

**MONUMENTAL, POLITICAL, UNCOMPROMISING: THE SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT PRESENTS THE EXTRAORDINARY TAPESTRIES OF HANNAH RYGGEN**

**HANNAH RYGGEN**  
**WOVEN MANIFESTOS**

**SEPTEMBER 26, 2019–JANUARY 12, 2020**

**PRESS PREVIEW: WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 25, 2019, 11 A.M.**

With her monumental tapestries the artist Hannah Ryggen (1894–1970) created a powerful, politically inspired oeuvre. Working from a small self-sufficient farm on the west coast of Norway, through her artworks she launched attacks on Hitler, Franco, and Mussolini, and made strong statements of support for the victims of fascism and National Socialism. The Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt is dedicating a major exhibition to the Swedish-Norwegian artist, running from September 26, 2019, to January 12, 2020. On the occasion of Norway being Guest of Honour at the 2019 Frankfurt Book Fair, the Schirn is providing the first in-depth insight into Ryggens oeuvre to the German public. In the about twenty-five tapestries presented, she takes on the fundamental issues in society: the atrocities of war, the abuse of power, our dependence on nature, and familial relationships as well as those with our fellow men and women. Many of her large-scale works deal with the events and political debates in Europe in the 1930s and 1940s, with her socialist beliefs shining through.

The exhibition focuses on Ryggen's monumental tapestries and aims to examine how the artist represented a different kind of modernism—one in which elements from folk art and mythology were mixed with contemporary issues. Ryggen explored an entirely new range of motifs while using a traditional medium for an unprecedented purpose: making portable murals that communicated her potent political messages to the public. In these times of increasing inequality, nationalism, and populism, Ryggen's uncompromising artworks continue to resonate, and provide an uncanny reminder of the need to fight for the principles of humanism. The Schirn brings together works from the Nordenfjeldske Kunstimuseum and the National Museum of Decorative Arts in Trondheim, which holds the most important collection of Ryggen's works, as well as from various other Norwegian and Swedish museums and institutions and private collections; these include the KODE—Art Museums and Composer Homes in Bergen, the office of the Norwegian Prime Minister in Oslo, the DNB Art Collection, the Telenor Art Collection, the National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design in Oslo, the Trondheim kunstmuseum, the Röhsska Museum of Design and Craft in Göteborg, the Malmö Konstmuseum, and the Stockholm City Museum.

The exhibition *Hannah Ryggen. Woven Manifestos* is supported by NORLA – Norwegian Literature Abroad and the Sparebankstiftelsen DNB.

“We can interpret Hannah Ryggen's monumental tapestries as woven manifestos of her artistic and political convictions, for which she advocated throughout her life. With her oeuvre, the artist presented a position and again and again commented on current political events based on her understanding of herself as a citizen of the world. It is both her humanist vision and her themes that make Hannah Ryggen's art seem especially topical and relevant to us today”, says Dr. Philipp Demandt, the director of the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt.

Dr. Marit Paasche and Esther Schlicht, the curators of the exhibition, explain: “Hannah Ryggen's oeuvre has been receiving new attention recently in the context of contemporary art, not least as some of her works were presented at *dOCUMENTA (13)* in 2012. During her lifetime, her tapestries were presented in important art exhibitions in Europe and the United States, but after

1970 they were increasingly categorized as craft and thus never really penetrated the canon of art history. Ryggen personally always regarded her works as fine art. By incorporating contemporary political events into her range of motifs, she gave tapestry as a medium a completely new role. But it is not only this that makes her oeuvre so special. Ryggen developed an entirely unique way of combining fiction, reality, and myths, and she manipulated different pictorial traditions with a rare ease.”

## TOPICS AND WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION—A SELECTION

The exhibition at the Schirn presents Hannah Ryggen’s monumental tapestries, with which she—throughout her life—took on issues such as power politics and international conflicts, National Socialism and fascism in Europe, the role of art, and the position of women in society.

