

# David Bloch

by Vivian Alpert Thompson

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David Ludwig Bloch is a German-Jewish artist who was interned at Dachau and presently lives in Mount Vernon, New York. He began producing works about the Holocaust after his retirement in 1975, first creating sketches, motifs, writing many catch words, and reading. He then got the idea for a format of 13" x 48" rectangular paintings that would be made in the shape of boxcars. From 1977 to 1980 he produced sixty paintings from the compositions formulated earlier. There were, of course, years in which the memories of the Holocaust dwelt in Bloch's mind before finally emerging in this body of work. The ensuing paintings are acrylic on masonite and mostly blue in tone—a color usually linked with melancholy and death.

Bloch was born in 1905 in Floss, Bavaria, in Germany. He was raised by his grandmother, having been orphaned soon after his birth, and he has been deaf since the age of one. He began his studies at a school for the deaf in Munich in 1915 and continued in Jena from 1923 to 1925, when he apprenticed as a porcelain decorator at a factory in Planken Hammer, near Floss. From 1927 to 1930 Bloch attended a technical school for porcelain industries in Selb and was employed as a porcelain designer at Bauscher-Hotel porcelain factory in Weiden, Bavaria. In 1934 Bloch was awarded an art scholarship to attend the State Academy of Applied Arts, but was expelled with the Nazi rise to power.— While trying to leave Germany, he worked as a freelance graphic artist. He was arrested and incarcerated at Dachau in 1938, on Kristallnacht. Through the miraculous help of an American cousin, Bloch was released from Dachau and left Germany in April 1940, fleeing to Shanghai.

He remained in Shanghai from May 1940 until 1949 when he came to the United States. While in Shanghai he produced woodcuts, some oils and graphics, and had several exhibits. Here he was employed as a lithographer for twenty-six years and worked on the White House china for President Johnson that depicted the state flowers. Nothing in Bloch's past seemed to presage the veritable flood of Holocaust works that he has produced since 1977. His earlier works have included pastoral water colors of Martha's Vineyard and Chinese scenes.

Most of Bloch's works, both his paintings and his many woodcuts, document Dachau in various ways. The opening of Dachau—the first Nazi concentration camp—on 20 March 1933, only fifty days after Hitler and the National Socialists had seized absolute power, marked the beginning of the Jewish nightmare under the Nazis. What Bloch depicts in his art is what he witnessed, read, or was told to him later. Bloch's Holocaust works are every bit a chilling indictment of the Nazi system.

Bloch's paintings are all 13" x 48"—a unique and demanding size, but one meant to be symbolic of the boxcars that transported the Jews to the death camps. A commentary written for an exhibition of David Bloch's work at the Mount Vernon YMHA stated: "These caustic, symbolic Holocaust paintings are extracted from anguished experience. Scapegoated and outcast, Dachau inmate and escape to Shanghai wartime privation, Japanese occupation and a final wrenching to

freedom and a new life here, artist Bloch remembers the Holocaust and gives us the only stalwart answer to Hitler's 'Jewish Question'; NEVER AGAIN."

## The Paintings

*Knock at Midnight* is about Bloch's own arrest. Seized on Kristallnacht, the night of broken glass when stores and synagogues were smashed and burned, Bloch was one of thousands of Jews who were removed from their own homes and taken off to a concentration camp. The painting is almost entirely a solid, deep, dark blue, broken only by the arrest scene that takes place in the extreme corner. The only light source comes from within the home, where the inhabitants have been jarred awake by the intrusion. Two black-coated guards with red Nazi armbands oversee the arrest. One Nazi holds a gun to the back of one victim's head, while a second victim, also barefoot and in pajamas, is shown from the chest down as he is forced down the stairs. Two other residents of the home look on in horror. We see the work from the outside, looking in, catching only a glimpse of the scene from the doorway of the residence. We are onlookers from a distance, witness to the scene in a general sense. Although this scene may be about Bloch's own arrest, nothing in the work indicates a specific place or person. It is generalized enough to represent the story for thousands, as the painting is meant to do. One of the invariable characteristics of Holocaust art is that it is not only highly autobiographical, but it also tends to tell the group story rather than that of one individual.



