



SIK ISEA

Schweizerisches Institut für Kunstwissenschaft
Institut suisse pour l'étude de l'art
Istituto svizzero di studi d'arte
Swiss Institute for Art Research



Josephsohn, Hans, *Halbfigur*, um 1990, Gips, 62 x 28 x 18 cm (Objektmass), Privatbesitz

Documentation level

■■■■□

Name

Josephsohn, Hans

Dates of birth and death

* 20.5.1920 Königsberg (Kaliningrad), † 20.8.2012 Zürich

Municipality of origin (CH)

Zürich

Nationality

CH

Brief biography

Bildhauer. Bronzefiguren und -reliefs

Fields of activity

Plastik, Gipsplastik, Gipsrelief, Bronzeplastik, Bronzerelief, Relief, Skulptur, Architektur

Lexicon article

Hans Josephsohn grew up in a middle-class merchant family in Königsberg, East Prussia. After passing his *Abitur* in 1937, in 1938 he travelled on a grant from a Jewish organisation to Florence in order to study sculpture at the Academy. Due to his Jewish heritage, this was no longer possible in Germany. Sojourn in Loro Ciuffenna, a municipality in the province of Arezzo. After anti-Semitic racial laws were also passed in Italy in September 1938, Josephsohn travelled to Switzerland. From 1938 until his death in 2012, he lived in Zurich. In June 1939, he began an apprenticeship with the sculptor [Otto Müller](#) in Zurich. This was repeatedly interrupted in the early years of the war by internments in various work camps lasting several months at a time. In the winter of 1939/40, he attended drawing courses at the Zurich School of Art and Design under [Max Gubler](#)

and [Heinrich Müller](#). After the end of the war, he made annual trips to Italy. Josephsohn was granted a Swiss residence permit in 1950 and naturalised in 1964. In 1952 and 1953, he was awarded a fine art grant by the City of Zurich. From 1946, he participated in group exhibitions. Individual exhibitions (selection): 1964 and 1997, Helmhaus, Zurich; 1965, Kunsthalle Basel (with the painter [Gustav Stettler](#)); 1975, Museum zu Allerheiligen, Schaffhausen; 1981, Aargauer Kunsthaus, Aarau; 1985–86, Landis & Gyr, Zug; 2001, Haus der Kunst, Brno, Czech Republic; 2002, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; 2003, Kunstforum Ostdeutsche Galerie, Regensburg; 2004, Evangelical City Church, Darmstadt; 2005, Kesselhaus Josephsohn, St. Gallen; Museum Liner, Appenzell, and the Diözesanmuseum Kolumba, Cologne; 2007, Sculpture at Schoenthal, Langenbruck; 2008, Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt am Main; 2012, Lismore Castle Arts (Ireland); 2013, Yorkshire Sculpture Park, Wakefield; 2014, Ernst Barlach Haus, Hamburg.

In 1977, Jürg Hassler made the documentary film entitled *Josephsohn, Stein des Anstosses* (Stumbling Stone); in 1996/97, Peter Mürger made the film *Hans Josephsohn, Bildhauer* (Sculptor); 2006 saw the release of the film *Hans Josephsohn – Im Haus der Plastik* (In the house of sculpture) by Marcus Spichtig, and 2007 that of *Josephsohn Bildhauer* by Matthias Kälin and Laurin Merz. In 1987, Josephsohn received an Honorary Tribute from the Canton of Zurich for his oeuvre; in 1999, this was followed by the Honorary Tribute of the STEO Foundation, Zurich; and finally the Art Prize of the City of Zurich in 2003. In 1992, the La Congiunta Foundation commissioned architect Peter Märkli to erect a minimalist concrete edifice in Giornico, Canton of Ticino, to house Josephsohn's sculptures; it was one of the first monographic museums ever dedicated to a living artist. At the end of 2003, the Kesselhaus Josephsohn was opened at the Felix Lehner art foundry in the Sittertal Valley near St. Gallen, which serves both as a permanent exhibition space and a depot.

