

An abstract expressionist painting by Fritz Ascher. The composition is dominated by large, dark, expressive brushstrokes in black and dark blue. The background features a mix of vibrant colors, including bright pink, orange, and yellow, with some areas of white and light green. The overall style is gestural and emotional, characteristic of the Abstract Expressionist movement.

The Fritz Ascher Society for Persecuted, Ostracized and Banned Art, Inc.

FRITZ ASCHER
EXPRESSIONIST

**The Importance of His Art for
Exploring and Understanding Our Own World**

Introduction

What does it mean to be persecuted? In today's world, with the troubling increase in autocratic political personalities both abroad and at home, this is a question essential for young people (and old) to address if they are to shape a secure future for themselves and those after them.

The purpose of this booklet is to promote thinking about this question, based on the exhibition of Fritz Ascher's work, along four lines:

- 1 to offer a brief introduction to the life and art of Fritz Ascher, including the complex question of his identity;
- 2 to raise, specifically within Ascher's life and art, the question of how persecution affected what he produced;
- 3 to use the discussion of these issues to broaden the issue by
 - (a) considering the problem of prejudice and how it can lead to persecution, and
 - (b) to invite students to choose a time, place, and circumstance in which to focus on an individual who has endured persecution and how persecution has affected the art produced (in whatever media) of that individual;
- 4 to consider how one might go about changing the inclination of so many humans to be prejudiced and, if given the power, to persecute others based on those prejudices. How can we as individuals, be part of the process of *tikkun olam*: "repairing the world"?

One: The Shaping of Fritz Ascher's Biography

Fritz Ascher was born into a Jewish family in 1893 in Berlin, Germany (Prussia). Jews at that time were nominally accepted as full members of society, since gradually, in the previous century or so, the increasingly politically powerful and unified state—most recently, Prussia had defeated France in the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71) in which new Prussian military technology had shined—saw itself as less Christian and more secular. In other words, religion was not considered a basis for citizenship or for participation in the social, economic, and cultural realms. Therefore, Jews were no longer to be excluded or marginalized for religious reasons.

As much as this was theoretically the situation, in actuality, many doors remained closed to Jews in all facets of the German world. Even Christians who had, during the past century come to think and speak of themselves as *post-Christian*—on the basis of which they had enacted laws permitting Jews into the mainstream of society, economically, culturally and even sometimes politically, as we have noted—had, more often than not, failed to abandon a sense of antipathy and/or supercessionist superiority toward Jews and Judaism. This situation had been reinforced fifteen years before Ascher's birth, when a German political philosopher and pamphleteer named William Marr had promoted the idea that Jews were not merely



Ascher Family, *Wedding Charlotte Ascher*, 1918. Photograph. Courtesy Bianca Stock

defined by religion. Using a term that had become common to the vocabulary of linguistics—referring to a group of languages that possessed certain distinct characteristics—he defined Jews as race: Semites. His goal was to suggest that Jews, as a race, could never really be Europeans, much less Germans, and that therefore they could never really be properly assimilated into Prussia. In fact, he suggested that, as a group, Jews represented a competitive threat to the full progress of Prussia as a modern state and as a forward-looking society.

Under these circumstances, a critical mass of middle-class and upper-middle-class Jewish families converted to Christianity—not for spiritual reasons, but for socio-economic reasons: not out of religious conviction, but out of the hope of offering their children better opportunities to succeed in the world around them. The time of Fritz Ascher's early childhood coincided, moreover, with the notorious Dreyfus Affair in France—the country that had previously been viewed by all of Europe as the most forward-looking with regard to its acceptance of Jews.

The false accusations of Dreyfus, a Jewish military officer, of spying for Prussia against his native France—he would be sent to Devil's Island by a military tribunal as punishment, and it would be more than a dozen years until his unequivocal innocence was acknowledged by the French state—shocked the world and raised the question of whether anti-Semitism was a disease without a cure.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Fritz Ascher's father, Hugo, decided, in 1899, that he and his children will leave Judaism—the children were baptized in 1901. (Interestingly, Ascher's mother, Minna Luise, chose not to do so—although twenty-five years later, she followed, four years after her husband's death). So Ascher, from age 8, grew up as a nominal Christian but certainly aware of his Jewish roots. His talent as a painter was recognized by his teen-age years—most importantly, by Max Liebermann, the leading painter in Germany, (who was Jewish), and arranged for admission for Fritz to the Art Academy on Königsberg in 1909. There is an interesting ink on paper drawing that he did in 1919, entitled *Burial*. In it, while the individual apparently offering a declamation at the gravesite offers no evidence of his religious identity, there are at least two figures, one of whom (on the lower left) gestures in distinct grief, who can be identified by their hats, coats, and apparent side-locks as traditional Eastern European Jews and several others may possibly be wearing skullcaps—so one may at least argue that he was present at a funeral that may have been Jewish: why else would two traditional Orthodox Jews be present at the grave site,

along with a congregation almost entirely made up of males? However, very lightly drawn background elements appear to be crosses, suggesting, on the contrary, that this is a Christian cemetery—and the gravesite appears shaped for cremated remains placed in an urn, virtually impossible for a traditional Jewish burial. The drawing could be said to encompass the interwoven religious elements of Ascher himself.



Burial, 1919. White gouache over black ink on paper, 10.5 x 8.7 inches

In the pre-World War I years he returned from Königsberg to Berlin, and became very involved with the cultural *avant garde* art and literary scene, and painted striking figurative images with a fierce expressionist style of often strident colors and rough-textured brushwork. When the war arrived, although many of his friends were drafted into military service, Fritz Ascher was not—and this is the period in which he seemed to become particularly interested in depicting Christ, albeit in a unique manner.