Knock at Midnight

The transport was a nightmare that is a major theme in diaries and documentaries. In *Transport* Bloch shows us the loading of the trains juxtaposed against a lovely winter scene with snow-capped mountains in the distance. At first glance it is a beautiful scene, until one becomes aware of the miserable masses of people of all ages being herded into the cattle cars, their meager belongings being stripped from them. The church is a silent onlooker in the background, a reminder similar to Bernbaum's indictment of the passivity and complacency of the church.



Transport

A sharp perspective funnels the eye back into the only opening: the entrance to the camp in *The Last Stop*. There is no other exit. The left side is flanked by barbed wire; the rest of the scene depicts railroad tracks that recede into the distance, depositing the victims at the camp.



The Last Stop

*Reception Deception* is a chilling work-brittle and crisp in its shades of blue against the stark whiteness of the snow-and haunting in its meaning. Three emotionless skeletal figures are playing music to accompany the newly arrived transportees being led to their deaths. The death march, with musical accompaniment, comes across as a *Danse Macabre*, only here the scene is played for real as the



Reception Deception

skeletons (probably human, but more dead than alive) play for the newly arrived (and soon-to-be-dead) masses. As the lines move slowly, they form the shape of a huge swastika. A few faces, blue with cold and suffering, look up at the musicians in puzzlement, at a world gone mad. The landscape is stark, bare, and flat, except for some camp barracks and the now-empty boxcars off to the side.

The deception also encompassed language, for the Nazis were masters at transforming seemingly innocuous words into words connoting great horror. *Brausebad*, meaning showers, was a euphemism for the gas chambers used to confuse the victims and to destroy even the language. The light is through the doorway, which is blocked by a Nazi guard whose face is the only natural, flesh-colored one. The victims—all ages, all sizes—are many shades of blue, their faces already numb to the horror about to occur.



Brausebad

The perversion of language appeared vividly at Auschwitz where the entranceway was marked by a tall gate labeled "Arbeit Macht Frei" ("Work Makes Free"). In his work by that name, Bloch superimposes the gateway over a space filled with skulls and death masks. The pathetic irony is made clear by the death masks: only through death was there freedom, for the people were murdered by overwork. The tones are a pale, whitish-blue, cold and deathly in their hues. In the lower portion of the painting is a second gateway—only this one has been barricaded with a red and white barrier so that no one can ever enter. It is Bloch's way of saying "never again."



Arbeit Macht Frei

The chilling imagery of *Arbeit Macht Frei* is repeated in *Gasps* and *Or Who Else Will Mourn*. *Gasps* is a horrifying work that shows the Angel of Death choking at the death surrounding him. It is "the angel's job to take us singly and in our time." Mass death goes against the natural order and is a travesty. The painting is filled with gruesome death masks, skeletal remains, and skulls with black cavernous pits for what were once eyes and mouths. *Or Who Else Will Mourn* is another haunting work. The Angel of Death is shown with a gas mask, shuddering in the midst of skeletons and skulls, even horrific scenes of skeletons embracing and comforting one another, covering their faces, cowering and shrieking.



Gasps



Or Who Else Will Mourn

Three dominant belching smokestacks are outlined against the sky in the foreground of *Death Factory*. The flames from two of them visible at the top of the canvas are evidence of the intense heat beneath. Dark smoke issues forth from both the crematoria in the background, lightening as it spreads throughout the sky, which takes up almost the top two-thirds of the painting. The sky is the focal point of the painting, for the smoke contains the faces of victims, faces that merge and emerge from the smoke



Death Factory

that carries their remains. There have been artists before who hid faces or figures in clouds (for example, Mantegna and Raphael); such an artistic device is not new. But nowhere else in art do we have the faces of hundreds of cremated victims peering at us from their death. The faces that Bloch depicts are not portraits, nor are there portraits in his other works. He is telling us not of the suffering and deaths of particular individuals, but of the endless numbers of victims of the Nazis. A barbed wire fence through which we see the darkly outlined barracks is in the foreground. The barbed wire is not merely a barrier to those inside; it is also a barrier to us as viewers. Much of the Holocaust art attempts to reinforce the inner-outer dichotomy, the sense that this was truly another world, or what David Rousset has called "l'univers concentrationnaire."

