





Emil and Johanne Nolde at the gallery of paintings in Seebüll in front of our painting

# Christian Ring A sea of love – Emil Nolde’s christmas present to his wife Jolanthe

The sea was always an important subject for Emil Nolde and can be found in his oeuvre in an extraordinary multiplicity of forms. His images originate in a head-on confrontation with the forces of the natural world. This is where he saw and experienced his motifs, before interpreting them artistically and bringing them to paper or canvas with heightened expressivity. In his memoir, he wrote, “All things primeval and primordial would captivate my senses, again and again. The great, roaring sea is still in its original state; the wind, the sun, and even the starry sky probably are almost the same as they were fifty thousand years ago.”

Emil Nolde aspired to bring man and nature together into a single unity in his art. He managed to do this by moving as close as he possibly could to the most elemental forces, which he absorbed deep into his innermost self. And he was determined to let other people share in his way of seeing – this was absolutely fundamental to his art. And this is the case here: Emil Nolde plunges the viewer of the

seascape *Meer (I)* into the midst of a gripping natural spectacle, the interplay between the forces of the ocean and of the clouds. These two primordial powers are given roughly equal space on the surface of the painting, while the horizon line is placed almost dead center – no coast, no boats, no people to be seen.

In *Meer I*, the ocean heaves in a riot of blue tones, from azure and turquoise to Prussian blue. Its elemental force is reinforced by white crests of foam, particularly the spray thrown up by two colliding waves, a deep blue one coming from the left, and a brighter one in the middle. Emil Nolde centers his vision on the dramatic collision between the mighty, mountainous waves and a glowing, fiery-red sky framed by a dark band of clouds so as to form a mysterious, even magical landscape of colour. The natural and supernatural merge in this image.

As the art historian Max Sauerlandt wrote in 1921, in the first major monograph that was written about the artist, “Emil Nolde knows the sea in a way no other artist before him has known it. He observes it not from the beach or from a ship, he

sees it just as it lives within its own bounds, freed from any relation to man, as that ever-moving, ever-changing, primeval and godly being which lives out and exhausts its life force entirely within itself, a being that to this day retains the unbounded freedom of the first day of creation.”

Emil Nolde temporarily ceased painting the ocean in 1940 and would not revisit the genre until six years later. *Meer (I)* was one of four marine paintings created in 1947. It is based on a water colour that formed part of a series which the artist called *Ungezeichnete Bilder* (see illustration); the series of “pictures not painted” dates from the early 1930s. In interpreting the image in oil, the artist chose to intensify the colour of the sky to striking effect. It was in the later sea paintings such as this one that Emil Nolde rises to new heights. Though still forcefully rendered, his oceans no longer seem violent or threatening. In these mature works, Emil Nolde expands and deepens his creative vision. Although colour as such remains his chief means of expression, he manages further to perfect his impressive control over the dynamics of colour and light. His



Emil Nolde. “Stürmische See (brauner Himmel)”. 1938–45. Watercolour



Lot 31

painterly aesthetic is softer and more serene, yet also more emotional and deeply probing.

*Meer (I)* was painted in Emil Nolde’s 80th year. It had been preceded by times of deep sadness: Though long in poor health, his wife Ada had died quite unexpectedly on November 2nd, 1946, after 44 years of marriage. In 1947, the old master of German Expressionism saw his life’s work honoured in a series of exhibitions that garnered great public acclaim. That same year, his life took another unexpected turn when he became re-acquainted with Jolanthe Erdmann, the daughter of his friend, the composer and pianist Eduard Erdmann, whom he had first met as a girl and who now was twenty-five years old. Nolde was deeply moved by this encounter. He fell in love with the young woman and began courting her. In light of the 55-year age difference, she hesitated, but ultimately they agreed that she would visit him at his home in Seebüll over an extended period so that they could become better acquainted. The courtship bore fruit: On February 22nd, 1948, the two tied the knot, surprising even their close friends.

Jolanthe was able to restore the painter’s *joie de vivre*. In the years that followed, she gently encouraged him to continue his work as an artist. She observed him carefully: “With Nolde, objects are often there in order to imbue the colours and shapes with meaning, so that they do not become arbitrary. There are sea paintings in which nearly everything is nonrepresentational – a tintinnabulation of colours. And yet, you do get the proper feeling: This is sea; and that actually deepens the sonority of the image. Not just colours and shapes, but the ocean as well. Thus, an additional level of sensation and emotion resonates in us.”

