

Marianne Manasse (1911-1984), Art historian and painter

The article below, reproduced in its entirety, was written in celebration of the Durham County Library's acquisition of a work by Marianne Manasse in April 1989. Her art works are in the Museum of the North Carolina Central University and in private collections.

This exhibition has been organized to share Marianne Manasse's art with the community. The artist lived in Durham the last forty-four of her seventy-two years. She died five years ago on January 15, 1984. Here in Durham, in addition to creating visual art, Mrs. Manasse raised two sons, earned an AB degree from the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill and a Masters from Duke University. For many years she taught German at North Carolina Central University, where her husband, Professor Ernst Moritz Manasse, chaired the Philosophy Department.

Marianne Manasse was born in Breslau in 1911, moved with her parents to Berlin, and lived there, except for brief study periods in France, Freiburg and Vienna, until Jews were no longer allowed to attend universities in Germany. Marianne accepted a position in Florence, Italy, to teach in a refugee school. There she met and married Ernst M. Manasse. Later in the 30's after she, her infant son, and husband had been arrested and jailed in Florence because they were German Jews, they realized that no place was safe for them in Europe. Thus they were forced by Hitler and his minions to flee Europe.

In 1939 the family was able to settle in Durham. Phyllis Tyler, in "A True Survivor", an article for the Spectator, printed shortly before the artist's death, writes of the hard journey to safety in Durham. Regarding the help with the flight, Ms Tyler quotes Mrs Manasse to have stated that "All along the way, bridges were built for me". We are fortunate that those bridges led her and her family to Durham.

The builders and locals of those bridges are frequent sources of inspiration for Mrs Manasse's late pictures. We do not see this in the early works which are strongly influenced by the German Expressionists. There is also a very different type of execution and feeling in the early works when compared with the creations from her last ten or so years. Her landscapes in the early works are related in style and paint application to those of Oskar Kokoschka – especially in their use of broad and strongly linear brush work. Human and animal forms, in Manasse's early paintings, are distorted (as if tortured by both mental and physical anguish) in shape and coloring - strident colors rather than naturalistic or representational –

in a manner related to that of Ernst Kirchner and Emil Nolde of the German Expressionist group called Die Bruecke. These three artists appear to have been especially strong sources of inspiration and learning for Marianne Manasse.

She was also influenced by the Spanish master Pablo Picasso and the French master Henri Matisse, two important influences felt and seen in most modern art. Manasse combines these various influences into an expressive and satisfying personal painting style.

Manasse's late works, those from the 70's and 80's, are truly different in technique and feeling from her early works. The artist appears to have distanced herself far enough in time and place from the nightmare of the Hitler years to share with us a happier vision. She allows herself to focus on and to express the joys of life. Expressionism still characterizes her work, but it is subjugated to a happy narrative and a mixed technique – collage and painting. This new approach is beautifully illustrated in Fairy Tale: Grim and Not so Grim (number 2 in this exhibition). The picture is not only an expression of happy childhood fantasies and humor remembered, but also happy and humorous moments in new locals with those new bridge-builder friends on the way to a new home. These are creations which speak of extraordinary journeys and safe arrivals.

These collage paintings have been compared to those of Romare Bearden, and there are many similarities. Both artists tore, cut and pasted paper and in-painted works in Masonite. Both were narrative artists of considerable power. Yet both are truly different; Bearden's collages are broader and more likely to focus on a single episode, whereas Manasse's are more segmented incidents or related events within an episode. Her collages frequently read from left to right and from the top down. This does not prevent the viewer from focusing in on or entering the narrative from other areas, however, after repeated viewings, the artist begins to direct you to this pattern. They are akin to illuminated manuscripts. They are uniquely visual statements of Marianne Manasse.

Let us end with Blue Greenberg's statement in "Exhibit a Testimony to Life," a review of Mrs Manasse's exhibit on view at the Durham Art Guild Gallery at the time of the artist's death (Durham Morning Herald, January 27, 1984, page 10D):

Most of us leave only our children as a mark on this earth, but artists have special opportunities. When they make marks with paint that someone else finds pleasing or treasures, their presence transcends the finality of death. Marianne Manasse's spirit lives in her paintings.

Norman E. Pendergraft
Director

NCCU Art Museum

With acknowledgments to Frank and Carol London, longtime friends of the Manasse family, who provided this document, and also to the Durham County Library.