

MEDIA RELEASE



Duality of Exile: Fred Uhlman in Captivity
14 December 2009 - 7 February 2010



Fred Uhlman *Two Cottages in Wales* pastel n.d.c1950 private collection Whangarei

Showcasing a suite of 'Art in Exile' exhibitions timed to coincide with concurrent exhibitions *Ey! Iran* toured by Exhibition Services Ltd. and developed by the Gold Coast City Art Gallery - *Baha'i Martyrs of Iran* - Shahriar Asdollah-zadeh and *Exiles* - Rudolf Boelee

curated by Scott Pothan

Whangarei Art Museum brings to light one of the most notable and more obscure treasures of the national art collection at Te Papa - 'Tossa' 1936 - rarely exhibited and now brought to Northland, tells an incredible story of survival, spirit and tenacity throughout the dire days of Fascism in Europe.

The German Jewish artist Fred Uhlman (1901-1985) a highly qualified lawyer, had escaped Stuttgart in 1933 to Paris and the threat of Nazi death-camps only to be later embroiled in the Spanish Revolution at Tossa de Mar in 1936. He fled yet again, just

days before the national borders were closed. Along this journey into exile he was then interred by the British on the Isle of Man during the Blitz as an 'enemy alien' with other famous artists like Kurt Schwitters, Walter Gropius and Oscar Kokoschka. Condemned by Hitler as 'degenerate artists/entartete Kunstler' – they were dual exiles and part of the great intellectual Diaspora which was to make London and New York the new epicentres of culture after the War.

'Hitler knew why he condemned artists, all artists, to silence, making them experience the bonfires of degenerate art. Because from true art springs a sharpness of conscience, the strengthening of the spirit, because it criticises insufficiency (mediocrity) and because it calls to a supreme humanitarian character' wrote art historian Alfred Kerr 1947

Penniless and committedly socialist he married into a notoriously nationalistic Tory British aristocracy (his father-in-law was to become Churchill's Under-Secretary for War) and subsequently became one of Britain's most celebrated artists and authors. Like L.S.Lowry his naïve-style paintings are now sought after, and his semi-autobiographical books are regarded as classics of their genre translated into many languages. His most famous novel *Reunion* first published in 1977 was acclaimed as a 'minor masterpiece', translated into 19 languages and made into a film in 1988 starring Jason Robards with a screenplay by Harold Pinter. Notably it was not translated into his native German until 38 years later in 1998 and 13 years after his death. The then National Art Gallery director Stewart MacLennan negotiated to acquire the *Tossa* painting directly from the artist's studio in London in 1968 and it has since been exhibited only twice in Wellington and once more recently in Spain in 2007 at the Centre Cultural de Caixa Girona.

The art museum is also exhibiting this work with another later painting by the artist which has also been in New Zealand for many decades in a private collection in Whangarei. These two works symbolically represent both his torrid early life of terror and the repose and recognition of the artist's later years. They also represent the two places closest to his heart as an artist – the artist's colony of Tossa de Mar in Spain where Frances Hodgkins, Marc Chagall, Jean Metzinger and Andre Masson found brief quietude from the storm clouds of war, and the post-War respite of the Welsh Valleys. It is fitting that they are both finally exhibited together, and even more fitting that they will reside together permanently, as the owner intends to gift the work 'Two Cottages in Wales' (in the Croesor Valley Gwynnedd, Wales where the artist regularly escaped to his holiday home) to the Te Papa art collection at the conclusion of the exhibition in February 2010.

Uhlman's first solo exhibition was at the Galerie Le Niveau in Paris in 1935 and later in London, he exhibited at the Zwemmer Gallery in 1938 the year he founded the League of Free German Artists. He was admitted to the London Group in 1940-3 together with Oscar Kokoschka, Augustus John and New Zealanders John Buckland Wright (1897-1954) and Frances Hodgkins (1869-1947). New Zealand modernist Dame Louise Henderson was also to study under Jean Metzinger in the early 1950's. In 1951 he exhibited with Patrick Heron at the prestigious Redfern Gallery in London. He was a member of the Royal Society of British Artists RBA. A retrospective exhibition of his work was held at Leighton House Gallery in 1968 from which *Tossa* was finally acquired for the nation. It has only been exhibited twice previously in New Zealand; in 1981 at the National Art Gallery Wellington and 1988 at The Dowse Art Gallery Lower Hutt.

A wood engraving by Stewart MacLennan OBE poignantly titled *Peace Lily* from the art museum's collection from the same period is also on display in this exhibition. MacLennan (1903-73) was the first director of the National Art Gallery in Wellington appointed in 1948. He was a contemporary of Uhlman's and was studying at the Royal

College of Art, London from 1935-39. He acquired *Tossa* for the New Zealand national art collection in his final year of directorship in 1968.

The Fred Uhlman spoke to art historian Frank Whitford towards the end of his life of his love of Wales:

'I live here like a monk, these days I hardly go to exhibitions. People are terrified of admitting that they like my work. It's so unfashionable to see anything in primitive or naïve painting'

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Fred Uhlman is represented in the Te Papa Tongarewa Collection Wellington; The Art Gallery of New South Wales; The British Museum Collection London; The Government Collection Great Britain; The Victoria & Albert Museum London; National Gallery of Wales; Musee de Grenoble France; Newcastle University Collection; Manchester Art Gallery; The Fitzwilliam Museum Cambridge University; University of Warwick and many private and corporate collections worldwide.

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WHANGAREI

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