

Lena Reichelt **The Power and Magic of Light:  
Otto Freundlich's Panoply of Living Colours as an  
Offshoot of Medieval Stained Glass**

Born in 1878 in Stolp, Otto Freundlich embarked on his career in the visual arts at the relatively late age of 27. As a painter, sculptor, graphic artist, author of works on art theory and social criticism, and not least as a maker of stained glass, he developed a highly personal language of abstract form. Despite his close ties with the avant-garde art scene in both Germany and France, he never became beholden to the artistic currents swirling around him. Thanks to his confident self-image as an artist, he was an individualist from the outset. Following his artistic training in Munich and Berlin, Freundlich took his first trip to Paris in 1908, where he stayed for several months, occupying an artist's studio in the Bateau-Lavoir building next door to Picasso. In 1910, he settled more permanently in the French metropolis of art, but without breaking off his contacts to Germany. Having moved to Chartres in March of 1914, he spent several weeks in July of that year living in an atelier located in the north tower of the town's cathedral. This marked

his first encounter with the craft of medieval stained-glass making and he related being enthralled by the "[...] splendor of the glass windows by the portail royal, [which] are visible right up close" (letter from Otto Freundlich to Wilhelm Niemeyer dated July 4th, 1914, pp. 184-185; in: *Verein August Macke Haus e.V.* (editor): *Otto Freundlich und die rheinische Kunstszene*. Bonn 2006, p. 184).

The sojourn in Chartres is widely regarded as the decisive influence on Otto Freundlich's later creative process. Up until the 1940s, he would repeatedly make motivic allusions to the rose windows of Chartres Cathedral (cf. Otto Freundlich, *Rosace II*, 1941). Freundlich himself described his stay in the North of France as follows: "For about five months, I was lost to the world of Chartres and re-emerged as a man marked for life [...]" (letter from Otto Freundlich to Gottfried Heinersdorff dated December 22nd, 1917; in: Archiv Puhl & Wagner, Gottfried Heinersdorff, Berlinische Galerie, Berlin; quoted in: *Verein August Macke Haus e.V.* (editor), 2006, p. 300). The Chartres interlude had awakened his keen interest in the techniques of stained-glass making, particularly in the ways it could produce intensely brilliant colours and striking contrasts of luminosity. Moreover, Freundlich's study of the rose windows of Chartres and his fascination for the cathedral's Gothic architecture shaped his view that art was a reflection of the cosmic order; it is the basis for

his concept of the individual's relationship to nature and the universe. He would go on to formulate these ideas in his writings on art theory, while expressing them in practice through his own vocabulary of form.

Freundlich created his first glass window in 1922 as a commission for his patron Julius Wissinger. Two additional stained-glass works of his were produced in 1924 at the Berlin workshop of Gottfried Heinersdorff, a master glazier and partner in the glass-construction firm of Puhl, Wagner & Heinersdorff (cf. Otto Freundlich,



Otto Freundlich and Jeanne Kosnick-Kloss' studio in Paris



Fig. left: South rose window of Cathédrale Notre-Dame de Chartres



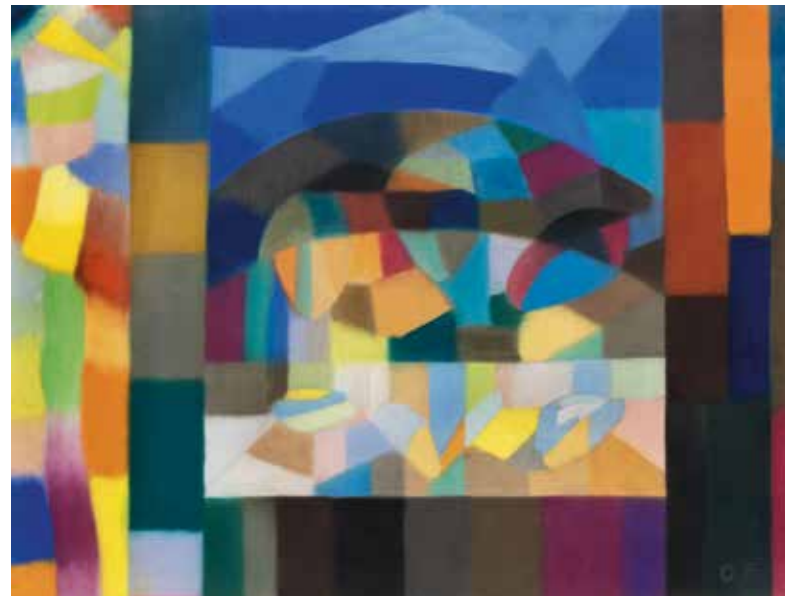
*Fries (Liegende Frau)*, 1924). Parallel to working with cut stained glass, Freundlich also took time to create numerous pastel paintings during the 1920s. These, too, were intimately linked to his affinity for glass as a medium and to his experiences in Chartres. Freundlich had described his idea that surfaces could be fragmented and forms deconstructed so as to release their respective, inherent power within the cosmic order as early as in 1914 in letters written from Chartres to his friend, the painter Amadeo de Souza-Cardoso. Just such a fragmentation and re-assembly of forms would become a basic element of the artist's individual visual aesthetic,

which already suggested itself in his first abstract work from 1911 (cf. Otto Freundlich, *Komposition*, 1911) and eventually culminated in the brilliantly coloured pastels of the 1920s, as the folio under discussion here impressively demonstrates.

