and Emil Nolde would follow in October of that year: "Let me begin by coming back to that magnificent wave painting which hangs above the sofa in the fireplace room. It is a delight to look at under the most varied lighting conditions and exudes an aura of greatness." (Adalbert Colsman to Ada and Emil Nolde, letter dated October 7th, 1940, Nolde Stiftung Seebüll).

At a time when Nolde's art was officially deemed "degenerate" by the Nazi regime, Colsman's acquisition of the dramatic seascape constituted a clear commitment to the work of his favorite artist. Along with Nolde's *Weisse Wolken* (1926), *Herbstblumen* (1931), and *Christina* (Lot 316), a portrait acquired after the artist's death, *Hohe See* would become a highlight of Adalbert and Thilda Colsman's collection. This painting in particular was one that embodied both the riotous colour and drama of modern painting that had become an invigorating elixir for the enterprising couple, "I have been burning for some time to see what you have created in the past few years," Adalbert Colsman wrote to the painter two years after the end of World War II, "and I am certain that this creative period must not be left unrepresented in that which is the physical embodiment in my home of the painter and human being Emil Nolde." (Adalbert Colsman to Emil Nolde, letter dated June 4th, 1947, Nolde Stiftung Seebüll).