

The Last Goodbye - Edith Birkin

(b.1928) 99 x 152.5 cm Acrylic on canvas



Overview of the Painting

This painting is one of many paintings that Birkin has made in response to her experiences during the Holocaust. The Last Goodbye is also the title of a book of poems and paintings that Birkin wrote about her experiences.

As a young girl of 14 years old, Birkin entered the Lodz ghetto in Poland. Three years after that, at just 17 years old, she was sent to Auschwitz concentration camp. She survived a death march to Flossenberg camp in Germany and was liberated from Belsen in 1945. On her return to Prague she discovered that none of her family had survived, and in 1946 she settled in England where she became a teacher.

Edith Birkin has talked about her experiences and her art work. You can hear and read some of these talks at The British Library. The following statement was taken from The British library Learning- Voices of the Holocaust. These two testimonies seem very relevant to the content of the painting.

About her art: "I evolved a pictorial language that enabled me to put my visions on canvas. It wasn't so much the cruelty or physical suffering that I wanted to record. Most of all, I wanted to show what it felt like to be a human being, in the starved, emaciated strange-looking body, forever being separated from loved ones".

About the gas chambers: "Of course we soon realised that there was this big chimney, you know, out of which came a lot of smoke, and the sky was red, the sky was red all the time.

Holocaust Education through the Ben Uri Art Collection © London Grid for Learning
www.benuriholocaust.lgfl.net

And you know, when we asked what it is they told us, and we couldn't believe it. Well the Germans didn't tell us, but other prisoners told us you know. 'What's this, what's this smoke, what's this fire, you know, why is the sky so red?' What is this all about, you know, we couldn't understand. But then we were told, very soon we were told you know, and we saw these transports of people coming; they came past us because there was this Lagerstrasse, you know, this road that was going to the gas chamber, from the train, and they came past. All these transports came past us, you know, thousands and thousands of people. And they never appeared again, they just disappeared into this building, you know. Somehow you know you just got used to it; you were there. It's more terrifying thinking back on it now, in a way, than then. Again, they said you know, they're giving us bromide in the soup to keep us calm. But things were so bad, and you lost everybody, that it was just another blow, you know, you just got sort of immune to these things."

Looking Closely

Contents and Ideas

This painting shows a scene in a concentration camp, with two children and a woman. There is a large group of people from which the children have divided so that they may greet the older woman. There is a barbed wire fence running through the centre of the painting and the children are separated from the adult.

The title of the painting implies that the child is saying goodbye to the woman, who looks like she could be a grandmother or Mother.

In this painting Birkin is depicting the gas chambers of the concentration camp, with the large chimney and thick black smoke. The sky looks red which can be seen to represent fire and burning.

The ground beyond the fence is covered with what looks like snow and the path seems wet, and yet the main characters of the painting – the two children and woman - are wearing no shoes and no coats, despite the apparent coldness.

The child in the foreground (front) of the painting has no hair, while the child at the fence has bright orange hair. This draws our attention to the difference between the two children.

The fact that the children have broken away from the crowd to bid their last farewell, highlights the individuality and family connection of each life lost in the Holocaust. The rest of the crowd move in unison along the path, their backs to the viewer with their heads slightly bowed; their destination is unknown, but the depiction of the gas chamber chimney and the title of the work, 'The Last Goodbye', suggest that they may never be seen again.

Form and Composition

The curved line of the path and fence shows a clear divide between the adult and the children, emphasising the feeling of separation.

The use of perspective gives us the feeling that this is a very large place, that this is just a snap shot of a place that goes on and on. This is achieved by the curve of the path, leading the viewer's eye round from the foreground to the back left of the image. This is accentuated by the group of people appearing smaller towards the furthest part of the path and the living blocks behind the wire fence getting smaller in the distance. These aspects make us think about what might be happening elsewhere in the camp.

The figures have a ghostly look to them, with hollow, dark eyes and large heads which look out of proportion to the bodies, making the figures look skeletal. Birkin often paints figures in this way, showing us that the prisoners in the camps were under-nourished and ill. However, as a viewer it also makes us think that the figures could be ghosts, reminding us of the number of people who died whilst living in camps such as this.

Materials and Techniques

This painting was made using acrylic paint. Acrylic paint is a thick but fast drying paint which allows the painter to work quite quickly. Birkin has used a variety of colours in her painting, with a contrast between the warm and cool colours. The sky is red and orange which reminds us of fire and burning, while the land, buildings and figures are all painted using whites, blues and greys, which make us feel as if it is a cold place. The use of darker colours and simplified forms for the buildings and fence also draws our attention to the human aspect of the work. The figures painted with white paint, make them look ghostly. Painting the foremost child in red and giving the other child bright hair draws the viewer's gaze towards them, thus making them the focal point of the painting.

About the Artist

Edith Birkin (b.1928)

Born in Prague, Edith Birkin was sent with her family to the Lodz Ghetto in 1941. Her parents died there within a year and when the ghetto was liquidated, Edith was sent to Auschwitz. Selected for slave labour, she spent the rest of the war working in an underground munitions factory. She took part in one of the notorious death marches and arrived, in 1945, at Belsen, where she was liberated the following month. On her return to Prague she discovered that none of her family had survived.

In 1946 she settled in England, where she became a teacher; she went on to adopt three children.

Why is this work important?

Looking at the art work made by Holocaust survivors about their personal experiences or memories can be an important way of learning more about the Holocaust.

The term Holocaust Art can mean lots of things. It can mean the art work made during the Holocaust by artists and non-artists, who were actually living through the Holocaust. It could also mean art that was made after the Holocaust either by artists that survived the Holocaust, or by artists who were not there but who felt that they wanted to communicate something about what took place.

Sometimes people make works of art, including writing and music, as a way of expressing emotions or memories that are very difficult to cope with or understand.

Edith Birkin states that she evolved a 'pictorial language' to help to her express her feelings about what she had lived through. She says that she did not make her art as a way of recording what had happened, but rather as a way of showing what it felt like for her. The paintings are very personal to her.

She describes her paintings as a language, which is a way of communicating. This might explain why the same styles and forms are repeated over and over again.