

**Norbertine
Bresslern-Roth**
Animal Painter

26.10.2016 – 17.04.2017

Neue Galerie Graz, Universalmuseum Joanneum,
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Norbertine Bresslern-Roth
Animal Painter

Neue Galerie Graz
Universalmuseum Joanneum
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The Graz-born artist Norbertine Bresslern-Roth (1891–1978) achieved great success with her animal pictures during her lifetime. The Neue Galerie Graz now dedicates an extensive solo exhibition to her paintings and graphic works. The Landesbibliothek will at the same time be showing her prolific work as a book illustrator.

Norbertine Roth was born in Graz on 13th November 1891, the only daughter of a saleswoman. She was brought up in fairly humble circumstances by her mother and aunt. At the age of ten, her school recognised her talent and recommended her to the renowned art teacher Alfred von Schrötter-Kristelli (1856–1935), who taught her for many years without payment. In the summer of 1909 she accompanied him to the Dachau artists' colony. In 1911 he referred her to the Landesmuseum Joanneum as an illustrator for their centennial publication. Further to this, he recommended her to Ferdinand Schmutzer (1870–1928), who taught at the academy in Vienna. From the autumn of 1911 Schmutzer took her on as a private student, also allowing her to work for free in the studio at the academy. At that time, women were still barred from admission to the academy as regular students. Many female artists only managed to gain specialised academic training by indirect methods or from expensive art schools dedicated solely to women. In 1917 she finished her studies with Schmutzer in Vienna and

moved back to Graz to Lange Gasse 29, where her mother was then living. She was to remain there until the end of her life. In 1919 she married Georg von Bresslern, whom she had met in Vienna. In the same year she joined the 'Freiland' artists' association, in which the Graz painter Fritz Silberbauer played a leading role. Like Franz Hofer, Leo Grimm and Norbertine Roth, he had been taught by Schrötter and later by Schmutzer. During their time in Vienna they also lived in the same digs at the Palais Pallfy on Lainzerstrasse.

A striking aspect of the 'Werkbund Freiland' group was the relatively high proportion of women amongst the artists, which could also be observed at Schrötter's art school. His commitment to supporting every student in a highly individual way resulted in a diverse art scene at this time, also reflected at the 'Werkbund Freiland'. As a successor organisation, the 'Graz Sezession' was founded as a society exclusively for men under its first president Wilhelm Thöny, who prohibited women from joining. They were all able to remain members of the Graz 'Kunstverein' (art associa-

tion), which was likewise greatly influenced by Schrötter and offered equal opportunities for exhibitions.

Animal Painting

A lifelong member of animal welfare organisations, Norbertine Bresslern-Roth was already enthralled by animals as a child and loved to watch them in the garden. 'The garden was also undoubtedly a great influence on my painting. At that time, we lived in Mandellstrasse, where I was allowed to use the garden.' Apart from this she was allowed to have aquariums and terrariums in the flat, where she tells of mainly having kept newts. During her studies in Vienna, the zoo at Schönbrunn was one of her favourite outings. Later she and her husband visited many European cities whose zoos served as sources of inspiration and subjects for her. In this way she established a body of animal sketches and watercolours that alongside photographs formed a valuable source for her pictures. She also gathered floral motifs in the same manner. The depiction

of animals in paintings is a long tradition, perhaps even the longest painting tradition all together. The 'animal scene' developed from still life as a separate genre in the 16th century. At this point, animals were also often included in groups within landscape paintings in order to create an image of the idyllic harmony of nature. This desire for harmony can still be seen in Norbertine Bresslern-Roth's pictures.

Linocut

A technique Norbertine Bresslern-Roth often employed was linocut that was to make her famous and which to an extent also became her trademark as an animal painter. She was supported in her realisation of over 270 motifs in up to 200 prints by her husband, who not only took on the cutting and printing but also attended to communications and distribution. From 1921 onwards, the Bresslerns began to work intensively on linocut, achieving enormous success in collaborative production that reached far beyond Austria to the USA and Australia.

The flatness that characterises her graphic prints clearly ties in with Viennese Jugendstil—as do her large-format paintings. The decorative, ornate style corresponded to her concept of art. Her view was that ‘the purpose of a picture, generally speaking, is to be hung in a home, wouldn’t you agree? And homes are dark and the pictures make black holes in the walls and that is something I wouldn’t want to have.’ She tended to pursue pragmatic approaches rather than theoretical, philosophical issues. The reasons for this can be found in her life story, and particularly her desire to secure the financial basis of her entrepreneurial marriage.

