

The Artwork of the Pogrom Night – 9. November 1938

Felix Nussbaum's Rue Triste

Results of an Art-Technological Examination at the "CICS – Cologne Institute of Conservation Sciences" of the Cologne University of Applied Sciences

In preparation for an exhibition about the beginning of the documenta, art technological investigations were carried out on two works of art from the collection of the Centre for Persecuted Arts in the "CICS - Cologne Institute of Conservation Sciences". X-ray and infra-red images confirm long-held assumptions about the context of origin and the dating of the painting *Trostlose Straße* (Rue Triste/Desolate Street) by Felix Nussbaum. In mid-1942, Felix Nussbaum, a German Jew living in Belgian exile, deposited the painting *Trostlose Straße* (Rue Triste/Desolate Street) with his physician Dr. Grosfils on Avenue Brugman in Brussels. In the late 1960s, it was rediscovered by Auguste Moses-Nussbaum and sold by the community of heirs via Galerie Hasenclever in the mid-1970s into private ownership. Since 2008, it has been on permanent loan to the Center for Persecuted Arts in Solingen.

The catalog raisonné interprets the painting *Trostlose Straße* as a visionary premonition of death and establishes the year 1928 as the presumed time of its creation. The painting finds its first mention under the title *La Rue Triste* in an article in the newspaper *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant* in Brussels on February 11, 1939. The painting now reveals its secret through an art-technological examination at the "CICS – Cologne Institute of Conservation Sciences" of the Cologne University of Applied Sciences. Under the visible layer of paint hides a second, unknown painting by Nussbaum, which can be precisely dated by preliminary drawings. *Trostlose Straße* was painted ten years later than previously thought and refers to the pogrom night of November 9, 1938.

The X-ray image made at CICS reveals a fully elaborated painting, and two nearly identical preliminary drawings by Nussbaum can be identified. In the catalog raisonné, the preliminary drawings are associated with the beginning of the war in Poland in 1939. After Nussbaum's deportation, the drawings remained in his secret Brussels studio on Rue Général Gratry. In 1980, one was donated by Roger Katz to Yad Vashem in memory of his family murdered in the Shoah.

The other is in the Jewish Museum in Frankfurt am Main. Both are inventoried under the title *Die große Zerstörung* (The Great Destruction). Nussbaum himself neutrally labeled them *Fassung I* and *Fassung II* (Version I and II). The painting under Rue Triste corresponds more to the drawing from Yad Vashem (*Fassung II*).

The apocalyptic theme of the two drawings is clearly evident. The people depicted are surrounded by a landscape of ruins. The sun and the moon appear simultaneously in the sky. In contrast to the drawings and oil paintings from the years before 1938, in these drawings, as well as in the (no longer visible) oil painting, groups of people interact with each other. The two figures at the lower left edge of the composition make contact with the viewer. The figures in the center express grief and loss, but also compassion. The people in the archway on the left are silent observers. Here, in a way similar to his history paintings of 1942 and 1943, he strove to metaphorically describe the reality of his life at the time. The occasion was, however, not the beginning of World War II, but rather the pogroms that took place in the German Reich on November 9, 1938.

The pogrom night had a profound impact on Felix Nussbaum. In a letter, he called it a "Teufelsbad" (devil's bath). On the one hand, the years of terror and persecution of the Jews in Germany were now being taken to the streets, and on the other, the last family members were now leaving their old homeland. In 1937, Nussbaum had tried to bring his parents to Belgium. Immediately after the pogrom night, Philipp and Rahel Nussbaum fled from Cologne to Amsterdam. After the forced sale of the company Gossels & Nussbaum in Osnabrück in the spring of 1933, this renewed flight of the parents was yet another climax of persecution and humiliation.

Through an infrared image made at CICS, we can look under the uppermost, impasto layer of paint and see the cat taking up an attack position in front of a pile of rubble. In the infrared image, we can surmise that the "pile of rubble" consists of window frames and broken glass. It blocks the cat's path. The National Socialist press trivialized the pogrom night of 1938 as a *Kristallnacht* (Night of Broken Glass), for which the pile of destroyed windows can serve as a symbol.

Why did Nussbaum paint over the image he had prepared with two drawings? Why did he paint this street scene with plague flags and the cat?

The street in Rue Triste resembles Johannisstrasse in Osnabrück, in the neighborhood where Nussbaum spent his childhood and youth. His parental home on Schlosstrasse was located not far from the large Gothic Church of St. John was, and in the immediate vicinity, on Seminarstrasse, was the headquarters of his father's company. Is it possible to see in Rue Triste a painful reminder of the city of his birth? In December 1938, he painted over a doomsday scenario depicting the pogrom night with a quick brushstroke for an exhibition in February 1939, and—triggered by the news about the terror that his parents had to experience in Cologne—became more personal. The presumed occasion for the two drawings and the original oil painting were the reports of the burning synagogues and the public murder of German Jews. He then received news of the final expulsion of his family and radically discarded his idea for the painting. In this historical moment, Felix Nussbaum painted over the apocalypse and reckoned with the city of his birth, as well as with Germany, which became a deserted, dead, dreary place of the past.

The painting Rue Triste and the research results will be featured in the upcoming exhibition at the Center for Persecuted Arts, opening on May 6, 2022.

Contact:

Jürgen Joseph Kaumkötter, Director of the Center for Persecuted Arts

Tel.: +49 (0)212-259-1412 / Email: kaumkoetter@verfolgte-kuenste.de

The exhibition concept, artworks released for publication (including Rue Triste), and promotional material are available for download on the exhibition website www.29-55.de in the press section.