*From A to Z* is 13" by 96" and Bloch's most involved work. It is both a documentary and a visual exploration of the destruction and reconstruction of language. *A to Z* symbolizes a range from Adolf Hitler to Zyklon B. The painting moves from left to right, beginning with vignettes of Hitler's rise to power: an announcement for a speech, a tree covered with swastikas, German beer mugs and toppled chairs (perhaps the aftermath of a meeting). Scores of arms stretch out in the "Sieg Heil" gesture, not attached to any bodies, but furthering the action and direction of the painting. The same is also true of the stomping, black-booted marching legs, which are detached from any body, thus adding to their anonymity. The symmetry and order of the rhythmic marching legs gives way to the chaos and mayhem of the next scene as the arm-banded, brown-shirted Nazis loot, burn books, and set fire to buildings and synagogues. Victims lie sprawled on the ground as others are beaten and tortured.

The last half of the painting is a landscape of death. Many different concentration-camp scenes cover the work. Like Bernbaum's works, much is happening and each small vignette has a story to tell. The colors have changed slightly from the first half where there were occasional bright colors, particularly the reds of the arm-bands and the speech announcement. The tonalities in the final half of the painting are all blue: somber, flat blues, not a pastel, but a washed-out, cold, deadly greyblue. An occasional touch of black from a Nazi uniform accents the work, as do the harsh black lines of the Zyklon B label. Several images that have appeared in other Bloch works reappear. The skeleton playing the violin is in the center of this panel; to the left is a swastika formed by the line of hundreds of victims; smoke issues from the crematoria; a roll call of emaciated inmates is to the far left. The Angel of Death hovers in the sky above the scenes of mass murder and torture. A gallows with six men hanging, perhaps symbolic of the six million, is in the background. A group of pale-



From A to Z (left panel)



From A to Z (right panel)

blue wraithlike victims, already more like ghosts than live people, is herded into the showers; they move from shadow into light—the light to be their final end, their only escape. The final right section of the painting (the "Z" that marks the end of the new alphabet) is a large can of Zyklon B, taking up most of the height of the painting, superimposed over scenes of destruction and desolation. Piles of human clothing, remnants, and books are mingled with the skeletons of victims. A dark, shadowy, demonic face of Hitler looking like a madman looms large above a group of skeletal remains; their empty eye sockets and faces appear to be pleading with us. Bloch's message concerns the Nazi desecration of language that occurred when a simple term like *shower*, or *Brausebad*, assumes an ominous and horrific meaning.

*Why* shows the legs of a hanged man from the knees down facing us in the foreground as a silent mass of blue inmates is forced to stand at attention to watch the spectacle. It is a stark, severe work, emphasized by Bloch's strong horizontals and verticals. The canvas's horizontal is reiterated by the horizontal mass of observers and then broken by the strong vertical of the two legs, the stripes of the uniform, and the vertical pole of the gallows. A few guards are positioned randomly to keep order. The bare feet and tattered pants legs make the scene more pathetic as we are forced to look at this totally undignified scene of death.



Why

*No Place to Go* shows shadowy figures. Both male and female, adult and child wander through a glow of light and move toward the darkness to an unknown void. The simplicity of the work enhances its impact. There is no ground line; all we see are shadows of human figures in a surreal setting. The awesome void in which they are placed is defined only by light and darkness and is all the more terrifying because of its emptiness and uncertainty.



