

The Life and Work of Kurt Seligmann
By Stephen Robeson Miller

The work of the artist Kurt Seligmann (1900-1962) has long been recognized as among the most distinctively idiosyncratic contributions to the art of Surrealism, a pan-cultural movement known for its collective individualism. His imagery, expressed in paintings in various media, drawings, and prints over a period of four decades and in several hundred works, is so unusual that it continues to fascinate long after we have become familiar with its special “vocabulary”. A characteristic Seligmann painting depicts a kind of dance macabre in which anthropomorphic figures – comprised of an amalgamation of armour, heraldic devices, ribbons, cloth, helmets, feathers, bone and ceremonial paraphernalia – cavort in unknown rituals in darkly cavernous, yet undetermined, space. This distinctively Seligmannian scene, with its haunting and expressive beauty, its dark pessimism, its cruel and angular shapes, was his own invention: the embodiment of salient aspects of his personality, background and temperament. As such it is also an expression of the influence of the time in which he lived and his peculiar sensitivity to it: an age in which he and other Surrealist artists of his generation responded to new developments in psychoanalysis, exploring irrational and unconscious sides of the human psyche in a world seemingly gone mad with conflict on an unprecedented scale in two world wars.

At the same time, Seligmann’s work is tied to the imagery of the Pre-Reformation artists of his Swiss homeland. There exists a kinship between the medieval fantasies of his Swiss and German forebears and his own armored images; between the vitality and cruelty of scenes of beheadings, combats, and impalements in the art of Urs Graf, Nikolas Manuel, Albrecht Altdorfer and Matthias Grunewald, and his own violence of expression. With this rich heritage, Seligmann’s work links twentieth century forms of the unconscious to the spirit of Germanic art of the sixteenth century. Moreover, this quality gives his art a richness that contributes to its enduring appreciation.

As important as Seligmann’s art may be to the history of Surrealist painting in the twentieth century, Seligmann the man played a pivotal role in the cultural history of the United States during the Second World War. As is well known and widely acknowledged in history books now, New York City in the 1940s played host to large numbers of European refugee artists and intellectuals who had escaped the Nazi threat in Europe. What is not as well known is Seligmann’s crucial role in bringing these people to safety in the U.S. This situation is beginning to change thanks to recent scholarship which draws upon the myriad documents and correspondence that Seligmann himself meticulously kept which reconstructs the development of the European exodus. The picture that emerges is one in which Seligmann’s involvement was vital to the survival of an intellectual climate which would lead to cultural Renaissance in America. The result was the rise of the “New York School” and Surrealism’s successor movement on the international stage, Abstract Expressionism.

Seligmann and his wife Arlette arrived in New York in September 1939, in the first month of the war, ostensibly for an exhibition of his work at the Karl Nierendorf Gallery. Therefore, Seligmann was the first member of the Paris-based Surrealists to relocate to New York from where, as has been mentioned, he was instrumental in helping to arrange the necessary papers and affidavits which rescued the colleagues he left behind. The Seligmans settled into an apartment in the Beaux Arts building at 40th Street near Bryant Park. There they became quickly established in the city’s avant-garde art circles. This was the beginning of many years of fruitful activity in which his work was exhibited regularly at Nierendorf, Durlacher and, later, the Ruth White Galleries. In addition, he designed sets and costumes for ballets by Hanya

Holm and George Balanchine and began a distinguished teaching career at Briarcliff Junior College and Brooklyn College.

The present writer became a good friend of Arlette Seligmann during the last eighteen years of her life, from 1975 to 1993. I remember well her telling me how her husband and the esteemed art historian from Columbia University, Meyer Schapiro, had met by chance in the galleries of the Museum of Modern Art soon after their arrival in New York, and the two men became fast friends. Schapiro later told me that he had been attracted to Seligmann's scholarly turn of mind, an intellect of infinite curiosity and breadth. It was such curiosity that would lead Seligmann to produce a major book on the subject of magic which is still in print, *The Mirror of Magic* (Pantheon Books, 1948). It was through Meyer Schapiro's brother-in-law, Dr. Milgram, who owned land near Chester, New York, an hour's drive northwest of Manhattan, that the Seligmans became acquainted with Orange County and the isolated hamlet of Sugar Loaf where, in 1940, they bought an old farm with sixty acres. Not only would Sugar Loaf be near New York, but it was a two hour drive from Litchfield County in western Connecticut where, later, others in their circle would settle (Yves Tanguy and Kay Sage in Woodbury; Andre and Rose Masson in New Preston, Hans and Friedl Richter in Southbury; Arshile and Mougouche Gorky in Sherman; Naum and Miriam Gabo in Middlebury; Alexander and Louisa Calder in Roxbury; David and Susie Hare in Roxbury; Julien and Muriel Levy in Bridgewater). These coupled with the many Surrealist refugees living in Greenwich Village (Breton, Matta, among others) along with the expanding circle of new American artist friends as well as dealers, critics, and curators, gave Seligmann a strong support system. Between town and country, friends and work, the Seligmans could be said to have led a rather charmed existence.