Apart from small-scale sculptural sketches for reliefs, for which he used clay, Hans Josephsohn always developed his works in plaster. Using small pieces of plasterboard, he constructed them as hollow forms, sometimes integrating fragments of earlier sculptures, and continued to edit them with a palette knife and chisel, thus creating compact volumes with raw, cracked surfaces. Sculptures considered worthy of the name are then cast in brass; in earlier years, also in bronze. Apart from a brief abstract phase around 1950, Josephsohn focused – with an exclusivity unusual for a sculptor of the 20th and the early 21st centuries – on the human figure. The «existential figure», the authoritative ideal of neoclassical sculpture, whose late representatives

influenced the artistic environment of his apprenticeship, also defines Josephsohn's work – although no longer as a stylistic point of reference, but by rigorously restricting the iconographical repertoire to standing, seated and reclining figures, the torso and the head. In Josephsohn's early years, Maillol was also a key reference.

Josephsohn eliminates all narrative, anecdotal, symbolic and psychological elements in favour of the sculptural qualities of volumes, forms and surfaces. The portrait heads of the 1940s are already subjected to this content-related and formal process of abstraction, just as the figures of workers dating from the mid-1950s are not based on any specific political or social consciousness, but on Josephsohn's interest in the composition of draped figures. More than nude figures, they enable him to concentrate on block-like forms. As has been customary in modern figurative sculpture since Rodin, a torso does not primarily mean a fragment or incomplete body, but a self-contained, sculptural volume whose quality would be impaired by orifices and protruding extremities. Early, streamlined, stele-like figures and half-figures are the expression of this quest for the essence of sculpture. Josephsohn usually did without model studies when sculpting the large-scale half-figures created from the late 1980s – in Gerhard Mack's words, «a completely new type of figure»: the heads, which account for just over half of the 1.5-metre-tall figures, sit, neckless, on amorphous busts. With hardly any naturalistic references, the sculptures thus appear to be autonomous bodies.

The reliefs occupy an important position in Josephsohn's oeuvre. Between 1947 and 1953, he created low reliefs, with abstract forms distributed across the surface which, like the sculptures, portray seated, standing and reclining figures. However, as lovers, mothers and children, couples and corpses, and in combination with objects, they represent fundamental interpersonal and spatial constellations. In the 1960s, and again from 1990, Josephsohn created numerous reliefs featuring three-dimensionally sculpted figures, usually constrained from above by a heavy girder. When the reliefs are already mounted on a wall, independently of their specific composition, their sculptural tectonics make their integration in an architectural context appear even more plausible, indeed imperative. Accordingly, Josephsohn prefers to place his sculptural works inside or in front of buildings rather than in parks among vegetation. Peter Märkli has taken this into account and integrated reliefs and figures into several buildings, for example, three reclining figures in Zurich's Birch school buildings (2004).

The magnitude of volume and clarity of form of Josephsohn's sculptures lend them a monumentality that predestines them for public presentation – although they lack the representative air of monuments. Their hieratic, statuesque forms and sheer physicality are the result of the extensive omission of detailed inner forms. These characteristics, combined with their almost uncouth appearance – particularly in the case of the large-scale half-length figures created from 1990 – confer on them a religious aura, and have induced some commentators to compare them with archaic sculptures. Josephsohn did indeed explore the sculpture of ancient advanced civilisations and the Romanesque period from the very beginning. However, no religious or spiritual connotations are intended.

Critics have always had difficulty in interpreting Josephsohn's art, but have unfailingly recognised his singular position and the consistency of his development. He did not achieve popularity, as the list of his exhibitions and especially the exhibition spaces in Giornico and St. Gallen attest, but he did find an environment in which he was profoundly respected. In Switzerland today, Josephsohn is considered one of the most important representatives of figurative sculpture since [Giacometti](#). Growing numbers of exhibitions abroad since 2000 have helped to garner recognition for Josephsohn on an international scale.

Works: Aarau, Aargauer Kunsthau; Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum; Berlin, terrace of the Neue Nationalgalerie, *Halbfigur* (Half-figure), 1990; Giornico, La Congiunta Foundation, house for works of Hans Josephsohn; Langenbruck, Schönthal Monastery, Sculpture Park; Schaffhausen, Museum zu Allerheiligen; Schaffhausen, Wald Cemetery, Relief, 1977; St. Gallen, Kesselhaus Josephsohn; Kunsthau Zürich; Zurich, Youth Hostel, *Liegende* (Reclining Female Figure), circa 1972; Zurich, Swiss Re, *Liegende* (Reclining Female Figure), 1970–73; Zurich, Birch School premises, *Drei Liegende* (Three Reclining Figures), 2004.