- Rue Triste, 1938, signed and inscribed on the reverse: "TROSTLOSE STRASSE Felix Nussbaum", oil on canvas, 56 x 43 cm, Private Collection, on permanent loan to the Center for Persecuted Arts
- X-ray image of Rue Triste
- Infrared reflectogram of Rue Triste

Centre for Persecuted Arts | Solingen

The Centre for Persecuted Arts in Solingen is a museum of discovery dedicated exclusively to artists whose opportunities for development and works were blocked, prevented or destroyed by the dictatorships of the last century and totalitarian regimes up to the present day. It is a cross-genre museum and its art and literature collection tells of lost and neglected works of art, stories and fates.

Cologne Institute of Conservation Sciences / TH Köln

At the Cologne Institute of Conservation Sciences (CICS), art technology, conservation and restoration of art and cultural assets from antiquity to the present are taught and researched in five fields of study. In the laboratory for art technological examinations, various modern radiation diagnostic examination techniques are used, which are supplemented by material analyses if required.

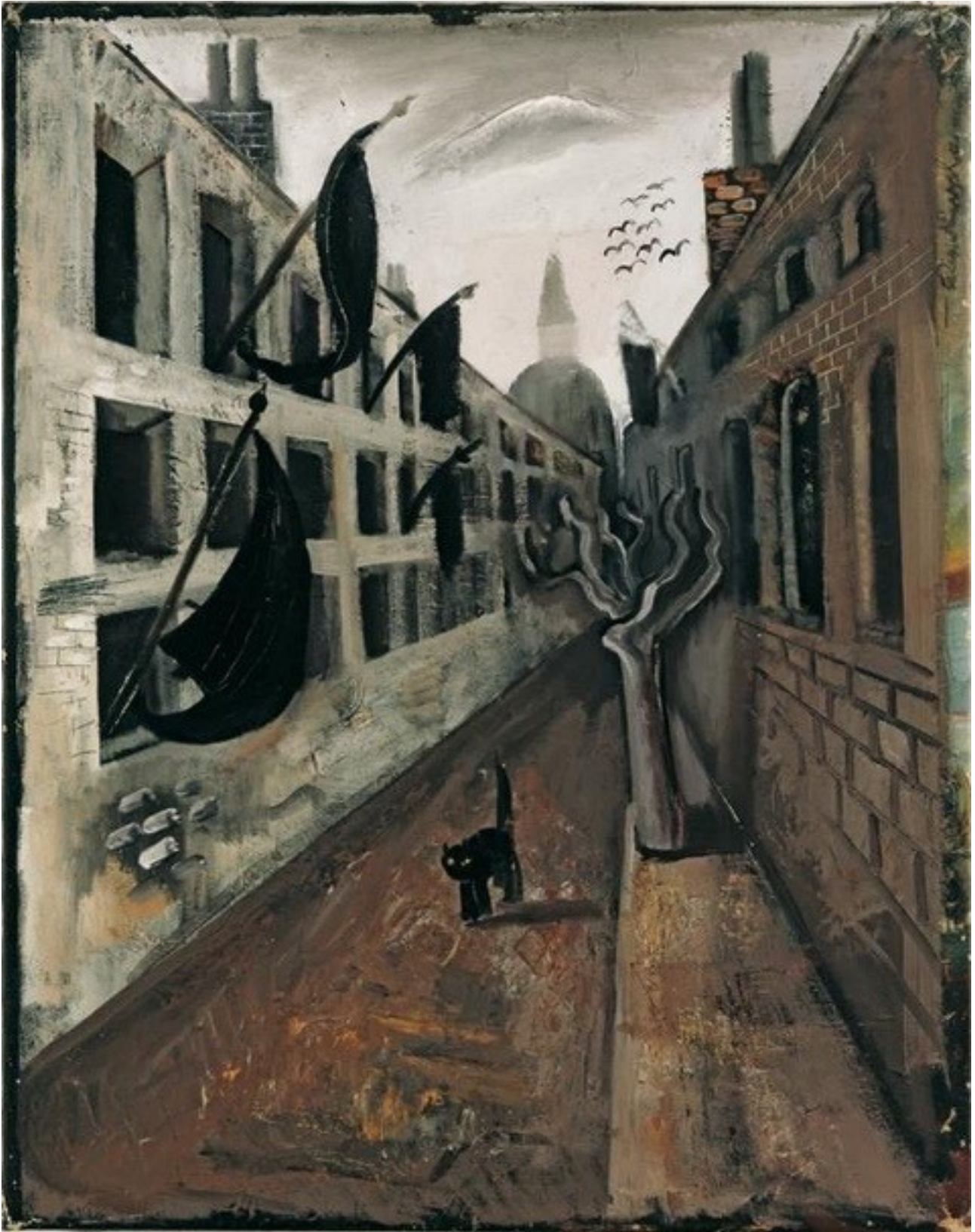
Contact: Prof. Dr. Gunnar Heydenreich


E-mail: gunnar.heydenreich@th-koeln.de

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Images for publication can be found on the exhibition website www.29-55.de in the press area as a download:

Museum Center für Persecuted Arts
Wuppertaler Straße 160
42653 Solingen
Germany
+49 212 258 1418
presse@verfolgte-kuenste.de



Felix Nussbaum, *Trostlose Straße*, c. 1938/39, oil on canvas, 56 x 43 cm, on permanent loan from private collection  Zentrum für verfolgte Künste, Solingen



X-ray image of the painting *Trostlose Straße*, rotated by 90 degrees. The image provides a view of the older representation, which has been painted over today.
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Felix Nussbaum, The Great Destruction, 1939, ink on paper, 54.5 x 67 cm
© Yad Vashem, Jerusalem



Infrared reflectogram of the painting *Trostlose Straße*. At the bottom of the picture, changes in the picture composition during the painting process are visible.

TH Cologne / CICS