No Place to Go

*Left: Death-Right: Slavery* refers to the selection that occurred on arrival and that continued with terrifying regularity. Those selected for hard labor received a temporary reprieve. Those picked out to die were sent to the gas chambers. Bloch shows those chosen for labor in a deeper blue; those fated to die were sent to the gas chambers. Bloch shows those chosen for labor in a deeper blue; those fated to die are light blue, thin figures that diminish and recede off to the left. On the far left a sinister depiction of the showers is painted a very deep blue to make it quite clear to viewers that there can be no uncertainty about what happened to the victims.



Left: Death—Right: Slavery

*Dachau is* where David Bloch was held captive until he was miraculously freed. As viewers we witness a roll call with the inmates' backs to us. Bloch constructs the work so that we become part of the group; we look where they look, seeing the same endless line of victims and the black-



Dachau

uniformed oppressors. To erase any doubt about what this scene is, the word DACHAU, in German Gothic printing, blares out at us with the immediacy of a newspaper headline. Five folded uniforms lie on the ground; even the dead had to be accounted for and recorded.

Another work describing the daily roll call is *Roll Call for All*. Three neatly folded uniforms of recently deceased inhabitants rest on the ground. It is essentially a portrait of three dead men, their numbers of identification and now empty clothing being all that we know of them. The rest of the work consists of legs-legs of those who can still stand at attention, in contrast to the casual stance of an SS man. The ground is white with strong shadows being cast by the legs and by the guard.



Roll Call for All

### Ten Commandments Imagery

Bloch uses the image of the Ten Commandments frequently in his works as an indictment of those who ignored the laws of God. In *The Powers That Be* a large tablet of the Ten Commandments faces us. Men with different kinds of headdresses representing the academic world (mortarboard), religious powers (miter), and political and economic powers (crown and top hat) have their backs to us, to the Ten Commandments, and to the fragments of Jewish civilization scattered in the foreground. Books are shown in disarray; not only has man turned his back on the laws that can help us to live decently, but also on the great literature of the world-literature that for centuries has sought answers for the great problems of life.



The Powers That Be

The mockery and desecration of the Ten Commandments is the blunt and disturbing message of *The Churches*. The tablets are again in the center of the work; a burned-out fragment of a building is outlined against the large tablets. Among the debris littering the foreground of the painting are a menorah, Torah scroll, and rimmon, the pomegranate-shaped decorative tops of the Torah. The skyline is a visual history of European church architecture, including Russian Orthodox, the twin spires of a Gothic cathedral, a dome similar to Saint Peter's (Renaissance), German towers, and a neoclassical church. They form a vast panorama of the churches of Christendom. The churches stand silent and distant behind the Ten Commandments, ignoring the destruction and havoc, removed and detached from the great suffering. Although erect and imposing, these buildings are a mockery when viewed against the Ten Commandments.



The Churches

While sharing Bloch's concern about the indifference of the churches, Bernbaum also confronted the shameful passivity and complicity of the rest of the world in several of his works, particularly *On Both Sides of the Warsaw Ghetto*

*Wall*. Each artist has approached this problem uniquely, but both extend the same message: that the rest of the world either actively looked on or it chose to turn its back on the suffering.

The Ten Commandments themselves have turned to rubble in *The Black Corps*. *The Black Corps* was a term for the SS who wore black uniforms with the skull and crossbones on their caps and jackets. The tablets have shattered; a red swastika is slashed across them like graffiti on a wall. It is a death march: the guards black, the victims pale, the architectural landscape of Germany mute and distant in the background.



The Black Corps

The Ten Commandments are finally destroyed in *The Empty Box*, where the fragmented tablets lie on the ground near an empty coffin. The Angel of Death again mourns for the deaths that were not his to take. A coffin is empty; the body is not where it should be, not having been buried or mourned in the usual way. The script on the tablet in this painting is in Hebrew; in earlier works, it is in Roman and Arabic numerals. Bloch intentionally shows the laws in different letters and numbers to stress the international and historical acceptance of the Ten Commandments as an appropriate and essential code of conduct.