After the war, it would seem that life resumed—except Germany had changed. Beaten down in a military disaster that it had primarily instigated, and forced to pay heavy indemnities to England and France, it descended into an intense economic trough—even as German leaders spoke to the people as if Germany had been the victor, thus creating a deep sense of confusion and contradiction. Leadership was weak and created conditions ripe for the rise of National Socialism, and by 1933, Hitler had been elected Chancellor of the post-democratic state. Ascher's painting by that time seemed subtly different in content: still mostly ebullient in style, but a growing focus on subjects such as sad clowns might be noticed.

Subtle subject change gradually became radical transformation of life after 1933. He began to change residences frequently, already, it would seem, subject to persecution. Conditions steadily worsened for the artist. His mother died on October 17, 1938—on his birthday (was it a natural death?).

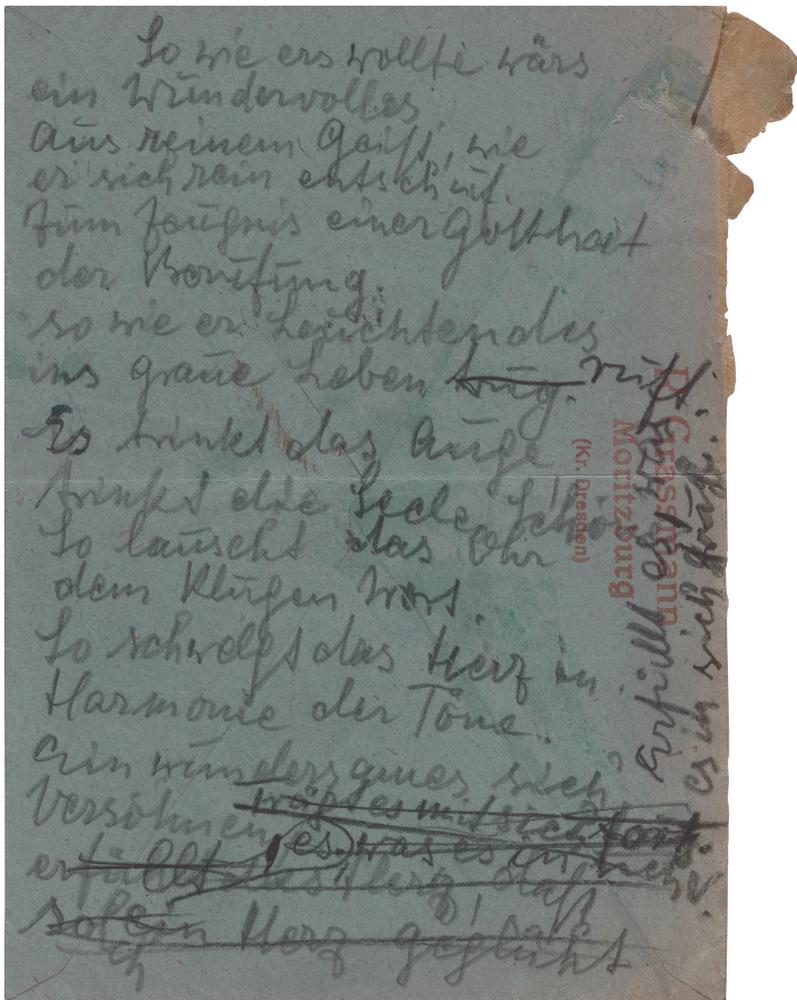
Barely a month later, on November 9-10, 1938—*Kristallnacht*, the “Night of Broken Glass,” when for the first time, the Nazis semi-formally promoted extensive violence against Jews and Jewish property across Germany—Ascher was arrested and sent to Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp. While there is no absolute record indicating whether his arrest reflected the fact that he was regarded as a degenerate artist or a Jew (or both), it seems likely that the reason was his Judaism, given that this was the Nazi focus on *Kristallnacht*. Clearly the nominal “conversion” of nearly four decades earlier had become irrelevant.

Although he was released in late December, through the efforts of his friend, Attorney Gerhard Grassmann, he was soon arrested again and sent to the police prison in Potsdam. This time it took Grassmann and the Evangelical Protestant minister, Heinrich Grüber five months to gain Ascher's release—that was supposed to lead to his emigration from Germany, but he was not able to board his scheduled ship for Shanghai. Back in Berlin, he now had to report three times weekly to police headquarters and once a week to the police prison located at Alexanderplatz, and by 1941 was compelled, with hundreds of thousands of others, to wear a yellow six-pointed star signifying his Judaism. The Nazis confiscated his parents' villa the following year, and in 1943 seized all of his assets.

When his name had come up on a deportation list in 1942, he was warned by the police chief, Heinrich



“Jude,” Star of David, 1940-1944. Cloth and dye, 4.5 x 3.6 inches. Photo Jacek Proszyk [CC BY-SA (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>)]



Poem by Fritz Ascher on envelope from R Grassmann Moritzburg to R Grassmann Berlin Lassenstrasse 26, not dated. Graphite on blue paper envelope, 6.2 x 4.5 inches. Courtesy Fritz Ascher Society

Wolber, and needed to disappear—while in a weakened state, having just undergone an appendectomy and suffering from myocardial insufficiency thanks to acute bronchitis. He was taken in, however, by Martha Grassmann (Gerhard’s mother), who hid him—for three years—first in her apartment and later, in the basement; hers was one of the few villas in the wealthy Grunewald area of Berlin to have been hit by a bomb. The location proved both difficult and ideal. Ideal because each villa in the neighborhood was surrounded by substantial acreage and because the neighborhood, that included many villas formerly owned by Jews, was now inhabited by high-ranking Nazis. Not the place where the SS would expect a Jew to hide. Difficult, once Ascher had to move into a tiny space in the basement, a space that was most certainly dingy and damp, with more than a few rats but without light, a bucket instead of a toilet, and no running water to wash.

