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EXHIBITION DATES

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BEN URI ART GALLERY

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ELSE MEIDNER



BEN URI ART GALLERY LONDON



INTRODUCTION

Else Meidner was born on 2 September 1901 in Berlin. She began her studies in 1918 in the studio of Professor Adolf Meyer and continued to work subsequently at the studio of Lewin-Funke, the *Kunstgewerbeschule* in the Prinz Albrechtstrasse, the Art Academy at the Steinplatz and finally in the class directed by her future husband, Ludwig Meidner, again in the studio of Lewin-Funke. All this happened in Berlin during the years 1918-1925.

Her art was encouraged very early. She won a scholarship when young on the recommendation of Käthe Kollwitz and also various prizes for drawings and engravings. She is an excellent draughtsman and some of us may remember her exhibitions of life-size drawings executed in charcoal and representing mainly heads and figures, at the Matthiesen Gallery in 1956. These were works produced in England, but only very few people knew then what an outstanding painter she was both in the traditional and in the modern style. The exhibition which she held at the Ben Uri Gallery, together with her husband, in 1949, passed unnoticed by a wider public. But the exhibition of 1959 at the Beaux-Arts Gallery and the retrospective exhibition of 1964 in the Ben Uri Gallery proved it convincingly.

In Germany her name was established from the time of her first one-man show in the *Juryfreie* in Berlin 1932, where oil paintings and drawings were exhibited. When after the second world war an exhibition of her work took place in Germany (Frankfurter Kunstkabinett, 1955) her talent was again duly acknowledged but nobody could undo the bitterness, the disappointment and the sufferings which were caused by the loss of her homeland, and the hopeless struggle for recognition in a country which was used to accepting only what had its origin in Paris, or later in the U.S.A. Else Meidner refused to accompany her husband when he returned to Germany and stayed on in England devoted to a work which again and again miraculously produced the inner strength she needed to survive. In a state of panic and loneliness, however, she decided to join her husband in Darmstadt but she returned to London after barely a year in May 1964. It was on that occasion that the Ben Uri Gallery organised the retrospective exhibition of which we have just spoken.

The concept of Else Meidner's art has its roots in her absolute acceptance of Rembrandt as a master. There she found a personality imbued with a deep religious feeling, an exquisite craftsmanship and the inner need to tell a human story by way of painting, engraving and drawing. Else Meidner too aimed at such qualities. Her feeling for the poetic, for the enigmatic, for volume, for the thorough building-up of a composition and her striving to relate a content, were combined with a 'modern' handwriting derived from the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists. It was only much later in England that colour entered as a primary means of expression. The colour scheme of Else Meidner's early work was relatively dark like that of the old masters but it nevertheless gave evidence of a modern painterly feeling. Soft outlines and a tendency towards flattening the space in the picture were elements in her later art. About 1955-57 we find

her returning to a rather accentuated plastic vision to change again suddenly, this time to her early lyrical beginnings. From about 1949 she tried to use strong colours and in about 1957 her art entered a phase which can best be described as a flowering of fine *valeurs*. There is a tenderness, a vibration of light and a sensuous *joie de vivre* in her late nudes, a meditative trait in the thoughtful faces of old people, airiness and a romantic approach in her few landscapes and poetic power in her still-lifes. One is led to think sometimes of Renoir when contemplating them, but there is also something else, an inner reservation which forbids the Northerner as well as her own race to conceive life as too pure a song of joy and beauty. At times Else Meidner gave expression to her tragic sense of life and this is exemplified most clearly in her water-colours and drawings on the theme of the "Dance of Death", and also in some of her many portraits. No artist has raised his voice more forcefully than she in depicting our modern *condition humaine*. Then again her art moved surprisingly into the realm of pure fantasy with the representation of classical themes (Apollo, Leda and the Swan, Amor and Psyche, The Faun etc.) and, above all, with the portrayal in primary colours of masks revealing the distorted, often brutal, sometimes ridiculous features of human nature. To the inwardness and poeticism in the work of Else Meidner we must add this fine feeling for the humorous and the grotesque, a characteristic which she shared with Ludwig Meidner. It is quite remarkable that although much younger than her husband and former teacher, she never fell under his direct influence, although she learnt a great deal from him.

