

Press Information

Felix-Nussbaum-Haus Osnabrück

"If I perish – do not let my paintings die"

Unlike any other artist of the first half of the century, the painter Felix Nussbaum, born in Osnabrück in 1904 and murdered at Auschwitz in 1944, recorded the experiences of the decades following the First World War in his paintings and reflected upon them as part of his own situation, which the artist, as a Jew, was pushed into by the racist ideology of national-socialist Germany. His pictures are shaped by the contemplative security of the province, the rapid success in the art metropolis of Berlin, consistent with the spirit of the age, the menace and disorientation of emigration, the threat of war and bomb war, the fear in internment camp, isolation in the underground and hideout, and finally the suffering and annihilation of the Jews in Europe by the Nazi regime. No other victim has artistically documented the "Holocaust" of Jews in Europe like Nussbaum. For him, in his hopeless situation, painting became an act of resistance, because it enabled him to retain his human dignity and, for a long time, gave him the strength he needed to survive. He was a recorder of this era, and became its victim.

The artist Felix Nussbaum cannot be assigned to the avant-garde; he belongs to the "lost generation", born around 1900, whose artistic development was impeded, like no other generation, by the circumstances of the time, cut off and finally forgotten. Their rediscovery only commenced in the 1970s. This is also when the Cultural History Museum of Osnabrück started to become preoccupied with the painter Felix Nussbaum. The Cultural History Museum of Osnabrück has carried out research into the life and works of Felix Nussbaum for over twenty years. In the course of time, the largest collection of works by this artist emerged in the museum, comprising more than 160 pictures. They are supplemented by documents containing biographical, contemporary and political elements that enable the experiences behind his pictures to be recognised as a political legacy: as a request and obligation not to forget what happened. This obligation was at last met in 1998 when the Felix Nussbaum Haus, designed by the architect Daniel Libeskind, was opened. The complete works of Felix Nussbaum have been exhibited here since March 1999, in accordance with his wish: "Even if I perish, do not let my pictures die, show them to the public."

Osnabrück's "Felix Nussbaum collection" dates back to the year 1970. Its existence is due to the great dedication of Augustes Moses-Nussbaum, Felix Nussbaum's cousin. She campaigned for the pictures that had remained in Brussels to be located and legally awarded to their rightful owners and for the bequest of more than 100 pictures to come to Osnabrück, the birthplace of Felix Nussbaum.

Thanks to the intensive efforts of the City of Osnabrück, the collection grew to over 180 exhibits in the subsequent years. In 1994, the Niedersächsische Sparkassenstiftung acquired the "Felix Nussbaum collection" and, together



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with the City of Osnabrück, it attends to the legacy of the artist. The significance and size of the collection prompted the City of Osnabrück to extend the Cultural History Museum by an annex – the Felix Nussbaum Haus.

The architectonic concept

In 1995, the Osnabrück contest for the realisation of the Felix Nussbaum Haus was won by the American architect Daniel Libeskind, who held his ground against 300 competitors. This was a stroke of luck, as the overwhelming national and international echo confirms. The jury was particularly justified in its choice because Libeskind did not view the Felix Nussbaum Haus as a subordinate annex to the Cultural History Museum. On the contrary: the drafter places the museum in a superior context that conceptually endeavours to spatialize the life and works of Felix Nussbaum. Libeskind has managed to establish an interrelation between the architecture and the tragic combination of Felix Nussbaum's life and works.

The architectonic concept of the Felix Nussbaum Haus makes use of a unique opportunity. It creates a spatial context in which the tragic combination of the life and works of the artist emerges as the all-dominant impression.

Using a system of reference axes – between Osnabrück, Berlin, Brussels and Auschwitz – the architecture symbolises the constant movement and increasing disorientation in Felix Nussbaum's life.

The building conveys an atmosphere of omnipresent insecurity at every turn. The Nussbaum Haus, the Nussbaum Corridor and "The Bridge" do not offer visitors the usual museal surroundings to behold pictures and drawings. On the contrary: gently inclined or sloping floors, nonparallel walls, windows devoid of right angles or partially transparent intermediate floors are a cause of constant irritation.

The exterior design of the complex of buildings also sends a clear message. The increasing coldness of the materials used – wood (the Nussbaum Haus), concrete (the Nussbaum Corridor) and zinc (the Bridge) – stand for Nussbaum's path of life: from his sheltered youth to the time of his expulsion and harassment up to his violent death at Auschwitz.