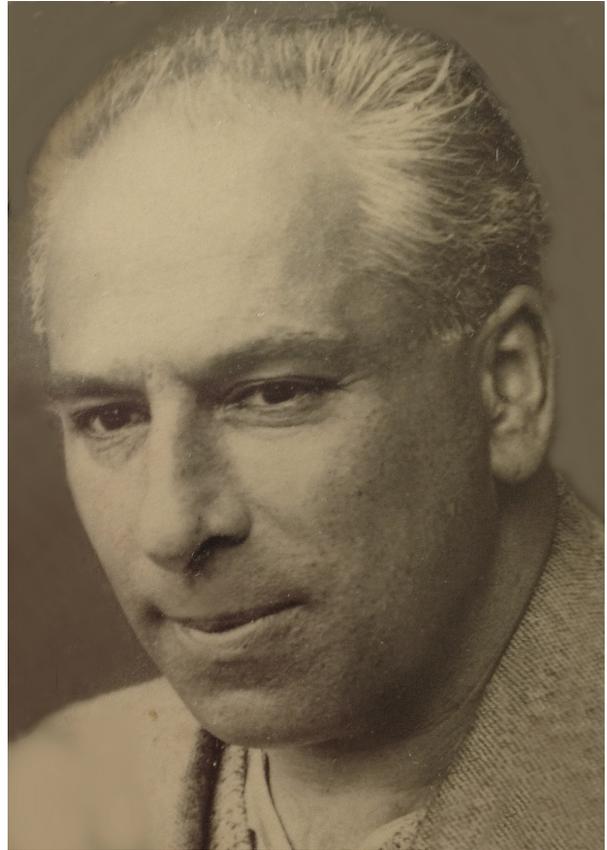
During these war years, without access to art materials, the painter turned to poetry, so that Ascher’s “middle period” offers very dense poems, as dense as some of the early period paintings had

been—a density that increased dramatically after the war, when Ascher was able to come out of hiding and put brush to canvas once again. Both he and his work had changed: if the later placed a much greater emphasis on landscape subjects, it also offered a style more intensely expressionistic than that before the war period, with an extremely thick impasto and colors both bolder and often, paradoxically, given the bold hues, darker than before.

Ascher continued to live under Martha Grassmann’s roof for the rest of his life—he died in March, 1970—for they moved into the villa a block from his war-time hiding place, into one of the two ground-floor apartments (there were six in all, on three floors) into which the villa had been subdivided. The accommodations provided him with a studio with a winter-garden annex overlooking the garden. The very social Fritz Ascher from before the war had metamorphosed into a very quiet man who socialized on a very limited basis. Those who have remembered him from those years refer to him as quiet and withdrawn, unfailingly polite and kind. His social anxieties were sufficient that he turned down a teaching position at the Art Academy in Berlin, and lost himself, instead, almost entirely in his painting, in which he turned repeatedly away from people toward nature.

He frequently strolled through the Grunewald city forest, most often alone. He did have a female friend with whom, for some twenty years, he often walked through the park—sometimes holding hands—and who talked with him in his studio while he painted, but virtually nothing is known about her (there is one painting and one ink on paper drawing that are supposed to be images of her). The five children in the building (two were the children of the superintendent of the villa, who lived in one of the English basement apartments in the building) were apparently welcome in his studio and sometimes found their way into his drawings, and there was a very small group of other friends.

In May-June, 1969, nine months before he died, an exhibition of 22 oil paintings done since 1945 showed at Rudolph Springer Gallery. By then Martha Grassmann and he, the last tenants in the villa, had to move out, as the landlord had sold it to developers in late 1968; it was demolished in June, 1969—six days after the Springer gallery exhibition came down. Although they found a small three-bedroom apartment, Ascher no longer had a studio, and his paintings had to be stored in a remote room. He had a stroke and fell into a deep depression,—he no longer recognized Mrs Grassmann—dying a few months after the move, on March 26, 1970. Martha Grassmann moved into a private old age home, and died in January of the following year. She was buried next to Fritz Ascher in the Wannsee Cemetery.



Fritz Ascher, 1950. Photograph. Courtesy Bianca Stock

Two: Fritz Ascher's Art and Experience

The following samples of Ascher's works of art help tell his story—that of someone whose career and whose life were strongly affected by the Holocaust, who had to hide in order to survive, to switch from painting to poetry during the war years and returned to a very different painterly vision afterwards. They all raise the question of what "expressionism" means as a term in art history, and offer an opportunity to wrestle with the elements of painting—color, line, texture—as both connected to and separate from the biography of the painter and the world around him or her. While each image is accompanied by a brief description, the purpose of this selection of images is to encourage students, based on the brief biographical information offered above, to theorize about the relationship between the works and aspects of the artist's life.