Franz Müller, 1998, updated 2014
Translation: Toby Alleyne-Gee

Selected bibliography

- Hans Josephsohn. *Existenzielle Plastik*. Museum Folkwang Essen, 2018. [Texte: Hans-Jürgen Lechtreck et. al.]. Göttingen: Edition Folkwang/ Steidl, [2018]
- *La Congiunta. Haus für Reliefs und Halbfiguren von Hans Josephsohn*. [Text:] Walo Huber. Zweite durchgesehene Auflage, erste Auflage 1996 (B2-12875). Zürich: Fondazione La Congiunta, 2018 [mehrsprachige Publikation Deutsch - Italienisch - Englisch]
- Matthias Kälin und Laurin Merz: *Josephsohn. Bildhauer*. [Zürich:] Pelicanfilms, 2007, 76 Minuten, Farbe [DVD-Video, 16:9, PAL]
- Gerhard Mack: *Hans Josephsohn*. Zürich: Scheidegger & Spiess, 2005
- *Werkbuch Josephsohn*. Hrsg.: Joachim M. Plotzek [et al.]. Köln: Kolumba, 2005
- *Hans Josephsohn*. Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum, 2002. [texts:] Jan Hein Sassen and Rudi Fuchs. Amsterdam, 2002
- *Hans Josephsohn*. Produktion: Peter Mürger. Zürich: Verein Künstler-Video dokumentation, Peter Mürger, 1997, 37 Minuten [DVD ab Videofilm] [Der Videofilm erzählt über die Biographie, ermöglicht Einsicht in das Werk, zeigt Arbeiten des Künstlers und stellt sein Haus für Reliefs und Halbfiguren in Giornico (TI) vor.]
- *Hans Josephsohn*. Helmhaus Zürich, 1997. [Texte:] Erich Brändle, Marie-Louise Lienhard und Guido Magnaguagno. Zürich, 1997
- Peter Mürger: *Hans Josephsohn. Eine Künstler-Video Dokumentation*. Zürich: Verein Künstler-Video Dokumentation, 1997
- *Stiftung La Congiunta. Peter Märkli - Haus für Reliefs und Halbfiguren des Bildhauers Hans Josephsohn*. [Hrsg.:] Kunsthau Bregenz; [Texte:] Walter Zschokke, Edelbert Köb. Stuttgart: Hatje, 1994
- Hans Heinz Holz: *Hans Josephsohn*. Zürich: ABC, 1981
- *Hans Josephsohn*. Schaffhausen, Museum zu Allerheiligen, 1975. [Text:] Paul Nizon. Schaffhausen, 1975

Website

<http://www.kesselhaus-josephsohn.ch>

Direct link

<http://www.sikart.ch/kuenstlerinnen.aspx?id=4000880&lng=en>

Last modification

28.02.2018

Disclaimer

Alle von SIKART angebotenen Inhalte stehen für den persönlichen Eigengebrauch und die wissenschaftliche Verwendung zur Verfügung.

Copyright

Das Copyright für den redaktionellen Teil, die Daten und die Datenbank von SIKART liegt allein beim Herausgeber (SIK-ISEA). Eine Vervielfältigung oder Verwendung von Dateien oder deren Bestandteilen in anderen elektronischen oder gedruckten Publikationen ist ohne ausdrückliche Zustimmung von SIK-ISEA nicht gestattet.

Empfohlene Zitierweise

AutorIn: Titel [Datum der Publikation], Quellenangabe, <URL>, Datum des Zugriffs. Beispiel: Oskar Bächtli: Hodler, Ferdinand [2008, 2011], in: SIKART Lexikon zur Kunst in der Schweiz, <http://www.sikart.ch/kuenstlerinnen.aspx?id=4000055>, Zugriff vom 13.9.2012.