

Art and Auschwitz

Sybil Milton

Sybil Milton is an internationally-known researcher and scholar, who has worked extensively on art of and after the Holocaust, including the publications *Art of the Holocaust* (1981) and *In Fitting Memory* (1991).

The desire and aim of the SS was to create a prisoner who submitted to the continuing terror of the camp without thought, without initiative, following every order. We quickly escaped this through jokes, songs, poems, irony, and caricature.

Mieczysław Kościelniak, Polish artist and prisoner incarcerated at Auschwitz
from May 1942 to January 1945,
quoted in the catalogue *Bilder von Auschwitz* (Frankfurt, 1982)

The phrase, art from Auschwitz, does not refer to a particular school, generation, or style, but to the place it was made between 1941 and 1945. Auschwitz has become a universally recognized symbol for German genocide during World War II. There, men, women, and children were suddenly thrown into the alien world of the German camps and modern technology was applied to the production of death. This macabre industry, like any other industry, included transport schedules, production quotas, quality control, and cost accounting. And for those momentarily spared, daily life meant exertion, exposure, starvation, and always fear. We must not forget that millions were brutally murdered. They were executed by firing squads in front of open burial pits. They were asphyxiated in specially constructed gas chambers. They died from beatings, malnutrition, and exhaustion. Only a very small number of those targeted for murder survived in the camps. But life continued. Men and women ate and slept; talked and dreamed; laughed and cried. They even created art. Thus, the Czech Jewish artist Alfred Kantor (born in Prague 1923), who published his drawings as a camp diary reconstructed from memory after the war, later explained his motivation to draw in Auschwitz:

Sketching took on a new urgency...Even though I knew there was no chance to take these sketches out of Auschwitz, I drew whenever possible.... My commitment to drawing came out of a deep instinct for self-preservation and undoubtedly helped me to deny the unimaginable horrors of life at that time. By taking the role of observer, I could at least for a few moments detach myself from what was going on in Auschwitz and was therefore better able to hold together the threads of sanity.¹

Until recently, art produced during the Holocaust has been viewed as an historical and aesthetic curiosity, rather than as a critical element of the documentation essential for understanding the history of the concentration camps. It is surprising that the conditions that barely sustained life resulted in the creation of artistic works—literature, music, and theater, as well as the visual and plastic arts. The relationship between arts and atrocity, although not fully understood, contributes to our understanding of the workings of Auschwitz and the Nazi concentration camp system, and at the time enabled artists to retain a measure of their individuality and survive under conditions of extreme duress.

Individual stylistic preference and the skill and personality of the artist were obvious determinants of the character of the artistic product. Artists working clandestinely had the small freedom to choose what subject to depict and also the materials they used, however limited. Unlike the works of Francisco Goya, Honoré Daumier, George Grosz, or even Pablo Picasso, the artists trapped in the Holocaust were not witnesses and social critics from outside. Artists usually could not work openly, much less exhibit in galleries and museums. It must be remembered that restrictions placed on incarcerated artists during the Holocaust constituted arbitrary limitations on their creative possibilities. The victim artist served as his or her own chronicler, historian, dealer, and consumer. He/she had to improvise materials for clandestine work by taking canvas and colors from labor assignments providing access to paper in SS offices, kitchens, or on the black market that existed in every camp and ghetto. Drawings were made on the backs of SS circulars, reports, and medical forms, on wrapping paper, tissue paper, and even on reused paper pockmarked with bullet holes from SS target practice. Charcoal, rust, watered ink, food, and vegetable dyes often provided the raw materials for color, line, and texture. High-quality normal canvas and oils were available on occasion, particularly when an artist received a labor assignment in an art or technical barracks or in an art forgery workshop.

Portraiture is one of the major forms of surviving art from Auschwitz as from other camps. This is not surprising, since diaries and documents attest to the fact that this was the most common genre. Portraits had a magical meaning in this setting (as also in many native and folk art forms). They gave the subject a sense of permanent presence among the living, extremely important when temporal physical presence was fragile and

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tenuous. Imprisoned artists sometimes also conveyed their own plight through self-portraiture. The depiction of one's own or another person's likeness, without abstraction or symbolization, was a cohesive metaphor for the value of individual life juxtaposed to the mass terror and anonymity of Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Other categories of concentration camp art include drawings of inanimate objects, including landscapes showing the bucolic countryside, real or remembered, as for example Bronisław Czech's flower illustrations on censored correspondence or his Tatra mountain scenes. These landscape studies reinforced the artists' memories and strengthened connections to a world outside the concentration camp universe. There were also architectural sketches showing the layout of the camp and its barracks. The other major types of surviving art are caricatures, as well as a few works of sculpture. The surviving art of Auschwitz, *The Last Expression*, fills an important gap in twentieth-century art history, balancing against official war art and the bombastic stereotypes of Nazi propaganda art. Moreover, it shows us the fragility of culture and human life in a site of horror and atrocities. This art also functions as a bond and common language, and creates a form of visual communication and understanding about the environment in which it originated.

¹ Alfred Kantor, *The Book of Alfred Kantor: An Artist's Journal of the Holocaust* (New York, 1971), n.p.