Paintings from before World War I until before World War II



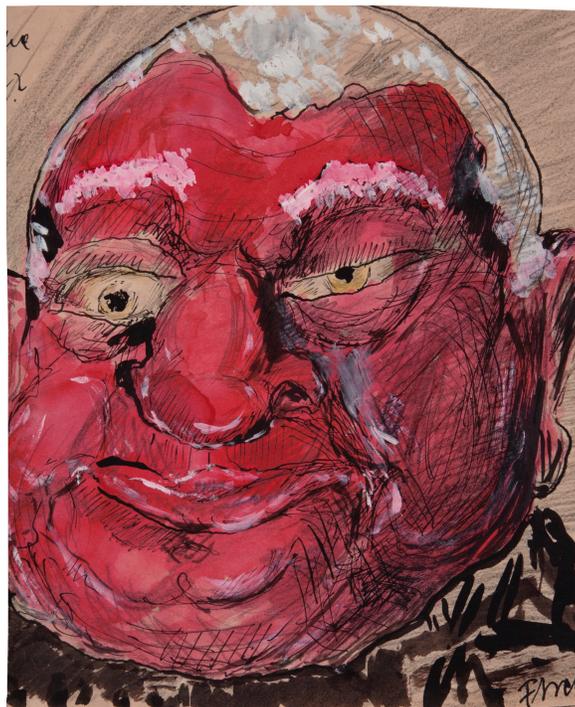
1 “Lone Man” (“*Der Vereinsamte*”), c. 1914
Oil on canvas, 47 x 33.5 inches

What does his image suggest about the mood of the man who painted it? Is the “Lone Man” the artist—and if so, how so? Is the loner oppressed—is he *lonely*, or merely *alone*? *independent*? Consider the following: the late nineteenth-early twentieth century was marked in much of central Europe in particular by both explosive cultural, socio-economic, and industrial expansion, but also by a marked kind of emotional malaise. It is the era when Sigmund Freud was first making an impact on how people thought about the unconscious and the importance of dreams. What of these issues and ideas might we see expressed in this painting?

2 *Male Portrait in Red*, c. 1915
Mixed media on paper, 10.5 x 8.7 inches

This is a very different sort of image, is it not? All face, and a very fat face at that—it’s been a long time since this man has missed a

good meal—and bursting with color. Why the color red? What is the history of that particular hue in the history of art? How had it shifted slightly in the previous fifty years (compare, for instance, the use of red in almost any medieval or renaissance painting of “The Virgin and Child” with Paul Gauguin’s 1888 “*Vision After the Sermon*”—with this image). What else is distinctive about this face—its eyes, perhaps? What about them? What do they suggest about this character? What else do you find in this image-stuffing face?



3 "Golgotha" ("Golgotha"), 1915

Oil on canvas, 53.4 x 69 inches

What marks this crowded vision of Golgotha as different from what one might recognize from traditional depictions of this subject? Where are the images of Christ and the two thieves placed within the image's composition, and are they in the light or in shadow? How does this last feature affect the stand out/disappear nature of their dark brown-black hue, both against a glaring, bright yellow sun that is ambiguously rising or setting and against the rest of the figures and landscape elements in the painting with their bright pigments?

Just below the foliage is a Roman soldier holding a spear—who might this be?—on horseback who appears to be chasing the foreground figures away; his facial expression is, interestingly, virtually identical to that of the Christ. What is it that the savior shares in common with this Roman pagan soldier—whose countenance one can discern even in its darkly shadowed state? People fleeing in a chaotic array all share two traits: they are enveloped in boldly-colored robes and their faces offer the sort of features, particularly their noses, which reflect generations of Northern European stereotypical depictions of Jews. If we view Ascher as a *Christian* painter, this is a remarkable image not only for its expressive power but even more so for its emphatic focus on all the anonymous figures, (rendered as a Christian might render Jews), rather than on the crucified Christ or on figures like the Three Marys, Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus or John the Evangelist: if any of these individuals is present it is far from obvious.

If we view Ascher as a *Jewish* painter, then he is one of a handful of Jewish artists to focus on the figure of Jesus between about 1870 and 1940. Compare this image with sculptures of Christ by Mark Antokolsky, Moses Jacob Ezekiel, and Marc Chagall: aside from diverse media (sculpture versus painting) what do the images created by these Jewish artists offer regarding their respective worlds compared both to each other and to the pre-World War I world of Fritz Ascher?



4 "The Golem" ("Der Golem"), 1916/1945
Oil on canvas, 71 x 55 inches
Jewish Museum Berlin GME 93/2

The Golem was a creature said to have been contrived of earth from near the river outside Prague by Rabbi Judah Loew (1527-1609), an expert in esoteric Jewish mystical formulae. The Creature was a forerunner of Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein*, of sorts: he was designed specifically to help the rabbi with everyday tasks (like gathering wood for the fire or bringing water from the river) and to protect the Jewish community from Christian predators. But only Rabbi Loew knew how to control him, and one day things got out of hand when the rabbi was away on a trip, so when returned he decided that he had to



remove the it/him from circulation. The story became enormously popular in both Jewish and non-Jewish circles in the late 19th/early 20th century though renderings in both Yiddish and German, the first by a Jew named Yudl Rosenberg, the second by a non-Jew named Gustav Meyrink, who was part of the pre-World War I cultural circle that included Ascher.

