

**News Release  
Public Information  
Department**

February 2003

***The Last Expression: Art and Auschwitz, Largest Exhibition of Art by Holocaust Victims, on view March 7 through June 15 at the Brooklyn Museum of Art***

Art created by victims of the Nazi Holocaust (including Jews, resistance fighters, and Gypsies), in the concentration camps, ghettos and hiding places of World War II, will be brought together for the first time in the exhibition *The Last Expression: Art and Auschwitz*, on view March 7 through June 15, 2003, at the Brooklyn Museum of Art.

*The Last Expression: Art and Auschwitz* will feature more than 200 works of art made by prisoners at the infamous Nazi death camp, as well as works produced in the concentration camps at Buchenwald, Gurs, and Drancy, and in ghettos such as Łódź and Theresienstadt. The objects range from self-portraits and landscapes to illustrated letters and caricatures, including oil paintings, watercolors, and drawings in ink, charcoal, and pencil.

The artworks were produced by amateur as well as trained artists—some working openly and others in secret. In some cases the works were created as evidence of, and resistance to, the horrors to which the artists bore witness. In other cases, the artists were given assignments by the SS authorities to produce portraits, landscapes, cards, and booklets, and in return, received extra food rations or camp commodities such as cigarettes.

Among the types of works produced at Auschwitz, portraiture was the most common, particularly portraits of other prisoners. The likeness of a fellow prisoner was a testament to existence and an assertion of life in the face of genocide. Restoring humanity to its subject, it became a small gesture of resistance. Portraits also served a very practical function of documenting individuals and were sent out to family members as evidence that a prisoner was still alive.

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Decorated letters constituted a type of artwork particular to Auschwitz. Political prisoners had the opportunity to write to relatives only every four or five weeks, and Jewish prisoners were not allowed to write home at all. Prisoners had to find stamps and paper, which were difficult to acquire. Letters were often illustrated by these artists who worked in camp print shops and had access to paper. Text and image were combined on the pre-printed stationery. Most of the letters were innocuous, but some contained symbolic or coded messages.

The artists represented in *The Last Expression: Art and Auschwitz* came from many different countries, including Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Belgium. Subjected to the humiliation, degradation, physical torture, they worked under the most difficult of circumstances, sometimes on the threshold of death, to give expression to, and seek refuge from, the suffering around them.

Some of the artists survived the camps and are still alive today. One such artist is Józef Szajna, who now lives in Poland. His powerful ink and pencil drawing *Our Biographies* (1944–45), is a rare example in which an artist represented the concentration camp experience using an abstract visual style. Szajna evoked a multitude of faceless, nameless prisoners using his thumbprint to indicate each of the many heads. Such a drawing would have been strictly forbidden by camp authorities, so he hid as many as twenty under his mattress in the infirmary.

The exhibition is the result of five years of research and travel by David Mickenberg, former director of the Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art at Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, and now director of the Davis Museum and Cultural Center at Wellesley College, and by Corinne Granof, Assistant Curator at the Block Museum. The Brooklyn Museum of Art's presentation is organized by Marilyn Kushner, Curator and Chair of the Department of Prints, Drawings and Photographs.

The works of art were gathered from collections throughout the world, with the majority coming from Poland and Israel. Among the lenders to the exhibition are the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in Poland, The Yad Vashem Art Museum in Israel, The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., the Felix-Nussbaum-Haus in Osnabrück, Germany, and the Museum of Tolerance, Simon Wiesenthal Center Library and Archives in Los Angeles, in addition to many private lenders.

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A catalogue, copublished by the Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art and Northwestern University Press, accompanies the exhibition.

The exhibition has been presented from September 27 to December 8, 2002 at Northwestern University's Mary & Leigh Block Museum of Art in Evanston, Illinois and January 7 to February 16, 2003, at the Davis Museum and Cultural Center at Wellesley College, Wellesley, Massachusetts, before opening at the Brooklyn Museum of Art in March 2003.

*The Last Expression: Art and Auschwitz* has been organized by the Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University. Support for the exhibition and its tour has been provided, in part, by the Federal Republic of Germany, Ellen Phillips Katz and Howard C. Katz, Northwestern University's John R. Lindgren Fund, the President and Provost of Northwestern University, and the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

Support for the Brooklyn Museum of Art's presentation is provided, in part, by Dime Savings Bank, the Keren Keshet Fund, and Frank and Katherine Martucci. Additional support comes from Judy and Josh Weston, Muss Development Company, the Joseph Alexander Foundation, Seymour and Laura Schweber, and Kenneth H. Schweber. *The Forward* is media sponsor of the BMA's presentation. Promotional assistance is provided by the Polish Cultural Institute ([www.polishculture-nyc.org](http://www.polishculture-nyc.org)).

Media Contacts: (718) 501-6334 or 6330, 6331, 6354, [www.brooklynmuseum.org](http://www.brooklynmuseum.org)

### GENERAL INFORMATION

#### **Admission:**

Contribution \$6; students with valid I.D. and older adults \$3. Free to Members and children under 12 accompanied by an adult. Group tours or visits must be arranged in advance by calling extension 234.

#### **Directions:**

**Subway:** Seventh Avenue express (2 or 3) to Eastern Parkway/Brooklyn Museum stop; Lexington Avenue express (4 or 5) to Nevins Street, cross platform and transfer to the 2 or 3. **Bus:** B71, B41, B69, B48. On-site parking available.

#### **Museum Hours:**

Wednesday through Friday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; First Saturday of each month, 11 a.m. to 11 p.m.; all other Saturdays, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.; Sunday, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Closed Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's Day.