



Horst Janssen (1929-1995)

Horst Janssen is one of the best-known German artists of the post-war period. He is regarded as a legend, a veteran of the art world, and an exceptional artist. Particularly in the fields of drawing and printmaking, he created a complex, highly multifaceted body of work that remains unrivalled to this day. He experimented with a wide variety of printmaking techniques, such as etching, woodcut and lithography, and mastered them to perfection. He drew his themes and techniques, as well as his stylistic diversity, from his engagement with Western and Far Eastern art history. Janssen's 'style of stylistic pluralism', his free and imaginative interpretation of various models, testifies to a great sensitivity to the inner connection between style, themes and techniques. None of these areas can be conceived of without the others.

Janssen's models are the Old Masters. Above all, the graphic work of these 'adopted ancestors' fascinates him and leaves a deep mark on his own oeuvre: Rembrandt's etchings, Kirchner's woodcuts and the electrified lines of Schiele's morbid female figures serve as models for him to find and refine his own perspective. Claude Lorrain is the inspiration for his landscapes, Rembrandt for his self-portraits. His love of the abysmal is evident in his engagement with Goya's 'Capriccios' the symbolism of James Ensor and the 'black romanticism' of Johann Heinrich Füssli. His copies are less imitations than appropriations of his models.

Janssen's subject matters – landscape, portrait, still life, self-portrait and the nude, the classical genres of art history – are informed by personal experiences and are often deeply emotionally charged. His themes revolve around Eros and death – and around himself. Hardly any other artist has produced so many self-portraits.

Just as certain figures and periods in art history inspire him to explore specific subjects, so too do certain techniques spark Janssen's imagination, which he adapts for himself in an unusual and independent manner. He achieves the highest level of mastery as a draughtsman and etcher. But his experimental spirit is also evident in woodcut, lithography and photography. His watercolours, ink drawings and washed pen-and-ink drawings are, too, exquisitely delicate.



Biography

Born in Hamburg in 1929, he grew up in Oldenburg with his grandparents. At the age of just 16, he attended the Art Academy in Hamburg and was a master student under Alfred Mahlau. Committed to figurative art throughout his life, he developed a virtuoso mastery of virtually all graphic techniques and an extraordinary stylistic diversity in his engagement with art history. In 1952, at the age of 23, Janssen received the Lichtwark Scholarship and a scholarship from the German National Academic Foundation; in 1964, the City of Darmstadt Art Prize; in 1966, the Edwin Scharff Prize from the City of Hamburg; and in 1968, the first prize for graphic art at the Venice Biennale. By the time of his first major solo exhibition in 1965, featuring drawings and prints in several cities, Janssen was already being hailed as a ‚genius of the century‘. In 1968, he represented Germany at the Venice Biennale alongside Richard Oelze and Gustav Seitz. He achieved international fame with exhibitions in 1980 at the Art Institute of Chicago and the Busch-Reisinger Museum at Harvard University in Cambridge, USA, followed by numerous others in major international museums, including Tokyo, Oslo, Paris, Novosibirsk and Moscow. The legendary Marlborough Gallery in London (1970) and the famous Galerie Berggruen in Paris exhibited his work, the latter doing so twice (in 1981 and 1986). In 1982, he was honoured with a retrospective at the world’s most important collection of graphic art, the Albertina in Vienna. Horst Janssen died on 31 August 1995.

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