

Hannah Frank- A Glasgow Artist

Riverside Gallery, Inverness, December 2005



'Nightforms' (1932)

WHEN SPEAKING to Riverside Gallery owner Hugh Nicol about the current exhibition of drawings, prints and sculpture by Hannah Frank his enthusiasm is obvious. Inverness is extremely fortunate that a private gallery has chosen to host an important touring exhibition by the poet and artist.

The artist's niece, Fiona Frank, gave a fascinating introduction to her aunt's work at IMAG to coincide with the exhibition opening.

It is rare to have such a personal account of an artist's work by a member of their family. For her niece Fiona, Frank's work always had a strong familiarity and presence, each piece like a member of the family.

It was her observation of people's immediate responses to the artist's work over time that convinced her of their importance. She is now committed to promoting awareness of Hannah Frank's prolific and remarkable artistic career.

Fiona Frank gave valuable insight into distinct creative periods in her aunt's life and of her lively character through poetry reading, recording and video footage. She is currently editing her aunt's diaries, and hopes to publish small volumes of her illustrations of "The Rubaiyat" by Omar Khayyam and poetry by Keats.

These exciting projects, in addition to the exhibition of Hannah Frank's drawings, prints and sculpture, will hopefully ensure that unlike her signature namesake 'Al Aaraaf' she will never disappear from public consciousness.

What we also see is a woman thoroughly ahead of her time.

Frank began to sign her work in this way during her time at Glasgow University, where she provided many illustrations for its magazine. 'Al Aaraaf', the title of a poem by Edgar Allan Poe, refers to "a mysterious star which suddenly appeared in the heavens and after growing brighter and brighter for a few days, suddenly disappeared, never to be seen again."

Now aged 97, Frank remains a "living link to the Art Nouveau movement", but more than that her drawings, prints and sculpture have the power to affect a whole new generation with her determined, creative and joyful approach to life and art.

This well presented exhibition contains many examples of Frank's visionary approach to her work. The earliest drawings and prints from the 1920's and 30's are characterised by a dark romantic melancholy often inspired by poetry.

"Nightforms" (1932) is a lovely example, with its moonlit gathering of elegant elongated figures defined by delicate white line on black ground.

While the human form and organic flowing line of a print such as "Sea Story" (1929) recall Beardsley, King, and Macdonald, there is something in the contrast of light and dark in Frank's work that conveys a deeper human understanding than that of brilliant decorative illustration.

"Flight" (1939), with its biblical and then current reference to Jewish persecution and exodus from Europe, is a powerful image, striking for its delicacy and feeling of foreboding. It is an image that still has human resonance today echoed in current affairs all over the world.

A poet herself, Frank's visual and sculptural work can be defined in the same way. All are strong individual statements with an appeal that transcends their own time and alludes to the openness of spirit of a unique artist and human being.

"Sun" (1943) is an excellent example of this, and is displayed threefold in the exhibition as an original pen and ink drawing, print and printing block.

What is so extraordinary about this image is the sun drenched feeling of joy conveyed entirely in black and white. The open hands of the figure echo the open wings of the birds in the composition, a recurrent image in Frank's work.

There is an overwhelming feeling of warmth emanating from this print that is deeply felt and positively soulful. Like many of her drawings and prints, the image is deceptively simple, but on closer inspection the fine detail of the background can be seen in each line rendered with care, intricacy and great technical skill.

The second edition of "Hannah Frank – Glasgow Artist", edited by her niece and published by the Scottish Jewish Archives Centre, is a superb accompaniment to the exhibition. The publication contains recently discovered material that gives a clear indication of Frank's superb draughtsmanship in her pencil studies for printed works and early self portraits.

What we also see is a woman thoroughly ahead of her time. Her highly stylised illustration for the winter syllabus of the "Glasgow Zionist Literary Circle" (1929) and series of bookplates displayed in the exhibition demonstrate that even the smallest of Frank's images has lasting impact.

This modernist quality is also present in Frank's sculpture which has the same stunning simplicity as her works on paper. Included in the exhibition are a series of smaller-scale female figures.

These seated, reclining and stylised plaster busts are cast in bronze. There is a dignity and grace in these long necked almond eyed women, a strong, timeless and beautiful image of the feminine. "Woman With Bird" (1955) is a remarkable inspirational piece and for me one of the highlights of the exhibition.

Frank continued to sculpt from the 1950's to the age of 92, and with such a long productive career the progression in her work visible in this exhibition is a fascinating journey. Though not featured in the exhibition, sculpture such as her "Untitled" female figure (1968) with its cruciform shape is an iconic image with great power and resonance.

When not touring the permanent home for Frank's work is the Jewish care home in Glasgow where she now resides. Prints and sculpture are displayed in the building's public areas. It seems fitting that her work has found home in the community she was born into in 1908 as well as being seen by the wider public.

I hope that the retrospective planned for January-February 2006 at the Kelly Gallery in Glasgow (and also in Boston, U.S.A in 2007) will help focus national and international attention on this amazing woman and artist.

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