

Ludwig Meidner (Bernstadt an der Weide 1884 - Darmstadt 1966)

Two Ecstasies in an Apocalyptic Landscape, 1921

Black chalk on Chamois velin with watermark 'Progress'
660 x 510 mm.

Signed with the artist's monogram and dated 'LM 1921', and inscribed Für W.K. (to the piano player Walter Kämpfer)

The work of Ludwig Meidner stands under the sign of the Apocalypse. In the background plays his Jewish origins and his interest in Christendom. More important still is his critical stance against war and total alienation, seen by him as modern capitalism's principal products. From 1911 Meidner is part of the Berlin avant-garde, and actively involved with literary and artistic expressionism. With like-minded artists, in 1912 he founds the group Die Pathetiker, referring to the vitalist notion of 'pathos' as developed by Nietzsche in his writings. He makes fierce portraits and many landscapes – urban or rural, usually during or after a large-scale catastrophe. He paints social crises and conflicts like volcanic eruptions, in an expressionist visual language that is influenced by futurism and contains echoes of the baroque. After the November 1918 Revolution he enlists in the artists-groups Arbeitsrat für Kunst and the Novembergruppe. It seems not too far-fetched to see a memory of the revolution's defeat in this picture of calamity, as well as a foreboding of the Fascist nightmare to come. Even with the courage of despair, the figures can no longer escape the menace encroaching from all sides.

Provenance:

Galerie Elke und Werner Zimmer, Düsseldorf
Private collection, Hessen

Artist description:

Was a German expressionist painter and printmaker born in Bernstadt, Silesia. He was apprenticed to a stonemason, but the apprenticeship was not completed. He studied at the Royal School of Art in Breslau and, from 1906 to 1907 at the Julien and Cormon Academies in Paris where he met and became friends with Amedeo Modigliani. He returned to Berlin to work as a fashion illustrator and produced views of Berlin.

In 1912 he began a series of paintings that marked a radical departure in style and would make his reputation. The "Apocalyptic Landscapes" are thought by some to anticipate the First World War. The series, produced rapidly in a hectic heatwave, are sometimes considered some of the purest "expressionist" works; in them, comets cross the sky like canon shells, fires rage, men scream and flee for their lives, buildings totter on the edge of collapse. Meidner would, however, never repeat the intensity and creativity of the apocalyptic landscapes.

After the First World War he turned to producing religious paintings including a long and repetitive series of portraits of "prophets". He was an habitual self portraitist producing a series of Rembrandt inspired self-portraits. His portraits from 1915 to the end of the 1920s are a gallery of the leading expressionist and Dada writers and poets. Meidner himself increasingly turned to writing—he produced several books of dense expressionist prose and contributed to many newspaper articles.

In order to escape antisemitic repressions he moved to Cologne where he became an art teacher at a Jewish School in 1935. In 1939 he fled with his family to England (his wife Else Meidner was also an artist) where he was interned as an enemy alien on the Isle of Man. He stayed in England, unrecognised, working in unusual jobs until 1953 when he returned to Germany. In 1963 he had his first major exhibition since 1918 in Recklinghausen and Berlin. He died on 14 May 1966 in Darmstadt, aged