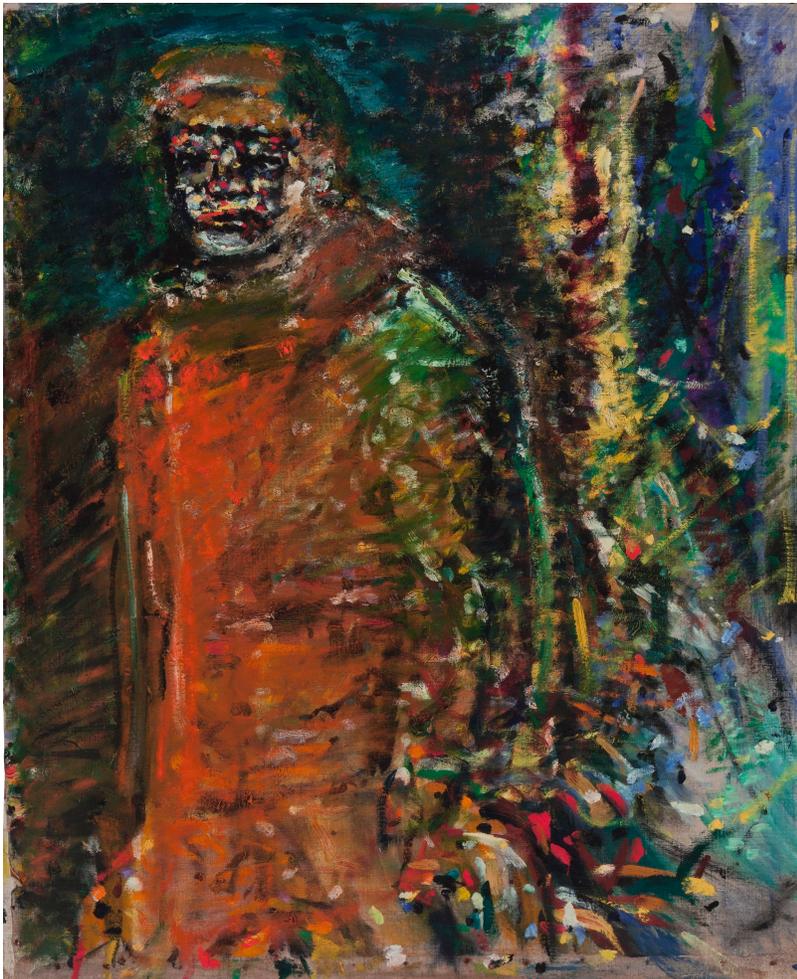
The artist presents the Golem it/himself with an expression of both fierce seriousness and sadness; the other three individuals—Rabbi Loew, presumably, in the center, flanked by his flowing white beard and his two assistants—have rather ghoulish expressions, noticeably limited teeth, and inordinately large hands. Where the Golem looks out directly at us they all look down and to the side, as if either distracted and afraid of something (could they see some vicious anti-Semite, such as the Priest, Thaddeus from the Rosenberg version of the story, off to the side?) that we cannot see; or they are unable or unwilling to lift their gaze and look us in the eye. The Golem looks more human than they and they look almost demonic. So he has reversed the norm and the expectation. Does this reflect a conscious or unconscious anti-Jewish bias, not to be unexpected necessarily for someone who is in the midst of trying to clarify his own identity as a Jew and/or as a Christian?

But if Ascher's depiction of the Golem it/himself is benign—who towers over the other individuals in the image, perhaps even protectively (hence the ferocity of his expression as he looks at us)—that also suggests that he is seen as a positive figure regardless of how those who made him and would ultimately have to destroy him were seen by the artist. This certainly accords with a distinct Jewish perspective. For Jews, the Golem was a kind of localized messianic character.

The film scholar, Heide Schönemann, asserts that Ascher's figures "are shaped in a manner suggesting Eastern European Jews, with *keepot* [skullcaps] and long robes, grouped before a background of big-city buildings that for Berliners would have appeared as typically Eastern (European.)" In other words, Ascher may be interpreted to have absorbed, as had many assimilated Jews, the Christian view of "stereotypical Jews"—meaning those from Eastern Europe—as fundamentally alien: as *other*. If Schönemann is right, then the threat that Jews pose to "us Germans" has been visually transposed as the threat that Eastern European Jews (because they are so shtetlized and unassimilated in their ways, including their garments) pose to "us German Jews."

How might we see Ascher's Golem as falling between the kingdoms of darkness and light? Meyrink describes the Golem as having a golden face-color, with weird eyes, and refers to golden earrings worn by Jews—which is how Ascher has depicted them. What is the main color of the Golem's skin in Ascher's painting—and how might that relate to color symbolism in Christian art?

And if we look at this work with its intense emotional quotient, and if we understand ambiguities in Ascher's sense of self that are expressed on this canvas and others—and if we accept that ambiguity as articulated on this particular canvas by a vision of the protagonists that is not altogether positive but of the Golem itself as something with local messianic potential—then we might also ask how the messianic concept in general was understood or treated by Ascher. How else, if at all, did he reflect on the messianic idea in his work—as, for instance, in the painting, *Golgotha*? How does the Golem compare, on the other hand, to *The Loner*, both visually and conceptually?



**5 "Bajazzo" ("Bajazzo"),
1924/1945**

Oil on canvas, 47.6 x 39 inches

Ascher expended a good deal of paint, ink and pencil lead on depicting clowns—specifically, the sort of clowns that Ruggero Leoncavallo's 1882 opera, *I Pagliacci* (*The Clowns*) made famous: the clown who weeps within (usually because of a heart broken by unrequited love) as he dons his make-up to make the people laugh—who have paid their money to laugh. The motif of the clown who laughs as symbolic of the Jew who entertains on the stage of history while inwardly weeping would later be explored by other Jewish visual artists, like Jacques Lipchitz, in his 1926 sculpture, *Pierrot Escaping*. Might we suppose that Ascher embraced this aspect of the "Lone Man" theme as possessing a specifically Jewish aspect to it? What are the particular qualities of this clown, in terms both of painting technique and the emotional presentation of the subject?