Exoticism

Exoticism helped Norbertine Bresslern-Roth to represent her ideal vision of man and beast living together. Her pictures combine naked human bodies together with animals in one habitat. Her commitment to animal welfare made Bresslern-Roth aspire to the unity of man and animal. A leaning towards the

other and the unknown is often presented as a place of yearning, possibly implying an escape from everyday reality. Her journeys to distant places were often in her own imagination. She blended fictitious idylls with well known images of the time drawn from advertising, film, and popular stories, incorporating her own fantasies of the South Seas. She also found inspiration at the circus and from ‘Völkerschauen’, public ethnological expositions, which she also visited at the Hagenbeck zoo in Hamburg. ‘Völkerschauen’ or ‘human zoos’, displayed non-European peoples—intending particularly to show how they shared their everyday life with animals. 300 shows of this kind took place in Germany alone. These ‘human zoos’ were extremely popular large-scale events even in smaller towns, consistent with a colonial system of values hierarchized according to western, white standards.

Long-distance travel

In 1928 Norbertine Bresslern-Roth and her husband travelled to Tripoli, which at that time was

still an Italian colony. This extended Italian trip had a lasting impression on her. The resulting *Tripoli Collection* series includes cityscapes, depictions of people and animals. In situ she chiefly made smaller watercolours and gouaches conveying a general atmosphere of colour and light, which was then picked up later in large-format pictures. They were produced after the journey both from her sketches and from photographs taken by her husband. For various reasons, however, her further travels were essentially restricted to conventional holidays on the Adriatic Coast or city trips within Europe.

Exhibitions

During the 1920s and 1930s, Norbertine Bresslern-Roth built up her exhibition profile in Graz, Vienna and Salzburg, and also abroad—here probably supported by the ‘Werkbund Freiland’ network. She attracted many commissions for commercial art, particularly book illustrations. Her career as an animal painter was established and she enjoyed huge success. Her work was exhibited

and recognised across the world, and also sold very well. She remained true to her conception of art and continued to focus on the subject of animals. Her oeuvre not only consists of portraits, landscapes, still-lives and ethnological studies—it also includes bookplates and calendar pages.

National Socialism

Norbertine Bresslern-Roth was recognised as an artist and was able to participate at exhibitions both during the periods of Austro Fascism and National Socialism. According to the latest findings of this exhibition, she can neither be described as part of the Resistance nor as a National Socialist painter. It would be more accurate to say that her art was accepted by the National Socialist system and indeed even promoted in prominent exhibitions. It is not verified if she also had to suffer repressive measures, for a long time thought to be due to her husband’s ‘half-Jewish’ background. During the Second World War he worked as a paramedic at the emergency hospital. What is noticeable is the large number of

donations Norbertine Bresslern-Roth made to the Landesmuseum Joanneum during the War.

Natural History

In 1936 it was planned that free-standing scenes should be set up within the context of a reorganisation of the natural science collections of the Landesmuseum Joanneum. The idea was that these dioramas would stage the habitat of animals in a lifelike way inside the museum for a broad public. A total of 12 such scenes were proposed, for which Bresslern-Roth was to design 10 large-format backgrounds. The stuffed animal specimens were produced by the Joanneum, who also actively asked hunters to contribute some of the local animals. Three scenes were realised during the first year. All of them took historical wildlife scenes as their theme: the ancient forest and the swamp forest both from around 1000 C.E. as well as the alluvial forest from about 1800. These three-dimensional pictures combining artistic *mise-en-scène* with scientifically correct depiction became a major attraction

and enjoyed great popularity over the decades. It was only in 2009 that the anachronistic images of a true-to-life learning model were replaced with more modern hands-on installations. The animal painter's affiliation with the Landesmuseum Joanneum was reflected not only in her free work on the dioramas but also in numerous donations from which the zoology collection, the Neue Galerie and also the numismatic collection benefitted. In 1937, for instance, she gave 257 prints to the Neue Galerie. The largest gift was without a doubt the picture *Elephants* in 1938, which for a while was perceived as being critical of the system.

The Post-War Period

After the Second World War, business was slow for the Bresslerns, with sales being almost impossible due to the generally adverse economic situation. They were nonetheless able to survive by producing children's books. Norbertine Bresslern-Roth was by now an established artist who remained steadfastly committed to her existing understanding of

art. Her aim was to continue making art for people who appreciated the decorative value of her work in their homes. She was never interested in Modernism; on the contrary, an abstract approach to art was entirely alien to her, if not offensive. When her husband died in 1952 she also stopped making linocuts, but continued to work on numerous commissions, including several large-format pictures, with the same unswerving intensity until she died on 30th November 1978.

Film

The film *NACHGETASTET GEWISSERMASSEN* ('a sort of tracing'), 2016, by XXkunst-kabel and Alexandra Riewe (script) shown in the exhibition examines the life and work of Norbertine Bresslern-Roth. It follows a narrative thread established in a 1961 interview with Trude Aldrian, the director of the Neue Galerie at that time.

