Josef Herman: Memory Learning Pack

This exhibition celebrates Josef Herman’s centenary year, by exploring the artist’s most formative years. Best known for his work celebrating the Welsh mining community, this exhibition reveals Herman’s early artistic influences and achievements, examining the six short, but pivotal years in which he journeyed from Warsaw to London, and everything in between.

Set against the turbulent backdrop of the Second World War, the exhibition features Herman’s most experimental and imaginative paintings and drawings. The work ranges from memory-fuelled images of Warsaw to stage set designs for the Celtic Ballet, and gives a real insight to what inspired the artist throughout what must have been an incredibly unstable time.

Josef Herman’s work explores the themes of Memory, Family and Tradition. We have divided the exhibition up into the following five headings to enable us to explore the themes, and reveal what memories are and how they can be recorded and understood.

**Home Life**
Images that depict Herman’s home life in Warsaw.

**War**
WW2, Holocaust, Pogroms, Losing Family and Friends

**Society & Working People**
Depictions of political figures and working people.

**Celebration!**
Festivals and traditions, Music and Dance.

**Friendships & Stories**
How stories are passed down to become collective memories. How friendships shape our past and inform new experiences. The influence of others.
Home Life

Herman had very sad news when he was living in Glasgow. He discovered that his family had been killed during the Second World War. He made a series of paintings and drawings titled Memory of Memories. In this series of artworks, he began to remember things from his childhood, things about the places he lived, the people he knew and scenes from his family life.

My Family and I is an intimate portrait of the artist’s family. In this family portrait, Herman tells us about each member of his family by their actions, and the objects around them.

Activity
Create your own portrait of your family, thinking carefully about:

- the room/area
- the position of each member
- who you count as ‘family’—it might be your parents, but also your cousins, close friends or even pets
- think about how each person is symbolised, through objects or actions—Josef Herman has pictured himself as an artist, by placing himself next to an unfinished canvas

How will you draw yourself?

Discussion Points

What can you learn about each member of Herman’s family from this portrait? For example, we know that his grandfather is a religious man. The black strip around his arm and the small black box on his head is called tefillin which religious Jewish men wear to pray. He is also wearing a pray shawl, called the tallit and holding the prayer book, the siddur.

Look at where Herman has positioned his mother. Why do you think he has placed her in the middle?

The picture on the right commemorates the moment that Herman left home, and saw his family for the last time.

Both My Family and I and Leaving Home depict Herman’s home life, including a drawing of his mother and father, but what is the difference between them?

Leaving Home
C. 1938
War
World War II, the Holocaust, Pogroms, losing family & friends

In this series of works, Herman made pictures about what was happening in Europe during World War II. He makes pictures of pogroms (a pogrom is a violent attack against a group of people, in this case against Jewish people during WWII). These pictures show the violence and destruction that took place during one of these attacks.

Discussion

Look at Warsaw (Ghetto) is Burning. It is a picture full of drama and fear. What is happening in the picture?
- a man is running from a huge fire, with a baby in his arms
- he looks like he might run right out of the picture, showing the force with which he is running
- his eyes are wide and his mouth is open, as if he is screaming
- he is cradling the baby in one arm, as though he has just picked her up, and has saved her

He also made pictures which show refugees, people who were made to leave their countries and homes because of new laws developed out of racial hatred towards the Jewish people. This is called anti-Semitism.

Many of the works in this group also depict families, very often mothers with their children, which show the sadness and pain of separation from family members, something which happened very often during WWII. Notice how each of the three “War” pictures shows an adult protecting a child.
- Can you see the child snuggling under his grandfather’s arm in Refugees?
- Describe how the mother is protecting her baby in Mother and Child Fleeing.
- with her whole body hunched against the wind
- her face is touching her baby’s head
- her hands look very large compared to the tiny baby, showing that she is strong and protective of her child
A great deal of Josef Herman's work expresses his admiration and respect for working people. After living in London, he moved to a Welsh mining town, where he is very famous for painting the miners who worked there. We can see that these pictures are building up to this series, as he begins to draw strong, contented men at work.

