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Moser, Wilfrid, *Toledo II*, 1961, Öl auf Leinwand, 130 x 97 cm (Objektmass), Kunst Museum Winterthur. Beim Stadthaus, 1227

Documentation level

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Name

Moser, Wilfrid

Dates of birth and death

* 10.6.1914 Zürich, † 19.12.1997 Zürich

Municipality of origin (CH)

Zürich

Nationality

CH

Brief biography

Maler und Bildhauer. Informelle Malerei, bemalte Holzreliefs und Grossplastiken aus Kunststoff

Fields of activity

Malerei, Plastik, Holzrelief, Relief, Assemblage, Collage, Kunst im öffentlichen Raum

Lexicon article

Born in Zurich-Enge as the only child of a Sinologist, later a French and German teacher, and art collector. From 1920–25, Moser attended school and studied the violin at the Zurich Conservatory. Frequent sojourns abroad during his father's teaching assignments, including Venice, Siena, Vienna, Dresden and Marburg. During holidays in the Ticino, he was encouraged to paint at the studio of [Marianne Werefkin](#). The Van Gogh retrospective at the Kunsthaus Zürich in 1924 was to leave a lasting childhood impression on Moser. In 1930, some of his children's drawings were published in *Schweizer Spiegel*. Models for these included works by Maurice Utrillo and Georges Rouault in his father's collection. In his parents' house, Moser made the personal

acquaintance of Swiss artists such as [Otto Baumberger](#), [Albert Pfister](#) and [Otto Meyer-Amden](#). After attending grammar school, he completed his school-leaving certificate in Lausanne in 1931, and started studying mathematics. With the Russian dancer Sonja Preopraschenkaja († 1935) he went on trips to Paris, to Russia in 1932, and to Berlin in 1933. He continued his violin studies; master classes with Willem de Boer, leader of the Tonhalle Orchestra in Zurich. Met the German painter Richard Oelze, as well as [Ernst Ludwig Kirchner](#) in Davos.

This period saw Moser's first serious attempts at painting; the subjects were Siena and the Jardin des Plantes in Paris. In 1934, he visited James Ensor in Ostende. Casual friendship with [Varlin](#), who in 1935 encouraged him to show his work with him at an exhibition of portraits held at the Galerie Forter in Zurich.

At the end of 1935, Moser travelled to Morocco, departing from Marseille with Nicolas de Staël. In Marrakech, he worked in a Swiss construction company. Sojourns in Central Africa and Malaga (Spain), drawing and painting in his free time. In 1937, Moser fought the Spanish fascists at the Malaga front. Seriously wounded, he was evacuated to Oran. In 1938 he painted cityscapes and figures. In 1939, he stayed briefly in a studio on the Rue Vaugirard in Paris. In 1940 he returned from Morocco to Ronco in the Ticino, where he built a studio house. In 1941 he married Johanna Gysi from Bern. In 1942, their son Manuel was born, but died shortly afterwards. Moser scarcely painted during his approximately 1,000 days of active service. In 1942, he created the woodcut series entitled *Totentanz Stalingrad* (Danse Macabre Stalingrad) and exhibited at the Oprecht bookshop in Zurich. His son Gabriel was born in 1944.

Immediately after the end of the war, Moser settled in Paris. Contact with Serge Poliakoff, Louis Nallard and Wols. During this period, Moser painted his early figurative works in pastels and oils on small-format cards: streets, hotels, houses, churches, a butcher's shop, the zoo, the Jardin des Plantes, the metro, souvenirs of Siena. In 1946–47, he studied briefly in the studios of André Lhote and Fernand Léger; in 1947, he again visited James Ensor and encountered the work of Wols at the Galerie Drouin. Trip to Siena and Rome.

In 1949, five of Moser's works were displayed at the *Junge Zürcher Künstler* (Young Zurich Artists) exhibition at the Kunsthaus Zürich. In 1952, he exhibited at the *Premier Salon d'Octobre* in Paris, and in the exhibition *Malerei in Paris – heute* (Painting in Paris – today) at the Kunsthaus Zürich. At this time, he was freeing himself of the impressions of the Klee exhibition held in Zurich in 1940 and working on *Compositions* with lattice-like structures and impasto paint

finishes applied with a spatula. In 1952, the Galerie Jeanne Bucher, which represented Moser, exhibited his work as exemplary of the Deuxième Ecole de Paris for the first time, and enabled him to buy a studio. In 1954, Moser's friend, the art critic Charles Estienne, published a manifesto of Tachism in *Combat*, to which Moser contributed with his series of *Golgotha*, *Banlieue* and *Cathédrale de Rouen* pictures.

Moser's exploration of Carrara and the Giudecca led to larger picture formats between 1957 and 1960. He met his future wife, Eva Rosa Puig, at this time. In 1958, he represented Switzerland at the 29th Venice Biennale and was given his first solo exhibition at the Galerie Jeanne Bucher. In 1959, *Bienal de São Paulo*; and with Pierre Alechinsky, Jean Messagier and Antoni Tàpies at the Kunsthalle Bern. In 1964, solo exhibition at the Kunstmuseum Luzern.