Else Meidner once remarked ironically to me: "Do you know that I am the greatest collector of Else Meidner's work? In my collection there are more than 1,200 drawings, in various media (pencil, crayon, charcoal, washes, pastel and pen), etchings, gouaches and oils on paper beside some 900 drawings in sketchbooks and more than 150 large-size oil paintings on canvas, wood and cardboard." This is a considerable opus and by far not complete. One day, when the best works of this collection will be available to the public – and may we hope permanently under one roof – they will be witnesses of our time, of her mastership and her ethos.

We may find a key to the full understanding of Else Meidner's work in a few words she wrote in a letter to the author of these lines: "I am an admirer of the perfection in creation. In giving expression to this admiration in my work, I praise the Creator. When I am concentrated, when I feel intensely during my work, then painting acquires a quality for me which comes near to prayer." "The artist enriches the soul of mankind," Rodin once said, "he is, as Virgil was called by Dante, a leader, a ruler and a master. But to proffer the good to man does not pass unpunished. The least that the masters deserve for the persistence with which they act to enrich the human soul is – immortality." Else Meidner has not worked and suffered in vain. We are proud to count her among our contemporaries and to be able to contribute to the final triumph of her great talent, and devotion.

J. P. HODIN

Catalogue

Prices on application

Oil Paintings

1. Woman knitting
2. Seated woman with hat
3. Praying woman
4. Seascape
5. Nude
6. Embracing masks
7. Landscape
8. Apollo and faun
9. Flowerpiece
10. Nude
11. Hilda in the Studio
12. Self-portrait
13. Flowers and fruit
14. Portrait of a man
15. The artist's Studio
16. Hanging masks
17. Woman with red turban
18. Old woman with hat
19. Self-portrait with flowers
20. Woman with headscarf
21. Self-portrait
22. Mask I
23. Mask II
24. Mask III
25. Mask IV
26. Mask V
27. Still-life (Collection: Alexander and Stella Margulies)
28. Self-portrait (Collection: S. Oppenheimer)

Drawings and Gouaches

29. Leda and the Swan
30. Death and the Maiden
31. Death and the Woman
32. Eve and the Serpent
33. Carnival
34. In the Bar
35. Handel's Hallelujah
36. Death and Globus
37. Death with Mother and Child
38. Angel of Judgement
39. Chess figures
40. Sphinx and Death
41. Mother and Child
42. Dancing Angels
43. Portrait of Dr. G. Newman
44. Self-portrait
45. Nude
46. Nude
47. Death and Child
48. Death and Woman
49. Apollo and Venus
50. Apollo and Woman
51. Portrait of Jörg
52. Nude
53. Woman with Hat
54. Death and Woman
55. Praying woman
56. Diaspora
57. Portrait of a Man
58. L'après-midi d'un Faun

59. Woman in Studio
60. Apollo and Venus
61. Nude
62. Portrait of a Man
63. Nude
64. Nude
65. Chess figures
66. Apollo and Woman
67. Self-portrait with Ludwig
68. Seated nude
69. Self-portrait
70. Woman with hands over head
71. Embrace
72. Woman with hands over eyes
73. Head of a woman
74. Self-portrait
75. Head of a woman
76. Seated nude
77. Garden landscape
78. Nude – back view
79. Garden with woman in chair
80. Child's head
81. Man with folded hands
82. Woman with hat
83. Portrait of Wolf Bergmann
84. Woman and Death
85. Seated nude
86. Self-portrait with Book
87. Ludwig drawing
88. Nude
89. Landscape
90. Nude
91. Self-portrait with Demons
92. Nude
93. Self-portrait with Ludwig Meidner (Collection: Dr. J. P. Hodin)
94. Self-portrait (Collection: Alexander and Stella Margulies)
95. The Angel of Death (Collection: S. Oppenheimer)

