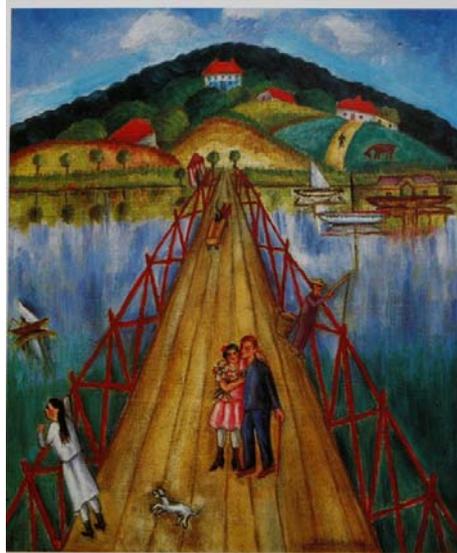


Chana Kowalska - The Bridge



Overview of the painting

Oil on canvas 1937

The painting shows a couple embracing on a bridge over a lake or river. Elsewhere in the painting other people are engaged in fishing or walking. The bright colours used and the stillness of the water create an impression of an early summer's day in the countryside. Overall the atmosphere of the scene is one of serenity and peacefulness.

As with Kowalska's other work, the *Shtetl*, this painting reflects a period of time as yet untroubled by the pressures of the industrial world, operating at a slower pace of life. It depicts a rural scene and tranquil scene. It appears that Kowalska was making nostalgic paintings of her time growing up in Poland. However, at the time that this painting was made Kowalska was living in Berlin, and she could also have gained inspiration from the German countryside.

There is however a sense of the unknown about this painting. It was made during a time of great political change across Europe and particularly in Berlin. The Nazi party were rising in power and Hitler had been made the German Chancellor in 1933. We are not sure what lies on the other side of the bridge, or who the viewer of this scene is, but there is a sense of uncertainty. In the distance lies the peaceful safety of the idyllic countryside. We are not sure what world awaits the couple at the other end of the bridge.

Looking closely

Materials and Techniques

Kowalska uses oil paints and strong, vibrant colours in her work despite the overall calmness of the scene. The strong colours make the hill feel near, even though the perspective of the bridge suggests that the hill is quite far away. The strong colours also make your eyes focus on the hill as a destination, and make the hill feel as an equally important part of the picture as the bridge. Furthermore, even though the hills and houses in *The Bridge* are in the distance, the colours are as strong and bright as the colours of the couple's clothes.

There is also a very deliberate and frequent use of the colour red throughout the painting. Notice the roofs of the houses, the colour of the bridge and the detail on the clothing, flowers and hair of the couple. Red can often be seen as the colour of passion and emotion, which could reflect the love between the couple. However, red is also often used as the colour of danger, it is a colour used for warnings. Perhaps there is more to this idyllic scene than meets the eye?

Form and Composition

As well as using strong colours, Kowalska uses the composition of the painting to draw the viewer into the scene and make us feel we are on the middle of the bridge, about to meet the hugging couple.

She uses 'one point' perspective to achieve this. The central positioning of bridge in the painting begins this effect and the lines made by the planks and the rails of the bridge which gradually narrow and almost meet at the far end of the bridge also lead us to one point, creating a sense of perspective. Furthermore, the people reduce in size, the further away they seem to be. When an image almost 'disappears' into the distance at the same point, it is called 'one-point' perspective. This effect draws the viewer into the picture and creates a sense of scale and distance.

Content and ideas

The Bridge can be seen as a poignant reminder of a traditional way of life which was lost during and after the Holocaust. The quiet, peacefulness of the picture bares no hint of what is to happen to the population of rural (Jewish and Non-Jewish) communities during the Second World War. The reflections in the water of the boats and the trees, and the fishermen on the bridge and in the boat are suggestive of a slow pace of life.

The concept of a bridge in literary and visual works of art usually hints at a journey or a transition from one part of one's life to another. It seems that Kowalska may want us to contemplate as to where the bridge might lead to.

About the artist

Kowalska was born in 1904 in Wlockawek, Poland and was the daughter of a rabbi. She started drawing at the age of 16 and became a school teacher at the age of 18. In 1922, she moved to Berlin and later to Paris. She worked as a journalist and wrote articles about painting for Jewish newspapers. In the Second World War, during the German Occupation of France, she worked for the French Resistance. Arrested by the Gestapo, she was first imprisoned with her husband, then deported and shot by the Nazis in 1941.

Why is this work important?

The personal biography of Chana Kowalska is as relevant to a study of the Holocaust as the content of her work. Kowalska was actively involved in the French Resistance during the Nazi occupation of France.

Resistance movements sprang up across all Nazi occupied countries in Europe. To support the Allied cause, members of the Resistance would gather intelligence, destroy communication lines and where possible actively attacked German troops. The French Resistance began after the surrender of France to Germany in June 1940, when the country was divided into two areas; one directly under Nazi rule and the second (Vichy France) loosely self-governing under French politicians and generals.

In reply to these acts of sabotage the Gestapo arrested, deported and shot anyone suspected of spying or collaborating with the Allies. Kowalska herself was arrested and shot for her involvement in this cause.

The resistance movements in countries such as France were instrumental in the eventual defeat of the Nazis, particularly through intelligence gathering and the disruption of communications and transport systems in the build-up to D-Day. The lives lost by individuals such as Chana Kowalska and her husband are testimony to the effort of the Resistance in defeating the Nazis.

Terms explained

The Resistance - An underground movement formed in Nazi occupied countries during the Second World War to fight the German occupying forces and the Vichy government. The French Resistance is sometimes referred to as the *Maquis*.

The Gestapo - The Nazi secret police force formed in 1934.

D-Day - The Allied re-invasion of Nazi occupied France in 1944. D-Day was a massive sea, air and land operation between British, Canadian and American troops with the assistance of the French Resistance.

One-point perspective – where there is only one vanishing point; one area in the distance set to which everything in the painting leads towards, getting smaller and smaller as they approach this point.