Norbertine Bresslern-Roth's CHILDREN'S WORLDS

Alongside the large-scale solo show at the Neue Galerie, this exhibition at the Steiermärkische Landesbibliothek focuses on a less familiar aspect of her work, which nonetheless occupied Bresslern-Roth throughout her life: her children's book illustrations. This display traces her career as an illustrator, her role models and sources of inspiration, together with her working methods. From her first commission as an illustrator at the age of 19 through to her schoolbooks in the 1970s, the exhibition demonstrates her capacity to immerse herself through visual imagery in the children's worlds of several decades. The selection of materials shows the career, role models and also the working methods of the Styrian artist, while also examining her conformity to National Socialism.

25.10.2016–14.04.2017

Mon–Fri, 9am–5 pm; 9am–1pm during the Christmas holidays
Event and exhibition space at the Steiermärkische Landesbibliothek in the Joanneum Quarter

Supporting Programme

(in German language)

Saturday, 29.10.2016, 11am

Guided tour with curator Christa Steinle

**Thursday, 03.11.2016,
3.30pm-4.30pm**

Free special guided tour for teachers with Monika Holzer-Kernbichler (art educator)

Friday, 11.11.2016, 3.30pm

Art and Natural (Hi)Stories
Short lecture and talk with Peter Sackl (zoologist) and Monika Holzer-Kernbichler (art historian)

**Saturday, 12.11.2016,
11am-12:30pm**

Themed dialogue: *Art Meets Nature* with Barbara Lainerberger (art educator) and Anna Gasperl (nature educator)

Friday, 18.11.2016, 3pm

Filtercafé
animal print
with Markus Waitschacher (art educator) and Gabi Gmeiner (art educator)

Thursday, 01.12.2016, 3.30pm

Art and Natural (Hi)Stories
with Monika Holzer-Kernbichler and Bernd Moser (mineralogist)

Saturday, 03.12.2016, 3pm

Condensed Reality
Short lecture on the diorama in the rotunda by Natalia Frühmann (exhibition designer)

Saturday, 03.12. 2016, 4pm

Tour about the Technique of Paintings and their restoration
mit Paul-Bernhard Eipper (restorer)

Saturday, 03.12.2016, 10am-5pm

Open Studio
All Beginning is White

Sunday, 04.12.2016, 11am

'My plane is fantasy ...' - Exoticism in Norbertine Bresslern-Roth's work
with Günther Holler-Schuster (art historian)

Thursday, 08.12.2016, 3.30pm

Children's Worlds at the Landesbibliothek
with curator Anna Kohlhauser

Thursday, 08.12.2016,

10am-5pm
Open Studio
All Beginning is White

Saturday, 10.12.2016,

11am-12.30pm
Themed dialogue: *Art Meets Nature* with Barbara Lainerberger and Anna Gasperl

Saturday, 10.12.2016, 10am-5pm

Open Studio
All Beginning is White

Sunday, 18.12.2016, 11am

Guided tour with curator Christa Steinle

Friday, 13.01.2017, 3pm-4.30pm

Themed dialogue: *Art Meets Nature* with Barbara Lainerberger and Anna Gasperl

Sunday, 15.01.2017, 11am

Images of Humans
Guided tour with Petra Maier (curatorial assistant)

Sunday, 22.1.2017, 11am

On the Printed Graphic Works
Guided tour with Joana Theuer (curatorial assistant)

Friday, 03.02.2017, 3.30pm

Children's Worlds at the Landesbibliothek
with curator Anna Kohlhauser

Sunday, 05.02.2017, 11am

On the Printed Graphic Works
Guided tour with Joana Theuer

Friday, 10.02.2017, 3.30pm

Art and Natural (Hi)Stories
with Monika Holzer-Kernbichler and Bernd Moser

Sunday, 12.02.2017, 11am

On the Printed Graphic Works
Guided tour with Joana Theuer

Saturday, 25.02.2017,

11am-12.30pm
Themed dialogue: *Art Meets Nature* with Barbara Lainerberger and Anna Gasperl

Saturday, 04.03.2017, 3pm

Condensed Reality
Short presentation about the diorama in the rotunda by Natalia Frühmann

Sunday, 05.03.2017, 11am

'My plane is fantasy ...' - Exoticism in Norbertine Bresslern-Roth's work
with Günther Holler-Schuster

Saturday, 18.03.2017,
11am–12.30pm
Themed dialogue: *Art Meets
Nature* with Barbara Lainerberger
and Anna Gasperl

Friday, 24.03.2017, 3.30pm
Children's Worlds at the
Landesbibliothek
with curator Anna Kohlhauser

Sunday, 26.03.2017, 11am
Images of Humans
Guided tour with Petra Maier

Sunday, 09.04.2017, 11am
Images of Humans
Guided tour with Petra Maier

Saturday, 15.04.2017,
11am–12.30pm
Themed dialogue: *Art Meets
Nature* with Barbara Lainerberger
and Anna Gasperl