The names of those who the Seligmann's saw regularly in New York as friends and colleagues, and who they entertained in Sugar Loaf, is a veritable Who's Who of the artistic avant-garde of the time. In 1941, Seligmann participated in the exhibition "First Papers of Surrealism" for the war relief benefit of French children; the cover of the catalogue was made by Marcel Duchamp from a photograph he had taken of the stone foundation of the Sugar Loaf barn. Another famous group exhibition which included Seligmann was the "Artists in Exile" show at the Pierre Matisse Gallery, New York, 1942: for its catalogue, George Platt Lynes' took a photograph that has since become recognized as one of the greatest assemblies of artistic geniuses of the twentieth century: Kurt Seligmann is shown standing with Andre Breton, Marc Chagall, Max Ernst, Yves Tanguy, Piet Mondrian, Fernand Leger, Roberto Matta, Andre Masson, Pavel Tchelitchew, Eugene Berman, Jacques Lipchitz, Amadee Ozenfant, and Ossip Zadkine – all of whom respected and enjoyed Seligmann's company and art. Another famous photograph from the time shows a bespeckled Kurt Seligmann seated in Peggy Guggenheim's New York penthouse with Leonora Carrington, Frederick Kiesler, John Ferren, Stanley William Hayter, Peggy Guggenheim, Berenice Abbott, Fernand Leger, Piet Mondrian, Max and Jimmy Ernst, Marcel Duchamp, and Andre Breton. Many of these made their way to Sugar Loaf during the 1940s, as did Joan Miro, Alexander Calder, Meyer Schapiro, Enrico Donati, Stamo Papadaki, Parker Tyler. The barn in Sugar Loaf was even the site of "etching parties" where Calder, Tanguy, Zadkine, and Meyer Schapiro, among others, made etchings hand pulled on Kurt's own etching press. In addition, the Seligmans traveled to Mexico in 1943 for an exhibition of his work during which time they saw the painters Remedios Varo, Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, Gordon Onslow-Ford, Alice Rahon, and the Surrealist poet Benjamin Peret.

Seligmann was also an active contributor to two journals of the 1940s, *View* and *VVV*, which acted as forums for Surrealism's cross fertilization of ideas and those of the young

American artists who came into its orbit. In these, Seligmann's articles on arcane subjects such as witch craft and the occult, in addition to his equally hermetic images, found a regular audience.

After the war when many artists had returned to Europe, the Seligmans remained in New York. Always a copious correspondent, Seligmann maintained his friendships and contacts with the Paris Surrealists. Actually, he and Arlette had never entirely dismissed the idea entirely of returning to France themselves, and so never sold their house in Paris in the impasse Villa Seurat designed by Andre Lurcat.

Instead, in the 1950s, they rented it to such artist friends as Man Ray, Isamu Noguchi, and Wolfgang Paalen. As it happened, they never returned to Europe for any extended period following a visit to see their families in 1949, and when they became naturalized United States citizens in the 1950s, they stayed increasingly in Sugar Loaf. Their close friends in America in these years were the Greek art historian Nicolas Calas and his wife Elena, painters Kay and Yves Tanguy, the collectors Mary and Earle Ludgin of Chicago, the film maker Thomas Bouchard (who was their neighbor in the Beaux Arts building in New York, and who, with his daughter Diane, made the only existing film on Seligmann). Seligmann's time throughout the 1950s was spent teaching at Brooklyn College as well as privately in Sugar Loaf; lecturing occasionally at colleges and galleries in New England; and exhibiting his etchings and paintings which increasingly found homes in museums throughout the country.

Kurt Seligmann's death at the age of sixty-one on January 2, 1962, from an accidental gun-shot wound in Sugar Loaf, took a severe toll on his wife Arlette. She withdrew and became reclusive, rarely left her farm and pursued her solitary interests in animal husbandry, environmental conservation and gardening. My visits with her there several times a year were spent discussing the Surrealist artists she had known in the 1930s and 1940s, her animals and plants. There was about her a childlike eagerness and wonderment coupled with a shrewd practicality; after all, the task of running a farm was both a joy and a struggle. She said that she liked to "be close to the earth". Indeed, with the sights and sounds of the farm, the rambling old house filled with the works of Kurt Seligmann and his friends, being fed a hearty lunch, was to feel transported, and to come away enlivened and refreshed. Kurt Seligmann's memory was felt everywhere. For Arlette, speaking emphatically in her heavily accented voice, time had stopped – but it was a time, and a memory, to which she dedicated her remaining years to preserving completely.