Paintings After World War II

It is arguable that Ascher created his strongest work after 1945, after emerging from his chrysalis, opening up emotionally, using his work as an instrument with which to *overcome* what he had experienced—and in those post-war years he remained connected to the expressionist color and form he had found by the 1920s and 1930s, while locating his own pictorial language in his landscapes. He added what might be seen, perhaps, as a deeper spirituality than before: not formal religiosity, but spirituality, visible in his intense Expressionism, in his thick impasto, vigorous brushstrokes and surprising pigments, in his Rembrandt-like interest in light and shadow. The Expressionist fervor of his earlier work if anything increased—perhaps reflecting the energy pent up during the years of visual silence, but his style may be said to have picked up where he had left it when Nazism and war transformed his world.

Ascher's work is freer than ever and as burdened as ever; one might say that it is completely disconnected from his Holocaust experience that is yet deeply embedded within every painting. His work has nothing to do with that experience and everything to do with it.



6 Self Portrait, 1953

Mixed media on paper, 18 x 12.4 inches

Since this is an acknowledged portrait of the artist by the artist, what does it possibly tell us about him at this point in his life? How has he been affected by the history through which he has lived? Is the effect of the years in hiding during the war—now 8 years away in the past—at all evident in his expression (in particular, his eyes!) and in his choice of pigments? What seems to be just below his chin—a kind of collar around his neck? Does it suggest any particular kind of character that he has painted? What do you suppose happens to those who are persecuted or oppressed or who experience violence, such as being mugged or raped, as time moves forward? Do victims forget what happened? Do they forget the details but remember the feelings? Do they wish they could forget but find themselves unable not to remember—if not while awake, then while asleep, when dreams seep into one's mind out of the unconscious? If you have access to more images, find Ascher's 1958 *Sufferer (Self-Portrait)* and compare it to this image, which is not explicitly titled "sufferer," and ask what we see and what might we feel about a continuity of pain?



7 Cross (Suicide Cemetery Grunewald), c. 1957. Mixed media on paper, 12.7 x 15.4 inches

This work on paper is a stylized representation of and reference to a specific cemetery in the Grunewald: the one to which those who had needed their lives by suicide—most of them, apparently, by leaping into the nearby Havel River—had been consigned since 1897, since suicides were not typically permitted burial in the consecrated ground of Christian cemeteries in and around Berlin. What might have drawn Fritz Ascher to that specific site in the vast acreage of the Grunewald? Why did he choose to depict that single cross and its visual context in such a stylized, non-straightforwardly representational style? What do you suppose motivated his choice of colors?

This is the only “suicide cemetery” in Germany—and has been around since the late 19th century. Why had such a cemetery apparently not existed for so many centuries before or elsewhere—why would a suicide be denied burial in the family plot in the communal graveyard? Why would that issue become significant at such a time in German history? It might be interesting to research and compare the attitudes toward suicides in different traditions: for instance, among the pagan Greeks—especially in Plato’s day—and Romans, among the Jews, Christians, or Muslims—and are there differences among the sub-traditions within each of these three Abrahamic faiths: Reform vs Orthodox Jews, Catholic vs Lutheran Christians, Sunni vs Shi’i Muslims, for instance?



8 "Setting Sun" ("Untergehende Sonne"), c. 1960
Oil on canvas, 49.2 x 50 inches

The subtitle of the catalogue of Fritz Ascher’s full exhibition that has travelled through Germany and will move through various cities in the United States is “To Live is to Blaze with Passion.” Among his post-war oil paintings, mostly landscapes, trees, and flowers (particularly sunflowers), there is surely no single painting that blazes with passion as much as this image. Is this painting abstract or representational? How does the artist use color—how many colors? Which colors, specifically?—to convey the absolute visual glory of the moment that he has captured? What, beyond sheer visual splendor, might one suppose this painting represents in

terms of larger issues—particularly issues that events like the Holocaust force to the surface of the questioning mind, regarding humans and God? There is nothing overtly pertinent to the Holocaust in this image—at least at first look—but how might it, in spite of that outcome of the viewer’s first look, offer a connection to the Holocaust and the artist’s experience (and non-experience) of it?

9 Bajazzo, 1963

Oil on canvas, 49.2 x 50 inches



Again the image of the clown—and again an image not of a happy being? Compare this image to the *Bajazzo* painting from 1924/1945 (#5 above) and ask, aside from the difference between a three-quarter figure and just a head, how the two images are similar and dissimilar. How is this a function of the difference in medium—black ink on paper vs oil on canvas—and how might it be a function of time period, the circumstances and the age of the artist? Both differences and non-differences! (What has *not* changed?)

Discuss how the artist does or does not identify with this face that is theoretically not his own at all? Compare the image to the *Self-Portrait* of 1953 (#6 above) and (if possible) the *Sufferer (Self-Portrait)* of 1958. And, by the way, think back to and compare all of these with the first image in this selection, *Lone Man* (#1 above), and ask again whether the artist always identifies with his characters, given the supposedly joyful, social figure that Ascher cut in those early days—which has changed emphatically by the time of these images.