The emphasis on verticality in *Blick aus dem Fenster*, the central motif of the arch as a nod to Gothic architecture, the almost mosaic-like recombination of individual elements into new forms, the brilliant colours and the chiaroscuro tension, the juxtaposition of components floating freely in space and the clearly defined architectural structure - all these are tell-tale indications of how closely glass and pastel were related in Freundlich's art, particularly during the 1920s. Luminous colour fields blur into one another as they move freely along the left edge of the picture, in what almost can be termed stark opposition to the otherwise wall-like, individual shapes that are stacked beside and atop one another, combining to form new

structures. Soft colour transitions compete with jarring chromatic contrasts. It is precisely these contradictory elements - light and shadow, freely devised shapes and strictly defined forms, clear contour lines and merging colours - that serve as the intentional compositional devices of the highly personal language of colour and form that makes Otto Freundlich's oeuvre so distinctive.

The centerpiece of the oversized pastel *Blick aus dem Fenster* is a picture-in-a-picture framed by a composite border and shifted slightly to the right by the colour fields floating playfully along the image's left-hand edge. Three parallel vertical bars of varying length make up the right-hand border, while the framing on the left consists of distinctly stacked coloured rectangles. Freundlich repeats these rectangles to create the lower border, imbuing them with the same block-like heft but placing them upright and side-by-side here. Darker and more restrained hues predominate in this frame, except for the vividly orange, upright shape on the upper right whose colour echoes the lighter feel of the image's left-hand side.



Lot 30

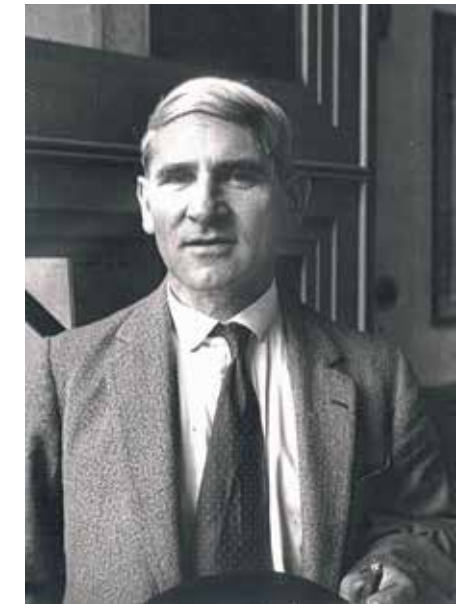
The centerpiece of the image, meanwhile, comprises four sections in which various round and angular elements abound - some closely intermeshed, others placed side-by-side, but all coalescing into new forms. Cut off by the upper edge of the image, a blue arc consisting of mainly triangular shapes in different shades of blue embraces the entire interior image. Immediately beneath it is another curved section rendered mostly in more restrained brown and green tones. Its downward sweep is echoed by an arc covering the next, lower part. Beneath these three half-rounded forms, Otto Freundlich places a broad, rectangular strip assembled from bright, yellow-orange, blue and green shapes, as if to suggest an architectural pediment.

At first glance, this base appears to exert its effect independently of the elements surmounting it. But a closer inspection reveals that it stands out solely due to the brightness of its coloration. As he was wont to do, Otto Freundlich has used the same original forms within the individual elements to create individual shapes, re-assembling them in various ways to create new structures each time. Three droplet-like shapes dominate the middle of the image's centerpiece; this motif is picked up once again, albeit with a much narrower shape, further below, where it serves to soften the initially jarring colour transitions.

In particular by using increasingly darker colours from the bottom to the top, the artist creates an internal visual tension within the image which draws the viewer's gaze into the work, where it ultimately comes to rest on the uniformly blue cloud formation - letting us look out the window, as it were, that gives the work its name. We can only surmise whether the *Blick aus dem Fenster* opens out on a landscape or on an urban skyline, since Otto Freundlich had returned to Paris when he created the work. What is certain is that the pastel on offer epitomizes Freundlich's intense preoccupation with the art of stained glass. It impressively bears witness to the close kinship between pastel painting and stained glass which so captured the artist's imagination during the 1920s.



Otto Freundlich. *Komposition*. 1938-41. Stained glass



Otto Freundlich. 1931

## 30 Otto Freundlich

Stolp/Pomerania 1878 – 1943 Sobibor/Poland

"Blick aus dem Fenster". Circa 1924/25

Pastel on paper. 50 × 64,7 cm. (19 5/8 × 25 1/2 in.) Monogrammed lower right: O.F. Catalogue raisonné: Heusinger von Waldegg 231. [3102] Framed.

### Provenance

Emil Grobel, Wuppertal (circa 1925 acquired from the artist) / Clemens Grobel (circa 1970–2011) / Private Collection, Berlin (acquired at Galerie Hasenclever, Munich)

EUR 80,000–120,000

USD 86,000–129,000

### Exhibition

Otto Freundlich 1878–1943. Gemälde, Graphik, Skulpturen. Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, 1960, cat. no. 10 / Otto Freundlich. Kosmischer Kommunismus. Cologne, Museum Ludwig, and Basel, Kunstmuseum, 2017, no cat. no., ill. p. 160

