



ROMAN HALTER (1927-2012): LIFE AND ART THROUGH STAINED GLASS

11 April – 8 June 2014

Ben Uri, The London Jewish Museum of Art

'LIFE AND ART THROUGH STAINED GLASS' examines the artistic career of architect, painter, designer and stained glass innovator Roman Halter. His near 50-year career as an artist would, had circumstances been different, have been much more widely recognised, as his command of many crafts was significant and distinctive.

Halter is best known and remembered as a survivor of the Holocaust (the Shoah) who channelled his relentless energy to ensure that young people, regardless of background, recognised and understood the extent of the evil and genocide of the past and the frightening but persistent reality of the potential for repetition.

This exhibition, whilst acknowledging the 'cause' of Halter's art, concentrates on examining the 'effect' through a selective survey of his career across a range of media, identifying, perhaps for the first time, the practice of preparing and creating stained glass as central to his creative process. His ambition of design, interpretation and inventive structuring within this medium sets him apart from many of his peers.

Surviving the death camp at Auschwitz, Halter was brought to London in 1945 by the Central British Fund and, after studying architecture, established successful practices in London and in Cambridge. In the early 1970s Halter shifted his engagement from the detached to the personal, moving to Israel in 1973. Harnessing his architectural skills within a design context, he was commissioned in the same year to design and construct the main gate to Yad Vashem, established in 1953 as the world center for documentation, research, education and commemoration of the Holocaust, in Jerusalem. On returning to London in 1976 Halter committed to a less secure career as a full-time artist, moving beyond architecture to embrace other art-forms.

Stained glass is an exact, technical, complicated, architectural art-form that merges engineered structures, on one hand, with both depth and balance of

colour appropriate to its space, on the other. Like many architects, Halter could ably address the technical requirements, but it was his innate creativity and his talent as a visual artist that allowed him to move between disciplines and to join a select group of practitioners who are today recognised as pre-eminent in this field.

His stained glass windows can be found in synagogues across London. In The Room of Prayer at Leo Baeck College he designed a series of small, brilliantly coloured squares of stained glass to decorate each window and designed and made part heart-shaped, part Menorah-shaped glass and aluminium windows for the ark containing the Torah. At the New North London Synagogue two tall, vertical, primary-coloured windows are inscribed in Hebrew, and at the North Western Reform Synagogue, eighteen monumental designs are intricately decorated with the theme of Life “Chai”, the Hebrew letters for the number 18. In The Central Synagogue an azure panorama of an idealised *Jerusalem* illuminates the stairwell mezzanine, whilst his commanding, prismatic *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel* stretches the capacity of stained glass design to new and near-abstract limits. In 1978 when this work was received it was considered an artistic step too far, but it has come to be recognised as a virtuoso work within this medium. After only seven years working in the discipline, in 1983 Halter began his three-year collaboration with Henry Moore, working on a blue stained glass window, *Reclining Figure*, which is one of the centrepieces of this exhibition.

Halter’s youth and forced labour under Nazi rule, combined with his strength of purpose and engineering design talents, allowed him to grow quickly as an artist in many different ways. Little-known to the general public, he was also commissioned to design the Royal Coats of Arms to hang in many British courts, embassies and consulates worldwide; one will be exhibited as a fitting tribute to the victory of justice over evil, poignantly designed by a Holocaust survivor.

The exhibition, featuring over 70 works, includes examples of his stained glass and preparatory ‘cartoons’, revealing that Halter used his architectural skills and the intricacies of stained glass as the foundation and structure for his paintings and drawings. The historian of stained glass, Caroline Swash, has written admiringly of Halter’s method of transforming ‘the connecting role (strips of lead) into an expressive low relief structure holding the coloured glass’. This is the compositional structure of Halter’s works in paint, too. These 2D works almost universally address his innermost fears and haunted memories in figurative, landscape and abstract form – in oils, acrylic, watercolour and pencil. Monumental figurative works, such as the *Prophet* and *Shlomo Hanged*, are architecturally threaded by a connecting lattice. A smaller but no less commanding work is *Woman in Mantilla* in which the delicate lace mantilla recalls the fine tracery of stained glass windows. The bold patterning of an Art Deco style double portrait in oil shines with the same luminosity as stained glass. Four dark gouaches depict scenes of the Holocaust and Halter’s extraordinary

series of minute watercolours of the English idyll of Dorset are violently intruded upon by graphic depictions and eerily detached prose accounts of Holocaust atrocities.

Colin Wiggins, Head of Learning at the National Gallery, in his catalogue essay has said of Halter's works:

This finding of beauty where there is horror is a tough statement. It cannot easily be explained or understood. However, throughout Roman's work there is this same clash of opposites. Each idea intensifies the other.

Halter's stained glass designs are as much about the symbolic as the aesthetic qualities of light. The exhibition celebrates a remarkable man devoted to the design of pure colour and light in spite of the darkest childhood experiences – life and art through stained glass.

Background information:

Halter was born in 1927 in Chodecz, a small village in northern Poland, and was the seventh and youngest child of a traditional Jewish family. At the outbreak of war, in 1939, when Halter was 12, the family were deported to the infamous Lodz Ghetto, some 50 miles away. It was during the horrors of this imprisonment that his grandfather, a constant companion and mentor during these early and most influential years, made Halter promise to tell the story of the Holocaust 'when' and not 'if' he survived. His grandfather's entreaty was a frequent refrain throughout Halter's long career as an artist and narrator of the atrocities he experienced and to which he himself bore witness, to which this exhibition is a further tribute.

UK Public Collections: The Imperial War Museum. London

UK Exhibitions: The Imperial War, Museum, London; Tate Britain; Redfern Gallery, London; LJCC, London.

For further information please contact David Glasser at

david.glasser@btinternet.com or Rachel Dickson at racheld@benuri.org

For high resolution images please contact Laura Jones at alixs@benuri.org

Press preview Thursday 10 April from 2pm at Ben Uri, Boundary Road, NW8 0RH

Talking Art Series: Monday 7 April at LJCC at Ivy House, 94-96 North End Road, London NW11 7SX: continues with David Glasser chairing a discussion on the life and art of Roman Halter with son and artist Ardyn Halter, Colin Wiggins Head of

Education at The National Gallery and film-maker and journalist Fergal Keane.