10 *Uncle Tom's Cabin (Berlin Grunewald)*, c. 1963

Mixed media on paper, 18.5 x 18.8 inches

This is a relative rarity in the artist's post-war oil-on-canvas imagery: human-contrived elements as a backdrop for natural elements. Describe the relationship between rectilinear and curvilinear elements in this image, of static lines and lines that seem to vibrate, of subtle color differences below and above, those contained by the trees and those contained by the buildings, as parts of a symbolic statement regarding human and divine presence and action in the world. How is that relevant to the artist's particular biographical experience?

These buildings were built in 1926-31. Research the Bauhaus as an architectural and industrial art movement in Germany: what was it all about? Where, specifically, and when did it flourish? What happened to it during the Nazi period and why? How and why might Ascher have been drawn to just these structures, artistically—rather than, say, any of the very different kinds of villas that abounded—in the Grunewald? The title of the gouache is based on a popular corner restaurant called “Uncle Tom's Cabin.” For an American viewer, however, unaware of this, how does that title—to the extent that it can be connected to the American past and its history of prejudice, stereotype, marginalization, and persecution—offer further food for thought regarding not just the past, in the US or in Germany, but the present and the future, as well?

Think, in thinking about all of these images, about how Ascher's works, from “*Lone Man*” to the last of his landscapes, are powerful reflections and refractions of what and how humans are, at our best and at our worst.



Three: The Problem of Prejudice, Stereotype, and Persecution

Prejudice literally means “pre-judge”—to arrive at an individual or a group with already-developed ideas of what and how s/he or they is/are, which tends to make it far more difficult to get to know or really understand what and who that individual or group is. Most of us have, in the course of our childhoods (and sometimes later) absorbed prejudices and stereotypes regarding different groups of people who are not from our subgroup—I am white, you are black; I am male, you are female; I am American, you are Mexican—so that if and when we meet someone from that other subgroup in a manner beyond the very superficial, we have difficulty stepping beyond those pre-conceptions and understanding that no two individuals are identical, and that in every group, including one’s own, there are kind and cruel, generous and stingy, ugly and beautiful individuals.

The outcome of this situation can be simply that I make my way through life limiting my relationships, since I can never trust or be comfortable with those in other subgroups. So my life is less rich and less varied. The outcome can be more nefarious: I arrive into a position of power, playing on and feeding the prejudices of a majority regarding a particular minority (or series of minorities) and when I arrive into that position of power, I may actively marginalize, stigmatize, and persecute those whom I have never cared to understand or to include in my world. In 1933, in Germany, this began to evolve in the handling of political minorities opposed to the Nazi majority and gradually to other groups; by 1935 the group most distinctly the focus of Nazi prejudice and stereotype, leading directly to persecution, was the Jews. In the United States, beginning in 2016, the sort of rhetoric articulated by leading Nazi politicians in the 1930s began to emerge with increasing vehemence, directed toward Muslims and Mexicans (“they are all rapists”) by a political leadership expressing the ugliest possible forms of prejudice and stereotype.

As an exercise, divide your class into a series of groups—it almost does not matter how many—ideally with members of each of those groups actually represented in the class. And make a list of the stereotypical attributes ascribed to each group.

- African Americans
- Catholic Americans
- Chinese Americans
- East Asian Americans in general
- Euro-Americans in general
- German Americans
- Hispanic Americans
- Italian Americans
- Jewish Americans
- Muslim Americans

After having spent some time (say, a half hour) coming up with these lists, gather together and write them up for all to see, to contrast, compare—and hopefully, to complain as your group comes up and you assert that some (all) of those attributes do not really apply to your group, which may help you recognize that the attributes on your list for some other group may not apply to it as simply as you thought they did. These groups are suggested somewhat arbitrarily—although several of them have

been subject to widespread prejudice and sometimes persecution—so feel free to come up with other groups; broaden the focus to non-American national, ethnic, racial and religious groups.

As a second, more history-based exercise (in addition to or as an alternative to the first exercise), select another character from history—perhaps only the history of the last two centuries or so—who may be compared to Fritz Ascher in terms of having been marginalized and/or persecuted and been transformed by the experience—whether the outcome became visible in visual or some other form of art or, say, in the realm of politics. How would one compare him—to choose three examples out of many, many possibilities—to someone like Martin Luther King (“Letter from Birmingham Jail”) or Nelson Mandela (African National Congress) or Khaled Hosseini (*The Kite Runner*)?

Four: The Future Is in Your Hands

If we are—all of us—to live in a better world, then we need—all of us—to live comfortably with one another. We don’t need to love everybody, but we do need to understand that, if we don’t acknowledge others’ differences from us as legitimate as their similarities to us, then it is not likely that others will acknowledge these elements of who *we* are. And what are “we”—as parts of diverse subgroups of humans and ultimately as *human beings*?

Consider ways in which each of us and all of us can contribute to improving the world for ourselves and for those who come after us. What is the role that may be played by politics? Sports? The sciences? The arts? How do different disciplines help to push the world toward a smoother spin—and what is it that pushes the world toward a dangerous edge? Consider, among those whom you might choose to compare to Fritz Ascher, how individuals like King, Mandela, and Hosseini figured out ways to contribute to repairing a broken world—each in his little part of it.

