

# JIMMY ERNST

(1920-1984)

## INTRODUCTION

Having been forced to move from his native Germany to New York in 1938 when he was 18 years old, Jimmy Ernst joined a group of young artists experimenting with surrealist painting techniques in New York City in the mid-20th century and became a U.S. citizen in 1952. His art is a beautiful combination of his early artistic education, his love and knowledge of Native American culture, jazz music, and a refined meticulousness (perhaps derived from his early work as a typesetter). Jimmy chose to develop his own path at the center of Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism, his European background and his embrace of his new U.S. home. Jimmy would often refer to his inner eye as the fountainhead of his work. You can see his interests in scientific theory, physics, atomic theory, structure of matter, combined with his musical experiences with American jazz. He passed away in 1984, just following the publication of his exceptional autobiography, *A Not-So-Still Life*.

## BIOGRAPHY

Hans-Ulrich Ernst, later known as "Jimmy," was born to Dada and Surrealist artist Max Ernst, and art historian and journalist Louise Straus-Ernst, who divorced when Jimmy was two. Max moved to Paris, as Jimmy and his mother remained in Cologne. Raised in an artistic milieu, as anti-Semitism rises after Hitler becomes Chancellor of Germany, Louise was forced to flee to Paris while Jimmy stayed in Germany with grandparents. He apprenticed with publisher Hans Augustin, near Hamburg, as a typesetter. In 1937, on a trip to Paris he sees Picasso's ***Guernica*** which moves him to perceive an artist's role as an agent of change. In 1938 Augustin gets Jimmy a visa and passage to the United States, where he discovers Hopi rituals, jazz, and science. Works at the Museum of Modern Art mailroom and paints at night. He befriends members of the avant-garde, notably, William and Ethel Baziotis, and attends the 1941 lectures on surrealism by Gordon Onslow Ford at the New School of Social Research.

Ernst became one of the eighteen artists photographed among a group of abstract painters who protested against the Metropolitan Museum's policy towards American painting of the 1940s, and who posed for a famous picture in 1950. Members of the group included: Willem deKooning, Adolph Gottlieb, Ad Reinhardt, Hedda Sterne, Richard Pousette-Dart, William Baziotis, Jimmy Ernst, Jackson Pollock, James Brooks, Clyfford Still, Robert Motherwell, Bradley Walker Tomlin, Theodore's Stamos, Barnett Newman, and Mark Rothko. These artists are part of the New York School and they were referred to as the "*Irascibles*" in an article featured in an issue of *Life Magazine*.

His father, Max Ernst, with whom Jimmy was often estranged, arrived in the U.S. with Peggy Guggenheim in 1941 and they were married at the end of the year. His mother,

Louisa, was captured and imprisoned at Auschwitz, where she ultimately lost her life in 1944. Peggy Guggenheim opens her gallery Art of This Century with Jimmy as director in 1942, just a few years after her uncle, Solomon R. Guggenheim had opened his eponymous Museum of Non Objective Painting, curated and directed by the Baroness Hilla ReBay.

With Eleanor Lust, Jimmy opened the Norlyst Gallery in 1943, which hosted three solo shows by Ernst. MoMA subsequently purchased a painting, *The Flying Dutchman*. Growing up around Surrealism and often surrounded by his father's surrealist peers - Duchamp, Tanguy, Breton, Dali, Masson, Miro, and others - Ernst integrates and bridges the two major influences of Surrealism and the nascent movement of American Abstract Expressionism.

His work, found in important public collections the world over, will be marked by an almost obsessively intricate grid of lines, under which one discerns forms and shapes. He never sought the critical spotlight that his more famous father enjoyed, but instead preferred to teach at Brooklyn College. In 1984, he dies shortly after his autobiography, *A Not So Still Life*, is published.

## Permanent Public Collections

include the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York; Smithsonian American Art Museum, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden and Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; Harvard Art Museum, Boston; Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia; The Art Institute of Chicago; Dallas Museum of Fine Arts and Houston Museum of Fine Arts, Texas; Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena, California; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; and The Israel Museum, Jerusalem.

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