

Susanne Schmid In the Waiting Room of Time: Oskar Schlemmer's Raum mit sieben Figuren

Our impressive picture belongs to a small series of sketches that Oskar Schlemmer referred to as *Lebensskizzen*. The title implies the underlying approach that makes Schlemmer's oeuvre so distinctive: His use of specific life situations and real people, this being the artist himself and his family, as his subject matter. We become spectators to various goings-on in the intimate atmosphere of a familiar domestic environment. The large-format study *Raum mit sieben Figuren* is such a "genre tableau," but also more than that.

Oskar Schlemmer was one of the first German artists to suffer under the systematic defamation that the cultural policies of the Nazi era entailed. Vilified as a "Cultural Bolshevik," he saw the murals he had painted in Weimar and Essen

destroyed, his vision of modern people living in a new spiritual community obliterated. As a man used to taking a universal view, he found this assault on his art utterly incomprehensible – after all, his entire creative efforts were directed at gaining an understanding of the human condition that might be valid for all humankind. As a painter, draftsman, sculptor, set designer, choreographer, and theoretician, he tirelessly asked questions about the essence of humanity: What makes us humans? What is a modern person's proper place between the visible and metaphysical worlds? Could a contemporary symbolic language be found that was appropriate to these mercurial times?

Oskar Schlemmer's creative journey began in 1906, when he entered the Stuttgart Academy of Fine Arts as a student of "free painting" (*freie Malerei*) in a course transcending stylistic and formal strictures. During various sojourns in Berlin between 1910 and 1912, the young artist saw himself confronted with many of the currents of the Euro-

pean Avant-garde. He found Cubism and the work of Paul Cézanne particularly intriguing, since they aligned with his intention of banning everything personal and emotional from his images – an aesthetic that becomes evident in two early self-portraits, for example, which he simply called *Männlicher Kopf I* and *Männlicher Kopf II*.

Following the traumatic experiences of the First World War, artists everywhere were full of hopeful excitement about the future, yearning for social reform and liberation. Schlemmer's goal of giving man a new self-image as both a physical and spiritual being was fully in keeping with these trends of his time. He developed the artistic figures – jointed puppets and mannequins – that he choreographed in his "Triadic Ballet" of abstract, experimental dance (the debut performance took place in 1922 at the Landestheater in Stuttgart). Theatrical stage work would become an essential component of his courses during his long time as a "master teacher" at the Bauhaus in Weimar and Dessau. Here, the creative exploration of bodies moving through space was regarded as a key experimental crucible for architectural ideas. As this fruitful period as a member of the Bauhaus School's faculty was drawing to a close, Schlemmer returned to painting and began working on complex compositions peopled with multiple figures. These efforts culminated in the iconic *Bauhaustreppe* (1932), his per-



Lot 12



Oskar Schlemmer with family in front of his *Meisterhaus* in Dessau. Circa 1927/28

sonal tribute to the Bauhaus School in Dessau, which was closed down in the summer of 1932. Brief professorial stints at the State Academy in Breslau and at the Unified State Schools for Fine and Applied Arts in Berlin followed. On 17 May 1933 – the Nazis had seized power in January – he was abruptly fired.

Oskar Schlemmer could only look on in helpless desperation as he was banished from cultural and public life. He became reclusive and did not take up the paintbrush again until 1935, creating a number of somber-hued works in oil on paper, which were structured more on the basis of colour than of line. 1937 brought new tribulations: 65 of his works were confiscated by the Nazis, and six of his paintings as well as six works on paper were displayed at the "Degenerate Art" exhibition in Munich. Luckily, an inheritance came through that allowed the Schlemmer family – Oskar, his wife Tut, and their three children Karin, Ute Jaïna, and Tilman – to purchase a modest home in Sehringen near Badenweiler in the Southern Black Forest. This "ray of light" may explain why the interior of our particular image appears flooded with sunshines.

The head and shoulders of a female figure, seen from the back, loom in the foreground. She suggests closeness, yet also blocks the viewer from drawing nearer: We are clearly not invited to enter. For what awaits us in this space is not just any randomly selected glimpse of daily life, but a formally staged scene in which each protagonist is assigned their place. The central motif selected by Schlemmer is one he had worked on repeatedly since the 1920s: a group of people socializing around a table. This particular *Tischgesellschaft* is flanked by two female figures: One is engrossed in a picture (or perhaps her own reflection), while the second is posed much like an antique statue – could she be an allusion to Giorgio de Chirico's "Disquieting Muses"? Each of the two has been assigned a companion figure, a reader seated in a typically Bauhaus "Freischwinger" chair on the left-hand side, and a vaguely childlike figure on the right. Which of these figures is real and which merely a symbolic abstraction? Schlemmer leaves it moot. But he gives all of them their due place on the stage, which he has carefully lit and imbued with festively ceremonial bluish colours. Oskar Schlemmer's human figures, sensitive and vulnerable though they have become, still seem determined to carry the artist's undefeated dream of harmony and moderation forward into an uncertain future.



Oskar Schlemmer. *Frauenshule*. 1930. Oil/canvas (von Maur G 202)

12 Oskar Schlemmer

Stuttgart 1888 – 1943 Baden-Baden

“Raum mit sieben Figuren”. 1937

Oil over pencil on oil paper. 49 × 66,5 cm (19 1/4 × 26 1/8 in.). Catalogue raisonné: von Maur G 380. [3276]
Framed.

Provenance

Galerie Gerd Rosen, Berlin / Private Collection, Southern Germany (1950 acquired at Stuttgarter Kunstkabinett Roman Norbert Ketterer, thence by descent to the present owner)

EUR 250,000–350,000

USD 269,000–376,000

Exhibition

Willi Baumeister – Oskar Schlemmer. Berlin, Galerie Gerd Rosen, 1946 („Raumbild“) / Malerei und Graphik der Bauhaus-Künstler. Stuttgart, Galerie Valentien, 1968, cat. no. 68 (ill. on invitation leaflet) / Oskar Schlemmer. Schwenningen, Räume der Berufsschule, 1969, cat. no. 12, w. ill. / Oskar Schlemmer – Visionen einer neuen Welt. Stuttgart, Staatsgalerie, 2014/15, cat. no 113, w. ill.

Literature and illustration

9. Kunstauktion. Zweiter Teil. Stuttgart, Stuttgarter Kunstkabinett Roman Norbert Ketterer, 18.–20.10.1950, cat. no. 2549 („Personen im Zimmer“), w. ill. / Hans Hildebrandt (ed.): Oskar Schlemmer. Munich, Prestel, 1952, no. 344