One of the two recipients of the 2018 Nobel Prize for peace, Nadia Murad, was a victim of ISIS persecution whose post-survival advocacy on behalf of women like herself, sexually assaulted in the context of war, led her all the way to Stockholm—a journey she could not possibly have imagined as she suffered intense persecution. None of us can expect to leave the sort of imprint that she is still leaving, or that Hosseini, as a novelist, is still leaving, or that King as a writer and a public figure and Mandela as a politician who spent 25 years in prison for fighting Apartheid have had. But all of us are obligated to consider the small ways—however small—in which we can leave the world a better place than it was when we were born into it.

Chronology of the Holocaust

1933

- January 30: German President Paul von Hindenburg appoints Adolf Hitler chancellor
- February 27–28: The German parliament (Reichstag) building burns down under mysterious circumstances. The government treats it as an act of terrorism
- March 22: Dachau concentration camp opens
- March 23: The German parliament passes the Enabling Act, which empowers Hitler to establish a dictatorship in Germany
- April 1: Nationwide boycott of Jewish shops and businesses
- April 7: Laws bar Jews from holding civil service, university, and state positions
- May 10: Public burnings of books written by Jews, political dissidents, and others not approved
- September 22: Reich Chamber of Culture (Reichskulturkammer) is established. Members have to prove Aryan descent and meet the “reliability and aptitude” standards (Jews excluded)

1934

- August 2: German President von Hindenburg dies. Hitler becomes President of Germany
- August 19: Hitler abolishes the office of President, declares himself Führer of the German Reich and People, and becomes the absolute dictator of Germany; there are no further legal or constitutional limits to his authority
- November-December: SS chief Himmler unifies the German state political police forces into the Gestapo office in Berlin under the authority of his deputy, Reinhard Heydrich
- December 10: SS chief Himmler creates the Inspectorate of Concentration Camps under the leadership of SS General Theodor Eicke

1935

- September 15: “Nuremberg Laws”: Anti-Jewish racial laws enacted
Jews are no longer considered German citizens; Jews can not marry Aryans

1936

- March 3: Jewish doctors are barred from practicing medicine in German institutions
- August 1: Summer Olympics begin in Berlin

1937

- July 18: the *Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung* opens at *Haus der Deutschen Kunst* in Munich, showcasing the officially approved art in Nazi Germany
- July 19: the *Degenerate Art* exhibition opens across the street in Munich, showcasing the (mostly Expressionist) art that was not officially approved in Nazi Germany

1938

- March 13: Germany incorporates Austria in the *Anschluss* (Union)
- April 26: Mandatory registration of all property held by Jews inside the Reich
- November 9-10: Kristallnacht (Night of Broken Glass): Anti-Jewish pogrom in Germany, Austria, and the Sudetenland; 200 synagogues destroyed; 7,500 Jewish shops looted; 30,000 male Jews sent to concentration camps (Dachau, Buchenwald, Sachsenhausen)
- November 12: Decree forcing all Jews to transfer retail businesses to Aryan hands
- November 15: All Jewish pupils expelled from German schools
- December 12: One billion mark fine levied against German Jews for the destruction of property during Kristallnacht

1939

- March 15: Germans occupy Czechoslovakia
- September 1: **Beginning of World War II: Germany invades Poland**
- December: Euthanasia program started

1940

- April 9: Germans occupy Denmark and southern Norway
- May 10: Germany invades the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, and France
- May 20: Concentration camp established at Auschwitz

1941

- April 6: Germany invades Yugoslavia and Greece
- June: systematic killing of men, women and children begins
- June 22: Germany invades the Soviet Union
- September 28-29: 34,000 Jews massacred by Einsatzgruppen at Babi Yar outside Kiev
- October: Establishment of Auschwitz II (Birkenau)
- November 19: Jews have to wear the Yellow Star
- December 7: Japan bombs Pearl Harbor and the United States declares war the next day
- December 11: Nazi Germany declares war on the United States

1942

- January 20: Wannsee Conference in Berlin: Plan is developed for "Final Solution to the Jewish Question"
- Summer: Deportation of Jews from Belgium, Croatia, France, the Netherlands and Poland to killing centers
- Winter: Deportation of Jews from Germany, Greece and Norway to killing centers
- November 23: Soviet troops counterattack at Stalingrad, trapping the German Sixth Army in the city

1943

- March: Liquidation of Krakow ghetto
- June 19: Berlin is declared "free of Jews"
- Fall: Liquidation of large ghettos in Minsk, Vilna, and Riga
- October-November: Rescue of the Danish Jewry

1944

- March 19: Germany occupies Hungary
- May 15: Nazis begin mass deportation of about 440,000 Hungarian Jews
- June 6: D-Day: Allied forces invade Normandy, France
- July 24: Russians liberate Majdanek
- November: Last Jews deported from Terezin to Auschwitz
- December 16: Battle of the Bulge

1945

- January 12: Soviet winter offensive
- January 18: Death march of nearly 60,000 prisoners from Auschwitz concentration camp
- January 25: Death march of nearly 50,000 prisoners from Stutthof concentration camp
- April 16: The Soviets launch their final offensive, encircling Berlin
- April 30: Adolf Hitler commits suicide
- May 7: Germany surrenders to the western Allies
- May 9: Germany surrenders to the Soviets

For further information see <https://hmlc.org> and <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org>.

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Check our website for further information about Fritz Ascher: <https://fritzaschersociety.org>.

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Fritz Ascher, *Uncle Tom's Cabin (Berlin Grunewald)*, c. 1963.
Mixed media on paper, 18.5 x 18.8 inches.

Find the teaching materials here: <https://fritzaschersociety.org>

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