In her oeuvre, Ryggen combines the personal with the political. At the beginning of the exhibition, two early tapestries are presented that reflect fundamental aspects of the artist’s worldview: the principle of self-reliance, and the equality of all people. *Fiske ved gjeldens hav (Fishing in the Sea of Debt, 1933)* describes the hopeless situation of workers, farmers, and fishermen during the economic crisis in Norway: a crisis that also affected the Ryggen family. In *Vi og våre dyr (Us and Our Animals, 1934)*, Ryggen depicts the day-to-day life of herself, her husband, the painter Hans Ryggen, and their daughter, Mona, on a small self-sufficient farm in the district of Ørlandet near Trondheim: a life closely linked with animals and nature.

Ryggen’s anti-fascist and anti-war works are in focus of the presentation at the Schirn. Both the number of these works and their large formats testify to the immense creative energy with which the well-read and well-informed artist dealt with national and international events. Conceived as public commentaries, these tapestries had a significant political impact. With *Etiopia (Ethiopia, 1935)*, Ryggen denounced Italy’s invasion of Ethiopia. One of her first works to be exhibited internationally, it was presented in the Norwegian pavilion at the Paris World’s Fair in 1937, in close proximity to Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica*—but was censored due to fears of offending the Italian state. Also during the occupation of Norway by the National Socialists, Ryggen produced tapestries that made clear statements about current events, despite the danger involved in doing so. The tapestry *6. oktober 1942 (6 October 1942, 1943)* impressively invokes the “atoning victims” during the period of occupation and depicts, amongst others, Adolf Hitler in a risible posture at the left, Winston Churchill in the center, and the imagined flight of the Ryggen family on the right-hand side.

In many of her works, Ryggen commemorated the resistance of victims of persecution, such as the German anti-fascist Liselotte Herrmann, who was executed in 1938. The Schirn is also showing *Drømmedød (Death of Dreams, 1936)*, in which Ryggen deals with the case of the German dissident Carl von Ossietzky, a recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, who was accused of treason and who, as a political symbol, divided Norwegian public opinion. The artist dedicated *Grini (1945)* to her husband, Hans Ryggen, who was arrested by the National Socialists in May 1944 and imprisoned in the Grini prison camp near Oslo. After the Second World War, Ryggen continued to take a position on contemporary incidents with, for instance, *Henders bruk (The Use of Hands, 1949)*, *Atomsen (Mr. Atom, 1951)*, and *Jul Kvale (1956)*, expressing opinions on Norway’s controversial accession to NATO and the arming of the world powers with nuclear weapons. At the age of seventy-two, she wove *Blod i gresset (Blood in the Grass, 1966)* in protest against the war being waged in Vietnam, using artificial dye for the first time for the blood-red grid pattern.

# SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT

The Schirn also sheds light on Ryggen's artistic development as well as inspirations from art and literature that are reflected in her oeuvre. The artist, who initially trained as a painter in Lund, Sweden, under the tutelage of Fredrik Krebs (1845–1925), started weaving in 1923. She spent the next ten years teaching herself to master all technical aspects. The materials for her weaving work she collected from her farm and the surrounding nature; Ryggen spun the yarn herself and colored the wool with natural dyes obtained from plants. She combined various pictorial traditions, such as traditional Norwegian folk-art weaving and elements from fresco painting, with a modern formal language. Two early tapestries in the exhibition reveal her development in both form and technique; *Synderinnen (The Sinner, 1926)* is her only monumental tapestry using the Gobelin technique; later she wove in the traditional Norwegian zig-zag technique. The Schirn is also presenting *Verhau (Squall, 1928)*, which is Ryggen's only purely abstract large tapestry. Characteristic of Ryggen's artistic approach is her narrative, often scenic or theatrical form of presentation and the collage-like compositions, as well as the blending of real, fictitious, and mythical individuals and motifs. She was well-informed on the contemporary art scene, and in some tapestries directly examined the work of other artists. The Schirn is presenting, for example, *Livet glir forbi (Life Passes By, 1939)*, for which Ryggen was inspired by reading Paul Gauguin's travelogue *Noa Noa*; the two-part work *Trojansk hest / Picassoteppet (Trojan Horse / Picasso Tapestry, 1949–1956)*, in which Ryggen utilizes motifs from antiquity and Greek mythology and addresses the dominant role of Pablo Picasso in contemporary art; and *Dikt av T. S. Eliot (Poem by T. S. Eliot, 1952)*, whose starting point was T. S. Eliot's "Little Gidding" from 1942. With *Hjemlige guder (Homely Gods, 1951)*, Ryggen created a satirical commentary on power structures in the art scene in Norway.