Around 1960, the first assemblages with painted wood. These evolved into collage reliefs. The first sculpture, *Sculpture grise*, was created in 1961. Moser worked on the *Métro* series until 1965; large-format, coloured woodblock prints, 1963–67, including *L'heure du goémon* (1967, with Charles Estienne). From 1968–1975, he abandoned painting in favour of painted sculptures and walk-in, large-scale sculptural works. Commissions in France and Switzerland (Zurich-Oerlikon, Olten). Moser met the art historian Tina Grütter in 1971. Exhibitions at the Kunsthaus Zürich (1970); the Bündner Kunstmuseum Chur (1971); the Museum zu Allerheiligen, Schaffhausen (1979). From 1971–78, Central Chairman of the GSMBA (Society of Swiss Painters, Sculptors and Architects). 1979, monograph by Felix Baumann.

Around 1974–75, he returned to figurative painting with the themes of Carrara, mountains, undergrowth and trees. In 1980, Moser once again participated in the 39th Venice Biennale. In 1984, thanks to his exploration of Delacroix, Van Gogh and Tiepolo, he returned to a gestural painting style. From 1994, his etchings and oil paintings focused among other things on the Pont Alexandre III in Paris. These were complemented by a series of pastels. The major retrospective exhibition at the Kunsthaus Zürich in 1993 was the culmination of Moser's life's work. From 1997–98, the Kunsthaus Zürich exhibited the pastels created between 1993 and 1997 under the title *Die Altersheiterkeit des Wilfrid Moser* (Wilfrid Moser's Cheerful Old Age). The Wilfrid Moser Foundation was founded in Zurich 2005. Retrospective at the Kunstmuseum Bern in 2009.

Survey exhibitions like the show designed by Tina Grütter for the Kunsthaus Zürich entitled *Beginn des Tachismus in der Schweiz* (The Beginning of Tachism in Switzerland, 1978) or *Konstruktion und Geste – Schweizer Kunst der 50er Jahre* (Construction and Gesture – Swiss Art of the 1950s, 1986) by Willy Rotzler show clearly that Wilfrid Moser is one of the leading representatives of abstract-figurative Expressionism in post-war Swiss art. Unlike [Hugo Weber](#), who soon left Paris for the United States and turned to Action Painting, Moser remained rooted in the tradition and painting culture of Europe, as exemplified in the colouring of Ensor and the gestural style of Wols. He had confidently left Switzerland in 1935, initially for Morocco, finding his way in the Existentialism of post-war Paris. This is where he became the painter of an urban attitude to life at the centre of which lies the existence of the individual. Moser's *Maisons*

ouvertes open our eyes to the precarious conditions of the "homeless", who were also a preoccupation of the literature of the time. The major theme of the *Métro* throws him into the underworld, where the hectic everyday life of the masses is combined with the mythology of Hades. Moser's world was always characterised by a fundamental feeling of uncertainty, fragility and impulsion. He found stability in the souvenir images of Siena, Venice or Carrara. In the compositional structure of his paintings he succeeded in bestowing an adequate form on this concurrent impenetrability of reality and the presence of mythology.

Rooms or cities do not merely symbolise the experience of the three-dimensional, but are a cypher for standing in the world, for the transience of the moment and of emotions, for chaos and uproar, for constant change. Even when Moser indeed started to translate his pictorial experiences into reliefs and freestanding sculptures after 1960, he never gained a secure footing. His principal work of sculpture, *A Midsummer Night's Dream in Soho* (1969–1970, Kunsthaus Zürich), is as little a monument as the sculpture of Leporello in the garden of the Kunsthaus Zürich (1987) created as a replacement for *Caliban*, which had been burnt in 1979. It is rather a sounding board of the fragile and the uncertain. In this sense, even Moser's controversial return to the figurative did not mean that he had converted to a material naturalism, although the natural world assumed an ever-greater role as a source of subject matter. Instead, after years of abstinence, it allowed him once again to consider painting – as at the beginning of his career – as a means of mastering his existence. This second appropriation led to a serene late work in which all the themes of his life were to re-emerge.

Works: Aarau, Aargauer Kunsthaus; Bellinzona, Museo Civico Villa dei Cedri; Kunstmuseum Bern; Chur, Bündner Kunstmuseum; Locarno, Pinacoteca comunale Casa Rusca; Kunstmuseum Luzern; Moselle, *Collège d'Aumetz*, ceramics, 1980; Kunstmuseum Olten; Olten, Cantonal School, *De rot Schwyzer*, 1976; Réclère, church, stained glass windows, 1969–1970; Rohrbach (Moselle), Ecole supérieure, sculpture, 1972; Schaffhausen, Museum zu Allerheiligen; Kunstmuseum St. Gallen; Talange (Moselle), Ecole supérieure technique, sculpture, 1974; Kunstmuseum Thun; Kunstmuseum Winterthur; Kunsthaus Zug; Kunsthaus Zürich; Zurich, Collection of Prints and Drawings of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology; Zurich-Oerlikon, Zentrum Dorflinde, fountain, *La fontaine bleue*, 1975–76; Zurich-Kloten, barracks, fountain, Cristalina, 1980.

Guido Magnaguagno, 1998, updated 2013

Translation: Toby Alleyne-Gee

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Website

<http://www.wilfridmoser.ch>

Direct link

<http://www.sikart.ch/kuenstlerinnen.aspx?id=4002295&lng=en>

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