The Empty Box

## Woodcuts

Much of the visual imagery that appears in Bloch's paintings reappears in his woodcuts. These woodcuts demonstrate some connection to Bloch's German background and his likely acquaintance with German Expressionism. The bold, harsh lines that give further emotional impact to the works, and the exaggerated, gouged lines of the faces hint at the influence of the German Expressionists, who would have been familiar to Bloch as a young man.

Several of the works superimpose a very large foreground figure or image against a detailed backdrop with a great deal of activity. One example is *Reception Deception* (essentially a detail of the painting of the same name), which has a skeletonlike figure with black sockets for eyes in a camp uniform (no. 1938) playing the violin on a platform. Behind him is a reception scene with the boxcars being unloaded, dead bodies piled up, and the remainder of the people herded into long lines forming the shape of a swastika. In the background, boxcars are lined up at least three tracks deep, as if to infinity.



Reception Deception

Another image that Bloch uses is that of a hanged man, shown only from the back and from the knees down, superimposed against a lineup of faceless, anonymous inmates who were most likely forced to witness the

hanging at a roll call. The man's pants legs are tattered, the ankles gaunt and emaciated, and the feet hang lifelessly. The black on white emphasizes the starkness of the work.



Why?

In *Crying Hands* a large image of a hand stretches from the lower left to upper right of the work. The hand is composed of many hands, all stretching, all plaintively seeking some help. The background is a mass of camp inmates, already looking like death heads, with sockets for eyes, emaciated bodies, and skull-like heads. *Brutal Steps* shows the dark figure of a Nazi, mostly in black, crushing a skeleton on the ground. In the background are the anonymous inmates and the smokestacks of the crematoria.



Crying Hands



Brutal Steps

Remnants of family life are scattered in *My Family History*, a work that features a shattered family picture, a broken, open violin case, a doll, and in the center a broken baby buggy—all mournful reminders of the individuals whose lives were lost. In the background an arm rises up imploringly from out of the ground.



My Family History

The motif of the Ten Commandments also appears in Bloch's woodcuts. *The Empty Box* shows the Angel of Death sitting on the edge of an empty casket, surrounded by debris, and the Ten Commandments again loom in the shadows of the background. Images of faces emanate from the ground like rays, becoming more indistinct as they reach the heavens. *The Ten Commandments* is a sardonic work that bitterly parodies the Ten Commandments by depicting ten scenes of destruction (from a pogrom to the ovens) on the tablets.



The Empty Box



The Ten Commandments

### The Message

"Never again" is the main message of most of Bloch's works, and he has emblazoned it against a backdrop of camp atrocities in a woodcut and in a painting entitled *Never Again*. In the painting the words appear across the fence of a camp that stands between us and the horrors depicted within it. On the far left are two figures being tortured, tied by their hands and feet to trees. One man has already died of that torment and is sprawled on the ground. A fragment of a burned-out synagogue is far in the distance. The glow of the crematoria and the red armbands of the SS are the only bright spots in the painting. All other scenes are indistinct and in fading shades of blue to black. Five figures hang on the gallows; one body is draped across the fence, electrocuted. To the right is a massive roll call; a beating in the midst of the crowd; a hanging in the distance; and the far-off smoke of the crematoria. Another



Never Again



Nie Wieder

train arrives in the distance, bringing more victims. Two dead bodies lay in the foreground, their bodies forming a swastika.

The message "never again" is crucial to the entire meaning and purpose of what he is doing artistically. Nailed onto a wall in his studio is a simple piece of metal, a fragment of barbed wire from the concentration camp at Dachau where Bloch had been imprisoned. For me, it was a chilling sight, and clearly for Bloch, it is a constant, painful reminder of what he must do in his art.

Bloch and Bernbaum represent survivors who want and need their art to be didactic and to serve as a reminder to the rest of the world. But other works of Holocaust art exist, sometimes far more indirect and circuitous.