Particular attention is given to Ryggen's engagement with women's politics. She repeatedly reflected on the role of women in a male-dominated society. The large-format triptych *Ugift mor (Unwed Mother, 1937)* is dedicated to the circumstances of single mothers, whereas *Gullammet Iselin (The Golden Lamb Iselin, 1935)* speaks of the ambiguous relationship between beauty and power. *Mors hjerte (Mother's Heart, 1947)* is a personal work about her own insights into motherhood and the complicated relationship with her daughter Mona, who suffered from epilepsy. This haunting portrayal of mother and child is a pioneering work in the way it presents a resolutely female range of experiences.

Hannah Ryggen's iconic work, *Vi lever på en stjerne (We Are Living on a Star, 1958)*, commissioned for the lobby of the Høyblokka, part of Oslo's Government Quarter, forms the conclusion of the exhibition. Ryggen took about six months to collect plants and dye the wool for this large-format tapestry, and another thirteen to weave it. Here, she unfurled a philosophical description of human existence as well as presenting the central positions of art and love as personal and political forces. This tapestry was damaged on July 22, 2011, in a bomb attack on the government building by the right-wing extremist Anders Behring Breivik. Although repaired by conservators, it still bears a trace, like a scar, in the bottom right corner: a reminder of this assault on democracy.

**CATALOGUE HANNAH RYGGEN. WOVEN MANIFESTOS**, edited by Marit Paasche and Esther Schlicht: includes a foreword by Philipp Demandt, texts by Marit Paasche and Marie Luise Knott, an interview with Ingar Dragset by Esther Schlicht, and a biography and chronology by Johanna Laub, as well as detailed views of the works. German and English editions, 136 pages each, ca. 100 figs., 24.5 x 29 cm (vertical format), Prestel Verlag, ISBN 978-3-7913-6969-3, 29 € (SCHIRN), 42 € (bookstores).

**VENUE** SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT, Römerberg, 60311 Frankfurt **DURATION** September 26, 2019–January 12, 2020 **INFORMATION** [www.schirn.de](http://www.schirn.de) **EMAIL** [welcome@schirn.de](mailto:welcome@schirn.de) **TELEPHONE** +49.69.29 98 82-0 **FAX** +49.69.29 98 82-240 **ADMISSION**

# **SCHIRN** KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT

€10, reduced €8, admission free for children under the age of 8 **PUBLIC GUIDED TOURS** Wed. 8 p.m., Thurs. 7 p.m., Fri. 11 a.m., Sat. 3 p.m., Sun. 5 p.m. **BOOKING TOURS** Individual tours or group tours can be booked by telephone on +49.69.29 98 82-0 or by email at [fuehrungen@schirn.de](mailto:fuehrungen@schirn.de) **CULTURE PARTNER** HR2 **CURATORS** Marit Paasche, Oslo, and Esther Schlicht, Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt **CURATORIAL ASSISTANT** Johanna Laub **THE EXHIBITION IS SUPPORTED BY** NORLA and the Sparebankstiftelsen DNB. NORLA is the organizer of Norway's turn as Guest of Honour at the Frankfurt Book Fair in 2019; the exhibition is part of Norway's cultural program for its appearance as Guest of Honour.

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