

Flame of Remembrance By Nina Grey



Overview of the Sculpture

'Flame of Remembrance', 1961
Plaster, height 86cm.

Nina Grey created 'Flame of Remembrance' in 1961 in England. During the holocaust she was living in the relative safety of London, so her sculptural rendition is memorial.

However, as a Jewish refugee of the First World War herself, the piece is still an acknowledgement of all the Jews who lost their lives in the holocaust.

Looking Closely

Form and Composition

The sculpture resembles the shape of a single flame on a circular base. The base itself sits on a wooden tablet which includes a plaque stating the title of the work and the artist's name, with Hebrew text above.

The flame is formed of many human heads, gradually decreasing in size towards the top. The heads are recognisable as men, women, and children, most of whom have their eyes closed. The heads are angled at different orientations, but most of them face outwards but are slightly downturned.

There is a slight curvature to the flame which suggests movement and life; however, as the entire flame and base is painted black, it has a dark, sombre tone.

Materials and Techniques

The sculpture was made in plaster and would have been used as a model to cast a version in bronze.

Plaster is a very versatile medium to use and one of its advantages is that layers can be added or carved away even after it has dried. This enables the artist to sculpt extra features and correct mistakes.

The actual structure for a plaster cast is usually built around an armature, so the weight is held in place and evenly distributed. Once the basic shape was formed, the finite details of the faces, hair, and headwear would have been carved in, and perhaps more plaster added in smaller quantities to create protruding features such as noses, ears, and chins.

The paint would have been added after the sculpture was completely dry. This coating also serves as a protective barrier to prevent crumbling and decay.

Contents and Ideas

The image of the eternal flame is used in many cultures as a continuous visual reminder of generations past. It is a particularly significant emblem in Jewish culture and is used religiously in Jewish synagogues: the 'ner tamid' hangs close to the Torah scrolls, representing their guiding light.

Just as the eternal flame can never be extinguished, neither can the faces of the holocaust ever be forgotten; Grey's 'Flame of Remembrance' ensures that the plight of the Jewish people is remembered eternally. By carving discernible features into the faces and including details such as kippah's, men's facial hair, women's headdresses and variant lengths and styles of hair, Grey has given each Jewish face an identity. This evokes a closeness and familiarity between the viewer and the face and gives the work multiple narratives. Each face becomes a real person with their own tale to tell of the holocaust and its horrors.

Grey sensitively reminds us of the fact that the Jews who were killed during the holocaust are not just a mass figure to be quoted from history books, but individuals who were husbands, wives, parents and children.

About the Artist

Nina Grey was born in Lvov, Poland in 1907. Lvov had a huge Jewish community and has a long history of war from sieges by the Cossack forces in 1648, to battles with Russia and Austria in WWI, and captivity of its people during the Second World War. In 1915 (before the holocaust), Grey and her family moved as refugees to Vienna, Austria; she was just 8 years old.

It was here, in Vienna that she grew up: attending the College for Jewish Teachers; embarking on a teaching career; and getting married. In 1939 war broke out in Europe and Grey and her husband moved to England.

Grey studied sculpture in London, attending the Hornsey School of Art, and then St Martin's. In the 60s she had exhibitions at Ben Uri Art Society and Foyles Art Gallery. In 1980 she presented the bronze cast of 'Flame of Remembrance' to Yad Vashem (World Holocaust Museum, Israel).

Why is the Work Important?

Similarly to other Jewish artists, Grey's contribution to 'Holocaust Art' came late in the timeline of the holocaust. The original plaster model was created in 1961, therefore Grey would have been 54 years old and the Second World War had ended 16 years before. It was another 19 years later that the bronze cast was presented to Yad Vashem. By this time Nina Grey was 73-years-old.

The timing of the work and age of the artist is significant as it echoes the message of remembrance and commemoration. As Grey has grown older and reflected on her life

experiences and the stories and experiences of the Jewish people in Europe, she has expressed these reflections in her work.

It is an important piece when remembering all the lives lost and the need to keep their 'light' burning; it keeps the memories of the individuals and their families alive.

Terms Explained

Cast a reproduction of a sculpture, created by making a mould of the original - usually with resin. This is then cooled, coated in a moulding substance, dried and hardened. Then, a liquid form of the casting material (such as bronze) is poured into the mould and left to set. Once the liquid has hardened the mould can be removed, leaving the cast [in bronze].

Armature a wire frame bent into the desired shape which acts as a support and guideline for a sculpture. Artists often leave sections of wire for attaching the sculpture to a base.

Ner tamid Hebrew name for a light or lantern that hangs in a synagogue or Jewish temple. It is never allowed to go out. 'Ner' means light and 'tamid' is eternal.

Torah Books of Jewish scriptures; there are five volumes which contain Jewish law and stories.

Kippah also known as 'yarmulke'. A head covering worn by Jewish men. It must be worn at all times and symbolises their obedience to God by creating a physical barrier between their flesh and the heavens above.