Growing up among peasants and working people in Warsaw, Herman was passionate about the fight of the workers. He even joined an artists’ group, ‘The Phrygian Bonnet' which was committed to respectfully depicting the Polish workers.

Discussion Points

What sorts of jobs are the people in the picture doing?
- fishermen
- possibly a miner, because of the axe he is holding, and the fact that Herman has drawn him looking very strong

How can you tell?
- Fishermen: the men are standing in a boat, facing out on to the sea
- man on the right is holding what could be fishing line or even a caught fish
- man on the left is holding a net
- they are wearing warm overcoats, it might be a chilly morning - fisherman start work very early

Why aren’t there any women in the pictures?
- at the time that Herman was painting, it was not very common for women to work in manual labour jobs

How has Herman made the pictures?
- think about how an artist records a moment, working in a portable sketchbook, probably making lots of studies
- he would have had to make quick sketches, at the scene of the work
- he may have continued the pictures later, working into them, adding colour and detail

Why is it important to document working people in art?
- artists traditionally depict grander scenes, workers were not seen as important

Look at the pictures of working men. How has Herman expressed their strength in his technique?
- strong, dark lines; simple, block shapes
Celebration!
Festivals, Traditions, Music and Dance

Herman frequently depicts Purim, rather than any other Jewish festival.

*Purim is a carnival-style festival which incorporates elements of disguise and concealment, a commemoration of how the leader of the Persian Jews, Mordechai helped save the Jewish people. The anti-Semitic Prime Minister, Haman wanted to kill every Jewish person in the land, but was brought to justice by Mordechai, who uncovered his plans.*

Look at the painting, *Jews Dancing*. The people in it are celebrating Purim. It is a fun, celebratory festival.

**Discussion Points**

Who can you see in the picture? How many people are there?

Can you find where the music is coming from?

- A bearded man plays the violin in the bottom left corner

Why do you think Herman was particularly interested in Purim?

Below right is a short explanation of the festival. Think about what was happening to the Jewish people at the time that Herman was painting, and why he might express this through the depiction of Purim.

**Activity**

Every culture and religion celebrates in a different way. Think about the kind of celebrations you have throughout the year. Do they involve dance, music, and singing?

Make a drawing, depicting your friends and family mid-celebration. Using *The Musicians* and *Jews Dancing* as inspiration, try to express the music through colour and markings in your picture.

Herman also commonly drew and painted musicians.

Look at this ink drawing of two musicians.

What kind of music do you imagine they are playing?

- It looks fast and exciting, because of the rapid, jolly way in which Herman has drawn the lines.

What instruments can you see?

- An accordion and a violin
By the time Herman had arrived in Glasgow, there was already a group of immigrant artists and poets living and working there. He was immediately introduced to the sculptor Benno Schotz, who was the Head of Sculpture and Ceramics at Glasgow School of Art. From there he was reunited with fellow Polish artist Jankel Adler, whom he had known in Warsaw.

Although he made many friends, new and old, Herman’s time in Glasgow was particularly difficult, as it was around that time that he was first informed of the death of his entire family, who had remained in Warsaw. He was obviously very upset, became quite ill with the distress. His fellow Polish artist, Jankel Adler was a very good friend to him, nursing him through this terrible time, and even painting Orphans in memory of Herman’s lost family.

The Ballet of the Palette
In this series of works, Herman creates the set design and costumes for a ballet entitled, ‘The Ballet of the Brush’. The ballet tells the story of an artist’s paint palette that is filled with colours, and a small brush and a big brush. The small brush is energetic and dances around being very busy. The big brush is very slow and very lazy.

The colours on the palette all represent different things:
- Pink: Graceful with Vitality
- Blue: Moody and Slow
- White: Fast
- Red: Vivacious and Dynamic
- Green: Youthful and Spring like

In the ballet, the back drop of the show is an unfinished painting belonging to Herman. The painting only has a blue background and a small white moon (which was a symbol found in many of Herman’s works) The little brush and all of the colours must inspire the big brush to work. Eventually after a frenzy of inspiration and movement, the big brush is finally persuaded to work, and finally the painting can be painted.