The particular esteem in which Emil Nolde held *Meer (I)* is reflected in the fact that he selected this particular painting as a Christmas present for his wife Jolanthe in 1949. On the back of the stretcher frame, he inscribed not just the work’s title and his own name, but also hers: “Jolanthe.” She recognized the gift’s significance and remained ever mindful of her painting’s special allure: “Perhaps the [red] grounding inspired him, in the case of my painting, to compose this strangely beautiful interplay of green-blue water with an unnaturally red sky. Maybe he had painted the water first, so that he was then able to sense the beauty of its contrast with the red.”

Emil Nolde died on April 13th, 1956, at the age of 88 and was buried next to his first wife Ada in a crypt in the garden of Seebüll. Six months later, Jolanthe Nolde moved out of the house in order to facilitate the establishment of the foundation for which Ada und Emil had made legal provision back in 1946, as well as the opening of the house as a museum. Under her husband’s last will and testament, Jolanthe inherited 20 paintings, 20 water colours, 20 graphic prints among other things. This was intended to ensure her financial well-being by sales of the works, given that she had no profession or academic or vocational training to fall back on. As it happened, Jolanthe Nolde kept *Meer (I)* until she herself passed in 2010.

## 31 Emil Nolde

Nolde 1867 – 1956 Seebüll

“Meer (I)”. 1947

Oil on canvas. 67.5 × 88 cm (26 5/8 × 34 5/8 in.). Signed lower left: E. Nolde. Signed and titled on the upper stretcher bar with brush in black: Emil Nolde: Meer (I). Inscribed upper right with brush in green: Jolanthe: Jolanthe. Ccatalogue raisonné: Urban 1290. [3056] In original artist's frame.

Provenance

Jolanthe Nolde, Seebüll/Heidelberg (1949–2010) / Private Collection, Northern Germany (2014–2021 on loan to the Brücke-Museum, Berlin)

EUR 1,000,000–1,500,000

USD 1,160,000–1,740,000

Exhibition

Emil Nolde. Gemälde, Aquarelle, Graphik. Eine Privatsammlung. Heidelberg, Heidelberger Kunstverein, 1958, cat. no. 20 / Emil Nolde. Der Maler. Berlin, Brücke-Museum, and Ravensburg, Kunstmuseum, in cooperation with the Nolde-Stiftung Seebüll, 2016/17 / Unzertrennlich. Rahmen und Bilder der Brücke-Künstler. Berlin, Brücke-Museum, and Bernried am Starnberger See, Buchheim Museum der Phantasie, 2019/20, p. 246, cat. no. 67, ill., and p. 247, w. detail illustration

Literature and illustration

Christian Ring, Nolde Stiftung Seebüll (ed.): Emil Noldes späte Liebe. Das Vermächtnis an seine Frau Jolanthe. Cologne, DuMont, 2013 (on the occasion of the exhibition of the Nolde-Stiftung Seebüll at the Berlin branch 2013/14), here 2nd ed. 2014, p. 14, p. 107, cat. no. 20 (ill.) and ill. p. 35 as well as photo as frontispiece (Jolanthe and Emil Nolde in the gallery of paintings Seebüll, ca. 1948) / Janina Dahlmanns: Emil Nolde. Der Maler (exhibition in the Brücke-Museum, Berlin, 2016/17). In: Museumsjournal, 3/2016, p. 56–57, here ill. p. 57 / Bernhard Fulda and Aya Soika: Emil Nolde. Eine Deutsche Legende. Der Künstler im Nationalsozialismus. 2 vols. Munich among others, Prestel, 2019 (on the occasion of the exhibition with the same title in Berlin, Neue Galerie im Hamburger Bahnhof – Museum für Gegenwart, 2019), vol. (I): Essay- und Bildband, photo p. 227 and detail photo p. 246, and vol. (II): Chronik und Dokumente, detail photo p. 238

- Emil Nolde gifted his love Jolanthe the painting as a Christmas present
- The painting had been on loan at the Brücke Museum in Berlin for several years
- In Jolanthe Nolde's possession for her lifetime, on the art market for the first time ever

Learn more!

